

**NORTH KOREA IN 2012: A YEAR OF
PRECARIOUS CONSOLIDATION**

YOU Ji

EAI Background Brief No. 777

Date of Publication: 13 December 2012

Executive Summary

1. The year 2012 was a year of precarious consolidation for North Korea, simultaneously pursued in both domestic and international arenas. Domestic consolidation is carried out on three fronts: enhancing Kim Jong-un's personal authority, strengthening the military and promoting people's livelihood.
2. Leadership consolidation is primarily measured by Kim's firm control of the army, achieved through suppression of any dissent to his rule and promotion of loyal followers to leading positions. In July he accorded himself the marshal rank, making him the youngest marshal in the world. His first year in power seems to have unfolded relatively smoothly.
3. In 2012 Pyongyang implemented limited tactical social and economic adjustments vis-a-vis its excessive control. Some profit mechanisms have been introduced to rural and urban production processes. The state selectively provides social and cultural benefits to the people wherever possible. A thin air of relaxation emerges at the grassroots.
4. Consolidation is also measured by North Korea's response to external pressure following the two-armed clashes with the South in 2010. Rhetorical belligerent voices notwithstanding, the DPRK largely avoided actions of brinkmanship in 2012. Tension in the Peninsula has eased.
5. Kim's consolidation was helped by a conducive external environment where all relevant parties to the Peninsula conflict were going through leadership transition in 2012. This has left Kim Jong-un some room for maneuvering.
6. In 2012 the status quo of the Peninsula best served China's vital interests. When this was translated into concrete policies, the primary one was to back Kim Jong-un in whom stability and survival of the regime lies.

7. This is not an ideal option for China. Crisis aversion helped domestic politics in the year of power transfer and there is no better alternative available. Yet under Xi Jinping, Beijing may gradually alter the way to stability realization, from being overtly passive to selectively pro-active in setting the Peninsula agenda.
8. In 2012, except for strong criticism of the North's failed satellite launch, all its adversaries adopted a wait-and-see attitude toward Kim in the hope that he would moderate the regime's military agitation and make changes at home. A small window of opportunity was opened for new relations with Pyongyang.
9. At the end of 2012 a conjuncture emerged in security-making in the Peninsula, as the new leaders in Washington, Seoul and Tokyo weigh their options toward Pyongyang. The general mood is to maintain stability.
10. When the North saw that brinkmanship got it nowhere and Seoul realized pressure alone would not work, a new beginning of contact started. Yet the North's new missile launch escalated tensions. The year 2013 would be a year of opportunities as well as crisis in the Peninsula.