



Becoming Kim Jong Un

A Former CIA Officer's Insights into North Korea's Enigmatic Young Dictator

By Jung H. Pak

13-minute read

Synopsis

Becoming Kim Jong Un (2020) tells the story of the North Korean dictator from his childhood as the son and grandson of two infamous Korean leaders through to his momentous summit with American president Donald Trump. Setting aside the insults and jokes about Kim that the media and internet often perpetuate, it takes a serious look at Kim's enigmatic persona and behavior and diagnoses the grave threat that he and his nation pose to the world.

Who is it for?

- People fascinated by international politics and global issues
- History lovers
- Anyone with an interest in modern Asia

About the author

Jung H. Pak, PhD, is a former senior CIA intelligence analyst responsible for Korea-related issues. She's also a former senior fellow and former SK-Korea Foundation Chair in Korea Studies at the Brookings Institution. Her writing has appeared in the *Atlantic*, *Foreign Policy*, *USA Today*, and the *Hill*.

What's in it for me? Chart the rise and reign of North Korea's leader, Kim Jong Un.

Ever since Kim Jong Un took the mantle of North Korea's leadership at the end of 2011, he's been something of an enigma.

In the public eye, he's often the butt of jokes. Media, movies, and memes insult his seemingly childish behavior and physical appearance. Yet the terrifying and brutal ways he's wielded his power are anything but funny. Over the years, Kim has had political opponents – including his own blood relatives – killed. He's also imprisoned citizens, disregarded international agreements, and generally cultivated an atmosphere of fear and repression.

As a CIA officer, it was the author's job to parse the enigma that is Kim. These blinks are a snapshot of what she knows about the North Korean dictator's singular life, character, and reign.

In these blinks, you'll learn

- why Kim's father may have chosen him as his successor;
- how Kim is trying to craft a modern-day dictatorship; and
- the mistake Trump made in sizing him up.

Kim Jong Un inherited the legacy of both his father and grandfather.

For many North Koreans, their leader Kim Il Sung was a hero.

Beginning in 1948, he ruled over the country for almost 50 years, and his people truly believed in his power and greatness. Portraits of Kim could be found everywhere – in homes, offices, stores, classrooms, and other buildings. His birthday became a national holiday, and at his funeral, attendees cried out, "Father!"

But as supreme leader, Kim Il Sung laid the foundations for his successors' brutal regimes. He imprisoned political opponents and carefully shaped the education system to instill obedience. He promoted the idea that he had superhuman, almost godlike abilities. And he made a scapegoat of anyone deemed not sufficiently faithful to the revolutionary spirit.

This was the legacy he imparted to his son, Kim Jong Il, and grandson, Kim Jong Un.

The key message here is: Kim Jong Un inherited the legacy of both his father and grandfather.

Education was particularly important to Kim Il Sung, who saw it as essential to promoting loyalty and raising obedient North Koreans. He frequently made trips across the country to reinforce the image of himself amongst his people and woo them with his charisma –

or, alternatively, scare them into believing there was a cruel world outside North Korea that intended to do them harm, and that only he could protect them.

If Kim Il Sung set this path in motion, his son, Jong Il, advanced it. Long before his father's passing in 1994, Jong Il had been designated as his father's successor. And, like his father, he cultivated an image of himself as a mythological figure and paragon of Koreanness. Massive sculptures, artworks, monuments, films, and works of literature were created in his honor. He expanded the political base his father had begun, exiling or discrediting dissenters and continuing to indoctrinate the population.

However, Jong Il's rule was marred by the dissolution of the Soviet Union, one of North Korea's most steadfast allies and economic supporters. Democracy began to flourish in Asia and indeed the world – which made North Korea, with its Marxist-Leninist politics, seem increasingly alone. This led the country to isolate itself further, strengthening internal security measures and even more ruthlessly rooting out dissent. It also, of course, began developing its nuclear weapons program, which it saw as a necessary and powerful deterrent.

This was the legacy that Kim Jong Un was born to. And from childhood, he recognized that he was, in some sense, the heir to the throne.

It's unclear why Kim Jong Il chose Jong Un as his successor.

On his eighth birthday in January 1992, Kim Jong Un dressed up in a costume – though not Batman or Superman. Instead, it was a miniature version of a military general's uniform, pinned with a single star. Meanwhile, real military generals bowed to him as if he were royalty.

Kim was raised in a world of immense privilege. Growing up, he had the run of his family's many villas and mansions, the ears of the family's servants, and all the toys and video games a young boy could want.

Then again, so did Kim's two older brothers and younger sister. Yet he was the one ultimately chosen to take up his father's mantle. Why didn't either of Jong Un's older siblings make the cut?

The key message here is: It's unclear why Kim Jong Il chose Jong Un as his successor.

Kim Jong Il adored his oldest child, Jong Nam. But Jong Nam wasn't chosen to take his father's place for several reasons.

The first was his mother. Jong Il eventually soured on her and exiled her to Moscow, which tarnished her son's name. And Jong Nam's own actions didn't do much to help the situation. As he grew up, it became apparent that he was, like his father, a bit of a playboy. This

resulted in embarrassing public mishaps, like the night he blindly fired a gun in a club for foreign guests at a North Korean hotel.

But that wasn't what truly disqualified him as a leader. Rather, it was his suspected desire to undertake policy reform and westernize the country's economy. As Jong Il saw it, Jong Nam had become a capitalist during the years he'd studied abroad in Moscow and Geneva.

The next of Jong Il's sons in line, Jong Chol, was simply deemed not tough enough to become leader. Jong Chol was more interested in music and basketball than politics, and according to one of his friends, he was "a nice guy who could never be a villain."

That left Jong Un, the second child of Jong Il and his second lover. Jong Un was educated in Europe, where he often struggled academically. But from a young age, he was passionate about sports, especially football and basketball. His fellow students described him as competitive and explosive on the court, a playmaker, who hated to lose.

Perhaps Jong Il spotted these qualities in his son and noted them as befitting of a leader. Or perhaps, out of the three Kim brothers, Jong Un was simply the only real option.

From the beginning, Kim Jong Un focused on developing North Korea's nuclear and cyber power.

Kim Jong Un made his political debut at a massive military parade on October 10, 2010, the 65th anniversary of the establishment of the ruling Korean Workers' Party. At the time, he was just 26.

The parade was meant to show North Koreans that the party and military both supported his rise. Soon after, Jong Un was appointed the vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission, admitted to the party's Central Committee, and given the title of four-star general despite never having served in the military.

Kim Jong Il was almost certainly worried about how his son would fare as leader. But Jong Un turned out to be an apt student. Immediately upon becoming dictator after his father's death in 2011, he set about increasing North Korea's might on the international stage.

The key message here is: From the beginning, Kim Jong Un focused on developing North Korea's nuclear and cyber power.

It's impossible to understand North Korea without discussing nuclear weapons. Nuclear armament is part of North Korea's lifeblood – and Kim Jong Un has done much to entrench it even further. These weapons are his main point of international leverage, and he uses them as powerful bargaining chips.

Typically, his strategy is to enter new international agreements and then almost immediately defy them. He'll say, for instance, that he'll suspend uranium enrichment or nuclear tests in exchange for benefits like food aid. Then, a couple weeks later, he'll conduct another test. Western nations respond with sanctions but then end up rolling them back in new agreements.

Along with nuclear weapons, Kim has also developed North Korea's armed forces, though its equipment is aged and its soldiers malnourished. It fares much better in the realm of cyberwarfare.

The country began launching cyberattacks as early as 2010. Its primary methods of attack are stealing from foreign banks and transmitting computer viruses. But perhaps the most well-known strike was against Sony Pictures Entertainment in response to its film *The Interview*, a comedy which features Kim as a lead character. Enraged by the depiction, Kim had his hackers publicize Sony employees' confidential information, including details like salary lists and social security numbers.

In an attempt to avoid further damage, Sony agreed to stop showing the film for a time – a decision which drew the ire of, among others, President Obama. Bowing to a dictator's demands is, after all, exactly what you *don't* want to do.

Kim Jong Un seeks to promote a vision of a twenty-first-century dictatorship.

In the summer of 2012, Kim Jong Un was photographed in something of a strange position. In the image, he's buckled into a roller coaster at one of North Korea's brand new amusement parks. He's grinning ear to ear and surrounded by other North Korean officials who look terrified and blissful by turns.

The image is jarring. Here he is, the leader of the world's most closed society, enjoying himself at an amusement park. Yet it's also representative of the persona Kim seeks to present both domestically and internationally. He's cultivated, as the regime calls it, a "socialist fairyland," with the capital, Pyongyang, at its epicenter.

The key message here is: Kim Jong Un seeks to promote a vision of a twenty-first-century dictatorship.

Foreign diplomats often term Kim's revamped North Korean capital "Pyonghattan," a mash-up of Pyongyang and Manhattan. There are high-rise apartments, shops selling modern goods, kids zipping around on Rollerblades, and fashionable women strolling the streets.

But the development doesn't end there. Outside of Pyongyang, Kim has also worked to develop the east-coast area of Wonsan as a tourist destination. It's now

complete with a multi-million-dollar department store, golf course, airport, and ski resort.

Why divert so much of the country's funding to projects like this? Well, Kim may be trying to chip away at dominant narratives that suggest that North Korea is a starving, bleak, decaying country.

More than that, though, Kim wants his people to believe that his nuclear weapons programs have brought them prosperity. This directly ties in to his policy of *byungjin*, or parallel development, which argues that North Korea can simultaneously have both nuclear weapons *and* economic success.

This message reverberates in a country that underwent a devastating famine under Kim Jong Il in the 1990s. During it, North Koreans were instructed to "tighten their belts" and only eat two meals a day. Kim's *byungjin* policy is designed to make North Koreans feel prosperous by comparison.

Unfortunately, much of it is just for show. In "Pyonghattan," elites live conspicuously fabulous, privileged lives. Yet in the rest of the country, North Koreans live primarily off the goods and services delivered by foreign aid groups. The streets of the glitz capital are a distant dream.

Kim Jong Un wants his people to see him as a vision of youthful vitality, a twenty-first-century leader. But the truth is far removed from this rosy image.

Beyond North Korea's modern facade lurks a brutally repressive regime.

Today, as many as 120,000 people are imprisoned in North Korean prison camps, where they're treated with unimaginable brutality.

Prisoners' bodies and minds are tortured equally. Everyone, including children, is forced to work strenuous jobs in mines, farms, or construction sites – and to do so on a starvation diet. The lack of food drives them to gain additional sustenance by capturing and eating rodents, frogs, snakes, and insects. Prison guards administer water torture, deprive people of sleep and mobility, and commit rape and forcible abortions.

The purpose of the prison camps is to contain and isolate any who challenge the Kim regime. Families of dissenters are detained, too, deemed guilty by association. But the camps are just one part of Jong Un's reign of terror.

The key message here is: Behind North Korea's modern facade lurks a brutally repressive regime.

Outside of the gulags, a culture of fear runs throughout North Korean cities. The surveillance state is everywhere, monitoring everyone and everything.

Officials reward vigilantes for reporting fellow citizens' violations of social mores. These could be as simple as a woman's hair being too long or a man forgetting to wear a required patriotic button on his lapel. A neighborhood watch system ensures that every detail about a citizen's household is recorded, including every single possession. Inspectors regularly enter homes unannounced.

Beyond all of this, Kim is willing to have his political opponents outright assassinated – even when they're his own blood relatives.

Perhaps the most notable and shocking of these was the 2017 assassination of Kim's older brother Jong Nam at Malaysia's Kuala Lumpur airport. In quick succession, two women ran up to Jong Nam and touched his face. In doing so, they administered a potent chemical nerve agent called VX, which is listed internationally as a weapon of mass destruction.

Why do this? Put simply, Jong Nam was a potential rival for the North Korean throne. Not only that, he'd made comments to the press criticizing Kim's regime and was ever in the public eye thanks to his frequent Facebook posts. In short, he was a dissenter whom Jong Un couldn't control.

But the assassination was worrying for reasons other than the obvious. In particular, it highlighted Kim's willingness to use chemical and biological weapons on his enemies. According to estimates from the US and South Korean governments, North Korea has 2,500 to 5,000 metric tons of chemical weapons – and the infrastructure to weaponize them.

Kim tries to gain political legitimacy through summits with world leaders.

The Korean Demilitarized Zone, or DMZ, is one of the most dangerous places in the world. It's a stretch of land that's 150 miles wide and extends 1.2 miles into both North and South Korea, with the Military Demarcation Line, known as the MDL, separating the two.

One day in April 2018, however, the DMZ was a site of not conflict but diplomacy. South Korean president Moon Jae-in was going to meet with North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un for the first time. No North Korean leader had set foot in South Korean territory since the days of Kim Il Sung.

After the highly orchestrated event, in which Kim symbolically stepped over the MDL, the two leaders sat and had tea under a copse of trees. It was an odd image, but it was also emblematic of Kim's recent strategy of highly visible diplomacy.

The key message here is: Kim tries to gain political legitimacy through summits with world leaders.

At the beginning of his rule, Kim went full steam ahead into his nuclear program. Now, he does the same in his engagement with world leaders.

Why did Kim decide to pivot toward diplomacy in the first place? Intense sanctions were the primary reason. United Nations sanctions were devastating to North Korea, cutting off the country's most lucrative exports to the tune of \$2.7 billion. If Kim could shrug off some of those sanctions, he thought, he could reinvigorate his country's shrinking economy.

Kim's meeting with Moon, however, was something of a dress rehearsal. The main event was still to come: a meeting with US president Donald Trump.

At the beginning of his presidency, Kim's and Trump's relationship was anything but peaceful. Tweets and taunts were frequently traded back and forth between the two leaders. Kim pushed the limits with new ballistic missile and nuclear tests; Trump responded with ever-stronger sanctions.

As the two continued to challenge each other, the rhetoric grew hotter and hotter – sometimes literally. Trump once tweeted that he'd meet North Korea with “fire and fury.” All signs began to point frighteningly toward war. In 2017, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists proclaimed that the Doomsday Clock – a symbol for how close the world is to nuclear annihilation – was two minutes to midnight.

Yet the two countries never came to an armed conflict. In fact, precisely the opposite occurred.

A nuanced approach must be taken in regard to Kim and his nuclear state.

The world was abuzz in the lead-up to the Trump-Kim summit in June 2019. Though some observers warned that it was a huge mistake, a Spring 2018 Pew Research Center poll showed that 71 percent of Americans supported the idea of Trump holding talks with North Korea. In South Korea, Trump's approval rating jumped from 9 to 32 percent.

Holding the meeting made a lot of sense. After all, Kim was – and is – the sole person in charge of North Korea's nuclear program. Through it, Trump could potentially sway him toward denuclearization.

But Trump's approach to the meeting made much less sense – and it meant that the meeting was doomed to end up a dud.

The key message here is: A nuanced approach must be taken in regard to Kim and his nuclear state.

Prior to the meeting, Trump insisted on projecting his own opinions and perspectives onto Kim. Waving away the intelligence community's analyses, Trump assumed

that Kim was a businessman who cared more about his country's economic prospects than anything else. He thought that denuclearization would come down to developing a rapport with Kim.

This, of course, ignored essential facts about Kim's perspective. The nuclear project is his legacy, inherited from his father, and North Korea's identity is tied to its status as a nuclear state. Giving it up in exchange for American money would be the height of dishonor.

Trump's misreading of the situation meant that little real progress between the two nations was made. After the summit, Kim made some symbolic moves, like shutting down the nuclear test site at Punggye-ri. However, this was more theater than reality, as such steps are easily reversed.

To move North Korea toward meaningful denuclearization, world leaders need to take a more nuanced approach. For starters, the US and its allies should take coordinated action to develop and strengthen their alliances. Washington should commit strongly to its allies' security and maintain strong sanctions. It should also work with Seoul and Tokyo to develop a menu of options the three are willing to execute to respond to the North Korean threat together.

Creating these alliances will intensify pressure on Kim's regime. Most importantly, it'll suggest to him that his nuclear program is a threat rather than an asset, and one that makes his country not more safe, but *less*. This approach treats Kim as the rational actor that he is – rather than the joke, the crazy person, or the overgrown baby that the media often makes him out to be.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks is that:

Kim Jong Un grew up in a world of immense privilege, surrounded by wealth and aware of his illustrious family lineage. Inheriting his leadership position from his father, Kim Jong Il, Jong Un has advanced a policy of *byungjin*, where nuclear arms development and economic prosperity are supposed to feed off of one another. Recently, Kim has placed his energy into maximum engagement with foreign leaders, which reached a peak in 2019 with his meeting with US president Donald Trump. In order to make meaningful progress toward denuclearization, world leaders will need to take concentrated and coordinated action to apply pressure to Kim.