

The bizarre murder of North Korean leader's half-brother

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The murder of the older half-brother of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in Malaysia on Monday is surrounded by many unanswered questions and much speculation. While the likely explanation is an assassination organised by North Korean agents, nothing can be ruled out.

According to Malaysian police, Kim Jong-nam, 46, had been at Kuala Lumpur International Airport, intending to fly to Macau, when he was assaulted by a woman who covered his face with a cloth. After reportedly seeking help at an information counter, complaining of pain and stinging eyes, he was taken to hospital and died later.

Malaysian authorities have performed an autopsy and tissue samples are being tested for poisons but no results have been released. The North Korean regime has “categorically rejected” the autopsy results, declaring that it was performed without its permission and its officials in attendance.

South Korean officials immediately blamed Pyongyang, asserting that two North Korean female agents carried out the assassination. Malaysian police have arrested three suspects in the murder—a young Vietnamese woman Doan Thi Huong, an Indonesian woman Siti Aishah, 25, and Siti’s boyfriend.

According to Indonesian police chief Tito Karnavian, Aishah was duped into thinking she was being paid to play a prank for a reality TV show.

The director of South Korea’s National Intelligence Service (NIS), Lee Byong-ho, alleged that Kim Jong-un had, after succeeding his father in 2012, placed a “standing order” to kill his half-brother. The NIS, which is notorious for its own misinformation and dirty tricks, directed particularly against North Korea, claimed to have intercepted a letter by Kim Jong-nam in 2012 pleading for his life.

Media speculation is rife as to why the North Korean leader would want his older half-brother dead, in the first instance putting it down to Kim Jong-un’s paranoia and determination to consolidate his rule. He has carried out a brutal purge of the top political and military leadership, including the execution of Jang Song-thaek, his uncle and number 2 in the regime, in December 2012.

Kim Jong-nam, however, had lived abroad for a number of years and reputedly enjoyed the lifestyle of a wealthy playboy. He was born to the first wife of North Korean leader Kim Jong-il and educated in Switzerland and Russia. He apparently fell out of favour after he returned to North Korea and began to advocate “market reforms.”

In an interview with the Japanese newspaper *Tokyo Shimbum*, Kim Jong-nam said: “After I went back to North Korea following my education in Switzerland, I grew further apart from my father because I insisted on reform and market-opening and was eventually viewed with suspicion.”

The North Korean regime is not opposed to pro-market restructuring, however. It has established a number of cheap labour zones, including one used by South Korean corporations at Kaesong until recently. The chief obstacle to its integration into global capitalism has been the diplomatic and economic isolation imposed on North Korea by the US and its allies ever since the Korean War ended in 1953.

Pyongyang has made several attempts to reach a deal with the United States that have collapsed as a result of Washington’s bad faith. In 1994, the Clinton administration, which was on the brink of attacking North Korea militarily, signed an Agreed Framework with North Korea to shut down its nuclear facilities in return for fuel oil, two light water nuclear reactors and

steps toward diplomatic recognition.

The Agreed Framework, which raised great hopes of a rapprochement between the two Koreas, was scuttled by the George W. Bush administration, which designated North Korea as part of an “axis of evil” with Iran and Iraq. However, bogged down in the war in Iraq, Bush turned to China to defuse tensions on the Korean Peninsula after North Korea’s first nuclear test.

Bush struck a deal in early 2007 through six-party talks instigated by Beijing, which included the two Koreas, the US, China, Russia and Japan. North Korea shut its nuclear facilities and began the process of dismantling them. Bush took North Korea off the US State Department’s list of state sponsors of terrorism, but sabotaged the agreement by demanding a tougher inspection regime. Even though the Obama administration struck a nuclear deal with Iran, it took no steps toward negotiating with Pyongyang, even as the North Korean regime upped the ante with further nuclear tests and missile launches.

Having come to power after the death of his father, Kim Jong-un confronts the same bind. As the regime has become increasingly isolated and subject to harsher sanctions, it has become more dependent on China, its largest trading partner by far. Beijing, however, has backed UN sanctions as a means of reining in its erratically, out of concern that its nuclear tests will trigger a nuclear arms race in North East Asia.

Pyongyang’s relations with Beijing have become increasingly frosty. Kim Jong-un’s execution of his uncle, Jang Song-thaek, resulted in a further cooling of ties. Jang had longstanding connections with Beijing and the accusations against him included “such acts of treachery as selling off precious resources of the country at cheap prices.” This was a thinly veiled criticism of China, which buys most of North Korea’s mineral exports.

If Kim Jong-un did order the assassination of his half-brother, the murder can only further undermine relations with China. Kim Jong-nam lived in Macau and Beijing, apparently with Chinese protection and financial support. He may well have been regarded as an important political asset who could be used as a figurehead to head an alternate regime, should Beijing ever decide to move against Pyongyang.

Fudan University professor Wang Weimin told the *Washington Post* that the top government circles in

Beijing were “highly nervous” about Kim Jong-nam’s death. It made “China more aware of how unpredictable and cruel the current North Korean regime is, as well as Kim Jong-un’s willingness to abandon China and sell it for his own benefit at any second.”

Wang said recent Chinese intelligence indicated that some in the North Korean leadership were suggesting sacrificing ties with China and trying to establish closer links with the US, Japan and South Korea. Whether that is the case or not, the murder compounds the already sharp tensions on the Korean Peninsula and throughout Asia, aggravated by the Trump administration and its confrontational stance toward China and North Korea.



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