

# Opinion

## A January chill from the North

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Kim Jong-Un — the third generation of the family that rules North Korea — is shocking those who had hoped the young leader would prove less cutthroat than his late father and grandfather.

In an address to his country earlier this month, he referred to his executed uncle as “factional filth” and went on to warn that if there ever was war again on his land, it would bring about an enormous nuclear disaster and the United States would not be spared from it.

His uncle had been arrested at a meeting of the politburo over which the nephew was presiding, stripped of his posts and duties, and killed. A few months before, Kim Jong-Un also ordered the execution of his former girlfriend, along with 11 other state entertainers, for allegedly making sex tapes and possessing Bibles. His ex-lover’s family, along with singers and dancers in her orchestra, were forced to watch as she was executed by machine gun before a firing squad.

Kim is the third and youngest son of the late supreme leader, Kim Jong-Il, and his consort and was selected for leadership by his father only a few years before he died two years ago. Very little is known about the heir of a forbidding three-generation dynasty that has slaughtered millions of people, either deliberately or through regime-inflicted mass starvation. Estimates are from one million to 3.5 million people have been deliberately murdered out of a total population of approximately 22 million, and possibly another 3.5 million have died from starvation or hunger-related illness. But these figures are little more than educated guesses.

Over the past 17 years, the international community has provided more than 12 million metric tons of food aid to North Korea, with 75% of that aid coming from China, South Korea and the U.S. But since the ruling regime insists on complete non-interference in its affairs, it controls the aid’s distribution. Some of the profit collected from selling the food aid, for example, was used to construct an \$809-million mausoleum for the grandfather and state founder Kim Il-Sung.

Since the grandson is now the world’s youngest head of state, at barely 30 years of age, the prospect of a reign of terror for decades more to come is daunting.

When the politburo appointed him the supreme commander of the People’s Army, with the military rank equivalent to a general, experts had hoped he would be open to negotiation and compromise given his non-military training in computer science. Then rebel groups reported last summer that the regime had ordered the public execution of more than 80 people before thousands of spectators forced to watch in stadiums. They were publicly hung for supposed state crimes, such as watching forbidden South Korean television and making illegal copies of popular

soap operas. Then Kim ordered his ex-lover shot and his uncle murdered, rather than imprisoning them for life with thousands of others in North Korea's notorious prison camps.

But the greatest threat from the brash young leader stems from his outspoken threats against North Korea's arch-enemy. Last March, Kim threatened to launch a pre-emptive nuclear strike against the United States. A few days later, he nullified the 1953 armistice agreement. The regime has already proved its nuclear weapons capability, with three underground nuclear detonations in 2006, 2009 and 2013, all at the Punggye-ri site. The yield of the detonations is increasing with each test, triggering UN sanctions. Still a pre-emptive nuclear strike by North Korea against Seattle, for example, remains a threat a few years into the future.

Presumably American forces could strike the Punggye-ri site first, but the actual size of the North Korean arsenal is unknown and its nuclear weapons may already be widely dispersed. The intelligence community puts North Korea's stockpile somewhere between six and 20 nuclear bombs. Compared to Russia and the United States' combined stockpile of 20,000 nuclear bombs, or China's much smaller stockpile of more than 300, North Korea's arsenal is relatively tiny. But a credible threat by Kim to use only one Hiroshima-sized nuclear bomb over Seoul or Tokyo could create widespread panic, causing millions of people to flee into the countryside. The economies of South Korea and Japan would suffer greatly. Japan is already reeling from the Fukushima nuclear disaster.

China is supposed to exert the upper hand in peaceful negotiations. Ensuring stability in the Korea peninsula is very important for China. A North Korean regime collapse would result in an unmanageable influx of malnourished refugees into China. Total denuclearization and demilitarization of the entire Korean peninsula would be the best solution. But China, along with the United States, Russia, Japan and South Korea, is unable to halt North Korea's sabre-rattling.

North Korea carried out missile tests on American Independence Day in 1999, unleashed a volley of seven unarmed missiles on America's birthday in 2006 and declared unilateral war on the U.S. in the spring of 2013. The reckless new leader even put his armed forces on high alert last October, ready to launch operations, with a spokesperson from the official news agency stating that the U.S. would be wholly accountable for the "unexpected horrible disaster" that would be met by its "imperialist aggression" forces.

Currently 28,500 U.S. soldiers stationed in South Korea are trained to use land mines, which remain one of the principal reasons why the U.S. continues not to sign and ratify the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention (known as the Ottawa Treaty because Canada launched the process that led to its creation). But in a crisis, with millions streaming on the roads into the rural countryside for safety, land mines embedded in the roads surrounding Seoul would be virtually unusable. Consequently, the U.S. continues to rely on threatening some measure of unacceptable massive nuclear and conventional retaliation against North Korea's nuclear-armed, conventional army, which boasts more than one million soldiers, albeit impoverished and under-equipped.

The main question now is whether the U.S. can credibly deter Kim Jong-un, or the dynasty's next familial successor. It may prove too difficult to reason with anyone in this family, especially such a militarily-inexperienced and bloodthirsty upstart.

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All the best,

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