

## The Death of Kim Jong-il and China's Preventive Diplomacy

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North Korea is not a big country, but it is a very important one. It is one of the few countries which still reflect the reality of the Cold War, and its stability is a key issue for the regional security. The Korean War 1950-1953 divided the Korean Peninsula into two countries: North Korea and South Korea<sup>1</sup>. North Korea was combined with Russia, China and other communist countries. South Korea allied itself with the US, Japan and other Western countries. The Cold War ended, but its legacy remains. The Korean Peninsula is not reunified, and people can still find hostility between the two Koreas and two groups of countries. South Korea is relatively rich and stable. However, North Korea is facing serious problems of poverty, and the rule of the family Kim has been threatened by a regime change, which can be caused by civil revolt or the intervention of outsiders. In order to guarantee its safety, North Korea has been developing its own nuclear ability. Afraid by the nuclear strength of North Korea, the US, South Korea and Japan try to force North Korea to abandon its nuclear programme, and this has reinforced the hostility between the two groups. The security situation in the Korean Peninsula is not hopeful.

The instability of the Korean Peninsula became even worse after the death of Kim Jong-il, since North Korea has been ruled for several decades by the Kim Family, especially by Kim Jong-il since

1994<sup>2</sup>. The death of Kim Jong-il on 19th December 2011 has made the future of North Korea uncertain. North Korea has become more vulnerable to internal and external threats. The future of North Korea and the security situation in Northeast Korea has attracted the attention of the international community<sup>3</sup>. The attention goes especially to China, because China is considered as North Korea's primary ally<sup>4</sup>. People are wondering if China is worried as other countries and what China will do to pacify the region. In fact, China remains relatively calm<sup>5</sup>. Why such a calm in front of the crisis of its neighboring country? This paper tries to explain the calmness of China after the death of Kim Jong-il, to analyze China's options to respond to any uncertainty, and the answer is based on the theory of preventive diplomacy.

### Preventive Diplomacy

China's reaction towards the death of Kim Jong-il can be explained by the theory of preventive diplomacy. The term "preventive diplomacy" is usually used in the international arena and refers

<sup>2</sup> "Profile: Kim Jong-il", BBC News, January 16, 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/1907197.stm>.

<sup>3</sup> "Kim Jong-il death - reaction as it happened," the Guardian December 19, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/blog/2011/dec/19/kim-jong-il-death-reaction>.

<sup>4</sup> "China Knew Early of Kim Jong il's Death", CNBC, December 20, 2011, [http://www.cnbc.com/id/45745804/China\\_Knew\\_Early\\_of\\_Kim\\_Jong\\_il\\_s\\_Death](http://www.cnbc.com/id/45745804/China_Knew_Early_of_Kim_Jong_il_s_Death).

<sup>5</sup> "Kim Jong Il is dead - Candid Chinese reactions", Seeing Red in China, December 19, 2011, <http://seeingredinchina.com/2011/12/19/kim-jong-il-is-dead-candid-chinese-reactions/>.

<sup>1</sup> Michael Hickey, "The Korean War: An Overview", BBC History, March 21, 2011, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/coldwar/korea\\_hickey\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/coldwar/korea_hickey_01.shtml)

## China's Preventive Diplomacy

to efforts of outside nations or groups of nations to prevent the escalation of conflicts between or within other nations. The assumption of preventive diplomacy is that intractable conflicts are easier to avoid before they happen, rather than fix them once they have occurred<sup>6</sup>. Preventive diplomacy reemerged in the theoretical literature in the early 1990s, initially without significant practical application. It was presented as an official policy of the United Nations by then-Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, in his 1992 Agenda for Peace. The end of the Cold War had suggested that the international community could intervene flexibly and effectively to prevent the explosion of conflicts. The most desirable and efficient use of preventive diplomacy is to ease tensions before they result in conflict - or, if a conflict breaks out, to act swiftly to contain it and resolve its underlying causes<sup>7</sup>.

The preventive diplomacy has the following characteristics: it depends on early warning that the risk of conflict exists; it requires information about the causes and likely nature of the potential conflict so that the appropriate preventive action can be identified; and it requires the consent of the party or parties within whose jurisdiction the preventive action is to take place. It is, in a short-term intervention, encouraging a peaceful solution, and in a long-term one, a prolonged initiative to stabilize and solidify a new peace agreement. The activities that are considered to be part of preventive diplomacy include: monitoring a tense situation; intervening to stabilize a potentially violent conflict before its outbreak; initiating activities that address the root causes as well as the triggers of a dispute; establishing mechanisms to detect early-warning signs and monitor specific indicators that may help to predict impending violence; coordinating interventions to prevent the creation of conflictual situations, and institutionalizing the idea of preventing violence on local, regional, and international levels<sup>8</sup>.

6 "Preventive Diplomacy / Conflict Prevention", International Online Training Program On Intractable Conflict, Conflict Research Consortium, University of Colorado, USA, 1998, <http://www.colorado.edu/conflict/peace/treatment/prevent.htm>.

7 Boutros Boutros-Ghali, "An Agenda for Peace, Preventive diplomacy, peacemaking and peace-keeping." Report of the Secretary-General pursuant to the statement adopted by the Summit Meeting of the Security Council, New York, 31 January 1992. <http://www.un.org/docs/SG/agpeace.html>.

8 "Preventive diplomacy and peacemaking", Report of the Secretary-General, March 24, 2012, <http://www.un.org/docs/SG/SG-Rpt/ch4b.htm>.

The relationship between China and North Korea is qualified as close "as lips and teeth"<sup>9</sup>. They are close because they are neighbouring countries, and they share a similar historical and ideological background. Their relations are more strategic considering the geopolitics in Northeast Asia. North Korea is often considered as a buffer state of China<sup>10</sup>. The instability of North Korea can cause instability in China, and a possible conflict between North Korea and Western Countries may involve China. The peace in North Korea is very important to China, and China has no choice but to defend it. However, facing the death of Kim Jong-il and the uncertainty of North Korea, China remains calm. Why? Some argued that China knew in advance the death of Kim Jong-il<sup>11</sup> and the succession of Kim Jong-un, youngest son of Kim Jong-il. The father already brought the son to visit Beijing and presented him to Chinese leaders<sup>12</sup>. It may be a good reason but another more convincing reason is that China is prepared for any case that will happen: peace or war. As a result, China doesn't worry much and has adopted the attitude of "wait and see".

### • Peace

Regional countries which once fought the Korean War and paid high sacrifice don't want to replay the same situation, and cherish the peace in the region very much. In order to keep peace after the death of Kim Jong-il, they see 3 possibilities: firstly, peaceful transition of North Korea: If North Korea can carry out a successful reform and become stronger, it will be able to keep stability in its territory and withstand the intervention of outsiders. Secondly, normalization of relations with the US and its allies: under these circumstances, North Korea will no longer be considered as a "rogue state" by the US, and the two

9 Grant Montgomery, "North Korea and China remain as close as lips and teeth", Family Care Foundation, December 20, 2011, <http://grantmontgomery.blogspot.com/2011/12/north-korea-and-china-remain-as-close.html>.

10 Lawrence Wilkerson, "North Korea as a Buffer State for China", TheRealnews (blog), VOLVBILIS NEWS REPORT, December 5, 2010, <http://volvbilis.wordpress.com/2010/12/05/north-korea-as-a-buffer-state-for-china/>.

11 "China knew early of Kim Jong-il's death - reports", Reuters, December 20, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/12/21/us-korea-north-china-idUSTRE7BK06Z20111221>.

12 "China Dismisses Reports of Kim Jong-un Visit", The Chosunilbao, Jun. 19, 2009, [http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2009/06/19/2009061900402.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2009/06/19/2009061900402.html).

antagonistic parties can even become friends. Thirdly, reunification of two Koreas: only the two Koreas can be reunified, there is no war between them and no reason for outsiders to intervene. The peace in Northeast Asia is not unreachable.

As every country, North Korea doesn't want to stay poor and unsafe. North Korea has a strong interest in opening-up and developing its economy. Kim Jong-il already had his own plan for this purpose by referencing China's developing model<sup>13</sup>. For North Korea, China is an example as a Communist country which has conducted market-orientated reforms successfully. North Korea made several experimental attempts in the past decade, including setting up a special economic zone and conducting a currency reform<sup>14</sup>. The country hopes to become a "strong and prosperous nation" since the year 2012, the 100th anniversary of the birth of Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong-il's father<sup>15</sup>. The death of Kim Jong-il gave North Korea another chance to have a braver reform. This opportunity seems more possible since Kim Jong-un was educated in Switzerland<sup>16</sup>. Only if its security is guaranteed and the economic gain is sufficient, North Korea can go further. The peaceful transition of North Korea will certainly stimulate the normalization of its relations with Western countries and even the reunification of the two Koreas.

China welcomes peace in North Korea and has tried its best to induce North Korea to compromise with its opponents in a peaceful way. China does have influence on North Korea, since it is North Korea's biggest trading partner and main source of food, arms, and fuel<sup>17</sup>. Some 45 percent of all North Korean trade is with China, and between 30 and 50 percent of China's entire for-

ign aid budget is spent on North Korea<sup>18</sup>. China is able to use its influence on North Korea and to ameliorate the security in Northeast Asia. China invited Kim Jong-il, showed its economic performance with the "open-door policy", and persuaded North Korea to engage in such a reform<sup>19</sup>. Meanwhile, China has strengthened its economic ties with the US, South Korea and Japan, and has persuaded them to ameliorate their relations with North Korea. It is argued that the normalization of relations between North Korea and Western countries may not be good for China, but a stable Northeast Asia is more important for China. In a similar way, China has supported the peaceful reunification of the two Koreas, and has made its contribution to the peace of Northeast Asia.

### • War

Peace is precious, and never easy to realize. Kim Jong-un, as the successor of Kim Jong-il, has little experience and is unknown to the outside world<sup>20</sup>. Kim Jong-il had decades to cement his succession to Kim Il Sung, but Kim Jong-un is only some 27 years old<sup>21</sup>. Is he able to resist the internal power struggle or possible external intervention? The answer is uncertain: The power struggle between Kim Jong-un and another son of Kim Jong-il is not ended. The estranged eldest son of Kim Jong-il, Kim Jong-nam believes that the impoverished government is in danger of collapsing and that his young half brother is merely a figurehead<sup>22</sup>; The North Korean military force would not listen to the young leader, and could intervene into the struggle politics; Chang Sung Taek, Kim Jong il's brother-in-law, would dictate to Kim Jong-un, and

13 Chico Harlan, "In China, Kim Jong Il studies the reforms he's spent decades resisting", *World*, May 25, 2011, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia-pacific/in-china-kim-jong-il-studies-the-reforms-hes-spent-decades-resisting/2011/05/25/AGwGIJBH\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia-pacific/in-china-kim-jong-il-studies-the-reforms-hes-spent-decades-resisting/2011/05/25/AGwGIJBH_story.html).

14 "North Korea's reform and opening-up", *Global Times*, August 31, 2010, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/opinion/editorial/2010-08/568593.html>.

15 "Succession in North Korea: Grief and fear", *The Economist*, Dec 31, 2011, <http://www.economist.com/node/21542227>.

16 "North Korea's leader Kim Jong-un's schooldays in Switzerland revealed", *Mirror*, December 22, 2011, <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/north-korea-leader-kim-jong-uns-98511>.

17 Jayshree Bajoria, "The China-North Korea Relationship", *Council on Foreign Relations*, October 7, 2010, <http://www.cfr.org/china/china-north-korea-relationship/p11097>.

18 ANDREI LANKOV, "Why Beijing Props Up Pyongyang", *Global Edition Opinion*, June 11, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/12/opinion/12iht-edlankov.html>.

19 David Wivell, "Kim Jong-Il Visits China For the Third Time In Just Over One Year: Report", *Huff Post*, 20 May 2011, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/05/20/kim-jongil-visits-china-f\\_n\\_864647.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/05/20/kim-jongil-visits-china-f_n_864647.html).

20 Jonathan Levine, "Is North Korea Headed for Chinese-Style Reform?", *The National Interest*, January 17, 2012, <http://national-interest.org/commentary/north-korea-headed-chinese-style-opening-6372>.

21 "Succession in North Korea: Grief and fear", *The Economist*, Dec 31, 2011, <http://www.economist.com/node/21542227>.

22 "Doubts on North Korea From Dead Leader's Son", *The New York Times*, January 18, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/19/world/asia/kim-jong-nam-says-north-korea-may-collapse-book-claims.html>.

could play the role of a secretive puppet master<sup>23</sup>.

The stability of North Korea is also threatened by external factors: The reform may not be enough, because North Korea is facing the demand of Western Countries for a regime change<sup>24</sup>. In other words, North Korea should change its communist regime and the leadership of the Kim family, but it will not be acceptable for Kim Jong-un and the recent group of interest. Kim Jong-un may intentionally confront Western countries to show his strength and ability. At the same time, the two Koreas are competing to play a leading role in the process of reunification, and the clash between the two Koreas seems inevitable. For the US, the divided Korean peninsula maybe good for their presence in Northeast Asia, and the reunification is good only when the unified Korea is under the influence of Western countries. Only if the competition between the two Koreas happened, the US and Japan would intervene, and instability would spill over into the region. When tension is out of control, war is going to break out.

War would be disastrous for China. The most direct influence would be refugees coming in Northeast China<sup>25</sup>. Northeast China is a traditional region of heavy industry, and too many refugees in the regions would cause huge damage. If the fire of war comes to China, China may be involved in fighting another Korean War. China wouldn't allow such a situation to happen. From a security aspect, China has promised to provide protection to North Korea under the 1961 Sino-North Korean Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance<sup>26</sup>; Economically, China supports North Korea by a huge amount of assistance<sup>27</sup>, and by providing suggestions for an economic reform; Politically, China has launched a shuttle diplomacy to avert

23 Ishaan Tharoor, "Chang Sung Taek", Time, December 19, 2011, <http://globalspin.blogs.time.com/2011/12/19/after-kim-jong-il-a-look-at-the-kim-family-tree/slide/chang-sung-taek/#chang-sung-taek>

24 Douglass K. Daniel, "McCain talks 'regime change' for North Korea", Salon, Nov 28 2010, [http://www.salon.com/2010/11/28/us\\_us\\_nkorea/](http://www.salon.com/2010/11/28/us_us_nkorea/).

25 Joel R. Charny, "Protection Strategies for North Korean Refugees in China" (paper presented at the Testimony, Issues Roundtable, Congressional-Executive Commission on China, April 19, 2004), <http://www.northkoreanrefugees.com/nk-ref-report.pdf>

26 Jayshree Bajoria, "The China-North Korea Relationship", Council on Foreign Relations, October 7, 2010, <http://www.cfr.org/china/china-north-korea-relationship/p11097>.

27 Jeong Jae Sung, "North Korea Reveals Chinese Aid", DailyNK, February, 6, 2009, <http://www.dailynk.com/english/read.php?catald=nk00400&num=4524>.

a Korean crisis<sup>28</sup>. If war really breaks out, China can receive North Korean refugees in its Northern provinces in a passive way. But China can also behave in a more positive way, that means sending troops in North Korea by invitation. China can create a buffer zone for refugees in North Korea, and try to reestablish order by using a certain level of force. North Korea and China are closely linked by a railway across the Yalu River, and China can react as soon as possible to any incident in North Korea.

#### • Nuclear Issue

One issue is most likely to sabotage peace and cause war, it is the North Korean Nuclear Issue. This issue is so delicate that the international community should handle it carefully. During the Korean War, North Korea was threatened, by the US Army, with the use of nuclear weapons. In order to have a nuclear balance, North Korea started its nuclear programme. In 2006, North Korea conducted an underground nuclear weapons test, and became the world's eighth atomic power. Even though it is unclear whether North Korea has mastered the ability to deliver a working nuclear weapon, the world opinion is worried<sup>29</sup>. The US and their allies are afraid of a nuclearized North Korea against them. China is also worried that North Korea's nuclear programme would cause conflict and turbulence in the region. Therefore, they have tried to persuade North Korea to abandon its nuclear programme by the carrot and stick approach.

China is the most suitable country to persuade North Korea. The more the Western countries do the same, the more North Korea doubts their real intention. Regarding the close relationship between China and North Korea, China has no choice but to take its responsibility. From 2003 to 2009, China held six rounds of Six-Party Talks which included China, North Korea, South Korea, The US, Japan and Russia<sup>30</sup>. Even though the talks didn't fully meet their objective, at least they maintained the exchange among regional countries, and re-

28 "China launches shuttle diplomacy to avert Korean crisis", People's Daily, December 1, 2010, <http://www.peopleforum.cn/viewthread.php?tid=52831>.

29 "North Korea's Nuclear Program", Times Topics, Jan. 11, 2012, [http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/northkorea/nuclear\\_program/index.html](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/northkorea/nuclear_program/index.html).

30 Jayshree Bajoria, "The Six-Party Talks on North Korea's Nuclear Program", Council on Foreign Relations, July 1, 2009, <http://www.cfr.org/proliferation/six-party-talks-north-koreas-nuclear-program/p13593>.

alized peace during these years. In April 2009, North Korea quit the talks, and the six parties lost their platform of discussion. However, the death of Kim Jong-il and the succession of Kim Jong-un opened another window of opportunity. China now is trying to catch this precious opportunity, bring six parties together, and restart the process of the Six-Party Talks. After a tremendous work, recently on 28 February 2012, North Korea announced a possible resumption of stalled international talks over its nuclear arsenal by announcing it would suspend its uranium enrichment programme in return for needed American food aid<sup>31</sup>.

In spite of the success of the Six-Party Talks, the international community still doubts the future of North Korean Nuclear Issue. Most people don't believe that North Korea would really abandon its nuclear programme except being coerced. It is argued that South Korea doesn't want North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons either, because once the two Koreas are reunified, the new Korea could become a stronger and nuclearized country. They are right. When regional countries are discussing the possible restart of the Six-Party Talks, North Korea announced its project of launching the domestically produced Unha-3 rocket scheduled for mid-April 2012 as part of celebrations to mark the 100th birthday of Kim Il-sung, and it is considered as a thinly disguised test for a ballistic missile capable of delivering a nuclear warhead<sup>32</sup>. The international community, including China, is looking for a solution in order to remove the military nuclear power of North Korea: In case of peace or the reunification of the two Koreas, China could work with other countries to persuade the two Koreas to put their nuclear project under the supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA); Similarly, in case of war or the occupation of one Korea by another, the nuclear project of North Korea should also be independent and put under the supervision of the IAEA.

## Conclusion

The death of Kim Jong-il has a big impact on North

<sup>31</sup> Peter Foster, "North Korea agrees moratorium on nuclear missile tests", The Telegraph, March 03, 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/northkorea/9114483/North-Korea-agrees-moratorium-on-nuclear-missile-tests.html>.

<sup>32</sup> Julian Ryall, "Crash fears over North Korean satellite trajectory", The Telegraph, March 25, 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/northkorea/9157167/Crash-fears-over-North-Korean-satellite-trajectory.html>.

Korea, and the future in North Korea is significant to the security of Northeast Asia. There are two possibilities, like many other security issues: peace or war. Peace can be realized by the reform of North Korea, and reach the normalization of relations between North Korea, South Korea and Western countries, and finally realize the reunification of the two Koreas. The war can be caused by an internal clash in North Korea or by force of a regime change by Western Countries, and it would be disastrous for the region. Another hidden danger which is most likely to cause war is the development of North Korean Nuclear Programme. A nuclearized North Korea is a threat for the regional security, but to force North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons would cause a stronger opposition even a nuclear war. For the security and stability of Northeast Asia, regional countries should seek peace, avoid war and realize the denuclearization of North Korea.

After the death of Kim Jong-il, China remained calm, because China tried its best to keep peace in Northeast Asia, and prepared itself for an eventual war in the region. China's strategy can be explained by the theory of preventive diplomacy. As an influential country for North Korea, China has used all the means to prevent the escalation of a potential war. China invited Kim Jong-il, showed its success of socialist reform, and persuaded North Korea to follow the similar way. China induced North Korea and Western countries to normalize their relations, and supported the reunification of the two Koreas. China paid special attention to North Korean Nuclear Issue, and persuaded North Korea to abandon its nuclear programme. In the long run, China wants to resolve the problem on a regional level, and to establish a security mechanism in Northeast Asia. For this purpose, China is engaged in a shuttle diplomacy among regional countries, and has held six rounds of Six-Party Talks. The Six-Party Talks served as a platform for discussion among regional countries, and helped to keep peace in Northeast Asia. In spite of all the difficulties, China's preventive diplomacy has obtained success.

North Korea's future is relevant to the security of Northeast Asia, which is important for China's external environment. North Korea insists on its nuclear ability, and quit the Six-Party Talks. As a result, the risk of confrontation between North Korea and Western countries remains high. In order

to control the situation, China and regional countries need the most to restart the Six-Party Talks. China is trying its best for this purpose, and the succession of Kim Jong-un provided the opportunity. Only if the Six-Party Talks can be restarted, they can be gradually transformed to a regional security mechanism, which is beneficial for North Korea, China and all the regional countries. While the prospects are bright, the road has twists and turns. The peace in North Korea and in Northeast Asia is not easy to realize. China's influence on North Korea is strong but still limited. The future of North Korea is still uncertain, and China needs more work and preparation in cooperation with regional countries.

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