

Smart Q&A  
No. 2012-01

Why the Korean Peninsula Will Be Stable in 2012 and  
What South Korea Should Do

February 6, 2012

Interviewee

Dongho Jo

Dongho Jo, Chair of the Center for North Korea Studies at the EAI, gave his outline for 2012 with prospects for the Kim Jong-un regime and the Korean Peninsula. The following is a summary of the main policy recommendations from the interview.

**Q1: What are the short-term prospects for the Kim Jong-un regime in 2012?**

**A1: "Even if Kim Jong-il had not passed away, 2012 was already set up to be Kim Jong-un's year"**

- Kim Jong-un's hasty succession process should not be interpreted as a sign of the regime's weakness. Kim Jong-il, aware of his failing health following his stroke in 2008, carried out rapid yet robust efforts to install his son as the next leader. From the outside such efforts appear desperate, but it would be wrong to simply compare it to Kim Jong-il's own succession process which was a more gradual transition.
- North Korea's build-up for declaring itself as a *gangseongdaeguk* or "strong and prosperous nation" in 2012 was always going to symbolize the smooth transition of Kim Jong-il's legacy to Kim Jong-un. Taking this into account, even if Kim Jong-il had not passed away, 2012 was already set up to be Kim Jong-un's year.
- 2012 will be a sensitive time, making it difficult for North Korea to take provocative actions toward South Korea. This is because the Kim Jong-un regime is expected to be more focused on extending the legacy of the Kim family by having extravagant celebrations for Kim Jong-il's 70th anniversary on February 16 and Kim Il-sung's 100th anniversary on April 15. In the short-run, the Korean Peninsula will enjoy stability.

**Q2: Is there any possibility that the Kim Jong-un will be different from his father?**

**A2: "The Kim Jong-un regime will have to consider moving in the direction of opening and reforms."**

- As a new leader, Kim Jong-un should develop his own slogan like his grandfather's *Juche* or ideology of self-reliance and his father's *Songun* or military-first politics. The new slogan, though, should be in line with his father's vision of a "strong and prosperous nation" in order to preserve the legitimacy of the Kim Jong-un regime. Interestingly, Kim Jong-il's vision consists of three pillars; political ideology, military, and economy. As his grandfather's *Juche* is related to political ideology and his father's *Songun* to military, Kim Jong-un's slogan will be related to the economy.
- Domestic political problems caused by economic difficulties will place pressure on Kim Jong-un to consider opening. While the North Korean economy has actually been experiencing positive

This product presents a policy-oriented summary of the Smart Q&A.

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growth due to the spread of unofficial markets, these markets have also caused a gap to emerge between the rich and poor as well reduced the role of the state's planned economy. Both of these effects threaten political stability. The Kim Jong-un regime will therefore have to consider opening up the economy in order to secure enough capital which will help the regime to revitalize the planned economy and reduce the role of the markets.

- Kim Jong-un cannot resist indefinitely pressure from China, the only supporter for North Korea in the international community, to pursue opening and reforms. Since 2010, China has tried to persuade North Korea to pursue opening and reforms, a path Beijing believes will lead it to become a stable and normal country which can then contribute to the stability of the Korean Peninsula.

### **Q3: After four years, what can be said about the Lee Myung-bak's administration's North Korea policy?**

#### **A3: "The Lee administration's North Korea policy has been sticking to its principles, but is devoid of results"**

- The Lee Myung-bak administration's North Korea policy has been sticking to its principles, but is devoid of results. By contrast, the Sunshine Policy under the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations obtained results but had problematic principles. For the remaining year, the Lee administration will not be able to give up its principles it has always upheld, but it will feel domestic pressure to produce results.
- The Lee administration finds itself in a difficult position as it still insists on an apology from North Korea for the provocations of 2010 while at home the administration is losing political support. At the same time, North Korea will be unlikely to make any dramatic moves because its focus will be on the major domestic events looming in 2012.

### **Q4: What should the Lee administration focus on for 2012?**

#### **A4: "President Lee should concentrate on building a foundation for the next administration."**

- For the remaining year, President Lee should concentrate on building a foundation for the next administration. It is crucial then that the Lee administration resolves the issues of the *Cheonan* sinking and Yeongpyeong attack so that it does not continue to hinder the next administration's North Korea policy in the future.
- Measures that can enhance inter-Korean relations while not impacting upon the Lee administration's principles could include: humanitarian aid, efforts to support Malaria prevention in vulnerable regions in North Korea during the spring, the expansion of the Gaesong Industrial Complex, and allowing visits to North Korea to inspect the equipment that had been previously installed by South Korea firms.

### **Q5: What strategy should the next administration in South Korea pursue?**

#### **A5: "South Korea should focus on a strategy of "co-evolution," which would create an environment that North Korea can feel secure in pursuing reforms without nuclear weapons."**

- Neither well-intentioned engagement nor hawkish sanctions have brought North Korea away from its military-first politics and toward giving up its nuclear weapons. What has been learned over the past 20 years is that North Korea's decision to change depends not on South Korea's policy but on the North Korean leadership's strategic perception to change.
- South Korea should focus on a strategy of "co-evolution," which would create an environment that North Korea can feel secure in pursuing reforms without nuclear weapons. Following Pyongyang's likely move in this direction, the international community should make efforts to coevolve in this regard. Such a North Korea policy must rise above the limited dichotomy of either "unconditional engagement" or "principled engagement" and evolve into "smart engagement." ■

## **About the Interviewee**

### **Dongho Jo**

Dongho Jo is a professor of North Korean Studies at Ewha Womans University. Before joining the university in 2007, he has worked at Korea Development Institute for 16 years as senior fellow and director of North Korean economic studies. He graduated from Seoul National University and received Ph.D. degree in economics from University of Pennsylvania in 1991. He is now policy advisor for the chief secretary to the President of Korea for diplomacy and national security, advisor for the National Assembly Budget Office, advisor for the advisory Council on Democratic and Peaceful Unification for the President of Korea, and advisor for promoting inter-Korean exchanges and cooperation at Ministry of Unification. His research areas are mainly the North Korean economy and inter-Korean cooperation.