

Guns quiet for now but hermit kingdom stirs

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The Australian
20 December 2011
P. 7

For all its inevitability, the death of North Korea's leader Kim Jong-il could bring a cascade of unpredictable and perilous consequences.

So far the signs are reasonably stable. A successor has been named by Pyongyang's state media: Kim Jong-il's third son, the Bright Leader, 29-year-old Kim Jong-un.

The guns are quiet on the inaptly named demilitarised zone between the two Koreas. The North is in mourning. The funeral has been set for December 28.

In the week ahead, the young Kim and his supporters will work to consolidate the succession, a process begun more than a year ago when he was promoted to senior military rank and seemingly anointed by a congress of the Korean Workers Party.

But even assuming an initial period of grace there is enormous uncertainty about what will follow next year. This, oddly, is meant to be the year when, according to official North Korea lore, the strength and prosperity of the state will be accomplished -- a century since founder Kim Il-sung's birth.

In the more prosaic realm of intelligence and strategic analysis, it has long been standard practice to think about succession crises in North Korea. The US, Japan, South Korea and China all play this game.

The worst-case scenario has often been assumed to be a contested succession leading to internal strife, perhaps even civil war, within the hermit kingdom. Refugees flood into China, control loosens on Pyongyang's nuclear weapons and external powers, especially Washington and Beijing, contemplate forceful intervention that might bring them into confrontation with each other.

Thankfully, this prospect remains distant. Whatever his baleful legacy of political oppression, cruelty and atomic arms, the late Dear Leader at least took belated steps to domestic stability when he began grooming Kim Jong-un.

It would be exaggerated and premature to speculate that North Korea is on the brink of regime collapse.

But some kind of regional security crisis remains plausible, which is why the immediate diplomatic focus is right to call for facts and calm. The first public statement from the White House said the US remained committed to stability on the Korean peninsula and to the freedom and security of its key Asian allies Japan and South Korea. This could yet become the big test of Barack Obama's commitment to Asian security.

The anxieties in Seoul and Tokyo about what might happen next are genuine. The South Koreans and the Japanese feel vulnerable to an impoverished neighbour with a massive military bolstered by nuclear bombs, chemical munitions and missiles.

In November last year, North Korea launched a lethal bombardment on the South Korean island of Yeonpyeong. Observers were initially baffled about the reasons for this act of belligerence, extraordinary even by Pyongyang's standards.

One credible explanation was that this attack was a blooding for young Kim Jong-un, a show of his determination and military prowess to bolster his questionable leadership credentials.

There were reports he had visited the batteries shortly before the barrage.

What is not known is whether such a deed was sufficient to prove that he has what it takes to lead a

militarised and totalitarian state.

A crucial question on the minds of Korea-watchers in the weeks and months ahead will be whether the new ruler will need more acts of international assertiveness to make his mark.

North Korea has tested nuclear devices twice, in 2006 and 2009. The first was widely regarded as a fizzer, the second a small but real fission explosion, perhaps a quarter the size of the blast that destroyed Hiroshima.

There has been much expert speculation that Pyongyang has a technical need to test again if it is to have an atomic arsenal it can believe in, especially if it wants a compact warhead to fit on a missile.

The North's hardliners might see another nuclear test as serving a diplomatic and, weirdly, economic purpose as well.

After all, the sad rhythm of diplomacy with North Korea in the past decade has been of laborious dialogue punctuated by outrageous deeds, atomic blasts, missile tests and revelations of secret programs. Each time, the North has tried to sell the world the same tired horse: a new promise of restraint in return for aid and engagement.

Lately, not all the signs have been bad. Reports have surfaced just this week that North Korea and the US were on the verge of a new deal: food aid in exchange for a halt to uranium enrichment.

However, this means that Kim Jong-il may have chosen a bad time to die. These talks are likely to be put on hold at least until the character of the leadership in North Korea is clear.

And if maintaining power in Pyongyang ultimately rests on a perpetual sense of siege, then it is unlikely the new leader's first diplomatic step will be about compromise and concession.

In North Asia, caution will be the watchword in 2012.

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