The Secretary's Morning Intelligence Summary

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DPRK: Slow-Motion Succession

Kim Jong II has apparently been hospitalized, creating a leadership vacuum and slowing consolidation of his succession. The lack of firm leadership has allowed a reopening of old debates on policy toward the South and the economy; so far, US-DPRK relations appear unaffected.

Seven weeks after his father's death, Kim Jong II has still not taken over as head of party and state. The official North Korean explanation—that a new leader cannot be installed while the people are still in mourning—is wearing thin. Evidence is accumulating that there are other forces at work.

Indisposed

There have been numerous reports that Kim Jong II is ill. Several sources say he has diabetes, perhaps complicated by other ailments. Illness would explain Kim's prolonged absence from public view at a time when he should be highly visible. It may also have created a leadership vacuum when the system can least afford it. If Kim does not make an appearance on National Day early next month, new questions will arise about his position.

Not ready for prime time

An unattributed August 21 Pyongyang radio talk on the succession implicitly admitted that the process was incomplete. The talk noted that even when the successor is "designated in a timely manner, it does not mean that the question of the leader's successor is completely solved." The commentary emphasized that work remains to be done in building the party's organizational and ideological foundations and in establishing the successor's "leadership system"—both tasks that a symposium last December credited Kim Jong II with having successfully completed.

Under attack?

There are other signs that the succession may be sputtering.
Iron broom

The leadership lineup (Korean Workers’ party Politburo members, party secretaries, and vice premiers) is unchanged. The only anomaly has been the ranking of Korean People’s Army vice marshals ahead of the party secretaries on two ceremonial occasions. Kim Jong Il will have to make some leadership changes soon, to root out pockets of opposition and put his own stamp on his regime. The reference in the August 21 radio talk to establishing the “successor’s leadership system” suggests that this unfinished business will be addressed soon.

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