

# The National Interest *online*

## Kim's Heir

by Doug Bandow

07.28.2009

President George W. Bush famously said that he “loathed” North Korea’s Kim Jong-il. Yet the United States might come to miss the brutal dictator, with his abundant gut and bouffant hair. Resolving the North Korean nuclear crisis through diplomacy was never going to be easy; with an impending leadership change in Pyongyang, diplomatic solutions are likely to become near impossible.

Reports suggest that Kim Jong-il may have pancreatic cancer; some analysts predict he could die within the year. Since the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) was established in 1948, only two men have held supreme power: Kim Il-sung, who died at age eighty-two in 1994, and his son, Kim Jong-il. The monarchical succession from the former to the latter faced opposition at home and in China, the DPRK’s closest ally, but Kim Jong-il’s rise to power was carefully orchestrated by his father in a process that took more than two decades. Who now will take the throne?

North Korea has evolved into the modern equivalent of the Ottoman Empire. “Great Leader” Kim Il-sung was married twice and had many other relationships. Kim Jong-il apparently has had four wives or long-term mistresses. The result has been several children from different spouses as well as a number of illegitimate children.

Family members have played a significant role in the regime. Kim Jong-il faced political competition from his uncle, Kim Yong-ju, who eventually was sidelined by Kim Il-sung. Kim Jong-il also pushed aside his younger half-brother, Kim Pyong-il, who since 1979 has been posted as ambassador to several European nations, keeping him out of domestic North Korean politics. When the elder Kim died in July 1994, Kim Jong-il appeared to face little opposition to taking control.

Until Kim Jong-il fell ill, he appeared to give little thought to his succession. However, STRATFOR’s Roger Baker believes that Kim “has a very strong fear that after he dies, if the country changes direction, that his family may be on the receiving end of vigilantism or punished or killed.” That’s plausible, though Kim may simply desire to cement his legacy by choosing someone who would have little choice but to venerate Kim’s rule. Observes Atsuhito Isozaki of Tokyo’s Keio University: “Since Kim had a stroke last year, North Korea appears to be in a hurry in naming his successor.” Earlier this year Kim apparently designated twenty-six year-old Kim Jong-un, his youngest son, as his heir.

Reports indicate that Kim Jong-un was recently shifted from his position at the Korean Workers’ Party to the National Defense Commission (NDC). Party and military officials have been tasked with promoting the younger Kim, jokingly referred to by some observers as “Cute Leader”; he is being called “Brilliant Comrade” and “Commander Kim” by the North’s media. Open Radio for North Korea reports that diplomats and military leaders have been informed of his new status and promotional efforts have been launched, including party and military propaganda campaigns.

Reports are circulating that the succession may be confirmed at an upcoming party conference in October of this year or next. Another theory is that the process may be formalized in 2012, the centenary of the birth of Kim Il-sung.

Kim Jong-un is a virtual unknown outside of North Korea. Only one photo of him exists, taken when he attended the International School in Bern, Switzerland. During his two years there he apparently demonstrated some proficiency in English, French, and German, enjoyed skiing and watching

Hollywood action movies, and favored the National Basketball Association. Classmates say he showed no political interest, though he was only in his mid-teens then.

However, unless Kim Jong-il survives and rules for at least several years, the younger Kim is unlikely to have an easy time claiming his political inheritance in a culture that typically reveres age—and in which potential rivals are many. The regime number two appears to be the elder Kim's brother-in-law, Jang Song-taek, who disappeared in a purge a few years ago but recently reemerged. Kim Jong-il recently named Jang to the NDC.

Jang is only four years younger than Kim and his independent authority is hard to assess. Jang, backed by the NDC's O Kuk-ryol and Kim Yong-chun, is thought to have been tasked to act as Kim Jong-un's principal mentor. However, he might not be satisfied playing a secondary role in the event of Kim Jong-il's death.

Many other senior officials have been waiting for years and even decades to take charge. Their loyalty to Kim Jong-il might not survive his death. Especially since there are more than a few Kim family members available to front for competing factions.

For instance, Kim Jong-il's oldest son is thirty-eight year-old Kim Jong-nam, who apparently fell into disgrace after he was discovered traveling on a forged passport while attempting to enter Japan in order to visit Tokyo Disneyland. He now lives in Macau. Although he seems out of the power equation and in a television interview voiced his support for Kim Jong-un, reports recently surfaced that his supporters were being purged and that Kim Jong-un's aides organized an assassination plot, busted by China. (If true, this would seem to mimic the Ottoman practice of new sultans eradicating male family members who could challenge their ascension.)

Kim Jong-un has an older brother, Kim Jong-chol. Their mother, Ko Yong-hui, is said to have been Kim Jong-il's favorite wife. Before she died of cancer in 2004 she reportedly was promoting both sons as potential heirs. The twenty-eight year-old Kim Jong-chol is supposedly sickly and viewed as effeminate by his father. Nevertheless, he apparently runs the Party Leadership Department, traditionally a critical position. However, some of the department's functions apparently have been transferred to Jang. Although Kim Jong-chol has formally pledged to support his younger brother, that could change and the former could be used by a competing faction.

Kim Jong-il's current wife/mistress, Kim Ok, and her relatives, though currently unimportant politically, also conceivably could play a role in providing a family connection in any ensuing power struggle. So could Kim Pyong-il, Kim Jong-il's half-brother who is currently serving as the DPRK's ambassador to Poland. More distant family members are not likely to dominate the North's political future, but still might play a role in any factional struggle.

How this international soap opera will turn out is anyone's guess. But it could have a significant impact on Pyongyang's relations with the rest of the world—and not for the better.

Given the horrors perpetuated by Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, it is hard to imagine the situation getting worse in the DPRK. However, overt factionalism, a brutal power struggle, and political instability would add an incendiary element to peninsula affairs. Observes Dennis Blair, Director of National Intelligence: "Any time you have a combination of this behavior of doing provocative things in order to excite a response—plus succession questions—you have a potentially dangerous mixture."

At the very least, an insecure leader, weak collective rule, and/or a de facto military government all likely would make North Korean concessions on the nuclear issue even less likely. A new, more responsible and forward-looking regime—one that recognized real international influence requires significant reform—might eventually emerge. However, counting on that result would let hope trump experience.

The United States should continue diplomatic efforts, both bilateral and multilateral. Moreover, Washington should intensify its efforts to engage China in a concerted campaign to pressure

Pyongyang and/or seek to effect regime change. At the same time, however, policy makers must realistically assess the future. The United States and North Korea's neighbors had better prepare for the possibility of an even more unsettled and dangerous future.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. He is a former special assistant to President Reagan and the author of several books, including *Tripwire: Korea and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Cato Institute) and *The Korean Conundrum: America's Troubled Relations with North and South Korea* (Palgrave/Macmillan, co-author).

**> Subscribe Now to The National Interest <**

Copyright © 2006 The National Interest All rights reserved. | [Legal Terms](#)  
P: (800) 344-7952, Outside the U.S.: (856) 380-4130 | [backissues@nationalinterest.org](mailto:backissues@nationalinterest.org)  
P.O. Box 9001, Maple Shade, NJ 08052-9662

The National Interest is published by The Nixon Center

The Nixon Center  
1615 L Street, Suite 1250  
Washington, DC 20036  
[www.nixoncenter.org](http://www.nixoncenter.org)