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The Continuation of a 'Deep-Seated Ancestral Relationship': China and the Passing of Kim Jong-il

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The famed 'Grand Mass Gymnastics and Artistic Performance Arirang' in Pyongyang features an elaborate 'DPRK-China friendship' segment, replete with socialist realist images of united revolutionaries. It cites the 'deep-seated ancestral relationship' between the two countries as well as the story of Kim Il-sung's triumph over centuries of difficult international relations, supported of course, by his Chinese comrades. The 60th anniversary of the opening of China-North Korea diplomatic relations was also widely celebrated in by both Beijing and Pyongyang in 2009.

In contrast, about ten years ago, North Korea hosted the first-ever visit by a US Secretary of State, Madeline Albright, in the process snubbing the Chinese defense minister on the 50th anniversary of the entry of Chinese volunteers into the Korean War. In 2000 North Korea seemed willing to pursue normalization of relations and the beginning of the Six-Party talks gave the West reason to hope that North Korea would be convinced to begrudgingly join the Western-led comity of nations. In ten years, however, the rise of China has re-shaped Pyongyang's priorities and it will also strongly influence North Korea's course during this transition period.^[i] With the breakdown of the Six-Party Talks in 2009, China has stepped up efforts at bilateral negotiations, with the following emphases (according to the Chinese official press): 1) to increase high-level visits between the two countries. In May 2011, Kim Jong-il made his third visit to China within only one year, having made only a total of seven in his life. 2) implementing a two-pronged approach of 'sharing experiences in party-building and state governance' and promoting social and economic development; 3) deepen cultural exchanges; 4) and perhaps most importantly, to increase communication and coordination to 'jointly safeguard regional peace and stability'.^[ii]

With the passing of Kim Jong-il in December 2011, some have heralded an opportunity for change on the Korean peninsula. William Hague, the Foreign Secretary, said tentatively in his official statement that 'This could be a turning point for North

Korea.^[iii] The assumption of leadership by an untried young man brings into question his ability to consolidate power and thus maintain the grip that his father had on the country.^[iv] Holding a press conference with the German Foreign Minister, however, Hague said that it would be difficult to be optimistic about North Korea.

I agree. Hopes expressed by the French Foreign Minister that the people of North Korea would be able to find 'freedom' or the one by the Australian Foreign Minister that North Korea would 'engage fully with the international community' are laudable but, in the short-term, laughable.^[v] The only short-term change that seems possible at this point would be economic in nature, mostly because of the deepening friendship with its large neighbor next door.

North Korea will most likely not be feeding its starving population anytime soon since it obviously desires a smooth transition of power over to Kim Jong-un and China too is interested in stability above all else. This means waiting on implementing any kinds of reforms that would upset the status quo. The front page of the *People's Daily* proclaims North Korea's calls for 'national loyalty' and to protect 'single-minded unity' after the Great Leader's death from 'great mental and physical strain' during a field guidance tour, and the paper, in effect, seems to condone this message.^[vi]

Past summits between North Korea and China emphasised economic reform and growth in the interests of regional stability over the over-arching demand of the other leading powers—denuclearization.^[vii] It would be difficult to find a rationale that would motivate the new leadership to take any steps towards denuclearization at a moment when a show of power and unified strength seem vitally necessary.

At the same time, no one else wants to rock the boat either. Interestingly, in the response to Kim's death, the South Korean president urged the public to 'go about their usual economic activities', inadvertently revealing the current priorities of the region.^[viii] The US also does not want to, despite stepping up involvement in East Asia in the past months. Indeed, Obama's recent trip to East Asia seemed less like a display of regional power and influence than an attempt to salvage some remnants of the previous clout the US used to have in the region. North Korea is unlikely to pay the same attention as it had in the past. Also as it continues receiving economic assistance and direct investment from China, North Korea does not have much incentive to cultivate the goodwill of the economically weakened United States and Europe. Neither does it survive on trade with South Korea, even though the South had once provided a major bulk of the North's total trade. In the aftermath of the Cheonan sinking, the South ceased most of its trade with the North, but China only became a more important partner.^[ix]

Within North Korea, the propaganda state apparatus is unlikely to be shaken. The widely-publicized displays of grief by the North Korean state-run media will overpower any undercurrent of political murmuring. Perhaps the state will engage in displays of force, like those after the passing of Kim Il-sung. Also, the cult of the first leader will only be perpetuated by the addition of yet another Great Leader to the canon.

Finally, during the transition period, because of the accession of a young and inexperienced leader, North Korea may depend more upon China to provide its current rulership enhanced legitimacy. China has already made moves to deepen its influence with senior officials and the military in North Korea.^[x] Perhaps yet again with the support of its friendly neighbor, another Kim can triumph over the misgivings of the rest of the international community.

[i] Scott Snyder, 'North Korean's Succession Poses New Challenges – Part II', *YaleGlobal* 04 Oct 2010, <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/north-koreas-new-challenges-part-ii>

[ii] *Xinhua*, 'China, DPRK seek stronger bonds as Kim Jong Il visits', 26 May 2011, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/indepth/2011-05/26/c_13895920.htm

[iii] *BBC News*, 'Kim Jong-il death: World reaction in quotes', 19 Dec 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-16239940>

[iv] Mike Chinoy, quoted in 'Kim Jong-il dies aged 69: latest reaction' 19 Dec 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/northkorea/8964926/Kim-Jong-il-North-Korean-leader-dies-aged-69-live.html>

[v] *BBC News*, 'Kim Jong-il death: World reaction in quotes', 19 Dec 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-16239940>

[vi] *People's Daily Online*, 'DPRK calls for national loyalty, unity after Kim Jong Il's death' 19 Dec 2011, <http://english.people.com.cn/90777/7681332.html>

[vii] For example, the Changchun summit in May 2011 between Hu and Kim promoted cross-border development plans between North Korea and Jilin province.

[viii] *BBC News*, 'Kim Jong-il death: World reaction in quotes', 19 Dec 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-16239940>

[ix] In 2009, Chinese exports to North Korea were \$1.9 billion and North Korean exports to China were \$793 million. From a paper published in December 2010 by the Congressional Research Service quoted by Edward Wong, 'China Moves to Ensure Stability in North Korea' *New York Times* 19 Dec 2011 <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/20/world/asia/china-moves-to-ensure-stability-in-north-korea.html?pagewanted=2&hp>

[x] *Ibid.*

