



In brief: North Korea and the nuclear issue one year on from the succession

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Kim Jong-Il died in December 2011 and was succeeded by his youngest son, Kim Jong-Un. While high politics in North Korea remains as [opaque as ever](#), majority opinion holds that Kim Jong-Un has successfully [consolidated his hold on power](#), is shifting power within the regime away from the military towards the party and is [exploring reform](#) cautiously. In terms of the relationship of the regime to the outside world, it might appear at first glance to be a case of *plus ça change*. After a failed ballistic missile launch in April 2012, an apparently more successful one took place in December, characterized at the time by the regime as a satellite launch. The UN Security Council passed a [resolution](#) further toughening sanctions on 22 January 2013, significantly this time with China's assent. North Korea has responded to the new sanctions with its customary [threatening rhetoric](#) and has announced that it is preparing to conduct a third nuclear weapon test, following on from those undertaken in 2006 and 2009. Experts wonder whether this test may be its first of a uranium-enriched bomb. The previous tests were of plutonium bombs. The Six-Party Talks have been stalled since 2009.

North Korea's successful ballistic missile test in December could mean that the regime is a step closer to completing the 'nuclear jigsaw' – but there is still [no evidence](#) that it has mastered the challenge of creating a viable nuclear *warhead* for a missile delivery system. The regime has now admitted that it is targeting the US with its ballistic missile programme, not just its East Asian neighbourhood. A nuclear weapon test of a uranium-enriched bomb could suggest that the regime is closing in on the ability to significantly increase its nuclear arsenal from the 8-18 bombs that it has been variously estimated to possess at the moment.

2012 has been characterized by one commentator as a “[year of doing nothing](#)” about the North Korean nuclear issue by the international community, arguing that the Obama's Administration's posture of ‘[strategic patience](#)’ was cover for parking the North Korean nuclear issue while it focused on getting re-elected. 2012 was a year of leadership transition amongst all the main parties to the Six-Party Talks. Obama is now re-elected, Xi Jinping is in place in China, [Park Geun-Hye](#) is South Korea's president-elect, Shinzo Abe is Japan's freshly-installed prime minister, Vladimir Putin has resumed the presidency of the Russian Federation and Kim Jong-Un is now apparently secure in his position. Some analysts are expressing hope that 2013 might see new impetus injected into negotiations

A third nuclear weapon test by North Korea in the near future seems highly likely. For Kim

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Jong-Un, a successful test would further consolidate his power and prestige within the country. At the same time, the regime may also hope that it would concentrate the mind of the Obama Administration – as well as increase North Korea's bargaining power if there is an eventual return to negotiations – which many observers believe it does want provided the terms are right. A further nuclear weapon test would also lead to a further toughening of sanctions; but few believe that this will deter Pyongyang.

South Korea's president-elect, Park Geun-Hye, made it clear during her election campaign that she is open to increasing economic and people-to-people cooperation with the North. Although there will be no move to resurrect the 'sunshine policy', many there now appear to view her predecessor's relative hard line on the North as having produced few benefits. There have been suggestions that Park may even propose a North-South summit. China, until now unable or unwilling to turn North Korea's growing economic dependency on it to major diplomatic effect, would happily endorse such moves to 'lower the temperature', as would Russia. However, Japan's hawkish new prime minister, locked in a tense stand-off with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, may be less inclined to do so. The great unknown as yet is whether and/or how the stance of the US might shift. In the immediate-term, it has held to its customary position that North Korean provocations should not be rewarded but punished. The Obama Administration faces myriad foreign policy challenges; the question is how far North Korea will move up the list of priorities. Iran casts a shadow over the US posture. If the US does move towards a strategy based on tangible incentives, it has the experience of the Clinton Administration to draw upon, which some insist was bearing fruit before being foreclosed by President George W Bush, who declared North Korea part of the "Axis of Evil".

One US expert recently envisaged a possible "[regional security settlement](#)", expressed through a legally-binding treaty, with six components: termination of a state of war; creation of a Permanent Security Council to monitor compliance and decide on violations; mutual declaration of no hostile intent; provisions of assistance for nuclear and other energy needs; termination of sanctions; and a Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone.

Some view this approach as unrealistic (North Korea will never denuclearize, full stop) or premature (the regime needs first to do much more to warrant restarting substantive negotiations involving give-and-take). For those for whom [human rights](#) is a dominant concern, Kim Jong-Un has so far done very little to improve North Korea's appalling record. However, the dominant view for now among North Korea-watchers is that the regime has not just stabilized politically; it looks like it may be having some success in stabilizing the economy too. If true, the prospects for regime change have diminished, not increased over the last year. This is leading some to counsel anew that the path to a different, denuclearized, North Korea will best be found through [an approach](#) in which offers of tangible incentives again play a larger part. But it remains uncertain how far the diplomatic and geo-political conditions for such an initiative exist.

Further reading: A Mansourov, "[A dynamically stable regime](#)", 38 North, 17 December 2012 (Part 1 of 3 – click this [link](#) for Part 2 and this [link](#) for Part 3)

Previous House of Commons Library briefings: [North Korea's dynastic succession](#), (SN06173, 3 January 2012); [North Korea: An Update](#) (SN05915, 24 March 2011); [North Korea: Recent Developments](#) (SN05096, June 2009); [North Korea: The Nuclear Issue and Prospects for Change](#) (RP 07/03, January 2007)