

Plus ça change in North Korea

DEREK BURNEY

The Globe and Mail
December 20, 2011

The death of Kim Jong-il is a stark reminder of the persistent danger of major conflict on the Korean Peninsula. If there is anything more threatening or more destabilizing than a tyrannical nuclear-weapons state with the world's fifth-largest standing army, it is the uncertainty stemming from a power struggle to fill its leadership vacuum. (North Korea tested some short-range missiles Monday, but analysts are suggesting they were unrelated to the leader's death.)

Few outside North Korea will mourn the loss of Kim Jong-il. He was a thoroughly corrupt and immoral dictator indulging in expensive cognac, movies and fine cigars while hundreds of thousands of his fellow North Koreans starved to death.

All that is certain is that his third son, Kim Jong-un, only in his late 20s but named as the "Great Successor," has neither the skill nor the acumen to take the reins of power. He is quite inexperienced and, therefore, vulnerable to those around him with real power, primarily the military, who have the most at stake in a leadership transition. Kim Jong-il had been groomed by his father for more than 20 years, whereas Kim Jong-un has had little time to learn the art of absolute power in a country that The New York Times has described as "one of the most opaque and repressive regimes in the world."

The military, along with some of the Kim family elders (including Kim Jong-il's brother-in-law and previous No. 2 Jang Song-taek), will likely jockey to fill the immediate void. But no one should underestimate the peculiar staying power of the Kim dynasty. It has no parallels anywhere, except perhaps in the writings of George Orwell.

There was a time, until the mid-1960s, when North Korea's economy was actually on a par with that of the South. Today, after decades of unrelenting emphasis by the North on military and nascent nuclear power at the expense of all else, the two economies stand in stark contrast at opposite poles of development. South Korea has the world's 15th-largest economy. While there are virtually no valid statistics, North Korea is estimated to be 90th. Today, many other countries seek to emulate the success of South Korea's dynamic economy, but only a very few rogue states are attracted to the nuclear-weapons technology of the North. The political systems of the two Koreas could not be more distinct.

As always, China stands firmly in North Korea's corner, reflecting a mix of factors – shared geography, similar ideologies and basic geopolitics. That may be reassuring in that there is little for China to gain from any precipitous military adventures by its neighbour, the consequences of which could be damaging for all in the region. In fact, Beijing's restrained response to a fisheries incident with South Korea a few weeks ago suggests that China may now see more value from its large economic relationship with South Korea than from its "eternal friendship" with the North.

Some suggest that shortages of food and hard currency will encourage stability in North Korea. Others, however, predict a period of confrontation to paper over internal turmoil. One thing that is unlikely is that there an "Arab Spring" movement will emerge. The transition is more likely to be bumpy, and notions of freedom of any kind will not be evident. The most hermetically sealed and most erratic totalitarian state of all may show some cracks and generate troublesome sparks over time, but there is little prospect of fundamental change.

Because so little is known about who is likely to emerge with real power in the days ahead, apprehension, with equal parts of concern, will be uppermost. The on-again-off-again six-party talks – which have been more off than on – aimed at restraining North Korea's nuclear ambitions were on the verge of renewal before Kim Jong-il's death. Given the paranoia of a regime in transition, the prospects of a resumption of or a permanent resolution to conflict on the peninsula are now as remote as ever.

South Korea and Japan, backstopped by the United States, will be on special alert until more is known about the succession in Pyongyang. The passing of one of the world's more bizarre tyrants is a time for all of South Korea's allies to show resolve and solidarity, emphasizing to others, notably China, the advantages of stability. Above all, we need to ensure that the Proliferation Security Initiative, to which Canada belongs, remains strong and effective.

Derek Burney, senior strategic adviser for Norton Rose OR LLP, was Canada's ambassador to South Korea from 1978 to 1980.