

# Kim Jong-un reappears

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By Tong Kim

On May 1, Kim Jong-un attended the completion ceremony for the Suncheon Phosphate Fertilizer Plant near Pyongyang. His reappearance effectively put to sleep three weeks of swirling speculation on his health, his whereabouts, and even the discussion of a succession prospect in anticipation of his death.

This time the news was real. It was televised May 2 by the Korea Central Broadcast, and published by the Korea Central News Agency and the Rodong Shinmun for both foreign and domestic audiences with photographs of Chairman Kim and his entourage including his sister Kim Yo-jong and other top ranking members of the party and the cabinet.

Kim cut a ribbon for the completion of the fertilizer plant. He looked in good spirits, smiling, and said, "the great leaders (his grandfather and his father) who worked so hard to resolve the food issue for the people would be very pleased to see the erection of this phosphate fertilizer plant."



While his performance at the ceremony appeared as normal, he may still have potential health problems, given the medical history of his family and his own for cardiovascular trouble, obesity, diabetes, and smoking. Kim's reappearance was reassuring to remove uncertainty and security concerns likely to follow if he had been incapacitated. For now, the stability of Kim's regime is desirable for the sake of peace.

In theory, the U.S. and South Korean alliance is ready to cope with any security challenges that would occur from a collapse of the regime, as they would carry out a contingency plan called OPLAN 5029. However, this plan probably requires updating and fine-tuning, in consideration of what China might do if the regime collapses. It is not a good time now to consult the Chinese on this issue due to a strained relationship between Washington and Beijing.

There were discussions of a few succession scenarios with respect to who will rule the country after Kim Jong-un. There will likely be a fourth family succession within the Kim dynasty, maintaining the same political system. However, nobody knows which member of the family will be the next ruler at this point.

It was Kim's absence from the April 15 birthday ceremony of his grandfather Kim Il Sung, the founder of North Korea, that had triggered a flood of unconfirmed reports and fake news that Kim was either incapacitated or dead from complications after undergoing cardiovascular surgery. Ji Seong-ho, a defector who has been elected to the National Assembly as a proportionate member of the conservative opposition party, said he was 99 percent sure that Kim was dead.

Rampaging rumors included claims that he was hiding from the coronavirus or he was injured from shrapnel while attending a live fire weapons training demonstration. The 38 North, a Washington website on North Korea, reported that a commercial satellite spotted Kim's train near Wonsan twice, but it did not say that Kim was staying in the area. Some argued the train was parked there for deflection or deception of Kim's whereabouts.

The latest episode of Kim's 20-day disappearance reminds us again, how little we know what's happening to the leadership of the regime, until Pyongyang makes an announcement. Kim had been unseen for two weeks and 40 days at a time before. North Korea is an impregnable intelligence back hole. We don't need Déjà vu the next time Kim disappears.

The technical means of intelligence gathering — from signals, communications, or images — did not help due to their intrinsic limits. And, it is almost impossible to collect confidential information about the North Korean leader through spies — human intelligence. The regime has been effective in protecting the secrecy of its leader.

Most prominent defectors, who weighed in on the state of Kim's health, including Thae Yong-ho, who served as a minister to the DPRK mission in London, were way off the mark. Many reputable news outlets too made errors in their reports. Nobody knew the truth. We still don't know what Kim did during those 20 days.

Seoul stood firm on its take on Kim Jong-un, saying it had detected nothing to raise suspicions that something was wrong with him. Surrogates of the government were betting that Kim was alive and well. Some of them conceded that maybe Kim was distancing himself from potential coronavirus infection.

Fortunately, the Moon government dealt cautiously with Kim's absence from public events, and so did President Trump, although Trump's words are often inconclusive and inconsistent. Now we are back on the fight against the pandemic and the search for a peaceful Korean Peninsula.

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