



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Media Frenzy Notwithstanding, Kim Jong-un Is Apparently Still Alive

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,556, May 8, 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Kim Jong-un was mysteriously absent from both the state event of Kim Il-sung's birthday on April 15, 2020 and the celebration of Korean People's Army Day on April 25, 2020. This set off a media frenzy about the state of his health. Social media quickly divided into two camps: one claiming he was either dead or in a vegetative state, and the other claiming it was all fake news motivated by anti-North Korean ideology. On May 1, 2020, pictures and video clips were broadcast on North Korean media of Kim Jong-un attending a ceremony, so he appears—if appearances can be trusted—to be alive.

The non-appearance of Kim Jong-un at two major public events in April led analysts to hearken back to the disappearances while in office of his father, Kim Jong-il. During his term, Kim Jong-il's health was a constant concern. His disappearance from the public eye for health reasons was highly problematic for the regime, which could not admit that the Dear Leader's life might be in danger for fear of prompting an attempt at regime change by the US or by internal forces.

The political bias and wishful thinking of news organizations covering Kim Jong-un's disappearance complicated the picture, with some international media sources claiming that Kim was either at death's door or already dead and others insisting he was alive and well.

The central difficulty for any analyst or journalist attempting to understand anything happening in North Korea is, of course, the lack of reliable information. The DPRK leadership understands that knowledge is power. Any intel about Kim's whereabouts and health, or about possible threats to his leadership, could prompt foreign intelligence agencies to try to

manipulate the North Korean succession. The lack of information released by the leadership leads analysts to “guesstimate,” which results in mistakes.

There is also the problem that the same intelligence can be interpreted different ways by different analysts. In the case of Kim’s disappearance, a train that was identified by satellite image was interpreted by some as an indication that Kim was on his last journey, while others insisted that it meant no such thing. Another case was luxury boats belonging to Kim that were spotted by satellite. Some claimed this was an attempt by the regime to show that Kim was alive, while others said it was an attempt to create that illusion.

Another element to be considered is the possibility of psychological warfare. Premature claims of Kim Jong-un’s death or severe incapacitation could be a deliberate attempt by forces hostile to the regime to disrupt the balance of power within the leadership. The regime’s response to false claims of the leader’s death or illness can reveal its weaknesses.

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