

Greet Rumors of Kim's Demise With Caution and Vigilance

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

While recent reports of Kim Jong-un's failing health could be true, there are historical and empirical reasons for prudence in taking them at face value.

The U.S., South Korea, and Japan have long planned for a range of contingencies, but currently are navigating decreasing military readiness and strained relations.

Washington should work with Seoul and Tokyo to coordinate national contingency plans and affirm America's unequivocal commitment to South Korea and Japan.

The U.S. Intelligence Community refers to North Korea as the “hardest of the hard targets” for a reason: It is exceedingly difficult to obtain information about the secretive regime. Discerning North Korean leadership intentions or the health of its leaders is particularly challenging.

While recent reports of Kim Jong-un's failing health could be true, there is reason for prudence in taking them at face value. Over the years, there have been many false reports exclaiming the declining health or death of Kim Jong-un, his father Kim Jong-Il, and his grandfather Kim Il-sung. Kim Jong-un may be one chocolate wafer away from a heart attack—but there are no indications that he is checking out.

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Source Reliability and South Korean Reaction

The rumors appear to be driven by a single source story by *Daily NK* reporting that Kim had heart surgery and was recuperating.¹ Subsequent stories of Kim's "grave condition"² or of being "brain dead" go beyond available evidence, yet triggered a media frenzy. CNN reported the U.S. is "monitoring" intelligence rather than the U.S. "has" intelligence that would, presumably, be highly compartmentalized and based on sensitive sources.

South Korea's presidential Blue House downplayed the reporting by commenting that Seoul has not detected any negative indications of Kim's health. Other reporters quoted sources in North Korea stating that life in Pyongyang was normal with some schools reopening after a COVID shutdown.³ North Korea's official media reported Kim Jong-un sent personal greetings to the president of Cuba.⁴

That said, Kim Jong-un was absent from the important April 15 celebrations of the birth of his grandfather, but this year's events were more muted, perhaps due to the COVID-related measures. Kim is in poor health and has struggled with several health issues. Both his father and grandfather died of heart attacks. North Korea delayed announcements of both previous leaders' deaths for a day or more, and Kim Jong-il's 2008 stroke was not known for several weeks.

Power Transitions in North Korea

As when Kim Jong-Il died, there is no formal succession plan in the North Korean constitution. Since assuming power in 2011, Kim Jong-un has repeatedly replaced senior officials so that there is no obvious successor. Being the "second most powerful man in North Korea" has not been a path to success.

Until recently, it was widely assumed that the strict Confucian culture of North Korea precluded choosing a woman to rule the nation. However, Kim's sister, Kim Yo-jong, has gained prominence and authority in recent years. Though nominally lower in rank to others in the North Korea delegation that attended the South Korean Olympics in 2018, she clearly was the real leader. Since then, she has gained important titles giving her more stature.

If Kim were indeed sick, he may have designated her as the only person he trusts, potentially giving her sufficient power to carry on the Kim family "Mount Baektu" bloodline, which stretches back to Kim Il-sung, the revered founder of North Korea.

Some experts predicted that North Korea would not survive the second dynastic succession between Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un in 2011, yet it occurred. Similarly, some will speculate that Kim Jong-un's death could lead to an explosion (lashing out at South Korea) or implosion (regime collapse, internal civil war, and potential loss of control of nuclear weapons). More plausible, however, is that the regime will take steps for an orderly transition of power.

Regardless of the veracity of the current rumors, they underscore the enormous importance of one individual's health on the leadership and potential stability of the North Korean regime, as well as the potentially fearful consequences of a botched transfer of power. Even an initially successful succession could deteriorate into a power struggle, with fissures among the senior leadership arising over time.

Regardless of who assumes power, there are no indications that a successor would pursue different domestic or foreign policies. The regime has long emphasized the centrality of nuclear weapons to its national security—and its resistance to negotiating them away. A successor may be more deft in reaching out to foreign countries, as Kim Jong-un was, but the underlying objectives and policies would remain constant. Even a stable North Korea will remain a threat.

What Washington Should Do

The U.S., in conjunction with allies South Korea and Japan, has longed planned for a wide range of North Korean contingencies. The allies have prepared for an all-out North Korean invasion, as well as lesser military scenarios and internal unrest. But current speculation on Kim Jong-un's hold on power comes amidst degrading allied military readiness brought on by cancelling exercises and COVID-related shutdowns, as well as strained U.S. relations with and between Seoul and Tokyo.

In these circumstances, Washington should:

- **Develop multilateral contingency planning for effective crisis response.** The U.S., South Korea, and Japan should coordinate their national contingency plans for North Korean scenarios. These plans should include a humanitarian component to safeguard the North Korean populace's human rights.
- **Affirm unequivocal commitment to defending South Korea and Japan.** This should be accomplished through the promise of extended

deterrence comprised of conventional forces, missile defense, and the nuclear umbrella.

- **Maintain a robust forward-deployed military presence in South Korea and Japan.** Such a presence is necessary to defend critical allies and maintain peace in Northeast Asia.
- **Resolve the stalemated Special Measures Agreement negotiations.** The U.S. should accept an incremental South Korean contribution for the cost of stationing U.S. forces, rather than continuing to demand an exorbitant five-fold increase.⁵ Now is not the time to be squabbling with our allies as we face growing military threats from North Korea.
- **Maintain a conditions-based transition of wartime operational control of South Korean military forces from the United Nations Command to Seoul.** South Korean President Moon Jae-in has advocated completing the transition by the end of his term, but none of the agreed-upon conditions have yet been achieved.⁶

Conclusion

There is always great uncertainty about North Korean intentions and capabilities, more so during a potential leadership transition. While rumors of Kim Jong-un's failing health should be met with caution, they should also trigger continued vigilance against the myriad of threats the regime can pose to the United States and its allies.

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Endnotes

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2. Jim Sciutto et al., "U.S. Monitoring Intelligence That North Korean Leader Is in Grave Danger After Surgery," CNN, April 21, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/20/politics/kim-jong-un-north-korea/index.html> (accessed April 21, 2020).
3. Chad O'Carroll and Oliver Hotham, "Life Continues as Normal in Pyongyang as Kim Jong Un Health Rumors Swirl," *NK News*, April 20, 2020, <https://www.nknews.org/2020/04/life-continues-as-normal-in-pyongyang-as-kim-jong-un-health-rumors-swirl/> (accessed April 21, 2020).
4. Alastair Coleman, Tweet, April 21, 2020, <https://twitter.com/alistaircoleman/status/1252553812826640384?s=20> (accessed April 21, 2020) ("Here's the North Korea main evening news and the top story is ... Kim Jong-in [sic] sends comradely greetings to the president of Cuba.").
5. Bruce Klingner, James Carafano, and Walter Lohman, "Don't Break Alliances Over Money," *The National Interest*, November 22, 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/korea-watch/don%E2%80%99t-break-alliances-over-money-98967> (accessed April 21, 2019).
6. Bruce Klingner, "Enhance South Korean Military Capabilities Before OPCON Transfer," Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 3452, December 2, 2019, <https://www.heritage.org/asia/report/enhance-south-korean-military-capabilities-opcon-transfer>.