

EMBARGO UNTIL 09:00 SEPT. 26 (KOR)

9.26일 오전 9시 이후 보도 가능합니다

North Korean Leadership Dynamics and Decision-making under Kim Jong-un: A First Year Assessment

Kim Jong-il's death in December 2011 brought about the hereditary transition of power to a third generation. Kim Jong-un, Kim Jong-il's youngest son, assumed the mantle of Supreme Leader. In a little over a year, he had acquired all of the titles of power, including supreme commander, first secretary of the Korean Workers' Party, and first chairman of the National Defense Commission. But this accumulation of titles does not mean that Kim has consolidated his power, a process that may take another year or two.

This paper argues that Kim Jong-un, while the ultimate decision-maker and sole source of legitimacy for the regime, has yet to fully consolidate his power. While he may be invested with inherent legitimacy by virtue of his position as Supreme Leader, he still needs to grow into the position and learn how to effectively wield power. This is a process of demonstrating capability and relationship building that could take one to two more years. In fact, Kim Jong-un is currently involved in a three-phase process of consolidation.

- The first phase, which began shortly after he was formally designated the heir apparent (September 2010) and is drawing to a close, has focused on the stabilization of the three-generation hereditary succession. In this period, potential opposition to the hereditary transition in power has been stamped out through purges and retirements.
- The second phase, which began in earnest in 2013, is focused on Kim's steps to establish a power base, which owes its loyalty directly to him. This patronage system will likely be tied to moves to accommodate the twin regime policy philosophies of "Military First" and "Creating a Strong and Powerful Nation." It is likely that as this phase plays out and Kim Jong-un begins to exert his independence as a decision-maker, the current regent/advisory structure will begin to change—something that could lead to churn within the upper reaches of the leadership.
- The final phase, according to many Pyongyang watchers, should begin around 2015, when Kim Jong-un is able to assume the full responsibilities of his position as Supreme Leader. He will have established his own decision-making processes and will be more directly responsible for policy formulation and execution. He will most likely begin to marginalize his regents, which could intensify the opposition exhibited in phase 2.

If Kim Jong-un is able to survive this final period with his position intact, regime stability will probably be ensured for the foreseeable future. But, there is a possibility that his powers will be curbed or that he will become a puppet to powerful forces inside the regime. If this occurs, the stability of the regime could come into question.

This paper also outlines an idiosyncratic process that recent defector reporting suggests Kim Jong-un's regents may have put in place in order to educate the young leader on his new role, as well as to give him the situational awareness he needs as the ultimate decision-maker. History is full of examples of young, hereditary leaders who have been thrust into the crucible of leadership where they are forced to devise a system of rule that comports with the culture of the regime, as well as their unique leadership style. Given the fact that North Korea

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is a Supreme Leader (Suryong) based system where all power and legitimacy flows from one individual, any argument that Kim Jong-un is a figurehead with no real authority is most likely untrue. That said, he lacks the 30 years of preparation that his father had before he assumed the mantle of leadership following Kim Il-sung's death in 1994. In order to prepare Kim Jong-un for his awesome responsibilities, the regime has apparently put into place a unique decision-making model that is quite different from the informal hub-and-spoke system Kim Jong-il relied on—something that is more formal and institution based.

This paper will examine the leadership dynamics surrounding Kim Jong-un's first year in power, in an attempt to piece together the picture of how decision-making and policy execution work under the new leader. It will begin with a discussion of the politics of power consolidation and the centers of power within the regime. This will be followed by a speculative discussion of how decision-making might work.

This paper does not support any particular policy strategy toward North Korea. That would require an additional set of analyses that is beyond the scope of this effort. That said, this paper might be used to inform policy debates about what can be done about the North Korean problem. These debates often revolve around what strategy (combination of carrots and sticks) will entice or force Pyongyang "to do the right thing." In order to derive an effective strategy, certain assumptions need to be made about how North Korea will react. The ability to form such assumptions can only come from an informed understanding of leadership dynamics and equities. If policymakers assume that Kim Jong-un has not yet consolidated his power, they need to consider the viability of any strategy that leads to North Korea parting with its nuclear program. They also need to question any speculation that Kim will embark on meaningful economic reforms—something that would require Pyongyang to make itself hostage to international aid in order to secure the resources necessary to successfully ditch the top-down command economy. Once policymakers begin to examine the North Korean problem from Pyongyang's point of view, the "30,000-foot solutions" often heard in Washington, Beijing, and Seoul lose their resonance. Policymakers are left with two possible outcomes, both very unappetizing: either there will be a regime change, or they must wait until Kim Jong-un consolidates power. The latter outcome is far from a solution and depends on Kim having the political courage to embark on a fundamentally new path. That said, it will launch a new era when the regime can react to international carrots and sticks without fear of internal backlash. Only time will tell whether this means a regime that can be bargained with in a meaningful way.