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The Death of Kim Jong Il – a comment by Professor Arne Westad

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By Professor Arne Westad

The news of Kim Jong-il's death have been received with hopefulness in the West and with a certain sense of dread in East Asia. While Western policy-makers first a foremost saw Kim as the tyrannical head of a despotic state, a monster who mistreated his own population while himself living in luxury, an increasing number of Asians came to view him, in all his grotesqueness, as a guarantor for some form of stability on the Korean peninsula. For the latter, it was hard to imagine any change that would be – at least in the short run – for the better. So great is the fear of the consequences of a North Korean collapse in the region that even Kim's belated turn to China was seen as a plus by other countries in the region, in the vague hope that Beijing would help steer North Korean foreign policy along a smoother course.



North Korea's options seem to be one of those perennials that both east and west routinely get wrong. While there are grounds to fear an uncontrolled meltdown of the Kim'ist regime, there is little doubt that change is coming to North Korea, probably faster than most people imagine. Even before Kim Jong-il's death, the regime was running out of options for its foreign policy. The decision to kow-tow to Beijing – a regime the Kims are dependent on economically, but have routinely insulted in the past – came because of extreme need: Pyongyang has done nothing to improve its own finances, and the elite feared a return to a similar situation as that of the 1990s, with widespread starvation. But in order to avoid complete dependence on China, the regime had also started secret negotiations with the United States, which reportedly were close to a break-through when Kim died 17 December.

Kim Jong-il was once as unlikely a successor to his battle-hardened father, Kim Il-sung, as Kim Jong-un is to his own father today. Born near Khabarovsk in the then Soviet Union in 1941, young Jong-il developed into something of a playboy during his father's rule, importing 20,000 films from the West for his own and his companions' entertainment at banquets that lasted up to four days, and fathering at least four children by three different mistresses. But he shaped up as his father got older, and in power he was far from the crazed and erratic nuke-toting pygmy that George W. Bush once allegedly referred to him as. Savvy and reasonably consistent, Kim defended his regime and what he saw as Korean nationalism until the day he died, although his room for manoeuvre became increasingly narrow.

His son inherits a weakening foreign policy position and a weakening economy. Even if Kim Jong-un survives the immediate succession period, he will have to opt for domestic economic reform at some point reasonably soon, or turn to nuclear blackmail of the world on a scale even his father thought irresponsible. The latter will bring him into conflict with China, the power that feeds his regime at the moment. The former is certain to destabilize the regime itself, or at least his leadership of it (which in the eyes of the Kim'ists is the same thing). My friend Zhu Feng at Peking University's School of International Studies is therefore right when he says in a comment that "this era will certainly bring change to the Korean peninsula...No matter what, to speak a bit cruelly, it is a good thing."

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