



Blue Glacier Red Team

A Red Team Special Memorandum

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This memo was prepared by Blue Glacier Security & Intelligence® to provide a pronounced “out-of-the-box” approach that will provoke thought and offer an alternative viewpoint on analytic issues. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to Blue Glacier at 703-934-2034 or 202-389-6200.

What if Kim Jong Un Dies in 2022?

Kim Jong Un’s recent, drastic weight loss has renewed speculation about his health, but medical ailments are not the only threats to the North Korean dictator’s longevity. How might he die in 2022, who might succeed him, and how could that succession unfold?

Nature and Nurture

Heredity and lifestyle are important determinants of health,¹ and Kim Jong Un is badly served by both. Kim’s grandfather, North Korea’s founder Kim Il Sung, died of a heart attack in 1994 at the age of 82.² He was overweight, a heavy smoker, and probably had high blood pressure, according to a declassified CIA document.³ He suffered a “heart failure” in 1991 and was fitted with a pacemaker, according to a French doctor who treated him.⁴

Kim Il Sung’s son and Kim Jong Un’s father, Kim Jong Il, died of a heart attack at age 69 in 2011, after just 17 years ruling North Korea. He had suffered a stroke just three years earlier.⁵ Kim Jong Il’s heavy smoking and drinking probably contributed to his early death. He seemed not to have moderated his habits even after a severe case of chronic laryngitis in 2009, reportedly caused by excessive smoking and drinking.⁶ In addition to heart problems, both Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il suffered from diabetes and stress, according to the former’s personal physician and a declassified State Department intelligence product.⁷

Even state media claimed Kim Jong Il “passed away at work aboard a train due to his pent up mental and physical fatigue.”⁸ Of note, Kim Jong Un’s mother Ko Yong Hui was diagnosed with cancer in the mid-1990s, traveled to Switzerland and France to receive treatments, and reportedly died of cancer in 2004 at the age of 51 or 52.⁹

Kim Jong Il’s eldest son and Kim Jong Un’s half-brother, Kim Jong Nam, was a smoker who also suffered from heart problems, according to Parisian doctors with whom he communicated (He was assassinated in Malaysia in 2017 with VX nerve agent, almost certainly on Kim Jong Un’s orders).¹⁰ Half-siblings’ history of cardiovascular problems can be as high a risk factor as it is for full-siblings, and cardiovascular risks associated with half-siblings can be greater than risks associated with parents and grandparents.¹¹ Kim Jong Un’s aunt, Kim Kyong Hui (Kim Jong Il’s younger sister), is also known to have heart problems (in addition to suffering from alcoholism, diabetes, and hyperlipidemia).¹² In 2013 an American cardiologist reportedly attended to her in North Korea, indicating that her heart condition had worsened.¹³

Parent-offspring and sibling genetic correlations explain up to 80% of the variance in body mass index (BMI).¹⁴ And as much as 80% of the variance in nicotine addiction is attributable to genetic factors.¹⁵ Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un has followed father’s habit of eating, drinking, and smoking to excess (smoking increases the risk of developing numerous disorders, particularly pulmonary and cardiovascular disease, as well as many cancers), and he often disappears from public view for weeks at a time. Various sources speculate that he suffers from diabetes, hypertension, hyperlipidemia, cardiovascular disease, thyroid issues, and gout, among other ailments.¹⁶

The South Korean National Intelligence Service reportedly believes Kim’s recent weight loss is intentional and asserts that he currently appears to be in good health (his 5’ 7” or 5’ 8” frame carried 308 pounds in 2020—a BMI of 48). However, with a current BMI of more than 40 (he reportedly weighs 264 pounds) he still has severe, or Class III, obesity.¹⁷

Kim Jong Un’s habits and family history of heart disease, diabetes, obesity, and nicotine addiction indicate significant health risks.

Uneasy Lies the Head That Wears a Crown

Kim Jong Un's understanding of the threats to his power is likely partially informed by assassination attempts and coup plots against him and his father.

- In 2012 Kim Jong Un reportedly faced an assassination attempt in downtown Pyongyang as a result of a power struggle in a military bureau.¹⁸
- At a family gathering in 2005 that included Kim Jong Il and his second son Kim Jong Chul, shots were fired at Kim Jong Il, who was knocked unconscious, according to South Korean intelligence sources.¹⁹
- Kim Jong Il believed himself the target of a massive bomb attack at the Ryongchon railway station that killed more than 160 people in April 2004.²⁰
- Presumably in 1997, a northeastern army unit planned a missile strike on key targets in Pyongyang, according to a former North Korean intelligence official.²¹
- Kim Jong Il was reportedly left temporarily “a vegetable” following an alleged assassination attempt in the fall of 1977, according to a declassified CIA analysis.²²

Chairman Kim consolidated his power in dramatic fashion—he executed some of his perceived political threats, including uncle Jang Song Thaek and half-brother Kim Jong Nam. Jang was one of three regents chosen by his brother-in-law Kim Jong Il to assist in Kim Jong Un's transition to supreme leader.²³ Jang was executed in December 2013 for "anti-party" and "counter-revolutionary acts", and reportedly hundreds of his supporters and their families were either killed or imprisoned in the aftermath, according to a former senior North Korean economic official.²⁴

Kim Jong Un's early shift from his father's “Military First” policy to one of “People First” likely made enemies for him within North Korea's military establishment, but Kim's skillfully managed his risk from that quarter in a less-than-lethal fashion. Seven months into his tenure, the 27-year-old Kim fired his top military official, the chief of the General Staff. As of this writing, the position has changed hands at Kim's direction six or more times. Kim as supreme leader has also replaced his minister of defense at least seven times over his 10 years, as compared with a only five ministers of defense during Kim Il Sung's 46-year tenure and three during Kim Jong Il's 17 years.²⁵ These frequent leadership changes make it difficult for any clique of senior officers to

guarantee the military's allegiance to themselves, which could reduce the likelihood of a military coup. However, these demotions and purges could have reinforced or created resentment in the military establishment. It is also possible that starving North Korea may produce a determined lone actor outside of the elite power structure who is willing to trade his life for that of Kim's. Over the past decade Kim has astutely consolidated and maintained his power. He has also adeptly *mitigated* the risk of coup and assassination from the military, the political establishment, and his family.

But Kim's largely successful efforts to stem disloyalty and rebellion hardly guarantee his long-term survival.

Timing is Everything

Kim Jong Un's consolidation of power suggests he sufficiently understands the nature of power in North Korea and thinks several steps ahead. Such a man has probably engaged in planning for his dynastic succession and also continuity of government, such as when he and his sister flew on different aircraft to the Singapore summit in 2018.²⁶ Kim's family history has also given us a few clues about how he might want his succession to unfold.

Kim Jong Il died young, denying his son the full grooming period that both men likely would have preferred. Kim Jong Il himself spent more than 30 years gaining the knowledge and experience he needed to succeed his father. Beginning in 1963, the year after he graduated from university, he held a series of positions in the North Korean political and military establishments.²⁷ In 1973 the succession scheme moved into high gear, according to a declassified CIA document.²⁸ During the 1980 Sixty Party Congress Kim Jong Il was publicly revealed to be a high-ranking party official and his father's chosen successor.²⁹

When Kim Il Sung died in 1994, Kim Jong Il had formally been North Korea's heir apparent for almost 14 years.

Kim Jong Un may have been his father's chosen successor as early as 1994 at age eight or nine,³⁰ but his active preparation for the job probably did not begin until 2009. According to the Kim Il Sung University newspaper, in late 2008, likely prompted by his stroke earlier that year, Kim Jong Il required his top military commanders to pledge their loyalty to his 24-year-old son.³¹ Kim Jong Un soon assumed leadership titles and positions in the military, party, and security apparatus. In 2010 he became a four-star general.³² A domestic propaganda campaign complemented these moves.³³

At his father's death in December 2011, Kim Jong Un had been preparing to take over the leadership of his country for only three years.

Looking for Mr. Right

Much of Kim Jong Un's own legitimacy is rooted in North Korean mythology of Korea's ancient founding god king Dangun and Kim's own "Paektu bloodline" flowing to him through his grandfather and father (Paektu, a still-active volcano on North Korea's border with China, is one of Korea's most important cultural and geological sites).³⁴ So he has probably selected a successor from within his family.

His surviving male sibling, older brother Kim Jong Chul, was passed over by Kim Jong Il for his effeminacy and lack of ambition,³⁵ and Kim Jong Un might reject him as successor for the same reasons. Their sister Kim Yo Jong, thought to be in her mid-30s, apparently shows talent in her government roles. And up to at least 2001 Kim Jong Il was not only more impressed with her and her sister than their brothers, he predicted one of his girls would succeed him, according to Russia's then ambassador.³⁶ But her elevation to Supreme Leader might be too unconventional for Confucian, male-dominated North Korean society—despite the fact several women have been promoted to powerful political and diplomatic roles in recent years.³⁷ Thus, Kim Jong Un's most likely choice as successor is his eldest son, who is reportedly also his oldest child. Little is known about him.

Most sources place Kim's eldest son's birth year as 2010. If so, he will be only 11 or 12 years old if Kim dies in 2022.

Princess Regent in Training

The most visible, immediate family member in Jong Un's inner circle is his sister Kim Yo Jong. Some observers see her career path as that of a successor but given North Korean society's traditional resistance to female leadership, it is more likely that she is being groomed to be regent for her nephew if Kim Jong Un does not live to oversee the transition himself.

Kim Yo Jong began her government career in 2007, and eventually served as acting director of the National Defense Commission, vice director of the Propaganda and Agitation Department, and Political Bureau (Politburo) member. As a member of the high-level delegation to the Pyeongchang Olympics opening ceremony in February 2018, she became the first member of the regime's ruling family to visit South Korea since the Korean War armistice.³⁸

The similarities between Kim Yo Jong's early career and that of her father, Kim Jong Il, are striking. She held senior positions within the military establishment and became vice director of the North Korean propaganda apparatus just a few years younger than her father was when he joined the same agency.

Since 2015, Kim Yo Jong has assumed positions that have increased her influence and her ability to hold power as a regent. Widely thought to be North Korea's unofficial second-in-command, she is also believed to have assumed temporary leadership over the country when her brother suffered a health crisis in 2014, according to a Seoul-based think tank run by North Korean defectors. She is thought to be married to Choe Song, a son of Kim Jong Un loyalist Choe Ryong Hae.

She reportedly, with her husband, directs both Office 38 which manages the ruling family's finances, and Office 39 which uses investments, illegal arms sales, and illicit fundraising activities to mitigate the effects of international sanctions and to fund rewards of cash and luxury items to favored government officials.³⁹ Such a position gives Yo Jong a powerful means to build the relationships and alliances she will need with the elite should she become regent—or desire to be supreme leader.

Waiting in the Wings

Kim Yo Jong is Kim Jong Un's most likely candidate to serve as regent to his son, and she is also a candidate to succeed her brother. But without a respected male face to present to the hyper-traditional North Korean public, the Kim dynasty might not long outlast Kim Jong Un. Complicating this calculus, any North Korean political figure with the standing to serve effectively as Yo Jong's co-regent could also present the risk of having the means to lead a coup, or to conspire to assassinate Kim Jong Un, Kim Yo Jong, and other Kim family members to immediately or eventually seize power for himself. What follows is a list of ruling elites able to become either co-regents or self-chosen successors to the Supreme Leader in their own right.

- **Choe Ryong Hae (72).** Kim Yo Jong's father-in-law is president of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly, making him North Korea's titular head of state, and leader of the body that has the power to interpret the constitution.⁴⁰ He is also first vice-chairman of the State Affairs Commission (SAC), second only to SAC chairman Kim Jong Un, who under the current constitution is the highest executive authority and the commander-in-chief of the armed forces.⁴¹ Finally, Choe is on the Workers' Party of Korea's five-member Presidium of the Politburo, the party's top policymaking body to which Kim Jong Un is also member.⁴²

He is a longtime loyalist of the Kim family and was a regent (in addition to Kim Jong Un's aunt Kim Kyong Hui and her husband Jang Song Thaek) selected in 2009 to groom Kim Jong Un to succeed his father.⁴³ Choe has extensive experience and a broad network of allies within North Korea's political establishment. But he is reportedly unpopular with the military, partly because of his involvement in transferring to civilian control a number of businesses previously run by the military.⁴⁴ Perceived by some analysts as more sycophant than sicario, he may lack the toughness and reputation among North Korea's elites to be the nation's sole male face. In addition to his previous and current positions, Choe's prominence and reported arrogance⁴⁵ could stem from:

- His connection to the anti-Japanese partisan revolutionary line, which is superseded in importance only by the Mt. Paektu bloodline of the Kim family. His father was friends with Kim Il Sung during the guerrilla movement in the 1940s. And Choe's grandfather served in the Korean Independence Army in the 1900s just as Imperial Japan moved to annex the Korean peninsula.⁴⁶
- Recent reports that reveal Choe's father led a legendary battle against the Japanese in 1937—not Kim Il Sung as is portrayed in North Korean propaganda.⁴⁷ In the extreme, Choe's father could be considered the true founder of North Korea instead of Kim Jong Un's grandfather Kim Il Sung.
- His 50-year personal relationship with Kim Jong Il.⁴⁸

Choe could be the elite who would most likely dare to question Kim Jong Un, or to attempt to consolidate power and succeed Kim if the supreme leader dies in 2022, or to even mount a coup.

- **Kim Yong Chol (74).** Kim is a retired general who, as of at least June 2020, serves as one of the dozen or so vice chairmen of the WPK's Central Committee.⁴⁹ He oversaw Kim Jong Un's military education at Kim Il Sung University. He was previously director of the Reconnaissance General Bureau, and in that capacity, he oversaw the cyberattack against Sony Pictures in 2014, the March 2010 sinking of the South Korea Navy ship Cheonan, and the shelling of Yeonpyeong-do (Yeonpyeong Island) later that year. A temperamentally combative and ideologically bellicose hard-liner who was reportedly difficult for his military superiors to manage, Kim has frequently been paired with Kim Yo Jong for international visits, including the 2018 Pyeongchang Olympics, and summits in Vietnam and South Korea.⁵⁰
- **Pak Jong Chon (age unknown).** Pak Jong Chon is a member of the Politburo's powerful Presidium of the Politburo. He was Kim Jong Un's artillery instructor at the artillery commander course at Kim Il Sung

Military University but was never mentioned in the North Korean press until after Kim assumed power. He was chief of the General Staff from April 2019 until June 2021. Kim Jong Un's education as an artillery officer has informed his views on the importance of modern artillery and ballistic missiles, underscoring Pak's influence with the supreme leader. A large portrait of Kim and Pak on display at an exhibition in October 2021 revealed the close nature of their relationship.⁵¹ **As a key Kim Jong Un loyalist with a solid reputation within the military establishment, Pak may be able to sway the armed forces to support whomever he chooses to endorse.**

- **Jo Yong Won (65).** Although Jo Yong Won is one of Kim Jong Un's key confidants, very little is known about him. Another member of the Politburo's Presidium, some Korea watchers consider Jo's formal ranking to be third in the country, after Kim Jong Un and Choe Ryong Hae. Jo is believed to have started as a military officer. Often seen in the background at high-level summits and accompanying Kim Jong Un during public appearances, Jo was a senior member of the supreme leader's 2009 transition team. He now serves as deputy chief to Kim Jong Un in his capacity as general secretary to the WPK Secretariat. **His influence is such that some observers believe he, rather than Kim Yo Jong, is Kim Jong Un's choice as regent.**⁵²
- **Ri Son Gwon (age unknown).** Although Foreign Minister Ri assumed office with little experience in diplomatic matters outside the Chosen Peninsula, as head of a North Korean group responsible for talks with South Korea, he has participated in many bilateral talks in the past 15 years. Fluent in English and widely known to be a political and diplomatic hardliner, Ri is an army officer well-connected with the North Korean military establishment. He is also known to be a close advisor to Kim Yong Chol, above.⁵³

Reading Tomorrow's Tea Leaves

As with Kim's previous protracted absences from public view, initially it will likely be difficult to assess the nature of his absence if due to deteriorating health, incapacitation, or death. An assassination staged to seem like a health crisis would further complicate outside analysis. Given Kim Jong Un's array of health risks, such an assassination might go undetected outside of and even inside regime elite circles. Several indicators could be associated with the severely deteriorating health, incapacitation, or death of Kim Jong Un.

- Propaganda aimed at improving North Korean attitudes about women as leaders could signal Kim Yo Jong's intent to either succeed her brother, or to serve as regent with or without a male co-regent. Such propaganda could reference historical figures like Queen Seondeok (7th Century), Queen Inhyeon (17th Century), and Empress Myeongseong (19th Century),⁵⁴ and or it could focus on more modern female Korean heroes of the anti-Japanese partisan revolutionary and Korean War eras.
- The regime elevates the status of Kim's wife Ri Sol Ju and shifts the emphasis of her imagery from stylish femininity and modern style to her role as a self-sacrificing and loving mother—including referring to her as “Mother of Korea” or similar moniker. This propaganda effort would support the eventual succession (after a period of regency) of Kim's chosen offspring. The regime extolled Kim Jong Un's great-grandmother, grandmother, and mother; state media referred to all three as “Mother of Korea” to support cult of personality and supreme leader succession efforts. His grandmother (Kim Jong Il's mother) was also named a “Hero of the DPRK” in 1972 when Jong Il emerged as his father's likely successor. In the early 2000s, army propaganda briefly referred to Kim Jong Un's mother (Kim Jong Il's wife) Ko Yong Hui as North Korea's “Respected Mother” in support of one of her sons as hereditary successor (presumed to be Jong Chol at the time).⁵⁵
- A formal announcement by Kim Jong Un, a Kim loyalist, or state media of his choice as successor. This declaration could confer legitimacy on the candidate,

although doing so too early could create opposition and charges of nepotism (if his declared successor is a Kim) from idealistic socialists.

- Unusual silence of state media, combined with unusual movements of internal security elements, especially units responsible for the personal security of regime leaders such as the Office of Adjutants (Office 6) in the Supreme Leader's Personal Secretariat, and the Guard Command (in particular its First Bureau).⁵⁶ The regime will initially limit—if not completely cut-off—information if Kim Jong Un falls severely ill or dies in private, especially while it investigates an assassination attempt.

Conclusion

If Kim Jong Un dies in 2022, regardless of the cause, North Korea's foreign policy priorities could largely remain what they are today as the strongman or strongwoman consolidates his or her power. But Kim's death could also lead to pronounced factionalism and instability, including a humanitarian crisis and civil war with regional consequences. And regional, if not international, concerns over the North's WMD stocks. Kim's moves to consolidate and preserve his own power have made a coup difficult but not impossible. Likewise, his apparent decision to improve his health has lowered his health risk level, yet it remains remarkably high due to his lifestyle and genetics. And while Kim likely proceeds with well-thought-out succession planning, no plan ever unfolds exactly as written by its planner.

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