

## **Leadership Transitions in the Two Koreas**

**Panel:** Session 6

**Date/Time:** April 26, 2012/17:30-18:45

**Organizing Institution:** Council on Foreign Relations (CFR)

**Speakers:** Scott Snyder, Council on Foreign Relations (moderator)  
Victor Cha, Center for Strategic and International Studies  
Woo Jung-yeop, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies  
Kenneth Gause, CNA

### *Panel Short Summary*

Ellen Kim, Center for Strategic and International Studies  
Jens Wardenauer, International Institute for Strategic Studies

The panelists discussed the current leadership changes in South and North Korea, and their consequences for international politics and the inter-Korean relationship. There was a consensus that the outcomes of both transitions are uncertain: in the North, this uncertainty relates to Kim Jong-un's degree of control and the potential for instability, while in the South, it relates to the unpredictability of domestic politics and what will be the new focus for debate.

Woo Jung-yeop discussed South Korean domestic politics and the parliamentary and presidential elections in 2012. The unexpected victory of the conservative Saenuri Party in the April general election was down to the failure of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) to exploit its poll lead, as well as Saenuri's swift change of political platform to the centre. The DUP moved too far to the left in its coalition with the UPP, and its resulting attacks on former DUP President Roh Moo-hyun's mooted naval base on Jeju Island and the KORUS FTA created doubts in the Korean public about whether the DUP was fit to govern. He also noted the complexities of interpreting an election in which the victorious party actually lost seats, and the losing party gained around 40 seats, and its possible impact on the presidential elections in December.

Kenneth Gause noted that North Korea's leadership transition has been going on since Kim Jong-il's stroke in 2008. He described three possible succession scenarios that were widely subscribed to before 2010. The first is that the designated heir would emerge unchallenged as supreme leader, in a true dynastic succession. The second was that a

collective leadership would emerge due to a lack of power and experience on part of the heir. The third possible scenario was a fractioned leadership with high potential for internal power struggles, due to the lack of a linchpin like Kim Jong-il. Gause also discussed in detail the succession process, including the promotion of key personalities connected to the security apparatus. His conclusion was that we are faced with a fourth succession scenario, in which Kim Jong-un has consolidated his power, but still relies on a support network consisting of the extended Kim family.

Victor Cha commented on both power transitions. For South Korea, he suggested that the outcome of the parliamentary elections was a surprise, but the fact that Saenuri won after a major revision of its policies was a positive sign for Korean party politics. It showed that in the future, Korean politics will revolve around a competition of ideas and visions, rather than the traditional regionalism and scandals. The implication of this year's elections for the ROK-US relationship is unlikely to be dramatic, due the maturity and resilience of the alliance. Regarding the change in the North Korean leadership, Cha commented that the country's political culture will help Kim Jong-un stay in power. From an international perspective, there is now increased uncertainty about North Korea, as the nature of the regime and its internal dynamics have changed. This has exacerbated the difficulty of diplomacy with Pyongyang. How resilient the new regime turns out to be will depend on whether it can deliver policy successes for its different constituents.

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