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NORTH KOREA as we know it is over. Whether it comes apart in the next few weeks or over several months, the regime will not be able to hold together after the untimely death of its leader, Kim Jong-il. How America responds — and, perhaps even more important, how America responds to how China responds — will determine whether the region moves toward greater stability or falls into conflict.

Mr. Kim's death could not have come at a worse time for North Korea. Economically broken, starving and politically isolated, this dark kingdom was in the midst of preparations to hand power over to his not-yet-30-year-old son, the untested Kim Jong-un. The "great successor," as he has been dubbed by the state media, is surrounded by elders who are no less sick than his father and a military that chafed at his promotion to four-star general last year without having served a day in the army. Such a system simply cannot hold.

The transition comes at a time when the United States has been trying to get nuclear negotiations back on track. Those efforts have now been replaced by a scramble for plans to control loose nuclear weapons, should the regime collapse.

And yet Washington remains powerless. Any outreach to the young Mr. Kim or to other possible competitors could create more problems during the transition, and would certainly be viewed as threatening by China. Since Kim Jong-il's stroke in 2008, the United States and South Korea have been working on contingency plans to deal with just such a situation, but they all thought they would have years, if not a decade.

The allies' best move, then, is to wait and see what China does. Among China's core foreign-policy principles is the maintenance of a divided Korean Peninsula, and so Beijing's statements about preserving continuity of North Korea's leadership should come as no surprise. Since 2008 it has drawn closer to the regime, publicly defending its leaders and investing heavily in the mineral mines on the Chinese-North Korean border.

But even as Beijing sticks close to its little Communist brother, there are intense debates within its leadership about whether the North is a strategic liability. It was one thing to back a hermetic but stable regime under Kim Jong-il; it will be harder to underwrite an untested leadership. For Xi Jinping, expected to become China's over the next year, the first major foreign policy decision will be whether to shed North Korea or effectively adopt it as a third northeastern province.

All indications are that Beijing will pursue the latter course, in no small part because of a bias among its leadership to support the status quo, rather than to confront dramatic change. And yet "adopting" North Korea could be dramatic in itself. China may go all in, doling out early invitations and new assistance packages to the young Mr. Kim, conditioning them on promises of economic reform.

While some observers hope that Kim Jong-il's death will unleash democratic regime change, China will work strongly against that possibility, especially if such efforts receive support from South Korea or the United States. Given that Beijing has the only eyes inside the North, Washington and Seoul could do little in response.

Yet even China's best-laid plans may come apart. The assistance may be too little, too late, especially given the problems the new leadership will face. A clear channel of dialogue involving the United States, China and South Korea is needed now more than ever.

And yet such a dialogue is completely absent since Kim Jong-il's stroke. Beijing has deflected every official and unofficial overture from Washington to have quiet discussions on potential North Korean instability. Before, China let its fears of Western interests get the better of it; wiser Chinese judgment should lead authorities to open such a channel now. The three sides should open with a conversation on all our fears about what could happen in a collapsing North — loose nukes, refugee flows, artillery attacks — and how each would respond.

With so little known about the inner workings of this dark kingdom, miscalculation by any side in response to developments inside the North is a very real possibility given the hair-trigger alerts of the militaries on the peninsula.

None of this will be easy. For China, the uncertainty surrounding North Korea comes against the backdrop of Mr. Obama's "pivot" to Asia and assertion that the region is America's new strategic priority. This has already created insecurities in Beijing that will make genuine dialogue with the United States even more challenging — and thus all the more necessary.

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