

North Korean leader's public absence remains unexplained

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North Korean leader Kim Jong-un made his first public appearance in more than five weeks, according to the state-controlled Korean Central News Agency (KCNA). The article published today reported that Kim visited a newly-built residential district as well as a new scientific institute. It did not give the dates of the visits or provide any explanation for his lengthy disappearance from public view.

Kim's previous reported appearance was at a concert on September 3. Media speculation about his absence was further fuelled when he failed to appear at a key commemorative event last Friday marking the 69th anniversary of the founding of the North Korean Workers' Party. In the past, Kim has made an early morning trip on that date to the mausoleum where the bodies of his father, Kim Jong-il, and grandfather, Kim Il-song, are interred.

The lack of any evidence as to Kim's whereabouts produced a range of speculative theories, ranging from health problems—after he was seen limping in television broadcasts—to the possibility of coup. The North Korean state media proceeded as if nothing had happened, with a brief reference last month to Kim “not feeling well.”

Kim's absence is unusual, but not entirely without precedent. His father was known to disappear from public view at times. Kim Jong-un also absented himself for three weeks in 2012 after being installed as leader following his father's death in December 2011.

However, the lengthy disappearance of the autocratic regime's top leader, coming on top of a brutal leadership purge less than a year ago, points, in all likelihood, to ongoing sharp tensions between the various factions of the military and state bureaucracy on which Kim rests.

The Pyongyang regime confronts an intractable

economic crisis that feeds deep social and political tensions. Having been subject to an economic blockade for decades by the US and its allies, the country depends heavily on China for trade and financial assistance. North Korea has established 14 special economic zones and is desperate to transform itself into a cheap labour platform, but, without a green light from Washington, most trade and investment remains blocked.

The Obama administration, as part of its “pivot to Asia” directed against China, has intensified the pressure on North Korea, exploiting the regime's nuclear and missile tests as the pretext for the US military build-up in North East Asia and the consolidation of Washington's alliances with Japan and South Korea. At the same time, the White House has hinted that a rapprochement might be possible. The price, however, would be high—not only the dismantling of Pyongyang's nuclear facilities and weapons, but a distancing from China.

The dilemma has clearly led to an ongoing debate in Pyongyang over how to end the country's economic and diplomatic isolation. Further evidence of the sharpness of the internal disputes was revealed in the sudden purge and execution of the regime's no. 2, Kim's uncle Jang Song-thaek, last December. Jang was known to have close ties to Beijing. He was accused of plotting a factional coup and also, tellingly, of “selling off precious resources of the country at cheap prices”—that is, to China.

In the same period, former Chicago Bulls basketball star Dennis Rodman made several high-profile visits to Pyongyang in 2013 and early 2014, ostensibly to meet with his fan, Kim Jong-un, and play exhibition matches. Washington formally denied any involvement in Rodman's activities, but US authorities would

undoubtedly have cleared the visits, and debriefed Rodman. What appeared to be a rather strange parody of the “ping-pong” diplomacy between the US and China in the early 1970s produced no obvious breakthrough.

Since then, North Korea seems to have picked up its tentative efforts to find an opening to the US and its allies. In May, Pyongyang struck a deal with Japan to initiate an investigation into Japanese citizens abducted by North Korea, in exchange for a minor easing of Japanese sanctions. Washington cautiously supported Tokyo in this endeavor but has not eased up its stance in any way.

In early September, Kang Sok-ju, North Korea’s leading nuclear negotiator, took a tour of Europe that included stops in Germany, Belgium, Switzerland and Italy and a meeting with the European Union’s top human rights official Stavros Lambrinidis. Along with the nuclear issue, the US has long used “human rights” to pressure Pyongyang. North Korean diplomats expressed hopes for talks with the EU early next year.

On October 4, with Kim Jong-un still absent, three top North Korean officials made a highly unusual visit to South Korea, supposedly to attend the closing ceremony of the 2014 Asian Games. The delegation, which apparently arrived unannounced, included Hwang Pyong-so and Kim Yang-gon, regarded as North Korea’s number 2 and 3 officials. Choe Ryong-hae, who held Hwang’s post until being removed earlier this year, also took part.

After a meeting with South Korea’s National Security Office head Kim Kwan-jin and Unification Minister Ryoo Kihl-jae, the two sides agreed to have further high-level talks in late October or early November. Kim also reassured Seoul’s unification minister that Kim Jong-un’s health was not a problem.

All these diplomatic gestures may, of course, result in very little. The tensions on the Korean Peninsula remain high. In just the past week, the two Koreas exchanged fire across their border in two separate incidents. The first was a naval altercation in the Yellow Sea last Tuesday over the supposed violation of the border by a North Korean patrol boat, which exchanged warning shots with a South Korean vessel.

Last Friday, according to South Korean officials, the North Korean army, in an apparent attempt to shoot down balloons carrying anti-North Korean leaflets,

fired shots toward the border. Some landed on the southern side, prompting the South Korean military to return fire. In response, North Korea threatened to cancel the high-level talks agreed on October 4. No casualties were reported in either incident.

Kim’s unexplained disappearance from public life is one more odd event that signals ongoing political turmoil inside North Korea’s brittle, crisis ridden regime.



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