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Why Does China Want to Have a Stable North Korea after Kim Jong-Il's Demise?

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The sudden death of North Korea ruler Kim Jong-Il has casted a long shadow over the strategic balance in North East Asia (NEA). His youngest son has taken the reins of power under his father's promotion in the past three years. Kim Jong-Eun has just turned 29 and has a Swiss educating background. His lack of governing and military experience may have lead the real power of ruling North Korea to lie in the competent hands of his uncle Jang Song Taek and his aunt Kim Kyong Hui (Kim Jong-Il sister) together with the top military and Labour/Communist Party members. In the short term, there will be a de-facto power vacuum existed in the North Korean/Party government. This is because Kim Jong-Il's approval is the only legitimacy that his son has so far. To this extent, some countries consider this is a great opportunity to tilt the balance of power in NEA. However, an unstable North Korea is clearly not at China's strategic interests both externally and domestically. According to the official condolence letter from the Chinese government, it referred to the word "trust" to re-affirm Kim Jong-Eun's legitimacy. The Chinese government and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has rarely used the word of "trust" when it addressed to a foreign country leader. This signals two crucial points of current North Korea leadership: 1) Kim Jong-Eun is the legitimate leader of North Korea after his father. 2) China will do its best to guarantee a smooth power transition and to facilitate a calm situation in Korean Peninsula. My blog post will explain the reasons why does China want to have an absolutely stable North Korea both in a short run and a long run.



Firstly, China has always treated North Korea as a strategic buffer zone to prepare for the possibility of the US military attack through the South Korean border. This was also a key reason why a newly established and impoverished PRC participated in the Korean War in the early 1950s. From then, China has utilized all kinds of economic means to aid North Korea from food aid to increasing investments inside North Korea. A relatively stable Korean border has inevitably helped China focusing on its own economic development. From a regional perspective, the South China Sea issue has already put China's borders and sea power challenged by many neighbor countries and the US. Beijing does not want to have another border dispute with its NEA neighbors. To this extent, China has put strong emphasis in developing an amicable relationship with North Korea. For example, the Chinese Ambassador to North Korea is a ministerial-level official which is the same level as Ambassadors to member states of the UN Security Council plus the EU. Kim Jong-Il's visit to China enjoyed some kind of privilege even the US President did not have. Eight out of nine the CCP Politburo members greeted him at his arrival in Beijing in May 2010. Both the International Department of the CCP and the Chinese Foreign Ministry directly involve in China's North Korea policy, which are rather unusual for China policy agenda-setting to other major powers. This in turn explains the strategic significance of North Korea in China's foreign policy making.



Secondly, a stable North Korea is also in convergence with China's own economic interests. A particular state's foreign policy is an extension to one country's domestic policy. China's North Korea policy is not an exception. In the past few years, there have been a soaring numbers of Chinese investors and businessmen operating in North Korea. China is also North Korea's largest trading partner. The North-East provinces of China (Heilong Jiang, Jilin and Liaoning) use the "promotion of NEA Free-Trade Zone" as a channel to revive their local economies. This is due to the economies being dominated by heavy industries-led and non-performing State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) between the 1980s and the 1990s. After several years of painful reform, a large number of the labour forces lost their jobs. To create more manufacturing enterprises is a greatest interests for ordinary Chinese, local business communities as well as provincial politicians. In addition,

Korean ethnicity in China makes up one of the major demographic components. They share the same language, custom and business culture with North and South Korea. This in turn may introduce the market economy to North Korea and improve the living standard of a mal-functioning state.

Finally, to have a stable North Korea is a way of showing China's competence as a responsible major power in international politics. Successfully dealing with North Korea will not only benefit China domestically but also promote an even more positive international image of China. This may help China to maintain the regional strategic balance at its own preferences. Under the current vulnerable regime, North Korea has presented a dangerous potential to re-test its nuclear power. Given Kim Jong-Eun's relative little experience in dealing with political and military conflicts, he may launch another round of nuclear test as a mean to present his strength to warn his domestic rivals, DPRK's neighbours and the US. To this extent, having a stable North Korea is only at the key interest of China but also of the rest of four members (Russia, Japan, South Korea and the US) from the Six Parties Talk. None of these major powers should impose any pressure to North Korea under the current situation.

In conclusion, a stable North Korea during the power transition period and over a long term will only do China good both domestically and internationally. Despite Pyongyang's announcement of not inviting foreign dignitaries to Kim Jong-Il's funeral, China shall utilize its unique advantage of Party diplomacy and its long-term ties with North Korea to stabilise this delicate situation.

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