

**KIM JONG-IL'S ILLNESS AND
NORTH KOREA'S SUCCESSION CRISIS**

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Executive Summary

1. The widely reported stroke of Kim Jong-Il in August 2008 was partially proved by his absence in the 60th anniversary of the founding of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), as celebration of every 10th anniversary is the country's key event of the year.
2. In North Korea the most likely trigger for a potential crisis to become a reality is its leader's incapacitation and failed succession. This eventuality seems to be approaching, even though Kim Jong-Il may have somewhat recovered, as indicated by his meeting with Wang Jiarui, head of Chinese Communist Party's liaison chief, on 23 January 2009.
3. Even though a crisis due to Kim's failed health has subsided for the time being, succession is still an unresolved challenge. With no institutionalized mechanism for an orderly transfer of power, each round of succession is likely to deal a fatal blow to the whole system. Kim is walking on an extremely fine line that does not allow much room for unforeseen circumstances such as his failing health.
4. Thus the dynastic cycle in North Korea has again reached a critical point. First, Kim has not designated a clear successor. Even if someone has been designated upon Kim's new illness, he may not have enough time to consolidate his power.
5. Second, Kim has persistently employed divide-and-rule method to maximize his own authority. This creates a few power cliques around his family members, a situation which may generate a zero-sum power struggle upon Kim's departure.
6. Third, Kim's dictatorship prevents the state apparatus from establishing horizontal links of communications among them. With multiple power centers

rivaling each other, the central government becomes paralyzed once the system loses its head.

7. Fourth, if the military can hold the post-Kim Jong-Il regime together, then the collapse of the Kim dynasty may not lead to the collapse of the country. A military junta may emerge to manage the state. As a result North Korea may continue to exist.
8. Yet Kim's divide-and-rule principle has also seriously factionalized the Korea's People Army (KPA). If the KPA cannot act as a unified force in times of power transfer, there is a probability that the DPRK may experience serious internal conflicts.
9. Fifth, the faltering succession system and resultant political instability will generate tremendous impact on the region. A huge military (1.7 million) under no effective civilian control and with nuclear teeth is itself a security nightmare.
10. Should any of the worst case scenarios occur, geo-politics would go through a major alteration. Yet only time can tell how long this drama will play out. A crisis in Pyongyang may occur overnight or take years to brew.
11. However, all neighboring states should prepare for the worst case scenario at this sensitive moment of US leadership change and Western financial crisis.