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Next of Kim

By Jennifer Lind

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Why North Korea's new leader won't give up his nukes.

Kim Jong-il's increasingly tremulous hand has [apparently tapped](#) his youngest son, [Kim Jong-un](#), as a likely successor. Little is known about the 25-year-old heir apparent, except that he's said to resemble his father physically and share the same dictatorial character. A Japanese TV station recently displayed an exclusive image of the younger Kim, only to receive a phone call from a confused South Korean construction worker who said it was actually himself. Some North Korea-watchers say that Kim Jong-un studied in Switzerland under the name of Park Chol, while other experts say no, that was some other son. Or maybe it was some guy named Park Chol.

Because of his shrouded life, and because of the nuclear issue, speculations about Kim Jong-un run rampant. Will his arrival jolt the flat-lined Six Party Talks into new life? Might he be a reformer, willing to trade nukes for economic incentives? We eye him apprehensively, fearing that the young-un will be a capricious steward of nuclear weapons. Will he threaten his neighbors with them? Will he sell them to al Qaeda? Might he even use them?

Of course, we can't know the answers to these questions now. But a useful way to get inside the head of North Korea's next Kim is to conduct a thought experiment. Ask yourself, what would *you* do if tomorrow you were appointed the leader of North Korea? Take a look around. Because of your father and grandfather's ruinous policies, your small country trudges along on a GDP of \$20 billion a year (less than that of New Hampshire's). Their policies created a famine that killed perhaps a million of your countrymen. People who survived (apart from the glossy cadres nestled within the regime) are stunted, malnourished, and diseased. Those few people who somehow find the energy to upbraid your government get dispatched with their families to murder camps.

Bristling enemies surround you. To the south is a country with double your population and 20 times your GDP. The



AFP/Getty Images

Line of fire: Kim Jong-un's going to be hanging on to those nuclear weapons.

southern neighbor has spent the past six decades preparing its large army to annihilate yours. In stark contrast to your army, its healthy young men and women train regularly. (Your hungry soldiers can't train for want of fuel; they spend all of their time fixing roads or bribing officials for smuggling opportunities.) The enemy boasts state-of-the-art weapons technology. (You can't find spare parts for your 1950s relics.)

Oh, and that country has a friend. It's the global superpower, a country of such vast economic might that your GDP is just a rounding error in comparison. Your people never go a day without thinking about how that country, 60 years ago, burned yours to the ground in an incendiary bombing campaign. Its people have absently labeled that episode "the forgotten war." Today, that country has more military power than the rest of the world combined, and a large nuclear arsenal trained on your palace.

The superpower recently overran not one but two countries (that lacked nuclear weapons) and is batting around the idea of attacking another (that lacks nuclear weapons). You watched when the superpower conquered Iraq without breaking a sweat and briskly put bullet holes through the leaders' sons. Your eyes widened when the superpower dragged a grizzled Saddam Hussein blinking out of a rat-hole, put him in an orange jumpsuit, and then hung him brokenly from a gallows.

The point of this thought experiment is neither to indict the United States nor to defend North Korea. But, if one wants to anticipate and understand the opponent's next move, it's useful to peer at the board from his perspective. And a glance at that board reveals that North Korea's nuclear weapons keep its leader out of that rat-hole, the gallows rope off his neck, and his children alive.

There is always the chance that Kim Jong-il's successor will be a historic reformer who decides to end the tyranny he has inherited, turning over his country and his family's future to the South, praying that its mercy keeps him off the gallows. But more likely, he'll just take over the family business of running North Korea. For those who wonder how he might think about nuclear weapons, look at that chessboard from Pyongyang's perspective and ask yourself: What would your move be?

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