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A New Regime In Pyongyang

LSE IDEAS

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The short-term and long-term impact on the Korean peninsula from the death of Kim Jong-il

The death of Kim Jong-il will result in some similar effects on short-term NK strategy as the demise of his father, Kim Il-sung. Yet there are many factors that can undermine the stability of the new regime and end with totally different results in NK politics than the case of Kim Il-sung.

Short-term: Military adventurism and the chance of coup or civil war

The NK government will raise tensions in the Korean Peninsula and can start some military adventures in the border area with SK in order to prevent agitation in its military and country. Specifically, the new leadership, which might not dominate the military yet because of the sudden death of its old premier, needs to test its control over the most sensitive and essential organization for NK prime power, the military. However, if the military action of NK is an 'intentional' decision of DPRK government, the DPRK would not like to engage in a total war. After all, the priority of the new Kim Jong-eun regime is to stabilize the chaotic country and military rather than to terrify South Korea which already expects hostile actions from NK.

However, the end of the second generation of Kims is quite different to the first generation in many aspects, and these differences can result in unexpected political upheaval in NK. First, Kim Jong-eun is still quite young, born in 1983, not having much political experiences, in contrast to his father who was designated as the 'crown prince of NK' in early 1970s and assumed many key positions in the NK Communist and Labour Party. In this situation, his guardian, Jang song-taek, seems to practice a real power. It is really like the Japanese Shogunate in which a shogun, the head of military, dominates the government in practice but respects the 'ritual' status of the Japanese emperor. In other words, Jang or other potential guardian of Kim Jong-eun would dominate NK at least until the young Kim gets older and more experienced. Secondly, the unstable succession of Kim Jong-eun could cause the struggles among 'princes', all of whom have eligibility for the 'king of NK.' That is, it is possible that the war or coup can happen in NK especially between and/or the guardians of Kim Jong-il's sons. The most serious problem is the magnitude of this civil war: if the central government cannot continue to control events, then some military leaders can defect to US or South Korea for military assistance for his campaign. And, more seriously, the fire of war in NK can extend to its neighbours, SK, Russia, and China. In this case, these countries, including the US, can intervene in the civil war in NK for their own security.

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