



## PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

### You Only Live Twice, Korean Style

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The miraculous “revival” of Kim Kyong-hui, the long-thought-dead aunt of North Korean dictator Kim Jung-un, illustrates the confusing opacity of North Korean internal politics. Pyongyang is in a difficult position, as Kim has failed to capitalize on the summits with Trump and China is now preoccupied with mitigating the economic impact of the coronavirus.

In 2013, North Korean dictator Kim Jung-un excommunicated his once-powerful uncle, Jang Song-thaek, from the Workers Party for supposedly being a counterrevolutionary, stripping him of all posts and titles and excising him from the country’s history. Jang was dragged bodily from the politburo—an event broadcast on North Korean state television—and executed shortly thereafter.

Soon after Jang’s execution, his wife, Kim Kyong-hui (Kim Jung-un’s aunt), vanished completely. It was widely suspected that she too was dead, with some rumors suggesting she had passed away due to heart attack and others claiming she too, along with other members of the family, had been executed.

Six years later, Kim Jong-un “revived” Kim Kyong-hui and displayed her to the public.

This is not the first time a public North Korean figure was falsely rumored to have been executed. Jang Song-thaek himself disappeared from the North Korean media years before he was finally executed in 2013. It was suspected that he had been executed by Kim’s father, Kim Jong-il, prior to his own death in 2011. But then Jang reappeared and was nominated as one of Kim Jong-un’s inner circle, only to be dispatched later by the son.

It is extremely difficult to unravel the political and military strata of the North Korean regime, which in turn makes it hard to discern the respective roles of party and military in decision-making. This kind of analysis is made all the more challenging when figures vanish for years and then pop up again.

The reappearance of Kim Kyong-hui raises questions about Kim Jong-un's recent policies, particularly his failure to make the most of the summits with Donald Trump. Kim Jong-un hoped his warming toward the US and South Korea would convince Washington to ease the sanctions on North Korea. His gamble—that Trump would be willing to accept Pyongyang's tactical change as a strategic change without expecting a surrender of some of North Korea's strategic assets—proved a failure. More than a year has passed since the Singapore summit, and though Trump had kind words for Kim Jong-un, they didn't translate into a change in Washington's sanctions policy toward the DPRK. Does Kim Kyong-hui's reappearance reflect a tactical shift on Kim Jong-un's part, and if so, is it a harbinger of another change in Pyongyang's foreign policy?

Kim Jong-un has replaced his foreign minister, but his diplomatic and military toolbox is very limited, especially during an American election year. What's more, the coronavirus crisis will worsen North Korea's economic crisis, as China will have to focus on the implications of the epidemic for its own economy. This will likely lead to a decrease in Chinese economic assistance to Pyongyang, which will sharpen the economic impact of the US sanctions. We should remember as well that the North Korean health care system, which has limited resources, will be seriously overburdened if coronavirus begins to spread inside the country. The authoritarian apparatus of the DPRK regime will certainly be unleashed to prevent the spread of the virus by limiting citizens' movement.

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