North Korea’s Dynastic Succession
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This week North Korea will hold its first Party Conference since 1966. In advance of the conference, Kim Jung-eun, 3rd son of Kim Jong-il, has been named a military general in the Korean People’s Army. How significant is this announcement?

For some time now, observers have suspected that Kim Jong-eun has been chosen as the successor to his father. The appointment as general and the Party Conference is merely one step in the path to Kim Jong-eun’s succession, and he has a long ways to go before being formally made head of the Korean Worker’s Party or the National Defense Commission. The Kim family has largely come to personify North Korea, and strenuous efforts have been made to identify the legitimacy of the Kim family with the prestige and survival of North Korea itself. Whether a third generation of Kims can continue to retain legitimacy and lead the country is an open question, but clearly the North Korean leadership sees familial succession as the most viable means to rule the country.

What do we know about Kim Jong-eun, and why was he chosen instead of his older brothers?

We know very little about Kim Jong-eun, and are not even sure about his age. He is in his late 20s, perhaps as young as 27, and he studied in Switzerland for a few years during elementary school. Aside from that, there is little information available about him, and he has not been highly visible in the past few years. 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-eun appears to have become the successor almost by default.

What is the likelihood that Kim the 3rd can take and hold power?

Kim Jong-Il 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-eun 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.

That Kim is not even thirty years old adds to the difficulties. Quite likely he will rule as “regent,” with senior members of the regime actually making decisions while Kim learns how to rule, develops internal factional support, and gains experienced. There is speculation that Jang Song-taek, Kim Il-sung’s brother-in-law, is increasingly influential and likely to act as a “guardian” for Kim Jong-eun during the first few years. Indeed, Kim Jong-il’s sister and wife of Jang, Kim Kyong-hui, was also been named general in the KPA this week, further signs of the emerging ruling circle in Pyongyang.

However, maintaining control over the North Korean ruling regime may prove to be difficult. There are doubtless numerous petty and major grievances, personal grudges, and genuine policy disputes within the ruling class, most of which remain submerged given the stability of Kim Jong-il’s control and leadership. After Kim Jong-il dies, if Kim Jong-eun experiences any unexpected crises or makes any policy missteps, there is a distinct possibility that internal resistance may emerge. In such a situation, with a young and unproven leader who lacks a set of supporters of his own, the situation could become volatile quite quickly.

Is there any sign that Kim Jong-eun 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-eun 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-eun 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-eun?
Kim Jong-il traveled twice to China in 2010, most recently in August. It is believed that his visit was primarily aimed at securing Chinese support for Kim Jong-eun, 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-eun’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-eun, 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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