

# Death of a Proliferator: North Korea in Transition

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Brief Analysis

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## The death of Kim Jong-il provides an opportunity for Washington to organize a show of disapproval for North Korea's nuclear and missile proliferation.

"**K**im is dead; long live Kim" was the essence of the official announcement from Pyongyang yesterday, which declared that the sixty-nine-year-old Kim Jong-il had suffered a heart attack and that the nation should unite behind his son, Kim Jong-un, "the great successor." The new ruler, thought to be in his late twenties, is a little-known quantity. But his inheritance is known, and scary: a small arsenal of atomic bombs, missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads to Japan and beyond, and a track record of proliferating both technologies to dangerous regimes in the Middle East.

Iran's Shahab-3 missile, which can reach Israel, is a copy of the North Korean Nodong, as is Pakistan's nuclear-tipped Ghauri missile, which can reach every corner of India. Syria's nearly completed reactor at Dayr al-Zawr, destroyed by an Israeli air raid in 2007, was modeled on the reactor that produced Pyongyang's plutonium nuclear explosive. North Korea's own centrifuge plant appears similar to Pakistan's uranium enrichment plant, a type also in operation at Iran's Natanz facility and soon to be operational in a mountain cavern outside the holy city of Qom. Yemen's President Ali Abdullah Saleh was also once a customer for Pyongyang's missiles, as was Egypt. And Syria's chemical weapons are mounted on North Korean versions of the Soviet-era Scud missile; their target is assumed to be Israel.

Going forward, Kim Jong-un's motives, like his father's, can only be guessed at. His grandfather, Kim Il-sung, was a contemporary of Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong, and antagonism toward the United States was a central theme of his rule, which spanned 1948 to 1994. Kim Jong-il, who became the world's first hereditary communist leader upon his father's death, further institutionalized poverty for his people but also developed an efficient military export economy, which helped him fund both personal extravagance and official corruption (for more on the regime's finances, see the author's July 2011 article "[For the Love of Money](#)")

<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC06.php?CID=1671>).

The immediate danger is that the military will encourage the new leader to make an early gesture of defiance to the world, such as another nuclear test or a missile test over Japan. Also possible is a deliberate confrontation with South Korea, needling the U.S. forces based there.

Washington's influence with Pyongyang is very limited, and for the most part, the Obama administration will need to ask Beijing to urge its southern neighbor toward caution. But Kim Jong-il's upcoming funeral provides an opportunity to emphasize directly to Pyongyang how isolated North Korea has become because of its egregious behavior. Specifically, Washington should ask its allies to minimize their level of representation at the December 28 ceremony or any offer of condolences. And if Kim Jong-un does indeed become his father's long-term successor, a determined effort should be made to build on any inchoate modern views he might have acquired during his high school years in Switzerland.

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