

# The death of Kim Jong-il

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The death of North Korean leader Kim Jong-il, formally announced yesterday, has produced a mind-numbing deluge of articles in the international press presenting the regime in Pyongyang as irrational and crazed—a dangerous threat to stability in North East Asia, requiring the US and its allies to put their militaries on alert.

Kim Jong-il headed an oppressive Stalinist regime that represented the interests not of the North Korean working class and peasantry, but those of a privileged bureaucratic elite. However, the chief responsibility for the perennial regional tensions lies with the aggressive policies of the US, which has repeatedly sought to destabilise North Korea since the end of the Korean War in 1953.

The Korean War itself was a monumental imperialist crime waged by the US and its allies, including Washington's fascistic puppet regime in the South, directed not only against the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in North Korea, but above all against the 1949 Chinese revolution and the Maoist regime in Beijing. The war left the country scarred and mutilated, with three million dead and many more maimed, and perpetuated Washington's artificial post-war division of the peninsula.

Kim Jong-il was installed as North Korea's top leader after the death of his father Kim Il-sung in 1994 in the midst of a confrontation with the US that again brought the peninsula to the brink of war. US President George H. W. Bush and his successor, Bill Clinton, had seized on North Korea's nuclear programs as a means of intensifying pressure on Pyongyang with a view to precipitating the disintegration of the regime.

The North Korean state confronted a worsening crisis

following the collapse of its chief benefactor, the Soviet Union, in 1991. It agreed to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), expecting in return that the US and its allies would ease crippling economic sanctions and move toward diplomatic recognition. In what has become a recurring pattern over the past two decades, the US bullied and pressured North Korea into agreements, but refused to make any substantive moves to end Pyongyang's isolation.

Matters came to a head in 1994 over the defuelling of North Korea's small experimental reactor at Yongbyon, which the Clinton administration alleged would provide plutonium for the production of nuclear weapons. Military conflict was avoided only when Clinton, after being warned by his military chiefs of the catastrophic consequences, backed off and dispatched former President Jimmy Carter to cut a deal with Pyongyang.

Kim Il-sung died shortly after Carter's trip. Kim Jong-il finalised what became known as the Agreed Framework, under which North Korea agreed to shut down and eventually dismantle its nuclear facilities in return for the supply of fuel oil and power reactors and, most importantly, an end to the country's diplomatic and economic isolation. North Korea froze its nuclear programs, but the US never lived up to its end of the bargain.

In South Korea, Kim Dae-jung, who became president in 1998, held out the possibility of a rapprochement between the two Koreas under his "Sunshine Policy." He represented sections of the South Korean corporate elite that sought to open up North Korea as a source of cheap labour. For Kim Jong-il, the policy held out the prospect of ending North Korea's deep economic slump following the end of the

Soviet Union. The two Kims shook hands in a highly publicised meeting in Pyongyang in June 2000, which was followed by a visit by US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to the North Korean capital in the dying days of the Clinton administration.

The euphoria in ruling circles surrounding the Sunshine Policy—resulting in Kim Dae-jung being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2000—rapidly evaporated with the installation of George W. Bush as US president. The Bush administration put US policy on Korea under review, ended any prospect of diplomatic contact and effectively tore up the Agreed Framework. Supplies of fuel oil were ended and the construction of the promised power reactors, which had never begun, was scrapped. In early 2002, Bush threw down the gauntlet to North Korea, declaring it to be part of an “axis of evil” with Iran and Iraq.

Bush’s provocative moves were never primarily about North Korea or its nuclear programs. In the first place, they were aimed against China, which Bush had declared to be “a strategic rival” during his election campaign. By deliberately escalating tensions, Washington threatened one of Beijing’s traditional allies, strategically situated on its border. At the same time, the US cut across the economic plans of China, Russia and the European powers to open up North Korea as a transport and pipeline route to South Korea and Japan.

Not surprisingly, Bush’s actions provoked a response by North Korea. After the US accused it in 2002 of having a secret uranium enrichment program, Pyongyang withdrew from the NPT, expelled UN nuclear inspectors and restarted its mothballed nuclear facilities. The result has been a decade of confrontation and tension on the Korean peninsula, moderated only by China’s efforts to facilitate a negotiated end to North Korea’s nuclear programs via six-party talks. The Bush administration only grudgingly agreed to take part in negotiations as the invasion of Iraq turned into a quagmire and the US could ill afford to immediately provoke another conflict on the other side of the globe.

Over the past three years, the Obama administration has not eased the tensions on the Korean peninsula, but

intensified them. It stymied Beijing’s efforts to restart the six-party talks by unilaterally changing the terms of the latest agreement to emerge from the negotiations. Late last year, the US, in league with the right-wing South Korean administration of Lee Myung-bak, provocatively held a series of joint military exercises close to North Korea after blaming Pyongyang for an artillery exchange that resulted in the shelling of a South Korean island. The Obama administration warned that any retaliation by North Korea would invite US and South Korean military action.

The US confrontation with North Korea last year was just one element of the Obama administration’s broad strategic “pivot” from the Middle East to the Asia Pacific aimed at undermining Chinese economic and strategic influence in the region. Since coming to office, Obama has strengthened military alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia and the Philippines, formed closer strategic partnerships with India, Indonesia and Singapore, and intervened aggressively in regional forums such as the East Asian Summit.

Obama’s willingness to risk a conflict with North Korea late last year underscores the recklessness of his administration’s strategic focus on the Asian region, which has any number of unstable flash points. It also highlights the significance of the discussion that has immediately broken out in American media and foreign policy circles about the “opportunity” that could open up with the installation of Kim Jong-il’s young and inexperienced son, Kim Jong-un, as North Korea’s new leader. Any attempt by the Obama administration to exploit or create political instability in Pyongyang has the potential to rapidly escalate friction with China.

Far from North Korea being the source of instability and tension in North East Asia, the main danger comes from the aggressive policies of the Obama administration as it seeks to wield its military might to retain the dominant position of US imperialism.



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