



North Korea: The Knowns and Unknowns Inside the Hermit Kingdom

Friday, May 22, 2020

This conference call was convened following North Korea's Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un's disappearance and sudden reappearance, inciting rumors regarding the leader's health and well-being. The question of what really happened to Jong-un remains, for the most part, speculative. In the discussion, three experts on the North Korean regime spoke about who Jong-un's successor could be and the possible leadership crisis. They also talked about North Korea's bilateral relationships with the US and surrounding North Asian countries and where they are headed soon.

Webinar panelists included:

- **James Crabtree (Moderator)**, Associate Professor in Practice and Senior Fellow, Centre on Asia and Globalization, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy Panel
- **Anna Fifield**, Beijing Bureau Chief of The Washington Post; author of *The Great Successor: The Divinely Perfect Destiny of Brilliant Comrade Kim Jong-un*
- **Prof. Robert Kelly**, Professor in Political Science, Pusan National University
- **Dr. John Park**, Director of the Korea Project, Harvard Kennedy School

The panelists touched on the following:

- Kelly spoke about the lack of clarity from North Korea regarding leadership succession, bringing to attention that, due to the Supreme Leader's lifestyle, it may not be very long before the leadership question becomes relevant again. He also talked about North Korea's bilateral relationship with South Korea, highlighting that provocations and tensions between the two are central to justifying to the North Korean people why unification has yet to happen and why South Korea seems to be more prosperous.
- Fifield suggested that we actually know very little about North Korea and its regime. She pointed out that we don't and likely will never know what happened to the leader. She emphasized Robert's point that we don't know what the regime's succession plan is, providing reasons for why Jong-un's sister could *and* couldn't be his successor. In addition, she touched on the troubling fact that the US and China struggled to communicate during Jong-un's disappearance even though they had mutual interests.
- Park helped to clarify the structure of the regime, calling it a "family-run business," in which the role is passed down from generation to generation. Further, he commented about who would replace Jong-un, suggesting that when there is only one possible leader, there is always opacity when considering the next step. He also talked about China's role in building North Korea's economy, crediting the Chinese marketplace for the increased efficiency and effectiveness with which North Korea can procure items.
- With regards to the upcoming US election and the relationship between the US and North Korea, there was a general consensus that Jong-un would prefer Donald Trump, that the leaders share some similarities, and that they have a strong relationship.

If you would like to listen to recordings of this webinar, please visit our [website](#).