



Paranoia and Mystery: Peering Into North Korea

Doug Bandow

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Yet another top North Korean official has met a violent and untimely death. Tragic accident? Political assassination? The world, or at least North Korea watchers, wants to know.

Especially since Kim Yang-gon was in charge of negotiations with South, where he was respected. Although the latest round of talks between the two Koreas broke off without result, there always will be another round. At worst, Kim could have been killed because of the discussions, either their failure or something else. At best, any future round will be delayed until he is replaced, and his successor may have less clout with ruler Kim Jong-un.

Kim Yang-gon supposedly died in an early morning car accident. A surprising number of North Korea's high officials appear to leave the world this way; indeed, the latter's predecessor, who helped arrange the first inter-Korean summit, was said to have died in a car accident in 2003. Yet defectors say accidents are common: the streets are poor, the officials' high status gives them immunity from traffic laws and encourages reckless driving; they often drive themselves to and from exclusive parties and typically drink heavily.

Still, it looks suspicious. Yet it doesn't appear to be a state-sanctioned hit. Kim Jong-un praised his "close comrade-at-arms" and showed emotion at the state funeral. Quite different from the denunciation as "despicable human scum" of his uncle, who was executed two years ago. Kim could have been play-acting, but the departed didn't have the sort of public profile requiring that his death be sanitized for the public.

Perhaps a rival took out Kim Yang-gon. However, killing the man won't stop the policy, which ultimately runs up to the senior Kim. Kim Yang-gon was well-connected, having served "Dear Leader" Kim Jong-il as well. The deceased ran the United Front Department of the Korea Workers' Party and was an alternate member of the Politburo. But it's not apparent that he is the sort of rival worth killing. Perhaps he was slated for bigger things at the party congress scheduled for later this year, which is expected to announce major changes. However, assuming Kim Jong-un's emotional reaction was not entirely feigned, targeting such a favorite would risk exposure and an untimely end.

Which leaves everyone outside again looking through the mirror darkly, as the Bible puts it.

The Korean status quo obviously is unsatisfactory. Indeed, it is positively dangerous. While everyone discounts North Korea's endless threats against both South Korea and the United States, as the North's military capabilities grow people are more likely to treat them as warnings to be taken seriously. Proposals for military action against the Democratic People's Republic of

Korea might enjoy a revival; after all, Defense Secretary Ashton Carter pushed for an attack on the DPRK's nuclear facilities during the Clinton administration.

Of course, the more dangerous Pyongyang perceives the international environment, the more committed it likely will become to building a sizeable nuclear arsenal and missile force. And to the extent the North can argue that it is responding defensively to America, the less likely Beijing will be to apply more pressure on the DPRK.

An intrepid few have forthrightly proposed military action. But that would be a wild gamble, risking thousands of lives, mostly Korean, on both sides. While Washington might hope that the North would be deterred from retaliating, America's propensity for regime change likely would leave Pyongyang convinced that ousting the Kim dynasty was Washington's ultimate objective. In which case there would be no reason for North Korea not to put everything into an attack.

Enhanced sanctions look pretty good compared to war. And tighter financial controls would make it much harder for the Kim regime to do business with the world. However, Sudan gets by despite strict financial controls, and much would depend on China's attitude. Without Beijing's acquiescence, the United States won't be able to cut the North's lifeline. Making life tougher for North Koreans without achieving either regime change or disarmament would only inflame Pyongyang's paranoia, making it embrace superweapons ever more tightly. Forcing a national implosion would have unpredictable and potentially violent consequences. The ultimate result might not be a free North, but a Chinese occupation and puppet regime.

For some, the People's Republic of China is the preferred option. Just get the PRC to force the North into line. That presumes Beijing has the ability to do so, but while China can cut the subsidized food and energy upon which the DPRK relies, that doesn't guarantee compliance. Moreover, the PRC has good reason to choose the status quo over creating the possibility of chaos and war on China's southern border. Moreover, Beijing is unlikely to do any favors for the United States, which would use a united Korea as part of a containment strategy against China.

If none of these, then what?

Some form of engagement with the objectives of moderating regime behavior, easing the threat environment, constraining arms development, encouraging domestic reform and improving human development. Not because the chances of success seem great, but because there is no better option.

That means the South should continue talks despite Kim Yang-gon's death, about which Seoul expressed its condolences. In fact, in his New Year's Day address, Kim Jong-un expressed his desire to improve bilateral relations.

And the United States should open a dialogue, with the objective of initiating official though low-key relations. A diplomatic presence in Pyongyang would provide a small keyhole for peering into this mysterious country. And tempering hostilities could lead to additional benefits, especially if Kim Jong-un uses next year's party congress to modernize. Although expectations should be low, Kim emphasized economic development in his New Year's Day remarks. In contrast, he made no mention of the DPRK's nuclear program and issued no military threats.

Winston Churchill once said of the Soviet Union that it was "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma." That certainly describes the DPRK for the West. Kim's death only makes the puzzle more complex. Increasing contact with Pyongyang is the best way to begin to understand the North and influence its future.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute and former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan. He is the author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.