Is there any possibility that North Korea will take any provocative actions toward South Korea in the midst of the political uncertainty in North Korea’s leadership?
North Korea is a country in which primary power resides in military circles. The first official title that Kim Jong-un was awarded in September 2010 was four-star general in the Korean People’s Army, despite Kim’s complete lack of military accomplishments or experience. North Korean military leaders, led by Lee Yong Ho (arguably Kim Jong-un’s right hand person), are likely to take on the role of caretaker for the time being. Therefore, it is still possible that North Korean military tries to deliberately create a carefully orchestrated external incident to conceal likely socio-political disorder caused by domestic uncertainty in the process of power succession. This is the immediate and greatest concern that the South Korean government is going to carefully monitor at this stage. The South Korean government issued an emergency alert for all government officials and military units right after the National Security Council meeting. The government also announced that it would tentatively halt South Korean visits to North Korea, with the exception of travel to the Kaeseong Industrial Complex, where 879 South Korean nationals are currently working.

However, strengthening internal control is a more immediate task for the North Korean leadership than is causing international crises, and the ruling elite will probably attempt to bring about stabilization of the post-Kim Jong Il regime as quickly as possible. In this sense, it would not be desirable to be embroiled in multifaceted diplomatic conflict with other regional players at this juncture. Given this internal urgency caused by Kim Jong Il’s sudden death, it is unlikely that the North Korean military will cause unnecessary tensions on the Korean Peninsula. Nevertheless, in the longer term, it is still true that the United States and South Korean government should put policy priority on carefully observing in which direction the North Korean military circle is moving.

Will Kim Jong Il’s death negatively affect existing inter-Korean economic relations, such as the joint production project in the Kaeseong Industrial Complex?
Inter-Korean businesses currently being conducted are essential for both Koreas. For North Korea, it is the biggest conduit to earn foreign currency apart from its joint investment projects with China. South Korean small businesses, especially traditional manufacturing businesses losing competitiveness in China and Vietnam, have found Kaeseong to be a viable alternative production base and have been heavily dependent upon much lower-cost production in an immediate neighboring country where they successfully enjoyed well-trained, Korean speaking, low-wage workforce. As long as the two Koreas share these interests, there is no reason to expect any drastic change in the future of this mutually beneficial economic project. However, the political uncertainty caused by Kim Jong Il’s death will inevitably bring about dampening effect on the recent renewed mood in inter-Korean relations aiming for the resumption of the dialogue. The power transition will probably create yet another obstacle to restoring the various levels of
inter-Korean economic cooperation projects which has been accomplished under the Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun leadership.

**Is it difficult to anticipate the resumption of South – North dialogue in the foreseeable future under Kim Jong-un leadership?**

It seems clear that things are getting harder and tougher when it comes to the likelihood of inter-Korean dialogue, especially at a senior level. The basic assumption is that Kim Jong-un will need a longer transition period than what his father did in 1994, resulting in more or less a power vacuum and reduced capability to make political decisions as to how to adjust the pace and scale of inter-Korean relations. More significantly, North Korean priorities will probably place strengthening relations with China as more important than inter-Korean relations, given the urgent need of North Korean leadership to secure Chinese support for the Kim Jong-un and to figure out how to manage diplomacy with Washington in the absence of Kim Jong Il.

In the same vein, an inter-Korean summit under the Lee Myung-bak administration, which will come end in February 2013, seems highly improbable. Even though Kim Jong-un is recognized as a North Korean top leader likely to fully replace his father sooner rather than later, it is still unlikely that the South Korean public will acknowledge this inexperienced, 29 year-old guy as an equal partner with South Korean president.

Over the years, South Korea has acquired a great deal of information about what Kim Jong Il envisioned for the North’s diplomatic relations with relevant regional players. This accumulation of information has been achieved not only by the activities of the intelligence agency but also by official and direct conversation with him and numerous inter-Korean high-level talks. But the total lack of information about Kim Jong-un is another factor that means that South Korean policymakers will have difficulty forecasting North Korean priorities or actions in the near future. I anticipate that many observers of North Korea are going to face the paradoxical reality soon that Kim Jong II, who was constantly demonized by some western media, is going to turn out to be in fact more predictable political partner than the succession regime we are about to encounter from now on.

**Does South Korea need to express condolences over Kim Jong Il’s death? In 1994 when Kim Il Sung died, it became a great source of domestic debate in South Korea.**

Of course, Kim Jong II is a highly debatable figure to South Koreans. But politically speaking, the only positive signal with regard to inter-Korean relations would be the anticipated power change in the South Korean politics in December 2012. The ruling party frontrunner Park Geun Hye recently signaled that she would not maintain Lee Myung bak’s unproductive and recalcitrant North Korea policy. What is more, she has her own direct channels of contact with top leaders in North Korea, and even held an official meeting with Kim Jong II in 2002. At the same time, the recently reunified opposition party has held two inter-Korean summits with Kim Jong II, and has maintained a more proactive engagement position in dealing with the North. This means the next South Korean president may advocate the restoration of inter-Korean relations. But we will have to wait and see until the new North Korean regime unveils its underlying posture on its relations with South Korea. What is required at this point is to prevent further exacerbation of situation. In this sense, the South Korean government may decide to express publicly an equal level of condolences over Kim Jong II’s death that North Korea showed when the two South Korean presidents died in 2009.

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