

NATIONAL REVIEW

A Modest Proposal to Solve Our North Korea Problem

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North Korea's supreme leader, Kim Jong-un, recently reemerged after a three-week absence only to disappear again for another couple of weeks. Indeed, some observers believe that the well-publicized "reappearance" was fake news, the work of a body double to maintain the fiction that Kim is alive and well amid widespread speculation about his health.

"The photos have instead raised suspicions that a lookalike could have been there in his place—with web sleuths noting discrepancies in facial hairline and dental features when compared with previous appearances," the *New York Post* reported.

If the skeptics are right, fears of North Korean instability or collapse — and the armed conflict that could result — remain. But their view has attracted little support, especially from established analysts. It would be an extraordinary propaganda coup if the North Korean regime had deployed a doppelganger for weeks or months while Kim was dead or incapacitated.

There's never been any confirmation that an official Kim double exists, though it is certainly possible. There *is*, however, a Chinese impersonator, Jia Yongtang. He fell into the job by accident. In 2012, he was working as a security guard in Beijing when someone noted his uncanny resemblance to Kim. He is only a few years older than Kim and found imitating the supreme leader's haircut easy. Keeping up with Kim's weight was more of a problem: Even after gaining 60 pounds, Jia lacked the former's girth. But he's still made a living from the resemblance. He even once teamed up with a Barack Obama lookalike for a U.S.–North Korea "summit."

Jia is a close enough match that he once told the *Washington Post* he was afraid the Americans "think I'm really Kim Jong-un and will come here to kill me." That seems a stretch — even the least capable intelligence analyst probably isn't going to mistake Jia for Kim when the former travels around China without the security agents, Mercedes, and portable toilet the latter requires.

And besides, no agent would plot to kill President Donald Trump's close personal friend — that just wouldn't be a good career move.

Yet there is a way that the U.S. could make great use of Jia.

The U.S. needs a new strategy to deal with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, a peaceful way to resolve the current stand-off. And I have one! Washington should adapt the script of the 1993 movie *Dave*, in which a lookalike is recruited to sub for the president after the latter suffers a debilitating stroke. Instead of killing Jia, the Trump administration should hire him.

He would, of course, need to be fattened up, taught Korean, and coached to pick up the Supreme Leader's mannerisms and speech patterns. Then, a grand swap would need to be arranged. The supreme leader has apparently been holed up at a beachfront compound near Wonsan, on the North's east coast. Infiltrating would be no mean feat, even for SEAL Team 6, and much could go wrong. A better strategy would be to arrange another Trump–Kim summit. In an apparent desperate attempt to notch a big diplomatic victory before November's election, Trump could invite his North Korean buddy to the White House for a signing ceremony highlighted by the promise to lift economic sanctions. The details of the alleged deal wouldn't matter, so long as Kim made the journey to Washington. And how could he say no? He would be expecting sanctions relief and the ultimate photo-op!

Once Kim was in America, the swap would be easy to arrange. But what to do with the “old” Kim once he's out of commission? After he has been slimmed down and adjusted through appropriate cosmetic surgery, he could be dropped off in South Korea. No doubt he would futilely attempt to convince everyone he met that he was the North's rightful leader, and find himself written off as an inveterate crank.

As for the “new” Kim, the possibilities are nearly endless, though it would probably be best not to change too much too fast once he was in power. He could begin cashiering the old guard around him while promoting likely reformers. Most important would be to send those who know the old Kim best, such as sister Kim Yo-jong and brother Kim Jong-chul, abroad. Yo-jong could be an ambassador to various European countries; that is how Kim Jong-il disposed of his half-brother, who posed a political threat. Jong-chul would be happy as a roving cultural ambassador, free to attend the rock concerts he is said to love.

With that out of the way, the new Kim would be free to announce a halt in work on nuclear and other WMD programs to coincide with the lifting of sanctions. And to promulgate a new investment code to encourage foreign investment, while instituting visa-free entry for Americans and South Koreans. And to strike a deal with the South to reduce military tensions, by withdrawing conventional forces from the border and opening the DMZ for traffic between the two Koreas.

Most important would be domestic liberalization — freeing political prisoners, closing concentration camps, allowing freedom of worship, legalizing contact with foreign countries, and more. Once such steps were taken the new Kim could go with the flow, so to speak.

Might this vision be slightly Pollyannish? Perhaps. But I maintain that the effort would be worthwhile. The alternative, after all, is likely the survival of a totalitarian, nuclear North Korea, a brittle regime that could collapse unexpectedly and violently at any moment. Surely it is worth seeking a different outcome.

All it would take is one agreeable Kim imitator!

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