

## Policy Watch: Will Kim Jong Il fall?

Published: Oct. 16, 2006 at 8:35 AM

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North Korea's missile tests on July 4, 2006, briefly succeeded in capturing the world's attention, but this was quickly overshadowed a little over a week later by the conflict that erupted between Israel and Lebanon. North Korea's recent nuclear test, though, has galvanized the world's attention on this reclusive nation and its oddball dictator, Kim Jong Il, even though the test appears to have been something of a dud.

Reports have emerged of a power struggle in Pyongyang between moderates (who want to normalize relations with the West to promote economic development in order to avoid the destabilization that extreme poverty can cause) and hard-liners (who fear closer relations with the outside world and economic development will lead to the destabilization that led to the downfall of other Marxist-Leninist regimes that tried to reform).

Kim Jong Il's solution to the problems posed by continued repression on the one hand and reform on the other is to behave threateningly toward the outside world in order to extort just enough aid from China and South Korea to feed his armed forces and (to a lesser extent) his people, but also justify continued isolation by portraying the outside world as threatening. Even he must understand, though, that his threatening behavior runs the risk of war. If indeed he is incurring this risk in order to maintain his control internally, then this suggests that his regime is indeed shaky.

But will Kim Jong Il be overthrown? And if so, how can this be done? The least likely way, unfortunately, is a peaceful democratic revolution such as those that occurred in most of Eastern Europe in 1989, Serbia in 2000, Georgia in 2003, or Ukraine in 2004. For these countries all had authoritarian rulers, but enough freedom and contact with the outside world existed to allow for democratic movements to emerge in them. The "Dear Leader" has made sure that neither of these conditions exists in North Korea.

Yet even if they did emerge, it is doubtful that a democratic revolution could occur there. In previous cases of peaceful democratic revolution, key elements of the security services have defected to the democratic opposition, and this has led in turn to the defection or immobilization of the rest of the armed forces. This process has occurred partly as a result of elements within the armed forces wanting democratization, but also because the armed forces can usually be confident that they will survive as an institution under a democratic government (even if some of their top leaders are purged).

In North Korea, though, the question of democratization is intertwined with the question of unification with the South. If democratization leads to unification, North Korea's military leadership undoubtedly fears that there will be no place for them in the new order, as it is the South's armed forces that will be the basis of a unified Korea's defense establishment. If the North Korean armed forces anticipate that democratization will lead to unification and their disbandment, unemployment, and impoverishment, then they are likely to continue backing the Dear Leader.

Another way in which Kim Jong Il might fall, of course, is through a simple coup d'etat. As elsewhere, this could be relatively bloodless. It would probably even be welcomed by North Korea's neighbors and long-suffering citizens if it led to reduced tensions and economic development. The Dear Leader, however, is undoubtedly alive to this possibility and devotes considerable time and attention to making sure it does not arise.

Yet just because a democratic revolution or a coup overthrowing Kim Jong Il are unlikely does not mean that his regime is invulnerable. His possession of nuclear weapons (if he does indeed possess them) will not help him either. The Soviet Union's possession of the world's largest nuclear arsenal, after all, did not prevent it from collapsing in 1991. Kim Jong Il is undoubtedly right in thinking that his acquisition of nuclear weapons will deter outside powers from attacking North Korea. They will do nothing, however, to deter his internal opponents from attacking him if and when the opportunity arises.

There can be no guarantee for those that hope for such an opportunity that it will arise. But Kim Jong Il has no guarantee that it will not.

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