North Korea’s recent shelling of Yeonpyong Island and other provocative acts have turned the spotlight on the complex leadership succession process under way to replace “Dear Leader” Kim Jong Il. Former South Korean Unification Minister Jong Seok Lee explores the possible relationship between the naming of Kim Jong Un as the heir apparent and the North’s bellicose behavior.
The current crisis unfolding on the Korean Peninsula is arguably the most dangerous since the 1980s. North Korea’s second nuclear test in May 2009 and the recent disclosure of uranium enrichment facilities clearly demonstrate the dangerous extent of North Korea’s nuclear program. Following the North’s recent artillery barrage on Yeonpyong Island, inter-Korean relations have reached their most perilous state. It feels as though the hands of time have pushed us back into the Cold War era.

Meanwhile, in North Korea, efforts to consolidate a succession to the ailing absolute ruler, Kim Jong Il, are in full swing. In August 2008 signs emerged that Kim had had a stroke. This prompted the leadership to designate his third son, Kim Jong Un, as heir apparent, and they have been working to build up his power base.

There is no concrete evidence of a connection between the Kim succession and North Korea’s recent acts. What is clear, though, is that the deep distrust that exists between the US and North Korea, as well as the deterioration of inter-Korean relations, has aggravated the bellicose temperament in Pyongyang, leading to the recent actions. Having said that, a possible connection with the pending succession of Kim Jong Un cannot be completely ruled out.

Provocations by North Korea in the spring of 2009 to some extent support this assumption. The North carried out a rocket launch at that time, even before the new administration of President Barack Obama had concluded its review of US policy toward North Korea. This was followed by a second nuclear test in response to statements...
and actions taken by the United Nation’s Security Council. The US did nothing to incite North Korea, nor was there any significant interaction between the two nations. Yet North Korea went ahead with these deviant acts. Many experts at the time wondered why the North would engage in such acts without giving the Obama administration time to adjust its policy.

However, if one correlates these provocations to the coming succession, then the background can be explained to some degree. The North Korean leadership used Kim Jong Il’s apparent stroke as an opportunity to accelerate the previously delayed succession process. As far back as 2005, the leadership showed signs that it wanted to enthrone as heir one of Kim Jong Il’s two sons (Kim Jong Chul or Kim Jong Un) from his deceased second wife, Ko Young-hee. However, it appears that Kim Jong Il himself put a halt to this. It is possible that he wanted to improve the country’s impoverished economic condition and ease its diplomatic isolation before designating his successor. Most likely, his initial plan was to formalize the succession in 2012, the year that North Korea has targeted to become a “Powerful and Prosperous Nation.” However, the deterioration of the leader’s health expedited the agenda. The North Korean leadership appears to have concluded that in order to complete the succession process before the death of Kim Jong II, they needed to speed things up.

UPPLIFTING KIM JONG UN
In the end, Kim Jong Il appointed Kim Jong Un as heir. At the same time, however, the title “Dear Leader” (Suryong in Korean) for North Koreans is a position of such cardinal importance that its legitimacy cannot be guaranteed simply by birth or being named “Dear Leader” by Kim Jong II. Kim Jong Un is a mere 26 years old and lacks the party experience and career achievements one would expect for someone to be named leader.

The significance of becoming heir to the “Dear Leader” — or the “New Dear Leader” — lies in understanding that position in North Korea. The most conspicuous characteristic of North Korean politics and society is the monolithic system (Yulcheje), in which all parts of the state and society are organized around the “Dear Leader;” it is analogous to the solar system’s planets revolving around the sun. The system is based on the Juche ideology and an extreme cult of personality. While the system formally purports to have the outward appearance of socialism, it is actually a magnified image of the “oriental family” in which the state is seen as an extended family. Trusting and following the “Dear Leader” is the most important virtue, much in the same way that each member of a family must trust and obey his or her patriarch. The state is also sometimes compared to a person. The “Dear Leader” is depicted as the brain, and the people as obedient limbs. Therefore, the people must display loyalty and filial piety toward their “Dear Leader.” And one cannot describe North Korea without reference to its “Dear Leader.”

This extreme patriarchal, monolithic system has ruled over North Korean society for over four decades, since the establishment of Yulcheje in 1967. To be sure, the system has recently been weakening, as skepticism about the “Dear Leader” increases in the face of chronic famine and starvation. Nevertheless, it still governs all aspects of North Korean society.
Because of the stature and absolute authority of the “Dear Leader,” his successor must have considerable experience and broad study to assume the role, and his qualifications must be acknowledged through the succession process. But because of Kim Jong Il’s declining health, Kim Jong Un was named a successor without going through this process. Nevertheless, it was critical to designate Kim Jong Un as the successor without delay, precisely because of his father’s failing health.

In such a pressing situation, it seems as though the North Korean leadership may have concluded that a demonstration of Kim Jong Un’s “strong determination” in foreign affairs would be a forceful way of establishing his leadership credentials. In this context, in order to demonstrate the great strength and determination of the heir apparent toward its people and cadres, the leadership may have decided to commit the hostile act of conducting a nuclear test.

Following the death of Kim Il Sung on July 8, 1994, the North Korean leadership brought the governance system based on the precepts of ancestors (Yuhun Tongchi) to a close. It amended the constitution on September 5, 1998, to discontinue the presidential system (Juseokje), which symbolized Kim Il Sung, and enthroned the chairman of the National Defense Commission as the de-facto head of state, thus establishing the “Kim Jong Il Suryong (Dear Leader)” system. In order to formally commemorate the commencement of the Kim Jong Il era, North Korea in late August 1998 launched a satellite called Kwangmyongsong No.1, taken from a metaphor, Paektu Kwangmyongsong, that refers to Kim Jong Il. Similarly, North Korea launched a second rocket in April 2009 that was named Kwangmyongsong No.2. Although the intention behind this recent rocket launch could have been to develop missile capabilities, the forthcoming succession suggests that it might have been an attempt to create internal solidarity under the motto of “scientific technology development.” Therefore, the leadership may have viewed the UN Security Council’s condemnation of the rocket launch as an unreasonable challenge to a decision made by their “Dear Leader,” prompting them to take the stinging and hard-line act of a second nuclear test. It is noteworthy that North Korea is domestically characterizing this entire process as a model of “excellent guidance,” demonstrating both the new successor’s commitment to scientific technology development and his “strong will to take action” against external threats. In other words, the provocative acts by North Korea in the spring of 2009 seem highly related to the succession of Kim Jong Un.

**Dialogue and Provocation**

The North Korean artillery barrage on Yeonpyong Island and the disclosure of the uranium enrichment facilities can likewise be seen to some extent as related to the efforts to highlight the “strong determination” of Kim Jong Un. But it looks unseemly to explain these provocations solely as a way of showcasing Kim Jong Un. Consolidating the succession through ostentatious displays of Kim Jong Un’s powerful leadership will inevitably incur international sanctions, deepening diplomatic isolation and economic hardships. North Korea is in such extreme economic straits that it is seemingly irrational to continue on such a course. Even China, which has been restoring its traditionally amicable relations with North Korea since the summer of 2009, has been negative toward these unilateral and unjustified provocations.

As efforts to consolidate the succession progress, North Korea’s international strategy appears to be a curious mixture of provocations and gestures to improve foreign relations — a sort of “either/or” strategy. Seen from Kim Jong Un’s standpoint, establishing his legitimacy while starving the people of North Korea would seem untenable. If anything, now is the time to repair and strengthen the economy and improve foreign relations in order to overcome diplomatic isolation. Rather than show off his leadership skills by launching rockets and conducting a nuclear test despite virtually unanimous international opposition, the successor should demonstrate problem-solving abilities by dealing with the international sanctions currently in place against North Korea. In response to these needs, since the fall of 2009 the country also sought, in its own way, to improve its foreign relations.
Accordingly, North Korea’s recent acts appear aimed at giving the US two stark options — either bilateral negotiations or a path whereby North Korea further develops its nuclear program. Likewise, the provocative acts against South Korea can be interpreted as pressure to choose between dialogue and conflict. For example, revealing the uranium enrichment facilities sent a message to the US and other concerned parties to choose between coming back to the Six-Party talks and watching North Korea build a nuclear power plant. Needless to say, the underlying implication is to strengthen North Korea’s nuclear weapons capabilities.

It appears that North Korea may have appealed to China to justify its provocations in the hope that China would help mitigate the pressure inflicted upon the North by the international community. For example, by showing off their uranium enrichment facilities to a visiting US scientist, North Korea asserted its right to the peaceful use of nuclear material; and in the case of the shelling of Yeonpyong Island, they raised the issue of the disputed Northern Limit Line (NLL).

Ultimately, North Korea is using opportunistic tactics in taking this either/or approach. With regard to the nuclear issue, it has yet to formally acknowledge that it has nuclear weapons, but it has expressed its willingness to abandon nuclear weapons if the rewards are satisfactory — if not, it will pursue the goal of becoming a fully-fledged nuclear-weapons state. It has shown that intent by openly displaying dual nuclear capabilities (plutonium and enriched uranium), carrying out additional nuclear tests and unveiling the uranium enrichment facilities. The North’s contradictory policy of provocation and efforts to improve foreign relations indicates the leadership is in a rush to consolidate the Kim Jong-un succession.

THE WAY TO RESPOND
Compared to Kim Jong Il, Kim Jong Un has become the successor in exceedingly weak circumstances. Kim Jong Il assumed his first leadership role in the Korea Workers’ Party in June 1964, and thereafter led the purge within the party and worked to establish the Kim Il Sung cult of personality for 10 years before being formally named as successor. Kim Jong Un has little in the way of career experience. Kim Jong Il also rose to succession during a period when the nation could provide its people with three meals a day, and there was a socialist bloc and reliable alliances with China and the Soviet Union in place. Kim Jong Un, on the other hand, assumes the role at a time of crisis, when internal resources are depleted, starvation is widespread and foreign isolation has been deepened. To make matters worse, the health of the “Dear Leader” Kim Jong Il, who is to play the decisive role in consolidating Kim Jong Un’s authority, is of serious concern to many. Kim Jong Il rose by assuming the role of a Party Secretary and a member of the Politburo, while Kim Jong Un is pursuing the succession as a member of the Central Military Commission of the Korea Workers’ Party, a reflection of the crisis facing the country.

Indeed, whether the succession will proceed in a stable manner remains to be seen. Although North Korea has ventured to carry out international acts of provocation and adopted an aggressive posture in order to consolidate the Kim Jong Un succession, the measure of its success is likely dependent on the lifespan of Kim Jong Il and North Korea’s economic situation. The longer Kim Jong Il lives, the more time Kim Jong Un will have to secure his role. Even though Kim Jong Un will almost certainly succeed his father, if North Korea’s economy continues to deteriorate, his future is not bright. Consequently, it is very probable that the North Korean leadership during this period, while occasionally engaging in provocative acts, will give up its lingering focus on the West (which it sees as preferring to apply sanctions against North Korea) and seek to promote improved economic relations with China. In particular, in order to overcome the economic crisis generated by the depletion of internal resources, it is likely that the North Korean leadership will pursue a limited economic development strategy that combines China’s open market policy with South Korea’s experience from the era of the late President Park Chung Hee. North Korea has expressed an interest in both the Chinese model,
North Korea’s recent acts appear aimed at giving the US two stark options — bilateral negotiations or a path whereby North Korea further develops its nuclear program. Likewise, the provocative acts against South Korea can be interpreted as pressure to choose between dialogue and conflict.

which gradually expanded the market economy through the development of special economic zones while maintaining the Communist Party’s dictatorship, and Park’s development approach, which emphasized government planning in the context of an authoritarian regime that had sufficient labor power but lacked natural resources.

Given the seemingly contradictory impulses at play — armed hostility, nuclear adventurism and a desire for warmer relations and economic development — what is the most desirable response in coping with Kim Jong Un’s succession in North Korea?

In the short run, because North Korea is using the image of Kim Jong Un’s “powerful” leadership as a tool to secure his hold on power, the South Korean government must be thoroughly prepared for security issues to arise in cross-border relations, while minimizing areas of conflict beforehand that may give North Korea an excuse to act. Additionally, viewed from the perspective of the international community and the South Korean government, there is a need to pursue dialogue with North Korea. The argument that dialogue with North Korea is useless has become widespread in both South Korea and the US following the artillery attack on Yeonpyong Island and the disclosure of the North’s uranium enrichment facilities. But despite that feeling, the absence of dialogue with North Korea will only prompt more provocation. Arduous as it may be, it is both practical and realistic to manage the state of crisis and move towards peace through dialogue.

In the mid- to long-term, it is essential to calm North Korea’s bellicosity and encourage the future Kim Jong Un regime to transform itself from a rogue state into a normal one. For this purpose, it would be most effective to entice North Korea into a framework of multilateral cooperation, based on the premise of normal diplomatic and rational acts. However, such a framework of multilateral cooperation does not currently exist in East Asia. Fortunately, the Six-Party Talks provide an essential foundation on which a multilateral framework can be established. The nations participating in the Six-Party Talks, including North Korea, agreed to consult on establishing a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula in the 2005 “September 19 Joint Statement;” And in the 2007 “February 13 Initial Actions Agreement” they agreed to create a working group to discuss mechanisms for peace and security in Northeast Asia. If and when these agreements are put into practice, it will naturally incorporate North Korea into a framework of multilateral security cooperation and largely curtail North Korea’s belligerence and irrationality.

Jong Seok Lee is Senior Fellow at the Sejong Institute in Seoul. In 2006, he served as Minister of Unification and Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National Security Council of South Korea. From 2003 to 2005, he was Deputy Secretary-General of the National Security Council. He has published numerous books in Korean on North Korea and North Korea-China relations. This article was translated from Korean by Irene Kang.