



A framework for Nordpolitik following the death of Kim Jong Nam by Hyuk Kim and Yeseul Woo

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On Feb. 13, 2017, Kim Jong Nam, half-brother of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, was assassinated in Malaysia. South Korean responses to the murder have been mixed. For some, it is confirmation of the tyrannical, despotic nature of the Pyongyang leadership, a call to stiffen South Korean resolve and a reminder to double down on security measures. For others, it is proof of North Korean insecurity and one more example of the need to reach out to Pyongyang and convince it that the outside world is not implacably hostile. We believe this act is an opportunity for young South Koreans to forge a bipartisan consensus on how to deal with North Korea.

There has long been a generational divide within South Korea when thinking about how to deal with the North. Unlike older generations who felt the pains of Korean division, younger South Koreans have no personal ties to the North and have thus made reunification less of a priority than their elders. It is widely believed that younger South Koreans are not willing to make the sacrifices necessary to make reunification a reality; they are more inclined to accept continuing division even if the price is high. A survey conducted by the Korea Institute for National Unification revealed that 55.1 percent of the younger generation in South Korea prefers division in the Korean Peninsula while only 19 percent of 60 year olds share that view.

Before Kim Jong Nam's death, a Korean government survey in 2016 revealed that 71.4 percent of the Korean people see North Korea as a grave threat, a sharp rise from 49.9 percent in 2015. Among 20 and 30 year olds, threat perception skyrocketed from around 40 percent to 70 percent. Meanwhile, a poll conducted by the Gallup in 2016 reveals that only 46 and 40 percent of 20 and 30 year olds respectively believe that the shutdown of Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC) was appropriate; this contrasts with 72 percent of 70 year olds.

Increasingly, young South Koreans recognize that the Korean Peninsula is at a tipping point. The assassination of Kim Jong Nam is proof that Kim Jong Un is determined to eliminate potential political competitors — his half-brother was one of the few remaining claimants to the Baekdu bloodline. The killing signals North Korea's intent to maintain an assertive *Byung-jin* policy that pursues nuclear weapons and economic development: there will be no moderation. As such, the assassination is a political provocation for South Korea and the entire world.

If South Korea is to successfully deal with North Korea, it must forge a bipartisan consensus on its Nordpolitik. While differences remain between the right and the left in South Korea, the Kim Jong Nam killing reveals important areas of common ground that can serve as the foundation of a stable and enduring policy toward North Korea.

The murder of Kim Jong Nam has made the North Korean threat more real to young people in Korea. A survey conducted after the killing shows that the search terms 'North Korea' and 'security' significantly increased in social network services (SNS) such as Facebook and Twitter in connection with one of the presidential candidates, Moon Jae-in. Since Moon is preferred by 20 and 30 year olds in Korea and that SNS is the communication tool of the young, it appears that Kim's death affected young people's perception of North Korea as a threat.

Second, the killing of Kim Jong Nam has made the North Korean threat more personal to South Koreans. In the aftermath of his death, many South Koreans expressed compassion for Kim Han Sol, Jong Nam's son, on SNS. They worried that Kim Han Sol, Kim Sol Hee, Kim Pyung Il, Kim Sul Song, and other members of the Kim family, will be Kim Jong Un's next target and should be protected. The idea that a leader could kill family members is always repugnant but it is especially so in a Confucian society.

In addition, there is Kim Jong Un's disregard for innocent people, shown by the readiness to use VX, an incredibly dangerous chemical agent, in an international airport. This converges with a growing sensitivity among South Koreans to human rights abuses in North Korea, an awareness that grows as this issue assumes more prominence in international assessments of North Korean behavior. (Traditionally, the left in South Korea has not looked closely at Pyongyang's human rights record; that is changing.)

South Korea's ambassador to the UN, Oh Jun, lamented that "North Koreans are not just anybody," a statement in 2014 that was shared widely through Facebook and touched the hearts of many young South Koreans. Since then, South Korean young people's interest in human right issues in North Korea has significantly increased. According to the Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, they believe the South Korean government should take a more active role in addressing the humanitarian situation in the North.

A third shift is perhaps most important: the Pyongyang regime is no longer an abstract threat, but is personified by the very singular personality of Kim Jong Un. He is ready to take significant risks in the pursuit of his objectives and seems indifferent to the costs to others of such actions. Previously, the government in Pyongyang was a theoretical, abstract entity to young South Koreans; while elder North Koreans had personal experience with the pain its decisions could impose, younger South Koreans did not. This shift in threat perception

from the abstract – the “regime in Pyongyang” – to a distinct personality – Kim Jong Un – is a critical change.

There has been a consensus in Korea that while North Korea’s nuclear weapons are a threat to South Korea, the issue should be resolved peacefully. The main difference between liberals and conservatives is how to address security within the framework of inter-Korean relations. The left argues that South-North economic cooperation should be maintained as a symbol of ties between Koreans regardless of North Korean provocations. They believe that if the relationship between North and South Korea is improved, then US-North Korean relations will follow, which will lead to stability on the Korean Peninsula. Therefore, they argued that South Korea should resume inter-Korean summitry and economic cooperation, which can jumpstart diplomacy.

Conversely, the right believes that the threat posed by Pyongyang is the critical factor in deteriorating inter-Korean relations. But since the Sunshine policy, security issues have largely been omitted from inter-Korean relations and figure prominently in relations between the US and North Korea; Pyongyang’s demand for a peace treaty is one example. Conservatives argue that Seoul’s reluctance in discuss security issues with North Korea creates room for Pyongyang to pursue its *Byung-jin* policy. Therefore, South Korea must address security issues within the framework of inter-Korean relations to make progress toward peace in the Korean Peninsula.

The murder of Kim Jong Nam gives young South Koreans a chance to break out of the stale and paralyzing split in views toward the North and allow them to forge a consensus on North Korea policy. This framework should be based on three components: a sense of urgency, the identification of Kim Jong-un as a threat, and the desire for reunification.

First, South Koreans should acknowledge that North Korean weapons of mass destruction are an imminent threat. This means abandoning the hope that North Korea will denuclearize quickly or easily. The North has enshrined its status as a nuclear weapon state in its Constitution. Two nuclear tests have been conducted within the last year, and its ballistic missile technology has advanced significantly. Furthermore, the use of a weapon of mass destruction, VX gas, should force South Koreans to acknowledge that North Korea’s WMD are not for regime survival and may be used against them. All South Koreans must take a firm stance against the North Korean WMD program, and ensure that this issue is addressed clearly in inter-Korean dialogue.

Second, a new framework should focus on the nexus between national security and Kim Jong Un. Liberals and conservatives in Korea now see Kim’s true nature. He is a dangerous and paranoid personality who constitutes a grave threat to South Korea’s national security. From this perspective, one focus of attack is undermining the sanctity of the Baekdu bloodline to delegitimize the Kim family rule and the basis of his authority. Measures to achieve this might include a public assessment of historical events that deify Kim Il-sung, such as the Bocheonbo battle. Seoul could step up efforts to reinforce splits among the ruling elites in Pyongyang, exploiting the fear in North Korea about Kim’s

capriciousness and paranoia, a development that is evident in the growing number of defections.

Third, South Korea should join and lead the international effort to hold the North accountable for its horrendous human rights record. There must be sincere efforts to enhance the humanitarian situation in North Korea. Measures could include raising international pressure on North Korea for human right issues and demanding transparency as a requirement for humanitarian assistance to prevent any aid and resources provided by South Korea being redirected to the North Korean military. Within this framework, it could be possible to resume inter-Korean economic cooperation and programs like the Kaesong Industrial Complex.

Kim Jong Nam’s death is a tragedy, but it may prove to be an opportunity for all Koreans if it allows South Koreans to see the Kim regime in a new light and gives them a chance to forge a new consensus on dealing with their neighbor to the North.

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