

## North Korea after Kim Jong-II: Implications for East Asian Security

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### *Summary*

The demise of the North Korean leader Kim Jong-II on December 17, 2011 has introduced a new dimension to the security situation in Northeast Asia. Though the fragility of peace is a cause of concern, it does not warrant any rash intervention by the international community, particularly the Big Four nations - the US, China, Japan and Russia. So far, the transfer of power to Kim's youngest son, Kim Jong-un, appears to be smooth. However, there is an element of uncertainty lurking behind this transition of power. The future of East Asian security would largely be shaped by developments that unfold in the Korean peninsula.

The demise of the North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il on December 17, 2011 has introduced a new dimension to the security situation in Northeast Asia. His death, it is feared, will make the situation in the Korean peninsula and Northeast Asia worse. Though the fragility of peace is a cause of concern, it does not warrant any rash intervention by the international community, particularly the Big Four nations – the US, China, Japan and Russia. What is needed at the moment is the exercise of restraint by the Big Four as they watch the new situation unfold and that they act in close cooperation to prevent any crisis in view of the power vacuum.

So far, the transfer of power to Kim's youngest son Kim Jong-un appears to be smooth. However, there is an element of uncertainty lurking behind this transition of power. Security analysts and Korea watchers are forecasting grim scenarios. Though none of these are likely to occur in the near term, the uncertainties are likely to continue for quite some time.

### End of an era?

The transfer of power from the "Dear Leader" to the "Great Successor", as the Koreans say, means that the junior Kim is inexperienced and immature. It is however premature to say that Kim's death signals the end of an era. Kim Jong-Il's death was not unexpected. He survived a massive stroke in 2008. But in view of his failing health, he decided on his third son, Kim Jong-un, to be his successor and elevated him to the status of a four-star General and Vice Chairman of the Party's Central Military Commission. Kim Jong-un's actual age is unknown but it is believed to be below 30 and therefore inexperienced.

Kim Jong-Il was chosen as successor by his father and founder of North Korea Kim Il-sung in 1974 at age 33 and learnt under his father's shadow for some 20 years, before taking over after his father's death in 1994. This young General lacks that experience. He was elevated abruptly and many wonder how the communist dynasty founded by his grandfather will fare. He is expected to be mentored by Jang Song-thaek, Vice Chairman of the National Defence Commission and husband of Kim Jong-Il's sister, Kim Kyong Hui, until his grip on power is cemented.

The present Defence Minister Kim Yong-hi, aide to the late Ko Yong-hi, wife of Kim Jong-Il and mother of Kim Jong-un, will also help Kim Jong-un consolidate power. The Defence Minister accompanied Kim Jong-Il during his visits to China in May 2010 and Russia in August 2011 and his support to the young General would mean that he will have the military's full support during the time when he consolidates power. The fact that as the head of the state funeral committee Kim Jong-un announced not to accept any foreign delegation to participate in the funeral on December 28 was not only in tune with the isolationist behaviour of the Hermit Kingdom but also indicated that he is the new face of the regime now. This decision not to have foreign guests could have been because Kim Jong-un was not ready for foreign scrutiny. On the contrary some argue

that an invitation to foreign guests for the funeral could have been spurned. Sensing such a possible humiliation as well as embarrassment, Pyongyang decided to announce to the world that no delegations would be invited to the funeral. No one is sure about the reason behind the decision to keep foreign guests away, nor would it be ever known.

In view of his manifest inexperience, lacking an organic military pedigree, the de facto power is likely to rest in the tested and capable hands of his uncle and aunt. Though the transition of power looks smooth, there is the risk of elite instability. Also, in the absence of Kim Jong-Il's restraining influence, one of Kim Jong-un's siblings and/or other disaffected members of the elites have the potential to create obstacles in the process of the Great Successor consolidating his power.

The year 2012 could prove to be grimmer if Kim Jong-un chooses to pursue a bold and adventurous, but a more risk-prone path to fast-track his rise. In the year of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Kim-Il Sung, he could take decisions aimed at taking the country to the threshold of economic development that may have unpredictable consequences for the country and the neighbouring nations. For, an opaque state cannot be expected to pursue a concrete, forward-looking market-opening strategy. Rather the policies are expected to play out in the form of external adventures, such as a military confrontation with South Korea, with perilous consequences.

Moreover, on the external front, its relations with the US, Japan, China, Russia and South Korea and these countries' perception of North Korea in their foreign policy and strategic discourse will be important for North Korea's future. One issue that concerns all these countries is ensuring political stability. Each of them is committed to stability of the Korean peninsula. As consolidation of power and not denuclearization is likely to be the priority for Kim Jong-un, the external actors will need to exercise restraint and desist from any strong response to the regime's expected or unexpected misadventures.

### Three main concerns

The main concerns regarding North Korea may be highlighted here.<sup>1</sup> As already stated, the first is the question of stability and how to guarantee this. Kim Jong-un's two elder brothers could try to indulge in a power play to unseat their younger sibling or could be used as pawns by the government or the military. In the short term, the succession process might coalesce around the third dynastic succession led by Kim Jong-un. It is to be seen if the new leader will be able to consolidate power. This process is bound to create a lot of uncertainty.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Auslin, "What Obama should tell China as transition unfolds in North Korea", *Fox News*, December 19, 2011 at <http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2011/12/19/what-obama-should-tell-china-as-transition-unfolds-in-north-korea> (accessed on | December 20, 2011)

The second concern is whether Kim Jong-un will indulge in any military action to signal that he is under control and thereby warn the US, Japan and South Korea not to push for the fall of the regime or try to create/encourage conditions for the regime's fall. Should Kim Jong-un feel insecure, some kind of military action to intimidate Pyongyang's neighbours cannot be ruled out. That would be a huge miscalculation by Pyongyang. President Lee Myung-bak already announced after the incidents in March and November 2010 that South Korea would not tolerate any more provocations and would be prepared for a military response. South Korea goes into elections in December 2012 and President Lee would like to expand his domestic support base by maintaining his hard-line stance. He played to the gallery of the people's sentiment by raising the "comfort women" issue with Prime Minister Noda Yoshihiko when he visited Japan in December 2011 with similar objective. A military conflict, if it breaks out, could go out of control quickly and bring in other powers' involvement.

The third concern is what long-term policy the new leader would follow and whether to liberalise the economy by market reforms. If he does adopt such a policy, it would be a good opportunity for the other members of the six-party talks to push for the denuclearization of North Korea's ballistic missile programs. If this path is followed, regional stability can be attained, thus signaling the dawn of a new era for Asia. At the moment, this appears to be the least likely of the paths the new leader will opt for.

## Reaction of major powers

### United States

The US was confused whether to officially respond to Kim's death. It considered the options of issuing a formal condolence message for a leader notorious for running a brutal police state or not do so and risk the anger of a new regime. Finally, it chose the former option. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton only urged a "peaceful and stable transition". She reiterated that the US and Japan hope for improved relations with the people of North Korea and expressed concern about their well-being. Here, the US may have erred. It would have been diplomatically apt if a carefully worded note focusing on the collective willingness (of US and its allies such as Japan and South Korea) to engage in dialogue with the new leader while avoiding paying tribute to the old, could have been sent. The diplomatic silence on the part of the US could send a wrong signal to Pyongyang, which in turn could harden its stance on the denuclearization issue. A strategy of engagement should always remain the preferred option for the US.

The US could see Kim's death as an opportunity to improve relations. Relations between the US and North Korea have long been strained over Pyongyang's nuclear weapons ambitions, its role in nuclear proliferation and its often tense military face-offs with South Korea, US' alliance partner in East Asia. The US could send signals to the new leader to re-open long-stalled negotiations over abandoning its nuclear weapons program

in return for food aid. If this is an opportunity, the other extreme is also possible. So, the US and South Korea continue to maintain their security alert status.

## China

Beijing has shown little interest in joining Seoul, Tokyo and Washington in preparing for the potential collapse of the regime in Pyongyang. This stance has seemingly persisted even in the wake of Kim Jong-Il's death. China is the North's top ally and economic benefactor. In turn, North Korea provides Beijing with a buffer against US influence in the region. Though Chinese thinkers favour an authoritative conversation with Pyongyang, Beijing's reluctance continues for its own strategic reasons. It remains to be seen whether this posture will change as China undergoes its own leadership change in 2012.

China's role on the future of North Korea is going to be crucial to watch but its true objectives would remain difficult to identify conclusively. The fear of mass migration of refugees across the North Korean border of over 1,400 miles in the event of instability is one factor that shapes Beijing's pursuit of stability. Also, Beijing's enhanced role in North Korea could also be motivated by its strategy to deny the US an increased presence in the region in cooperation with its two allies – Japan and South Korea. Beijing would be happy if Pyongyang continues to remain as an unpredictable nation for Washington.

## Japan

Tokyo was taken by surprise by the sudden announcement of Kim Jong-Il's death. Despite the global unease with this development, the response in Japan took a slightly different tone from that of the majority of the international community. Despite the fact that Japan falls well within the reach of North Korea's long-range ballistic missiles, majority of Japan's newspapers paid attention to the abductee issue in equal measure as the nuclear issue. The focus on the abductee issue might appear bemusing but the newspapers were only reflecting an issue that remains a priority for the readers. For example, *The Mainichi Shimbun* said that Japan should use this opportunity to settle the abduction issue.<sup>2</sup>

Another editorial in the *The Yomiuri Shimbun*, argued "(I)f progress is made on the nuclear issue, it is also possible regarding the abductions," pointing to the fact that "no negotiations on the issue since September 2008, when North Korea unilaterally broke its promise to reinvestigate the abductees' cases."<sup>3</sup> After years of painful talks, North Korea

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<sup>2</sup> "Japan should use death of N. Korean leader to settle abduction issue", *The Mainichi Shimbun*, editorial, December 20, 2011, <http://mdn.mainichi.jp/perspectives/news/20111220p2a00m0na001000c.html> (accessed on December 20, 2011)

<sup>3</sup> 'Beef up international cooperation on nuclear, abduction issues', *The Yomiuri Shimbun*, editorial, December 21, 2011, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/dy/editorial/T111221005244.htm> (accessed on December 29, 2011)

eventually admitted to kidnapping at least thirteen Japanese citizens during the height of the Cold War but refused to disclose further details. In 2002, Koizumi Junichiro took the bold step to travel to Pyongyang and secured the release of five abductees, then seen as a diplomatic success. The problem however is that despite the significance of this matter for Japan, in the international community, it lacks urgency as compared to North Korea's weaponisation program. Therefore, Japan has to fight a lone battle on the abductee issue.

Japan's politicians and bureaucrats have not remained wanting in engaging with South Korea to see if dissatisfaction with North Korea's actions can be translated into greater bilateral cooperation with the South. Even that suffered a setback when South Korean President Lee Myung-bak raised the "comfort women" issue with the Japanese Prime Minister during his visit to Japan in December 2011. However, following the leadership transition in North Korea, Japan, South Korea and the US were soon back to deepen their engagement strategy to get the stalled six-party-talk restarted. Japan is also trying to reach out to China as China is widely considered the greatest 'influencer', if not having the primary 'control' over Pyongyang's policy.

On December 25, 2011 Prime Ministers Noda and Wen Jiabao of Japan and China respectively, met in Beijing in advance of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the normalisation of bilateral relations. The range of topics that were discussed covered territorial disputes, direct exchange of currencies and the future of the Korean Peninsula in the post-Kim Jong-Il era.<sup>4</sup> Whether the Korea issue could be a long-lasting factor in sustaining the bonhomie between Japan and China remains to be seen.

Not all in Japan consider indirect diplomatic efforts as being capable of averting a crisis. There is a view reported in *The Asahi Shimbun* that suggests that "(I)f North Korea plunges into turmoil during this transitional period of power, all of East Asia may slide into a state of flux." It raises a pertinent question: "How should Japan and other neighboring countries respond to Kim's sudden demise, which could have huge implications for the region?"<sup>5</sup>

The prospects for dramatic market reforms are also viewed with scepticism. North Korea continues to pursue a 'military-first' doctrine which places ultimate priority on maintaining the world's fourth largest army despite the abject poverty of its people. When North Korea tested its short-range missiles on the morning of Kim's death on December 17, 2011, it suggested a strong military posture under the new regime.

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<sup>4</sup> 'China and Japan plan direct currency exchange agreement', *BBC News*, December 26, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-16330574> (accessed on December 29, 2011)

<sup>5</sup> 'Post-Kim Era: Many uncertainties about new regime', *The Asahi Shimbun*, December 20, 2011, [http://ajw.asahi.com/article/asia/korean\\_peninsula/AJ201112200046](http://ajw.asahi.com/article/asia/korean_peninsula/AJ201112200046) (accessed on December 29, 2011)



Like China, Japan is equally concerned with the possible surge of refugees should turbulence inside North Korea turn ugly and therefore has contingency plans in place.<sup>6</sup> Military alerts, however, have not been raised.

## Russia

Like the US, Japan and China, Russia is too concerned about a smooth transition of power. Both Russia and North Korea have always had close economic ties and have recently expanded them. Russia, therefore, would want stability in the Korean peninsula. In particular, Russia is involved in two big projects – the Trans-Korean gas pipeline, and the Khasan-Rajin railway that aims to connect both the Koreas – and would not like these to be derailed. During Kim Jong-Il's visit to Russia in August 2011, the pipeline deal was discussed. As regards the second, the Russian Railways has already completed the first step of the Khasan-Rajin project in October 2011 and is working towards its completion at the scheduled time.<sup>7</sup>

Russia is trying to reclaim some of its lost glory and reasserting its position in Northeast Asia. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, then Soviet Union was North Korea's biggest economic partner and an important supplier of strategic materials and technology. For example, in 1989, North Korea's trade with the Soviet Union comprised 56.8 per cent of its total trade. Since then, this volume has decreased and Russia is now third among North Korea's major economic partners, with a trade of about \$100 million a year. It is estimated that the number of North Korean specialists working in Russia is about 15,000.<sup>8</sup> In view of this, any instability in North Korea would adversely affect Russia's economic interests. Another reason for Russia to deepen economic ties with North Korea is because the latter owes the former an outstanding debt estimated at \$8.8 billion and Russia aims to recover some of these from the pipeline deal as Pyongyang would earn a substantial amount from allowing transit rights.<sup>9</sup>

## Expert Opinions

Experts on Northeast Asian issues almost unanimously agree that the new situation is pregnant with plenty of uncertainties. For the time-being, Tokyo is taking a 'wait-and-

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<sup>6</sup> 'Government mulls steps to handle Korean refugees', *The Japan Times*, December 25, 2011, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/nn20111225x1.html> (accessed on December 25, 2011)

<sup>7</sup> "Russian businesses eyeing North Korean transition", December 20, 2011, at <http://rt.com/business/news/russia-north-korea-jongil-225/print/> (accessed on December 21, 2011)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> See the author's Issue Brief "Kim's Russia Visit: Evaluating Diplomatic Currency", November 9, 2011 at <http://www.idsa.in/issuebrief/kimsRussiaVisitEvaluatingDiplomaticCurrency> (accessed on December 30, 2011)

see' attitude as the North is thought to be ruled under 'collective leadership'. North Korea specialist at Keio University, Professor Okonogi Masao is of the view that the power transition would not result in "any major change in the regime."<sup>10</sup> Consolidation of power within is likely to dominate the work of North Korea's elites over coming months.

Victor D. Cha, an expert on Northeast Asia at Center for Strategic and International Studies, observes: "Up until tonight, if anybody has asked you what would be the most likely scenario under which the North Korean regime could collapse, the answer would be the sudden death of Kim Jong-Il. And so I think right now, we're in that scenario and we don't know how it is going to turn out."<sup>11</sup> According to Baek Seung-joo of South's Korea's National Institute for Defense Analyses, "worries are high". According to him, since Kim Jong-un is young, that the "elite generals' loyalty to him may grow thin in the long run."<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, Ralph A. Cossa is of the opinion that one can only guess who the real power-wielders are and who will be "whispering in his ear and to whom he will be listening?"<sup>13</sup>

According to Michael Green, a Bush administration Asia specialist and present senior adviser at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, North Korea is not going to suddenly collapse. According to him, it is likely to be several months before the North again begins to assert itself. Its aim to establish itself as a "mighty and prosperous state" in 2012, 100 years after the birth of first leader Kim Il-Sung will remain on course. The new leader might decide on a third nuclear test and more missile tests to demonstrate to the world and its people that the country has full nuclear weapons capability.

*Wall Street Journal* columnist Michael Auslin opines that China may use the pretext of instability in North Korea and intervene to maintain stability along its border. He says that such a situation "would present Seoul and Washington with a choice to respond or whether to accept an increased Chinese influence, if not some level of control, over the North."<sup>14</sup> Yevgeny Kim of the Institute of the Far East, however, contends that there is no need to panic as "all major appointments are under control". There are too many hawks in South Korea ready to do away with the regime and the temptation to overthrow the

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<sup>10</sup> 'Post-Kim Era: Many uncertainties about new regime', *The Asahi Shimbun*, December 20, 2011, n. 4

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in [http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/45720281/ns/world\\_news-asia\\_pacific/t/could-be-turning-...](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/45720281/ns/world_news-asia_pacific/t/could-be-turning-...) (accessed on December 21, 2011)

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in <http://www.nti.rsvp1.com/gsn/article/china-south-korea-push-new-n-korea-nuclear-talks-envoy/?mgh=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.nti.org&mgf=1> (accessed on December 24, 2011)

<sup>13</sup> Ralph A. Cossa, "The Kim is Dead! Long Live the Kim?", *PacNet* #70, December 20, 2011 at <http://csis.org/publication/pacnet-70-kim-dead-long-live-kim> (accessed on December 29, 2011)

<sup>14</sup> Michael Auslin, n.1.



regime might be strong. However, this overlooks the fact that South Korean society is too divided to be able to unite against the North. Another expert of the same Institute, Konstantin Asmolov, argues that the “unsettled differences between Seoul and Pyongyang could send the entire Asia and Pacific into chaos”.<sup>15</sup> Yet another North Korean expert, L. Gordon Flake of the Mansfield Foundation says that “US diplomacy is dependent on policy, not personalities”, but that “Pyongyang is unlikely to be able to make any key decisions right now”.<sup>16</sup>

## Reactions from India

There has been no reaction from the Indian government so far, except that media reports have presented their independent perspectives. For India, nuclear proliferation activities in North Korea and its complicity with Pakistan’s nuclear weapons program is a matter of concern. Kim will be remembered in India for his help in bringing many Indian cities within range of Pakistan’s nuclear weapons. Pakistani nuclear scientist A.Q. Khan’s sharing of sensitive uranium enrichment technology stolen from Western Europe and his suspected visit to North Korea 13 times to promote Pyongyang-Islamabad nuclear nexus is well known. India is concerned that Pyongyang transferred medium range missile technology to Khan’s lab, which resulted in the induction of Ghouri missile with a range of 1,500 km into Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal. In the changed situation, India fears a revival of North Korea-Pakistan nuclear bonding.<sup>17</sup>

In the meantime, India’s ties with South Korea are deepening politically and economically. India’s neutrality officially ended when India openly disapproved the sinking of the *Cheonan* in March 2010. As a strategic partner, South Korea can count on India’s cooperation along with Japan and the US in the event of a crisis engulfing the Korean peninsula.

## Future of nuclear talks

Though North Korea walked out of the six-party-talks in 2009, the US had been working quietly to resume dialogue with North Korea. The US has pressed Pyongyang to suspend

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Sergey Anisimov and Vladimir Fedoruk, “North Korea: Shrouded in Mystery?”, December 25, 2011, <http://www.eurasiareview.com/25122011-north-korea-shrouded-in-mystery-oped/> (accessed on December 29, 2011)

<sup>16</sup> “The demise of Kim Jong-Il is a transition fraught with uncertainty, nervousness and danger”, December 20, 2011, at <http://www.thenews.com.pk/TodaysPrintDetail.aspx?ID=83096&Cat=1> (accessed on December 29, 2011)

<sup>17</sup> “Kim Jong-Il’s death: India fears revival of North Korea-Pak nuclear bonding”, December 20, 2011 at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Kim-Jong-ils-death-India-fears-revival-of-North-...> (accessed on December 20, 2011).

its uranium enrichment activities as a first step towards wider nuclear talks in return for food and other humanitarian aid. Kim's sudden death has been a setback to this diplomatic momentum. The US at least knew who to talk to when Kim was in charge but there is a lot of uncertainty after his death. It will remain unclear for a while who calls the shots in North Korea's opaque regime.

The biggest challenge for the US, therefore, is how to restrain the authoritarian regime's development of nuclear warheads, growing array of short-range, medium-range and intercontinental ballistic missiles. It has a large fleet of Nodong ballistic missiles with a range of 1,400 km or 870 miles, enough to hit South Korea, Japan, parts of Russia and China. North Korea conducted nuclear tests in 2006 and 2009, and then revealed a new uranium enrichment program in 2010. It transpired in November 2011 that Pyongyang was constructing a new light water reactor at Yongbyon. In view of the inexperience, the new untested leader is likely to continue the nuclear path as a deterrent against regime instability. This could also be a way to consolidate his hold on power and therefore political reforms or opening up to the West are unlikely to happen soon.

The US policy of carrot and stick did not work. Pyongyang played to the US gallery and succeeded in extracting food aid by promising to restart nuclear talks. The US decided to resume food aid that had remained suspended since early 2009 when Pyongyang ordered aid groups monitoring the distribution to move out. Both the US and North Korea also started discussing the resumption of a program to bring home the remains of US servicemen killed in the Korean War. This was another attempt to inject a measure of trust into their relationship. When the Kim Jong-Il regime showed interests to resume nuclear talks, the US decided to send a shipment of 240,000 tons of humanitarian aid to North Korea, what would have been the first US food aid in almost three years to a country where three million people are believed to be malnourished.<sup>18</sup> Following Kim's death and the ensuing political instability and uncertain future of the nuclear talks, the US decided to hold back the shipment. Cha says that "what comes next will be far more significant than the question of whether nuclear talks can get traction".<sup>19</sup>

Despite the uncertainties, China and South Korea have decided to work towards quick resumption of the six-party talks on denuclearization. South Korea's lead nuclear negotiator Lim Sung-nam visited Beijing in the aftermath of Kim's death and held discussion with top Chinese officials including Chinese nuclear envoy Wu Dawei. The two nuclear negotiators pledged to support activities to promote stability in the North.

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<sup>18</sup> Paul Richter, "Kim Jong-Il's death creates diplomatic uncertainty for U.S.", *The Los Angeles Times*, December 19, 2011, at <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/world/la-fg-us-north-korea-20111220,0,46577...> (accessed on December 20, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

However, it does not appear likely that the six-party talks on denuclearization will resume anytime soon as Pyongyang is not going to give up its nuclear weapons. Yet, there is no better option available to all parties than to try making efforts to get Pyongyang back to the negotiating table with the hope that some day it will yield, see reason and understand the futility of pursuing its current policy of nuclear weaponisation.

## Assessment

Can we expect that something similar to what happened in China after Mao's death on September 9, 1976 will happen in North Korea as well? One would recall that Mao's death was quickly followed by the arrest of the Gang of Four; Mao's wife too was arrested four months later. His death precipitated China's embrace of economic reforms. Can one expect a similar thing to happen in North Korea? One may not expect such a thing to happen in North Korea in the immediate future. This is because the state is too authoritarian and reclusive with rigid information control which prevents clamour of freedom by the people. The second question is, will the Arab Spring spread to North Korea? With the military's hold firmly in place, this seems to be unlikely scenario too.

During Kim Jong-Il's time, the regime in Pyongyang surely had a plan in place for the April 15, 2012 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of founder Kim Il-sung. After the respectable pause for mourning, the new leader is expected to proceed along the already agreed structured plans. The US and South Korea will hold the presidential elections in November and December 2012 respectively and this will surely be factored in Pyongyang's strategy of consolidation of power. This could mean continuing talking with the US to get food aid, and also opening up to South Korea, for economic considerations. However, it is unclear whether this would lead to eventual resumption of the six-party talks.

On the other hand, the other extreme is also a possibility. After a quiet transition in leadership, the North might carry out additional provocations as a means of demonstrating the younger Kim's authority. The two attacks in March and November 2010 that killed 50 South Koreans were suspected to be engineered by Kim Jong-un as part of a strategy for strengthening his position ahead of his assumption of power.

Along with a massive conventional military, the North is believed to hold enough plutonium for fewer than 10 nuclear weapons, though it has not demonstrated the capacity to convert nuclear warheads to missiles or bombs. The Stalinist state is also reported to hold thousands of tons of chemical warfare material and an active biological weapons program. It is believed to possess eight nuclear weapons but to destabilise the region, even one is enough.

The big question centers on the future of nuclear arsenal. The real issue to worry about is who retains control over the hermit nation's nuclear weapons or authority for their potential use. Whose finger can now access the veritable trigger over the nation's

deliverable weapons, if there are any? So little is known about the secretive regime's nuclear arsenal that even the best-informed Korea experts are reluctant to speculate what command-and-control changes might be afoot now that Kim is gone. The nuclear arsenal can be a key asset for the new regime to consolidate its domestic support base and assert itself internationally. But it could also play a role in succession struggle, if Kim Jong-un fails to assert his political authority.

According to *Military Balance 2011*, North Korea has 1.2 million people on active duty (1.02 million army personnel, 60,000 navy and 110,000 air), plus 189,000 active paramilitary personnel and further 600,000 reservists.<sup>20</sup> There are also 5.7 million reservists in the worker/peasant Red Guard, which is compulsory to the age 60.<sup>21</sup> Pyongyang is also suspected to have a submarine capable of launching a "suicide" nuclear attack.

North Korea is paranoid about the outside world and believes that it needs nuclear weapons for deterrence. But the political elite probably will realise that use of the nuclear weapons would mean its own immediate destruction.

Any developments in the nuclear impasse are not likely to occur before spring or summer of 2012. That would provide the nation with time to move past the death of Kim Jong-Il and for setting up the new power structure giving enough time to Kim Jong-un to consolidate power and establish his legitimacy.

It is anybody's conjecture about North Korea's possible future. Eventual collapse could be a possibility but no time frame can be put for that to happen. Reunification of the two Koreas is desirable but does not seem to be in the horizon. Should the new regime decide to be adventurous and launches a military strike on its southern neighbour with a view to signal its control at the helm, it is likely to elicit a commensurate military response from South Korea as Pyongyang would have breached the tolerance threshold. The situation would soon get out of control and necessitate the involvement of other countries. On the other hand, should the new leader not behave irrationally and introduce market reforms and allow North Korea to be embraced by the outside world it would augur well for North Korea's future. But if instability continues and threat perceptions further heighten with little hope for reconciliation, South Korea and Japan could review their nuclear options. Thus, the future of East Asian security would largely be shaped by developments that unfold in the Korean peninsula.

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<sup>20</sup> See, International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2011*, available at <http://www.iiss.org/publications/military-balance/the-military-balance-2011/> (accessed on December 26, 2011)

<sup>21</sup> "North Korea: 10 facts about one of the world's most secretive states", at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2011/dec/19/north-korea-facts-secretive-state> (accessed on December 29, 2011)