



## **U.S. Should Offer To Talk While Kim Jong-Un Kills His Way To Power in North Korea**

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May 31, 2015

Secretary of State John Kerry recently visited Seoul and South Korean President Park Geun-hye will head to Washington later this month. The main agenda item: what to do about North Korea. As usual, no one knows what is going on in Pyongyang. Its internal politics appears to be bloodier than usual. Ironically, this might provide an opportunity for Washington to initiate talks over a more open bilateral relationship.

Almost everyone will believe anything, however implausible, about the determinedly secretive and ostentatiously odd North. The latest rumor is that young dictator Kim Jong-un had his defense minister executed with anti-aircraft fire for disrespectful conduct, including falling asleep in meetings.

Like so many other stories about the North this one should be true even if it isn't. What better evidence of the aberrant and abhorrent nature of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea?

Minister Hyon Yong-chol probably has been purged, though his picture atypically appeared in older television programming after his alleged demise. Perhaps the best evidence that Hyon is dead is the DPRK's failure to produce him to embarrass the Republic of Korea. However, South Korea's National Intelligence Service acknowledged that it could not confirm his particularly gruesome form of execution.

If Hyon was killed quickly and unexpectedly, it probably wasn't for dozing off, even in front of the new strongman. More likely the military man was plotting, or at least feared to be plotting, against the North's leadership. Certainly that is a better explanation for his expeditious dispatch, especially by an anti-aircraft gun.

There has been striking turnover among party and military officials, including multiple appointments for some positions, since Kim Jong-un took over after his father's death in December 2011. Half of the top 218 officials have been changed, according to the NIS. Five of the seven pallbearers other than Kim *fil's* are gone. Vice Marshal Ri Yong-ho, one of the "regents" appointed to aid Kim in consolidating power, was removed after an unusual Presidium meeting in July 2012. Ri was rumored to have died in a gunfight with arresting officers or have been convicted of being a counter-revolutionary.

Even more dramatic was the arrest and execution of Kim's uncle, Jang Song-taek, another "regent" seen as the regime number two, in December 2013. He was charged with treason, among other offenses, and his blood relatives were said to have been later executed as well. Kim family members had fallen from power before: Kim Il-sung chose his son, Kim Jong-il, over the former's brother, and Jang, married to Kim Il-sung's daughter, was purged but then reinstated by both Il-sung and Jong-il. Never before had a family member been publicly removed and executed. Then came conflicting reports on whether Kim Jong-un's aunt, Kim Kyong-hui, had died, was poisoned, or is still alive.

In April the NIS reported that so far this year 15 high ranking North Korean officials, including an economist whose advice Kim Jong-un disliked, had been executed. Overall some 70 top apparatchiks and more than 400 lower level officials apparently have been killed this year, many by extraordinary, even horrific means, including flamethrowers.

This brutality towards the power elite sets Kim apart from his father and grandfather. The latter fought bitter factional battles in the mid-1950s but once he gained supreme power purges usually meant demotion and internal exile, not death. Disgraced officials, such as Jang, often made a comeback. Similar was the experience under Kim Jong-il, who kept a younger step-brother in Europe as an ambassador and even resurrected the uncle long before shorn of power to ease Kim's rise.

While Kim Jong-un's apparent penchant for executions may reflect a peculiarly sadistic nature, it more likely grows out of insecurity. Only 28 or maybe 27 when his father died, Kim's succession was pushed extremely quickly after his father suffered a stroke in August 2008. In contrast, Kim's grandfather spent decades grooming Kim Jong-il to take over. No doubt there were other family members, such as Jang, who saw themselves as more qualified for the job, and many party and military officials who believed it was time to move power outside of the Kim family entirely.

Although there is no sign of organized resistance to the latest Kim, continuing turnover and executions after more than four years in charge suggests that Kim is not, or at least does not see himself, as yet secure. An iron hand may cow any thought of resistance. However, the changing political game in Pyongyang almost certainly exacerbates regime instability since there no longer is a relatively safe harbor, acquiescing to whatever the latest Leader decides since one might reappear for a second act. If execution instead awaits one, even for acts short of actual rebellion, it might be worth going for broke.

Repression is rising in other ways. For instance, the regime apparently has been employing “Patrol Teams” as press gangs to fill out its construction work force for projects to be finished by October, the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Korean Workers’ Party. According to Radio Free Asia the regime has targeted the unemployed, those not wearing pins for Kim’s father and grandfather (limited to the elite), and more stylishly dressed young men. District committees also apparently hand out unpopular work assignments related to the upcoming celebration. Moreover, the Korean Worker’s Party has been sending out propaganda teams across the country extolling the DPRK’s military might and ability to defeat both the U.S. and South Korea.

The regime also has strengthened border controls with China. The number of North Koreans arriving in South Korea is down more than half since Kim took over. The government has increased the amount and quality of fencing, surveillance of cross-border phone calls, number of border guards, rotation of border personnel, and use of returnees to warn against defection. The cost of passage—bribes to guards and payments to traffickers—has doubled.

If Kim retains control, none of this might matter. However, everyone is wary of something other than the usual predictable unpredictability in Pyongyang. Secretary Kerry denounced the “stories of grotesque, grisly, horrendous public displays of executions on a whim and a fancy.” President Park Geun-hye noted “growing concern” over “an extreme reign of terror within North Korea.”

Governance matters since the North continues to expand its nuclear capabilities. Although Pyongyang appears to have faked its supposed submarine missile launch and experts disagree over the likelihood that the DPRK has miniaturized a nuclear warhead, analysts worry that North Korea could have 20 warheads by next year and 50 to 100 by 2020. While nothing suggests that Kim is suicidal—members of the dynasty appear to prefer their virgins in this world rather than the next—Pyongyang’s decision-making process could become more unilateral, unpredictable, or both.

Unfortunately, there is little that the U.S., and American allies South Korea and Japan, can do to directly influence events within the DPRK. War would be a foolhardy risk; tougher sanctions aren’t likely to work, and certainly won’t do so without China’s support. Badgering Beijing isn’t likely to convince it to risk the peninsula’s stability in an attempt to oust Kim. The Kim regime is well beyond the reach of moral suasion.

Nor is negotiation likely to have much effect. There is unmistakable evidence of economic reform and greater prosperity in North Korea, but the state has been attempting to reassert control over the black market economy which has burgeoned since the famine. Moreover, there is no political change. While the North recently launched an international charm offensive, it continues to highlight weapons development and spout rehashed threats against America and the ROK. The regime might be willing to negotiate over future weapons expansion, but would not likely trade away the one factor causing the world to follow events in the DPRK. Moreover, no piece of paper would guarantee against Washington’s propensity to impose regime change whenever it seems convenient.

Nevertheless, the possibility of division and dissension in Pyongyang gives Washington a new reason to suggest direct discussions without preconditions, but with the prospect of benefits for a

change in direction. In February, the Kim regime disclaimed any interest in talking to the “gangster-like” U.S. government, but likely would not reject a process seeming to offer the respect it long has craved. If the regime is unsettled, those disaffected might benefit if Washington stood ready to reward a new approach. Of course, opposition to Kim may have nothing to do with substance; indeed, the military most likely is unhappy with its loss of its influence and privileges under Kim Jong-un. No one is going to risk their life simply in hopes of engaging the West.

However, Kim’s bloody rule offers at least a possibility of a shift within the ruling elite. Then a clear American willingness to reward a more reform-minded government might aid the least bad actors in any power struggle. A peace treaty, diplomatic relations, and end of economic sanctions all should be on the table. It’s still a long-shot, but almost any proposal to address the North is a long-shot.

We look through a glass darkly, wrote the Apostle Paul, and that certainly is the case for North Korea. Last week officials from the U.S., ROK, and Japan gathered to discuss how to respond to the North, but no new ideas were forthcoming. However, recent events suggest that something unusual is going on in that normally abnormal place. Proposing talks and suggesting rewards would be the best response to an uncertain situation. Someday Pyongyang will change. Engagement is the best way to prepare for that day.

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