

## **Palace politics and the 2<sup>nd</sup> North Korean nuclear test**

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North Korea's brazen second nuclear test has once again caused instability within Northeast Asia and created yet another crisis for the new Obama administration. This test – like North Korea's missile test two months ago and today's announcement reneging on the 1953 armistice – was most likely conducted as much for internal, domestic reasons, as it was to send a message to the Obama administration.

The regime is unstable because there is no clear successor to Kim Jong-il. Kim himself was announced as his father's successor twenty years before he actually took office, and this allowed him time and legitimacy to build support among important internal constituencies, and also created an aura of inevitability that led North Koreans to accept him as the next ruler.

Kim Jong-il's poor health over the past year has surely intensified the internal maneuvering over his successor, and North Korean elites are almost surely engaged in "palace politics" as they attempt to position themselves for power and to protect their interests in the future. That Kim Jong-il has not yet anointed a successor implies that none of his possible successors has built enough factional support to become the clear choice. As a result, the internal factions and potential future leaders have every incentive to show their loyalty to the Kim family and to prove their nationalist credentials.

The logical results of this leadership instability is both far less long-term planning and strategic vision, as well as an incentive for nationalistic and assertive acts, as various factions attempt to prove their loyalty to the Kim family and the North Korean regime.

North Korea's latest provocative act – announcing that it will not abide by the 1953 armistice – is further proof that the regime is focused inwardly, and not on the outside world. Although skirmishes in the West Sea are a likely result, few observers think that North Korea has any real intention of starting a general war. However, the bellicose nature of the recent North Korean rhetoric and actions -- and in particular, the accelerated nature and disproportionate nature of the provocations -- points to a regime that is no longer calibrating its actions for intended external effect as part of an overall strategy for dealing with the outside world. With Kim Jong-il obviously physically weakened, this week's moves point to an intensifying internal struggle

which may get worse before it gets better. The unfortunate fact is that if North Korean elites are competing with each other to prove loyalty to the Kim regime in the face of an uncertain leadership succession, we can expect more provocative acts, and less external ability to affect the regime.

The U.S. administration has responded properly by under-reacting rather than over-reacting. Too much bellicose rhetoric from the U.S. would only benefit hardliners in Pyongyang, who use those actions to justify their actions. Yet the unfortunate reality is that the range of policy options available to the Obama administration and other governments in the region is quite narrow to begin with. Few countries wish to risk military action to change the North Korean regime, because the potential costs in terms of lives and economic damage are staggering. No country is willing to simply live with a nuclear North Korea, either. As a result, the Obama and Lee Myung-bak administrations are left with a modest range of policy options, including mild economic sanctions, rhetorical pressure, and perhaps some form of quiet diplomacy.

If North Korea can resolve the succession issue quickly, the regime might survive well into the future. On the other hand, we may be seeing the beginning of the internal collapse of the Kim dynasty, and governments around the region might do well to begin reviewing their contingency plans for how to deal with the chaos that such a collapse would surely bring.