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**December 22, 2011**

**Voice of America**

**Russian Service**

**Crossfire**

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### **Moscow Hopes for Policy Continuity in North Korean Succession**

The death on December 17 of North Korea's Kim Jong Il, one of the world's most repressive dictators, has produced a moment of uncertainty and danger for that country's allies and adversaries. The uncertainty is whether the youthful Kim Jong Un, the "Great Successor" to his late father, can consolidate power in the regime's key institutions: the military; the Korean Worker's Party; the government administration; and the security agencies, which have supported his family's rule since 1948. The danger is that the new leader might try to prove himself through a provocative act or that leadership instability could lead to aggressive external behavior. (In 2010 North Korea, a nuclear power, killed 50 South Koreans in two separate military attacks). The regime has already taken steps to portray Kim Jong Un as the country's unchallenged ruler. Early signs from Pyongyang suggest the new leadership will continue to seek to the near impossible task of raising the North Korean's abysmal standard of living without overdependence on external aid (In recent years Chinese involvement in North Korea's economy made some elites nervous). It also hopes to continue its nuclear and missile programs. Any negotiations concerning reunification with the South, at least for now, seem out of the question.

Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov said this week that he did not believe Kim Jong Il's death would affect relations between the two countries. Ties between Moscow and Pyongyang have been deep since the Soviet era (Kim Jong Il was born in the Soviet city of Khabarovsk in 1941, while his father was fighting in the Red Army against the Japanese). While bilateral trade has declined in the past two decades, Russia remains North Korea's third-largest trading partner. Russia has been seeking to increase its involvement on the Korean peninsula in recent years. Moscow has proposed the creation of a trans-Korea gas pipeline. In October Russian railways began work on the restoration of a 10,000 kilometer railroad line between the two Koreas. Hundreds of North Korean workers are employed in the timber industry of Russia's Far East. Kim Jong Il discussed bilateral economic ties with President Medvedev at a meeting near Lake Baikal last August.

Nevertheless, Russia has often criticized the Kim dynasty for preserving “Stalinism in its worst forms.” Of additional concern to Moscow has been North Korea’s nuclear missile effort. Russia has supported UN sanctions against Pyongyang and restricted the ability of Russian firms to engage in activities that might support North Korean weapons programs. It has also taken the diplomatic lead in restarting the long-stalled Six Party talks designed limit North Korean nuclear testing and nuclear weapons production. This week Lavrov had conversations with Secretary of State Clinton and Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi about the North Korean succession and the need for peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. On December 19 the U.S. State Department announced it would exchange information on the North Korean nuclear program with Russia and other Six Party participants.

Neither President Medvedev nor Prime Minister Putin have been invited to attend Kim Jong Il’s state funeral on December 28. That will be a domestic event only. But Lavrov’s smooth diplomacy this week has been marred by the Kremlin’s prickliness over foreign criticism of its own authoritarian policies. While Medvedev was quick to send his condolences to Kim Jong Un over the death of his father, neither he nor Putin commented in public on the death of Czech statesman Vaclav Havel a day later. Condolences were “sent...over Monday” from the Russian embassy in Prague, a much lower diplomatic level. During his lifetime Havel was a frequent critic of Putin’s Russia. In an appeal to Russian citizens in the newspaper *Novaya gazeta* less than two weeks ago, Havel accused the Russian state of insulting the dignity of its citizens.

With the leadership situation unsettled, for now there is little chance for major reforms. But even if Kim Jong Un solidifies his hold on power, as Aleksei Malashenko of the Moscow Carnegie Center pointed out this week, small changes could also be dangerous. “North Korea is almost the Soviet Union. As soon as any processes start, the entire structure may tumble down...The North Korean regime resembles a well inflated balloon. Yet a small hole” could cause it to burst.