

A Modest Proposal for Regime Change in North Korea

Doug Bandow

January 9, 2018

No one is quite sure what to do about North Korea. President Donald Trump appears determined to start a war, a prescription for regional disaster. Despite Kim Jong-un's surprise pitch last week to South Korea for talks, no one believes he's prepared to give up his nation's nukes.

So what to do? Initiate Operation Iron Mask.

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea is almost unique to its degree that power is exercised by one man. Whether the nominal communist state will continue as Asia's only absolute, as opposed to constitutional, monarchy, depends on Kim's longevity, since his presumed two children are quite young. Irrespective of the future, however, only Kim's will appears to matter today.

Naturally, proposals for regime change are circulating in the U.S. and South Korea, and perhaps in China as well. But so far the idea appears to be a fantasy. Other than flattening Pyongyang in an attempt to kill Kim—which would be a great way to trigger all-out war, with mass death and destruction in the South as well as the North—there is no obvious way to reach North Korea's Supreme Leader.

Moreover, no one knows who would follow him. The problem with Kim is not that he is suicidal or irrational—not more so than President Trump, anyway—but that he wants to build nukes and put them atop ICBMs. His successor might want to do so as well, and could end up being less logical and predictable. In international affairs it is always dangerous to assume things can't get any worse.

However, there's a somewhat related though much better idea out there: Substitute a new Kim for the real one. Let everyone believe that the same ole SL continues to reign, wisely governing over the dotting masses. Even if those around him noticed a change, they would be unlikely to say anything. Indeed, Kim has already confounded expectations by switching to wearing a Western-style suit for his pitch to South Korea. Who wants to be the next person saying goodbye while facing the barrels of an anti-aircraft gun after thinking he noticed a small difference and doubted the SL, the closest thing to God incarnate in the DPRK?

A candidate for the "new" Kim is Kim Minyong, known professionally as Dragon Kim. He is a Kim Jong-un impersonator. Born and raised in the Republic of Korea, he attended university in the U.S. and speaks English, Chinese, and Japanese, as well as Korean. He has modeled the

“real” Kim’s haircut, expressions, speech, walk, and dress. Who better to take over in the DPRK?

To put Operation Iron Mask into motion, Kim Minyong would announce that he was exhausted from running his business, which helps place South Korean students in overseas universities, as well as acting as Kim Jong-un in events around the world. He would leave on a “vacation” of indeterminate length, no forwarding address included.

Then he would meet up with his international team—South Korean, Chinese, American, Russian, and Japanese—to handle any contingency. Obviously, the most delicate task would be the SL substitution itself. How to switch the new for the real Kim? The beauty of employing Dragon Kim is that his appearance would allow him to do what no one else could: go anywhere and everywhere. Instead of being seen as foreign agents, his confederates would travel on his coattails. Get them into the royal residence and magic would happen. (Think of the movie *The Man in the Iron Mask*.) The next morning the new Kim Jong-un would emerge.

At which point the possibilities would be endless.

Of course, New Kim (NK) could not unveil himself as a reformer extraordinaire too quickly. The changes would have to be rolled out, transformational but not so fast that his minions came to doubt his sanity.

His first decree could be to freeze missile and nuclear tests. After all, as he’s said before, the DPRK had “completed” its nuclear deterrent. So it would make sense to pause, instead of beginning the new year by unduly frightening the imperialist powers. Let them contemplate the North’s extraordinary power in an atmosphere of quiet.

NK’s next step could be to quietly inform his security services that he has uncovered threats against the revolution by the military, and tell the military the same about the security services. After they arrested each other, he could appoint a new generation to their positions, empowering a kinder, gentler leadership. Order must still be kept, but the nature of that order would be changing.

NK could officially invite people from around the world to visit the DPRK, with visa-free entry for everyone but Americans. The latter, however, also could come if Washington ended its travel ban to North Korea. Come one, come all, and see paradise in action. Bring your money, books, and videos.

Next, he could announce that he’d felt his people’s love, so he was abolishing the *songbon* system of social classification. Why punish people for the actions of others in the past when their current support is so strong? Along with that would be an amnesty for those currently held in labor camps. Past misunderstandings should not be allowed to color the present.

Given the people’s everlasting commitment to the Kim dynasty, NK would then end restrictions on religious activity. There’s no doubt the Korean people recognize the Kims as god, so why should he act afraid?

By now, it would be time to unveil his “socialist market” system, by which the DPRK would copy Western economic methods while putting “socialist” in every name and description of the respective activities. Just as the North has pioneered the concept of a communist monarchy, it would lead the way in implementing “socialist capitalist” policies.

Since capitalism with Korean socialist characteristics would need workers, NK would end conscription and encourage young men to enter the workforce. He would announce that “to get rich is glorious.” After they made a few zillion won, he would encourage the newly wealthy to “give back” and join the military. Until then, however, he would urge them to copy the West’s entrepreneurial model—in the DPRK’s unique socialist way, of course.

That would be the moment for NK to approach President Donald Trump. The 105-story Ryugyong Hotel, informally called the Hotel of Doom, continues to sit empty, though construction cranes recently have been sighted, suggesting renewed building activity. The reforming Supreme Leader should suggest that the Donald take the structure over as Pyongyang’s very own super-duper Trump Tower. U.S. sanctions would have to be lifted, but that would be a small price to pay to advance the Trump Empire in the North.

The ribbon-cutting ceremony between the two leaders would offer a good opportunity for an informal summit. NK might suggest that sizable investments in the North could lead to the withdrawal of conventional weapons from their advanced positions near the DMZ, the inter-Korean border, followed by dismantlement of the DPRK’s nuclear and missile facilities.

After which NK would announce that he was tearing down the “wall” (mostly removing the troops) separating the North from both South Korea and China. Since everyone knew that North Korea stood so much higher than its neighbors, NK would indicate that it was time to allow the imperialists and their puppets to benefit from the connection.

Finally, NK would announce that he had completed the Kim family legacy by reuniting the Koreas, at which point he would visit Mount Paektu, the sacred mountain featured in family mythology. As NK headed for the cloud-shrouded summit he would be seen no longer, exiting on the Chinese side into the care of the multinational team that planned and executed Operation Iron Mask.

Coincidentally a bit later Kim Minyong would reappear in South Korea, shorn of his familiar Kim Jong-un look. He would reopen his educational business, bolstered with students from the now northern section of the united Republic of Korea hoping to study abroad.

Observers would subsequently refer to 2018 as the Miracle Year in recent Korean history. Analysts would debate the mysterious transformation of Kim Jong-un before his equally mysterious disappearance.

In future years the people of Northeast Asia, and especially of what had been North Korea, would enjoy a new era of peace and prosperity. Among them would be a man once known as Dragon Kim, whose unique skills were quickly forgotten in the aftermath of Korean reunification.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and a former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan. He is the author of Tripwire: Korea and U.S. Foreign Policy in a Changed World and co-author of The Korean Conundrum: America’s Troubled Relations with North and South Korea.