

NORTH KOREA

Death of Kim Jong-il

Facts:

Kim Jong-il, the North Korean leader, died on 17 December 2011, at the age of 69, after having ruled the country with an iron hand since 1994. On the very same day, KCNA called upon “all the members of the party, servicemen and the people to faithfully follow the command of comrade Kim Jong-un”, a form of official dubbing for the youngest of the three sons of Kim Jong-il, 27 or 28 years old, who brings the third generation of the Kim dynasty to power.

Comments:

- The succession had been secretly planned by Kim Jong-il, following an episode of apoplexy that nearly killed him in August 2008. Ever since, he was trying to push his son up the ranks of the State apparatus. Kim Jong-un finally came out of the shadows by being appointed as the four-star general in September 2010, and then Vice-Chairman of the Central military commission of the party. At the head of the security services, he then tried to gradually set up his networks vis-a-vis the “old guard” of the party.
- However, the legitimacy and the authority of the new Head of state are far from being accepted. There are several possible scenarios:
 - A succession “without a hitch”, during which Kim Jong-un could at least initially become a “puppet” in the hands of the more experienced leaders. If this happens, Chang Song Taek, Kim Jong-il’s brother-in-law, could be led to play a key role.
 - A war of clans, in a situation where the leading figures in the party and the old guard, mainly the military institution, could be less inclined to hand over the power to a young leader. In this scenario, Chinese mediation should, as usual, be decisive.
 - The scenario of a civil war, which is improbable as long as the succession has been planned in advance, would further drown the country in chaos. This will compel the other member countries of “Six Party Talks” to intervene, perhaps even militarily, and could jeopardise the regional balance.
 - A military adventure that could, under the pretext of nationalism, intensify everybody’s attachment to the current regime. This can only be part of a final attempt to remain in power if the throne becomes shaky.
- In this context, South Korea and Japan along with China and the United States are on their guard and are anxiously keeping an eye on the development of the situation in the country. Today, everybody hopes that the succession takes place smoothly and that stability is maintained in the peninsula.
- The absence of any certainty regarding the circumstances of Kim Jong-il’s death makes it impossible to know whether the strong diplomatic message, sent to the international community on 17 December, according to which Pyongyang accepted to halt its uranium enrichment programme for military purposes, is the product of the new authorities. Nevertheless, it is certainly plausible, and it shows signs of opening up as well as appeasement, at least temporary, of international tensions.
- In the short term, it involves identifying the current priority: establish the “new” regime at the head of the country. Plus, this standpoint facilitates calling for urgent aid related to food and energy that the population requires to get through winter.