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TAGS: PREL, PHUM, PGOV, SOCI, KN, KS, CH  
SUBJECT: A/S CAMPBELL DISCUSSES DPRK FUTURE WITH EXPERTS

Classified By: AMB D. Kathleen Stephens. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

#### SUMMARY

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1. (C) A group of five ROK opinion leaders and experts on North Korea issues told A/S Kurt Campbell on February 3 it was difficult to predict whether Kim Jong-il's youngest son Kim Jong-un would be able to succeed his father without sparking instability in the North. Of the five experts, one thought the younger Kim might succeed and one argued his lack of leadership experience made it unlikely he would win the support of the ruling elites. They agreed that Kim Jong-il's brother-in-law Jang Song-taek would prove a strong rival for the younger Kim and would probably be tempted to challenge him. Kim Jong-il had used draconian controls and international aid to discourage coups after having foiled three such attempts in the late 90s. China's strategic interests were fundamentally at odds with U.S.-ROK interests in North Korea. End Summary.

Succession in Progress but Success in Doubt

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2. (C) Assistant Secretary Kurt Campbell met on February 3 with Korean opinion leaders with a keen interest in DPRK issues to hear their views on the future of North Korea. The experts agreed that regime succession was fully underway and that the North Korean people had accepted the process. Kim

Sung-min, Representative for Free North Korea Radio, a VOA-style broadcast station run by North Korean refugees, said a North Korean diplomat based in Beijing had told him over the phone that morning that the DPRK Foreign Ministry had instructed all of its overseas missions to "lay the foundation for leadership change in Pyongyang." Most of the experts believed the challenge for Kim Jong-il's youngest son and designated heir, Kim Jong-un, would most likely come after his father died. Former Prime Minister Chang Sang recalled the Chosun Dynasty's 500 year history in which political intrigue and tension might simmer for years, but tended to erupt only after the king died.

3. (C) The group agreed that Kim Jong-il's brother-in-law and right-hand man Jang Song-taek was spearheading the succession drive and would be a rival for power once Kim Jong-un's father died, but the group was split on the younger Kim's prospects for holding onto power. Kim Sung-min believed it would be difficult for Jang to wrest power from the younger Kim once the succession process was complete. National Assemblywoman Park Sun-Young suggested it was unclear whether Jang would be content to control the younger Kim from behind the curtain, or would challenge him directly for outright control. Park is a member of the right-of-center Liberty Forward Party and was formerly the Director of the North Korea Human Rights Studies Center at Korea's Catholic University.

#### Doubts About Younger Kim's Experience

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4. (C) There were many reasons to doubt that Kim Jong-un would be able to successfully fend off challenges to his control after his father died, according to Han Ki-Hong, President of DailyNK, an NGO focused on democratizing North Korea and disseminating information about conditions within the country. Han noted that Kim Jong-il had twenty years of experience as an official of the Korean Workers' Party before his father died. Furthermore, Kim Jong-il had the benefit of years of guidance from his father after he had been officially anointed in 1980 to eventually succeed him. By contrast, Kim Jong-un had very limited experience and might not get much direct guidance before Kim Jong-il dies. Even now, Han said, it was not clear that Kim Jong-il's health was good enough to exercise the faculties necessary for day-to-day management of state affairs. Given the limited opportunity the younger Kim had to gain experience, Han doubted his ability to solidify his position in the Party and win the unwavering support of Pyongyang's power elites. Han recalled the tumultuous state of affairs in the ROK following the death of President Park Chung Hee in 1979 and suggested the DPRK succession would be "100 times more troublesome."

Han is a veteran of the ROK student democratization movement that emerged in the post-Park era.

#### Tight Control and Aid Kept Regime Afloat

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5. (C) Kim Heung-kwang, Representative for North Korea Intellectuals Solidarity, an NGO formed by intellectuals who had defected from the North, opined that brutal repression and international aid had been the secrets of Kim Jong-il's ability to fend off challenges. After three separate coup attempts in the 90s, Kim Jong-il had implemented very strict controls and sent a stern warning to would-be plotters by executing anyone who had been even remotely involved in the plots. Therefore, only the military could even dare consider rising up, but the Security Services had successfully kept the military in check. Kim Heung-kwang went on to suggest that the "indulgence" of the international community over the past ten years had also helped sustain the regime. The large-scale assistance provided to the regime by the ROK, China, the U.S., Japan and others had been intended in part to avoid a hard landing, and indeed had kept the regime afloat, he said. Park Sun-Young suggested that North Korea had skillfully played Washington and Beijing off one another. She believed that the DPRK had exploited large amounts of assistance from China, taking advantage of a situation in which Beijing was presumed by Washington to have significant influence over Pyongyang.

#### China Complicates the Endgame

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6. (C) The experts agreed that China's obsession with DPRK stability at all costs, was clearly and fundamentally at odds with U.S. and ROK interests. Given a choice between reaching out to Seoul or Beijing, Park believed that Pyongyang elites would reflexively look to China for support if they believed they needed help in maintaining stability. The Seoul option would be unacceptable because of the U.S.-ROK alliance and concerns over becoming subservient to Seoul. China, on the other hand, would gladly provide support with few or no strings attached, just to maintain the DPRK as an independent entity, she maintained.

7. (C) Han Ki Hong noted that although Washington had a keen interest in both denuclearization and human rights, the U.S. stake in North Korea was minimal compared to that of China by virtue of its proximity to the North. China did not share American perspectives on these two key issues, considering them somewhat abstract. Rather, Beijing was concerned about what it considered to be more concrete issues, such as a potential flood of "economic migrants" and broader social

unrest on its immediate border.

Reaching the People and Close Cooperation are Key  
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8. (C) Negating Chinese influence over the long term, Park Sun-Young observed, would involve close U.S.-ROK cooperation in winning the hearts and minds of the North Korean people. Park said that while she understood the importance of the nuclear issue for Washington, she urged more focus on human rights issues that would convince the populace that "we are on their side."

STEPHENS