

On the Death of Kim Jong Il: Contrasting Perspectives

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Tim Beal

The sudden and unexpected death of Kim Jong il dominated the international news at the end of 2011 and led to a plethora of articles and assessments. Journalists who were winding down for Christmas were pressed into service and there was an explosion of instant expertise – as James Church, the ‘veteran intelligence operative’ and pseudonymous author of the Inspector O series put it, ‘practically everyone who has ever eaten Korean food has been called on by the media to opine.’¹ Most of what was written and spoken was predictably nonsense, but even so there was a considerable amount of informed or valuable assessment. I use ‘valuable’ in the sense that it throws light on the thinking of the author who in turn is representative of an institution, or a set of them (e.g. Washington mainstream think tanks), or of an influential school of thought.

What follows is a brief survey of a selection taken from the Viewpoints section of my website [Crisis in Korea](#). This provides a web home for material relating to my book of the same name.² More such quotes will have been added by the time you read this.

One of the major themes of my book *Crisis in Korea: America, China, and the Risk of War* is that war on the Korean peninsula will almost inevitably result in a Sino-American conflict, as it did in 1950, and for much the same reasons. The consequences then were dreadful but it hardly needs stressing that nowadays, with China so much stronger, the economic consequences alone would have global repercussions. A recent report from RAND suggested that Korea was the most likely place for a Sino-American conflict.³ Here Bonnie Glaser Senior Fellow, Freeman Chair in China Studies at the Washington think tank Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) broaches the subject. Glaser assumes, incorrectly, that ‘the regime could collapse, causing civil conflict’. This is highly unlikely, as others point out below, but one of the themes of my book is that the Lee Myung-bak could use a *perceived* collapse to precipitate a crisis leading to war, or that America and South Korea might stumble into invasion.

[The sudden death of North Korea’s leader Kim Jong-il could lead to a major crisis and even military conflict between the United States and China.](#)

The succession of power to Kim Jong-un, Kim Jong-il’s youngest son, seems to be proceeding smoothly so far, but it remains uncertain whether regime stability can be preserved. If Kim Jong-un’s rule is challenged in the coming months or years, the regime could collapse, causing civil conflict, refugee flows, or “loose nukes.” That scenario would likely result in U.S. and South Korean forces heading across the 38th parallel to stabilize the country, provide humanitarian assistance, and identify and secure the nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction sites. China might then dispatch the People’s Liberation Army into North Korea, perhaps in response to a request from a military faction that invokes the 1961 Sino–North Korea Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance.

Glaser, Bonnie. "China in 2012." CSIS Critical Questions, 9 January 2012.

Victor Cha, a Korean American, also writing for CSIS, is a former official in the George W. Bush administration. As might be expected his talk is of ‘belligerent provocations against the United

States' that might lead to crisis. Brings to mind the belligerent provocations of Vietnam, Iraq, Iran and a host of others.

Both the greatest threat and opportunity over the next year is what follows the sudden death of Kim Jong-il in North Korea

The power succession to his not yet 30-year-old son could lead to more belligerent provocations against the United States and its allies in order to cement his leadership position. Or the power succession could fail, leaving us with dire concerns about who then in North Korea has control of its nuclear arsenal. At the same time, the death of a dictator who starved his people while accumulating nuclear arms could open opportunities for new diplomacy with the West or even Chinese-style reform in that dark kingdom. Which way North Korea goes is unknown and requires serious study.

Cha, Victor. "Korea in 2012." CSIS Critical Questions, 9 January 2012.

If we can divide Korean Americans into good and bad then, to my reckoning, Christine Ahn comes out on the side of the angels. Here she makes the point that 'regime collapse is not in the cards for North Korea' but more important than that she draws our attention to developments in the South. Lee Myung-bak's *nordpolitik* is widely considered to have failed, and one consequence of his confrontational policy, exemplified by his apparent fabrication of the Cheonan evidence (discussed in some detail in my book) is the deterioration of relations with China.⁴ But Lee is now a lame duck president and there is a revival of more positive politics in the South which might, in turn, bring the United States into a more peaceful mode.

A Korean Spring?

As 2011 came to a close, the death of North Korean leader Kim Jong Il took the world by surprise (including the CIA which, like the rest of us, only learned of his passing 48 hours later). Given the dearth of understanding about North Korea in the West, the media could only speculate about the future of the new regime in Pyongyang. The usual pundits also took the opportunity to renew their calls for regime change. After all, 2011 was the year when the masses rose up to overthrow repressive regimes; could the same fate be in store for North Korea?

If anything has become clear in the weeks following Kim Jong Il's passing, it is that regime collapse is not in the cards for North Korea....

What happens in North Korea, however, is also clearly influenced by what happens in Seoul, and the winds of change are blowing strong south of the Demilitarized Zone where grassroots movements are challenging the country's retrograde neo-Cold War leadership. After four long years under President Lee Myung Bak's repressive and hard-line policies, 2011 marked the revival of democracy in South Korea thanks to three particularly inspiring developments for peace, economic justice, and anti-corruption

A third development in South Korea that has become legendary for raising tough issues of corruption by President Lee and other political leaders is the hugely popular weekly online talk show that launched in April. Named after the nickname given to President Lee by his most vocal critics, "NaneunGgomsuda" ("I am a petty-minded creep") covers corruption within South Korean politics and the dominance of the conservative, pro-business, and pro-government media.

The changes occurring in South Korea may not only usher in a more progressive regime in 2012 and greater social justice; it will undoubtedly influence the way that Pyongyang chooses to engage with Seoul. It took both North and South Korean leaders to make the sunshine policy possible, though the South Korean leaders got most of the credit.....

The popular uprisings in the south will no doubt influence prospects for reconciliation, peace, and the reunification of Korea. These changes on the Korean peninsula present a unique opportunity for the Obama administration to take a constructive approach on Korea for a change, instead of blindly following an unpopular South Korean president whose time is up.

Ahn, Christine. "A Korean Spring?" Foreign Policy in Focus, 4 January 2012.

The Russians, with their long relationship with North Korea, often provide the most authoritative commentary. Russia is a relatively minor player in Korea affairs compared with the US or China, but an important one – as evidenced by President Medvedev's renewed proposals for a gas pipeline.⁵ Here veteran Koreanologist Georgy Toloraya gives some impressions of Kim Jong Il the man.

I remember my first close encounter with Kim Jong Il

...in July 2000 in Pyongyang, when he briskly walked into the room in Paekhwawon Guest House, where Russian President Putin and his entourage, of which I was honored to be a part, was waiting for him. He energetically shook hands with everyone without looking them in the eyes. My first real-life impression of this man whom I had seen in photos and videos (as well as from a distance) so many times was that he was more than met the eye. Having encountered several Koreans from all walks of life both in the North and South and abroad during my decades as a Koreanologist, I was impressed how this particular Korean was different: he emanated charisma and intellect, looked free and relaxed. His speech was fast and witty, he seemed to draw on enormous resources of intellect and had a remarkable memory on almost any subject (one exclusion might be modern economics, in which he, it seemed, was not so very interested, regarding it just as a tool for rich Westerners to extract profits from their fellow compatriots and poor countries).

This first impression of Kim as a really remarkable personality only deepened during subsequent meetings lasting for many hours, both in Russia (especially on one trip when we travelled on Kim Jong Il's train for almost two weeks across Russia) and in Pyongyang, in the company of many Russian dignitaries, sometimes in a quite informal atmosphere. Kim would freely talk on subjects as varied as relations with the United States, the situation in South Korea (which he knew well, much better than we did as Russian diplomats), international politics as well as Russian cinema and folk music. He was inquisitive, open to argument and never forgot what was said. He even remembered details about Russian diplomats and dignitaries involved in North Korean affairs from the time his father was in power and had a judgment on each one. He highly valued sincerity and wholeheartedness. The North Korean leader's aide (known worldwide as Kim Ok) would prompt him with some details if he would ask, and Kim Jong Il would never hesitate to ask his subordinates about certain specific issues (like economic or military ones); he was not trying to show his "superhuman abilities." It is true that Kim was fond of wine, good food and song, but for us Russians, not bound by Western political correctness, that was not something appalling. He was quick enough to make decisions on the spot, and usually these decisions proved later on to be right.

Toloraya, Georgy. "Kim Jong Il: The Lessons of Life and Death." 38 North, 28 December 2011.

One of the sad things in the aftermath of Kim's death was the missed opportunity to build bridges. The Chinese did all the right things, the Americans sat on their hands, and Lee Myung-bak (among others) made things worse. There is a story to be explored there some other time but here we see Dr John Linton, an American doctor with long experience in South Korea and many trips to the North, calling in vain for an official condolence visit. Lee's actions produced deep anger in Pyongyang and we are unlikely to see much improvement in Inter-Korean relations during the rest of his term.⁶

Kim Jong-il's death could provide an opportunity to improve inter-Korean relations.

"Kim Jong-un, who will lead the North in the future, and some new-generation North Koreans have studied abroad and are familiar with computers and other electronic gadgets," he said. "This could lay a promising groundwork for change in the North."...

The South Korean government's decision not to send an official delegation to Kim Jong-il's funeral, he said, was wrong. "No matter how hostile your neighbor was when he was alive, it's a kind of Korean tradition that anything is forgiven and accepted at funerals," he said. "A condolence visit by the South Korean government could provide an opportunity for thawing inter-Korean relations."

American Dr. John Linton, the director of International Health Care Center at Yonsei University's Severance Hospital in Seoul, has visited North Korea 23 times since 1997

"American Doctor Recounts Changes in N.Korea." Chosun Ilbo, 27 December 2011.

One of the opportunities that fortunately failed to materialise on the death of Kim was an invasion of North Korea enabled by signs of instability (and hence of ability to resist). The South Korea military were put on alert and here the Russian expert, Alexander Vorontsov suggested that Secretary Clinton was 'testing the waters' for intervention. As it turned out the smooth transition in the North (helped surely by the awareness that the vultures were hovering) and strong Chinese signs of support for Pyongyang, put that off the agenda, for the time being at least, but hopefully for longer.

Post-Kim Jong Il DPRK

Predictions that the DPRK will shortly plunge into chaos and that a tide of infighting will sweep over its leadership are completely groundless. Any serious watcher is fully aware of the country's robust political stability, with nothing like an organized opposition or public protests of considerable proportions in sight.

It became known that over the past several days US Secretary of State H. Clinton engaged in intense consultations with representatives of the countries neighboring North Korea. In particular, she had several phone conversations with the foreign ministers of Russia and China. The contents of the talks remained undisclosed, but hypothetically Washington could be trying to bounce at least some kind of unarticulated consent to regime change in the DPRK out its partners. If this is the case, the probability that the endeavors produced any results is minimal. To stress the importance of its ties with the DPRK, Beijing took an unprecedented diplomatic step when China's leader Hu Jintao and eight other top Chinese officials visited the N. Korean embassy to deliver condolences.

Vorontsov, Alexander. "Post-Kim Jong Il DPRK." Strategic Culture Foundation, 25 December 2011.

Another person who drew attention to the dangers facing North Korea at this juncture from a United States happy to precipitate the North's 'absorption into the US-dominated South' if the opportunity arose is the Canadian Stephen Gowans. He is a refreshingly incisive writer who, though he tends to focus too much on the economics of imperialism rather than the geopolitical mode of its expression, does cut to the quick.

Kim Jong-il's Death is a Danger for North Korea, not its Neighbors

There are a few facts to keep in mind to understand what's going on in the wake of the death this week of North Korean leader Kim Jong-il.

#1. US foreign policy vis-a-vis North Korea has always sought to force the latter's collapse to pave the way for its absorption into the US-dominated South—and did so well before Pyongyang began to work on

nuclear weapons. US hostility toward North Korea has never been about nuclear weapons. On the contrary, North Korea's nuclear weapons are a consequence of US hostility. US hostility, now in its seventh decade, is about what it has always been about: putting an end to what Washington mistakenly calls North Korea's Marxist-Leninist system (Marxism-Leninism has been replaced by Juche ideology—a home-grown doctrine of self-reliance), its non-market system, and its self-directed economic development. None of these offer much latitude for US profit-making at North Korea's expense, and hence are singled out for demolition.

Gowans, Stephen. "Kim Jong-Il's Death Is a Danger for North Korea, Not Its Neighbors " What's Left, 20 December 2011.

Finally back to China, and to Victor Cha. Whilst he underestimates the resilience of North Korea his focus on China is telling. United States policy towards North Korea is really a subset of its China policy. Washington instinctively sees tension on the Korean peninsula as an essential glue to hold together the core of its alliance to contain China. If peace breaks out in Korea (as perhaps it might in 2013?) then that strategy is in deep trouble.

[China's Newest Province?](#)

NORTH KOREA as we know it is over. Whether it comes apart in the next few weeks or over several months, the regime will not be able to hold together after the untimely death of its leader, Kim Jong-il. How America responds — and, perhaps even more important, how America responds to how China responds — will determine whether the region moves toward greater stability or falls into conflict

Cha, Victor. "China's Newest Province?" New York Times, 19 December 2011.

As we might expect, perspectives on what has happened and what will happen on the Korean peninsula differ considerably. This very short selection illustrates that. It also brings out, I think, another point. We must look carefully at who is speaking as well as what is said. In particular the American analysts (Bonnie Glaser and Victor Cha) display a degree of wishful thinking about a collapse of North Korea which is a reflection of deeper strategic desires relating to China. It might be too much to say that America is willing to fight China to the last Korean but it is important to locate official analysis and US policy towards the Koreas (both Koreas) within this broader geopolitical context.

What the Korean peninsula needs, it seems to me, is easy to describe but difficult to accomplish. Peaceful, gradual, consensual unification to mutual benefit and a positioning of Korea as a neutral, independent polity friendly with, but not beholden to, its neighbours—Japan, Russia, China and the United States.

Beal, Tim. *Crisis in Korea: America, China, and the Risk of War*. London: Pluto, 2011.

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"S. Korea's Crimes against Ethics and Treachery under Fire ". *KCNA*, 4 January 2012.

"S.Korea-China Relationship on the Brink." *Hankyoreh*, 5 May 2010.

¹ James Church, "Reflections on "The Party as the Kingmaker", " *38 North*, 27 December 2011.

² Tim Beal, *Crisis in Korea: America, China, and the risk of war* (London: Pluto, 2011).

³ James Dobbins et al., "Conflict with China: Prospects, Consequences, and Strategies for Deterrence," *Rand Corporation*, 10 October 2011.

⁴ Aidan Foster-Carter, "South Korea changes course on the North: back to the F word," *East Asia Forum*, 19 October 2011. Min-hee Park, "Tensions high as S.Korea-China relations mark 18 years," *Hankyoreh*, 24 August 2010; "S.Korea-China relationship on the brink," *Hankyoreh*, 5 May 2010; Editorial, "Serious lack of diplomacy between Seoul and Beijing," *Hankyoreh*, 22 December 2011.

⁵ Tim Beal, "Russian chess: Russia moves to use economics to promote peace in Northeast Asia," *Pyongyang Report* 13, no. 1 (2011).

⁶ "Lee Myung Bak Group of Traitors Accused of Thrice-cursed Crimes," *KCNA*, 30 December 2011; "S. Korea's Crimes against Ethics and Treachery under Fire ", *KCNA*, 4 January 2012.