The Death of Kim Jong-il and the “Great Successor,” Part 2
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Kim Jong-un, the son of Kim Jong-il and grandson of Kim Il-Sung, is slated to become the new leader of North Korea. What do we know about him?

We know almost nothing about Kim Jong-un other than rumor and speculation. We know he’s younger than 30 years of age, but we don’t know his exact age. We know he went to school briefly in Switzerland while a child, but have almost no information beyond that. He is reputed to like sports, although this tells us very little about his personality or leadership abilities. Indeed, we have almost no evidence of his political acumen or personality traits, because he only was elevated to leadership positions last year, in September 2010.

However, Kim Jong-un reportedly became the “Great Successor” to his father by being seen as the most competent of Kim Jong-il’s sons. Analysts suspect that he was chosen over his brothers in part because his brothers have shown themselves incapable of assuming the mantle of leadership. His oldest brother, Kim Jong-nam, was detained in 2001 while attempting to enter Japan on a forged Dominican Republic passport using a Chinese alias. He reportedly told Japanese authorities that he was hoping to visit Tokyo Disneyland, and the incident caused considerable embarrassment to the North Korean government, and eliminated him as a possible future leader of North Korea. The 2nd son, Kim Jong-chul, is widely reported to be “too effete” and insufficiently driven, and was evidently not considered a serious contender for leadership. As a result, Kim Jong-un appears to have become the successor almost by default.

What types of issues will Kim Jong-un face? Can he actually rule the country?

Although there is intense speculation that the regime may fall apart after the death of Kim Jong-il, that is in fact quite unlikely. The regime has already planned for an orderly succession, Kim Jong-un is clearly the next leader, and there is a cadre of senior generals and members of the inner circle who will work in the short run to make the regime run smoothly. Most likely, Kim Jong-un will keep a low profile for the first few years, in much the same way his father did upon taking leadership in 1994. When Kim Il-sung, the founding leader of North Korea, died in 1994, Kim Jong-il took no formal actions for three years. It wasn’t until 1997 that Kim Jong-il openly became the leader of North Korea, and by then the transition was quite stable. It would not be surprising if the regime has planned the same thing for Kim Jong-un, with a relatively long transition period where senior leadership makes the decisions and Kim
However, Kim Jong-un will face significantly greater obstacles to ruling than did his father in 1994. When Kim Jong-il took power in 1994, North Korea was only a few years past close Soviet and Chinese support. At that time, the country had not yet experienced the devastating famine of the late 1990s that killed perhaps one million citizens. The economy was still relatively robust, and of course the nuclear issue had only begun to emerge. Kim Jong-un will attempt to take and hold power in much more diminished circumstances. The country is weaker, poorer, has faced almost two decades of withering international pressure over its nuclear policies, and the citizens themselves are slowly learning more about the outside world than ever before. In these conditions, it is not clear whether any ruler can find a viable set of policies to solve the daunting internal and external problems facing North Korea.

Is there any sign that Kim Jong-un may pursue different domestic or foreign policies than his father?

The answer is that we simply do not know at this time. Given his youth and inexperience, we have no indications about how Kim Jong-un may see his foreign or domestic policies. But it is probably unlikely that he would stray too far from the path of his father. After all, his legitimacy derives solely from his family, and thus Kim Jong-un will probably be very reluctant to risk undermining that legitimacy by undertaking policies that could be seen to counteract those followed by his father. The military is widely considered to be the most influential institution in North Korea, often more influential than the Korean Worker’s Party itself. Kim will most likely have to navigate a delicate balance between maintaining the support of members of both these powerful institutions while at the same time attempting to fashion coherent domestic and foreign policies.

What has been China’s reaction to the rise of Kim Jong-un?

Kim Jong-il traveled numerous times to China, most recently in August 2011. It is believed that one purpose of these visits was to secure Chinese support for Kim Jong-un, and it appears that Kim was successful. The Chinese are North Korea’s closest supporter, and although relations between the two countries are hardly warm and intimate, both countries need each other. China’s main goal with North Korea is to maintain stability and avoid the problems that could arise with a rapid collapse of the DPRK regime or some other type of crisis. Thus, it appears that the Chinese have accepted Kim Jong-un’s eventual leadership, although they remain highly suspicious of familial rule. The Chinese prefer institutionalized rule, and the code words used after Kim’s latest trip was the Chinese Communist Party’s support of the “rising generation” in the Korean Worker’s Party. Although clearly this implies Kim Jong-un, it also emphasizes Chinese support for the entire younger generation of leaders in North Korea and its emphasis on the Communist Party in Korea rather than personalistic rule.

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