

Korean Reunification — Closer than Anyone Thinks?

Salvatore Babones asks if Korean reunification is on the cards

North Korea's 31-year-old 'Supreme Leader' Kim Jong-un was last seen in public on September 2, 2014. On October 14 the North Korean government released undated photos purportedly showing Kim paying an inspection visit to a government research facility, but as of writing there is still no firm evidence that he is at the reins of government despite massive international media attention questioning his grip on power.

Power in North Korea has been passed down from father to son over the last seven decades as 'Great Leader' Kim Il-sung was succeeded by 'Dear Leader' Kim Jong-il who begat 'Supreme Leader' Kim Jong-un. As North Korea prepares to enter its eighth decade, Kim is potentially missing in action and there is no designated successor in sight.

Conventional policy analysis predicts instability and mayhem if Kim does not resurface soon to resume control of his domain. But another outcome is possible, perhaps even likely. It is conceivable that Kim may have been deposed by his generals due to a volatile combination of murderous ruthlessness and youthful inexperience. If so, the generals may be much more open than the Kim family was to compromise with the South.

Military juntas the world over have come to understand the benefits — to themselves — of compromise with the United States and acceptance of capitalism. All across Asia, from Indonesia to Myanmar to South Korea, the families of former military commanders are now extraordinarily wealthy property developers, investors, and local fixers. And then there's the example of China right next door.

The Kim family that has ruled North Korea for seven decades has every incentive to cling to absolute power. As recent events across the Middle East have shown, family autocrats do not, perhaps cannot, step down gracefully. North Korea's faceless generals, on the other hand, are unlikely to face international tribunals or execution by firing squad. The rational thing for them to do is to hand over the reins of power and fade into wealthy obscurity.

If the North Korean generals do sue for peace, expect reunification in short order. The South Korean government may be against it but the South Korean population wants it and South Korea is a vibrant democracy. If the German precedent of 1989-1990 is any guide, popular euphoria will quickly sweep away official attempts to put on the breaks. As soon as the credibility of military power begins to erode, people power will ensure rapid reunification.

The reunification of Korea and the spread of democracy from the South to the North through the mundane mechanism of crony capitalism may not make for a very inspiring story, but that does not make the story any less likely. The only person standing in the way is Kim Jong-un, and he may not be standing at all. A charismatic dictator cannot remain out of sight for long without

losing control of his people's imaginations. Whether he is in fact alive and well making inspection tours, is just sick or really has been deposed, Kim Jong-un may already have passed the point of no return.