

Lurid claims that North Korea used VX poison to kill Kim Jong-nam

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Malaysian police stated yesterday that Kim Jong-nam, the older half-brother of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, was killed by a potent nerve poison, VX, when he was attacked at Kuala Lumpur International Airport on February 13.

The American press immediately seized on the unsubstantiated claim to ramp up its demonisation of the North Korean regime over its alleged use of a banned chemical weapon and to suggest that the Trump administration take action against Pyongyang.

The *New York Times*, for instance, entitled its story “In Kim Jong-nam’s death, North Korea lets loose a weapon of mass destruction.” The *Wall Street Journal* headline declared, “Role of VX nerve agent in Kim Jong-nam’s death raises global alarm.”

What is publicly known about the murder is limited. The Malaysian police investigation is still underway. Three people have been detained—two young women, one from Indonesia and the other from Malaysia, along with a North Korean man. Malaysian authorities have named seven other North Koreans, including a diplomat, they are seeking in relation to the murder.

Kim Jong-nam was attacked by the two women, who allegedly smeared chemicals on his face then fled. Kim sought medical help, quickly collapsed and died on the way to hospital. Two autopsies have been performed but details have not been released. No one has come forward to claim the body or make a positive identification.

Relations between Malaysia and North Korea deteriorated sharply after Pyongyang demanded the release of the body without an autopsy and publicly criticised the Malaysian investigation. North Korea’s ambassador to Kuala Lumpur, Kang Chol, told reporters last week that “we cannot trust the investigation” and accused Malaysia of colluding with

“hostile forces”—claims that Malaysian authorities have dismissed.

Kim Jong-nam lived much of his life abroad and had a reputation as a playboy, living in the Chinese territory of Macau. He was publicly critical of the North Korean regime headed by his half-brother and called for pro-market reform, but made no indication he would make a bid for power in Pyongyang.

Despite the lack of detailed evidence or formal police findings, a mountain of media speculation continues to grow as to how and why Kim Jong-nam was killed, all pointing to North Korea. Whether or not Pyongyang carried out the assassination, the incident is being exploited to the hilt to further a reactionary political agenda.

An editorial in yesterday’s *Wall Street Journal* entitled “North Korean Terror Notice” blamed the murder on Pyongyang and declared: “This is one more reason the US should redesignate North Korea a state sponsor of terror, a status it never should have lost in 2008.”

The editorial is part of the mounting clamour in US foreign policy and military circles for diplomatic, economic and/or military action against Pyongyang as a high priority. The Obama administration reportedly recommended to Trump and his advisers that Pyongyang be placed at the top of its foreign policy agenda because of the alleged threat that it would have a nuclear-capable intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) in the next few years.

When the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un announced on New Year’s Day that his country would soon test an ICBM, Trump, as president-elect, tweeted that it “won’t happen,” implying the use of military action to prevent it. His administration is reviewing US policy toward North Korea, having been critical of the

failure of the Obama administration to force Pyongyang to dismantle its nuclear and missile programs.

The call for North Korea to be redesignated a state sponsor of terrorism only highlights the cynical character of US policy. The *Wall Street Journal* editorial claims that the Bush administration delisted Pyongyang “in exchange for denuclearisation promises that Pyongyang broke as always.” In reality, as part of a deal struck in 2007, the Bush administration only belatedly and reluctantly took North Korea off the US State Department list after Pyongyang had shut down and begun to dismantle its nuclear facilities and readmitted UN inspectors. The deal broke down after the US insisted on additional, more intrusive inspection protocols.

As the editorial admitted, branding North Korea a state sponsor of terrorism would have little practical effect. It would, however, effectively sabotage China’s attempts to restart the six-party talks that led to the 2007 agreement and end any prospect of direct US negotiation with North Korea, which has been urged by a few US commentators.

The editorial also made clear that the chief target is not North Korea, but its neighbour and ally China, which the Trump administration has already threatened with trade war measures and military action to block access to its South China Sea islets. Relisting North Korea, it declared, “especially if followed by long-overdue sanctions on the Chinese firms that sustain the Pyongyang regime... would put Kim Jong-un and his Chinese patrons on notice.”

Trump has previously lashed out at Beijing for allegedly failing to use Pyongyang’s dependence on China to force North Korea to submit to US demands. Under pressure from Washington, Beijing, which has already imposed heavy UN sanctions on Pyongyang, announced this week that it would suspend all coal imports from North Korea for the rest of the year, compounding its economic crisis. Coal exports have been the country’s single largest foreign currency earner.

China has opposed North Korea’s nuclear and missile program, as it provides the US with a pretext for expanding its military presence in North East Asia and could trigger a nuclear arms race involving Japan and South Korea. At the same time, Beijing fears an implosion of the North Korean regime that could result

in a unified Korea allied to the United States.

Relations between Beijing and Pyongyang deteriorated further this week when the North Korean state-run KCNA news agency castigated “a neighbouring country, which often calls itself a ‘friendly neighbour’”—a reference that can only mean China—for “dancing to the tune of the US.” Such explicit public criticism of China is unprecedented and will likely produce a reaction from Beijing.

The mounting media campaign against North Korea over Kim Jong-nam’s murder recalls the propaganda about the “war on terror” and “weapons of mass destruction” that was used as the pretext for the US-led illegal wars of intervention in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. Any US action to destabilise or take military action against the crisis-ridden North Korean regime threatens to rapidly draw in other powers, including China, and plunge the entire region into conflict.



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