

April 9, 2013

## Domestic reasons behind the crisis

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One year has passed since the new leader, Kim Jong-un (age 30), rose to power in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The alleged "Will of Kim Jong-il", Kim's late father, demanded that the successor mend relations with South Korea, and move to resume the Six-Party talks, with the aim of gaining recognition as a nuclear power. Given these mandates, the last year might be seen as rather unsuccessful. So how can we explain the current developments in North Korea?

Kim Jong-un opened 2012 as an 'era of prosperity', promising 23.5 million North Koreans that none of them "will need to tighten their belts again". To support this claim the government built apartment blocks for 100,000 families, stacked the shops with Chinese-made goods, and launched a satellite into orbit. New economic measures were promised and foreign trade encouraged. New forms of art and entertainment, such as all-female electronic music band, a new roller-coaster, and dolphinarium were pompously introduced in Pyongyang, the show-case capital of the DPRK.

Yet following the short-lived honeymoon with hope, a chain of confounding policy decisions began to take shape: the DPRK-US food-aid and normalisation agreement was thwarted by a provocative rocket launch; the madness of an anti-South Korean smear campaign, actually bolstered the electoral success of conservatives in Seoul; and several of the North's most conservative top-brass officials were removed from their positions, ostensibly for insubordination. Some suspect that a group of disgruntled officers even attempted to assassinate Kim Jong-un in November 2012. If the rumours are true and Kim had to join hands with loyal hardliners to save his regime, the political chess match could have played a major role in North Korea's recent aggressive behaviour, including the ICBM launch and the third nuclear test.

Regardless of this potential power struggle, North Korea entered the year 2013 as a self-proclaimed nuclear state equipped with long-range rockets, a growing 3G mobile phone network, and the rapidly improving physical infrastructure. Pyongyang was turning into a mecca for multinational CEOs and sports celebrities. North Korean mines were extracting various natural resources vital for its own use and for export (uranium, rare earth metals, high grade coal and gold). Tens of thousands of North Koreans worked at the Kaesong Industrial Complex, a joint project with South Koreans just north of the De-militarised Zone, producing hi-tech and consumer goods.

It was the UN Security Council Resolution № 2087 (issued on 22 January 2013) that suddenly changed the dynamics of North Korea's development. In punishing Pyongyang for the rocket

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The opinions expressed herein are strictly personal and do not necessarily reflect the position of ISPI.

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launch that violated earlier injunctions, the international community demonstrated a rare unity. Even Beijing and Moscow supported the carefully worded text and demanded that Pyongyang freeze its indigenous nuclear and rocket technologies. Kim Jong-un took personal offence to the resolution and ordered the detonation of a third nuclear bomb in February. Another strong-worded UNCS Resolution № 2094 (dated by 7 March 2013) followed. Kim was inclined to rip up the 1953 Armistice and proclaim war on the US and Republic of Korea.

The joint US-ROK military drills, Foal Eagle and Key Resolve, also added fuel to the flames. Pyongyang promised to target American bases not only in South Korea, Okinawa, Guam, and Hawaii but also aimed its strategic rocket forces at the continental US. Foreign diplomatic missions in Pyongyang were also informed that their safety would not be guaranteed after 10 April. All North Korean workers were withdrawn from the Kaesong Industrial Complex, the last surviving zone of cooperation between the North and the South.

Despite what seems to be a flagrant, masochistic and witless escalation of international tensions, the origins of and rationale for the current North Korean crisis and nuclear standoff are domestic. In order to play down the seasonal spring hunger and with the festivities of Kim Il-Sung's anniversary fast approaching, the young leader Kim Jong-un must do something extraordinary. By inculcating ferocious anti-Americanism the regime diverts the people's attention from an economy in shambles and consolidates them around the Supreme Commander. Kim's increasingly dubious assurances of prosperity can now be naturally abrogated in light of a "hostile imperialist attitude" and "imminent war". The near-war situation will also give youthful Kim additional extraordinary powers that will help him overcome his real and imaginary rivals in the succession process.

Unfortunately this adds credence to the idea that the purpose of Kim Jong-un's succession was to avoid any substantial change in the DPRK due to the fact that change threatens the very existence of the North Korean state. If anything along the lines of that which played out in the Soviet Union, following Gorbachev's Perestroika and Glasnost, were to happen in North Korea, the leadership would be unable to control the situation. The system would implode under the pressure of economic reform or political change. As the elites in North Korea are equally reluctant of any idea of change, the mood to maintain domestic stability prevails, and with it, the status quo.

Leadership succession in North Korea has definitely become a case of 'like father, like son'. Kim Jong-un is the legitimate successor and perfect choice to continue the Kim dynasty; he is of revolutionary blood and widely recognised as such. He is eulogised and worshipped as the Supreme Commander by the Korean People's Army and as the Dear Leader by members of the Korean Workers' Party. Common people associate him with their expectations of socio-economic improvement and national security, and he is also a token of stability for the elites. If everything goes according to his father's plan Kim Jong-un will stay in power for a very long time.

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Le pubblicazioni online dell'ISPI sono realizzate anche grazie al sostegno della Fondazione Cariplo.

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