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Who is Kim Jong-un?

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(MUSIC)

DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews.

The music you just heard comes from Footsteps, a pay tribute to North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un who came to power following the death of his father, Kim Jong-Il, just over six years ago.

In that time, he has conducted more than twice as many missile tests as his father and grandfather combined, including four nuclear tests, adding to the two conducted under his father. In 2017, his regime tested ICBMs that appear capable of hitting the United States and he has engaged in a war of words with President Donald Trump whose administration has called North Korea "America's greatest national security threat."

In a new Brookings Essay titled, *The Education of Kim Jong-un*, Brookings expert Jung Pak tells the story of Kim's upbringing, provides insight on his decision making, and makes

recommendations on how to thwart Kim's ambitions. Dr. Pak is a senior fellow and the SK-Korea Foundation Chair in Korea studies at Brookings's Center for East Asia Policy Studies and has held senior positions at the Central Intelligence Agency and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence.

Also, on the show today, another installment of Wessel's Economic Update, in which David Wessel discusses his views on the recent volatility in the stock market and what relationship — if any — it has to the economy.

You can follow the Brookings podcast network on Twitter at [policy podcasts](#) to get the latest information about all of our shows. You can also hear Jung discuss these issues in a new edition of The Rational security podcast, which you can find and listen to from our friends over at Lawfare.

And now on with the interview. Jung, welcome to the Brookings cafeteria.

PAK: Thanks Fred. I'm so happy to be here.

DEWS: I have to tell my listeners that in addition to being a podcast host one of my other jobs at Brookings is to be an editor and kind of project manager on the Brookings essay. And so we're all very thrilled to have worked with you on producing and now publicizing your new Brookings essay, *The Education of Kim Jong-un*.

PAK: Yes, I can't thank you enough for pushing this essay through and for guiding me through the process. I think it's a fantastic product, and I feel very lucky to have been able to write the 19th Brookings essay.

DEWS: In addition to the argument that you make the insight that you bring, there is also wonderful pictures and charts and some graphs on the online product which you can find at [Brookings.edu/NorthKorea](#). So let's talk a little bit about the essay. Why is it important that we understand the background and personality of a figure like Kim Jong-un?

PAK: You know, as I said in the essay or in the background of the essay is that I spent the past six plus years in intelligence looking at this leader and trying to get into his head and trying to do the analysis that would be useful for policymakers in understanding his motivations and his drivers because I think the same act or the same action or provocation or outreach — or

whatever North Korea does — it's important to figure out what the drivers are for those actions because the same action can have different policy responses if the drivers are the motivations are different.

So we tried to get as much information as we can to piece together a picture of Kim Jong-un, which is really hard, given the closed off nature of the regime, and the fact that some of the most basic information about the leaders are not open information and not released by the North Korean government. But also in drawing this picture of Kim Jong-un and his regime based on the fragmentary information, I cited a former colleague of mine who's now at Heritage Foundation. He had said in an interview a few years ago that trying to figure out the North Korean regime is trying to figure out a jigsaw puzzle and somebody else is trying to throw extra pieces in there. And I love that quote because it's so accurate. But I also think that the picture keeps changing because people don't remain static.

And I think one of the key thesis of my essay is to make sure that people should be aware of how people change. Leadership changes. Motivations change. And so our analysis has to keep pace with developments and not get set in a particular way of looking at the issue.

DEWS: Well, given that Kim Jong-un is the leader of a very secretive regime in a very remote place and he's surrounded by this vast propaganda machine, how do you get what might be an accurate picture of who this person is?

PAK: For me, it was knowing the history and being a careful observer of what's happening in North Korea, but also the regional context. What are the South Koreans doing. What are the Chinese doing. What is the nature of the U.S. South Korea relationship that might affect North Korea's perceptions? But the context is important, the observation is important, listening, knowing the history — these are all important. But I think the propaganda — North Korea's propaganda also is really helpful in figuring out what the regime wants the internal and the external audiences to see and understand about the regime.

DEWS: Something that I'm really interested in as a general statement or general principle is the phenomenon of somebody coming to power. He was in his 20s — so another thing we don't know exactly is when he was born — but he was in his 20s when his father died and he was very inexperienced as compared to his father and especially his grandfather Kim Il

Sung. Why did the more experienced people in the regime who were already there support him — or did they? And, you know, generally, what are the mechanisms of his coming to power? How does that really work?

PAK: We do know when he was born, the U.S. Treasury Department — when they sanctioned him for human rights violations — they listed 1984 as his birthday and his aunt who had defected also confirmed that he was born in 1984.

So at least we know that, after many years of not knowing or being certain of his birth year. On how does a 20 something year old become a leader — there was a lot of talk when he first became leader of North Korea that there's no way that a 20 something year old with very little-known military experience or leadership experience could lead this impoverished, backward isolated country like North Korea.

But what his father Kim Jong Il did was to set up an infrastructure of people loyal to him to support the new leadership — and that involves the party, the military, the internal security services — all of the mechanisms within North Korea's regime infrastructure that could make sure to help and guide Kim Jong-un through the succession process.

But soon after he came to power, Kim Jong-un started to replace the people more loyal to his father in quick order. He began to cultivate his own power base, replacing people, shuffling people around, demoting, banning people to the countryside, going to political re-education camps. And I think that was to make sure that the people around him are more loyal to him and not to his father. And it also creates a sense of uncertainty which makes people unlikely to make any big moves against him. So fear and repression is something that I think maybe runs in the family talent business.

But Kim was very decisive in making sure that the infrastructure supported him and him specifically and not his father.

DEWS: You mentioned this in the essay – infamously, a few years ago, he had his uncle killed for some seemingly minor infraction. I don't know what it was, but it sounded like it was a very brutal public execution one of many that Kim Jong-un carried out.

PAK: Right. There have been several purges. But I think what was so shocking about his uncle's execution was the fact that Kim Jong-un trotted him out this broken old man, leaning over, handcuffed, and a lengthy list of indictments against him of being against the unitary power of the regime, of being a traitor to the regime, and to North Korea.

And the fact that he was reportedly killed by anti-aircraft guns. For me, it showed how willing Kim is to go to punish anything or anybody who harbors any sense of dissent against the regime. So this wasn't just the message against Jang Song-Thaek, his uncle, but it was a message to everybody else that he's willing to kill his uncle to make sure that his regime is solid and that his power is cemented. And I think that the most dangerous thing for anybody in North Korea's regime is to be called the number two or the most powerful person after Kim Jong-un. And that was what Jang Song-Thaek was in that sense.

DEWS: There was also the case of the assassination of Kim's older half-brother, Kim Jong-Nam, in Malaysia in an airport. In fact, Kim Jong-un himself is the third son of his father so there's a lot of interesting things going on there and then he maybe ordered the assassination of that figure. Can you talk briefly about the assassination of Kim Jong-Nam?

PAK: Kim Jong-un and the regime was almost certainly behind this. I know the trial is ongoing and the assassination of Kim Jong-Nam, the older half-brother, with the assassination of the uncle ... you know, it's like the North Korean *Game of Thrones*, right, where Kim Jong-un appears to have no qualms about making sure that he's the only leader. And there was a recent example in his New Year's speech where there is that nuclear button back and forth with President Trump.

What Kim Jong-un said in his years speech — he said the nuclear button is in my office, right. So to me, it signifies that it's not the regime that has the button. It's not the family that has the button. But it's in his office. So the only thing that stands between this malevolent lurking US waiting to invade North Korea and North Korea's safety and security and prosperity is Kim Jong-un alone. So the public executions of Kim Jong-Nam and his uncle shows me that, you know, he wants to send this message that he's the leader and he's driving events on the peninsula. And this is for internal and external audiences.

DEWS: But all that also seems to send the message — or at least it's interpreted this way especially by our own president — that Kim Jong-un is an irrational madman. But that's not what you say in your piece; you say that he is rational and not suicidal. Can you talk in some more depth about this idea that he's a madman, he's irrational?

PAK: Since Kim Jong-un came to power, I spotted at least a couple of ways that people would describe Kim Jong-un. And that's the nature of the 10-foot-tall baby description that I put in the essay. Somebody who's ten feet tall — you know, Kim Jong-un is not ten feet tall, he's not omnipotent, he's not all seeing, he's not all knowing. But he's also not a baby, in that he's not reckless in this erratic or irrational kind of way, uncontrollable, likely to hurt himself and other people.

I think the caricatures are unhelpful, but you know the regime propaganda and Kim's own over-the-top rhetoric, you know, just reinforces the belief that he's this madman who's willing to risk war with the United States. I think that if you believe he's irrational, then diplomacy or economic sanctions won't work. And also, deterrence won't work. If he's rational, then he can make decisions based on his understanding of current dynamics and can be deterred. But if he's irrational, then our policy options narrow to the military one — where we have to strike him before he hurts himself his people and the United States — most importantly. The other side too is that because I believe he's rational, he can play this game pretty well. He's been playing this game longer than the South Korean president, Moon, who came into office mid last year, and President Trump, who came into office last year. He's been at this for six plus years. So he knows how to play the game. He knows how to maintain the initiative. He's not erratic, as far as I can tell. So I think he's a formidable opponent. But he's neither omnipotent nor a baby.

WESSEL: I'm David Wessel and this is my economic update. This seems a good time to talk about the stock market, after an unusually long spell of rising stock prices record breaking almost every day. The stock market's been gyrating lately — a reminder that what goes up comes down. I'm going to leave it to others to explain why the stock market moves so much so quickly or that any obvious trigger. Was it a sudden surge of inflation anxiety? Some bad bets by big investors? Automated trading gone awry? I'm always amused by the pundits and analysts who suggest after the market crashes that it was obvious to them that stocks were overvalued. I wonder why they aren't fabulously wealthy if they're so precious. Instead, I like to

talk about the relationship between the stock market and the economy where we work, shop, and play what economists call the real economy.

When do plunging or gyrating stock prices pose problems not just for investors, but for consumers, workers, and businesses? Let's start with consumer spending. Of course falling stock prices are unpleasant for people who own shares. That's roughly half of all American households. The most of the shares are held by a small slice of the population. When stock prices go down, people who own stock — whether in individual companies mutual funds or their 401k retirement plans — tend to spend less readily. Maybe put off buying a new car or renovating the kitchen. But that has a relatively small impact on the economy. After all, consumer spending didn't skyrocket when stock prices were rising last year. I remember the panic over the 1987 stock market crash. A 22 percent drop.

With the benefit of hindsight, it didn't have much lasting effect on the economy whatsoever. And the recent turmoil in the stock market occurs at a time when nearly all other economic indicators suggest the economies of the U.S. and the rest of the world are doing well, displaying some welcome momentum. Next there's financial stability. The ripple effects if you will. If some big financial institutions bet the wrong way, if stock market volatility pushes some bank or insurance company under, that could be a problem. We learned during the global financial crisis how financial viruses can spread across the globe and infect the real economy. Now, an isolated bankruptcy or two isn't a threat. The financial system can take that in stride, particularly given the changes that have been made to strengthen it since the Great Crisis. The risk comes of problems spread from one institution to another. And shake up the entire financial system, perhaps accelerated by high frequency or computerized trading. A small risk, perhaps, but a risk. And finally, there's the issue of confidence. Even if you don't own a lot of stock, it's a bit unnerving to see headlines about 1000 point drops in the Dow Jones industrial average. We know the decisions that business executives make about hiring and investment reflect more than number crunching spreadsheets. Business attitudes matter. Turmoil in the stock market to say the least is unsettling, and it can lead business executives to delay big decisions. Moreover, whenever there's uncertainty or turmoil — whether in the markets, in natural disasters, and foreign policy — businesses, consumers, and workers, citizens, generally want to be sure that there are adults in charge in Washington — the sort of people who can reassure us that yes we have a problem but we're on it. Don't worry. You can decide for yourself whether the Trump administration can do that.

DEWS: I do want to go a little bit into the military options in a few minutes but first I want to ask, what are his objectives? I mean, what does he want?

PAK: I think he wants prestige and strategic relevance and to be able to conduct, of course, of diplomacy — which is to maintain the initiative on the Korean Peninsula and in the region, for that matter. One of the things I wanted to make sure to highlight in the essay is that objectives can change and while his grandfather and his father might have thought about obtaining nuclear weapons and developing and advancing them and demonstrating them, that might have been for defensive purposes. And I think Kim Jong-un, the third generation, I think still wants to reach fruition of that nuclear deterrent or deterrence against U.S. invasion which would give them freedom of action in other ways.

What I worry about — and I think we should be very careful about — is how Kim might have offensive aspirations, such as reunifying the Korean peninsula under his terms and that's one of the things that the Trump administration seems to be very focused on, is that offensive aspect of the motivations. I don't think that we're there yet. But I do think that we're in danger if Kim's confidence continues to grow. And if he thinks that he doesn't have to make a choice between nuclear weapons and developing the economy, which has been his policy for the past five years.

DEWS: It seems pretty clear that he's not going to give up his nuclear weapons. You cite in the essay the case of Moammar Gadhafi and Libya and he gave up his nuclear ambitions and then everyone says look what happened to him, he ended up dead.

PAK: Yeah, you know the North Korean regime and their media, or their statements — they always refer to Iraq and Libya as reasons why the North Koreans will never give up their nuclear weapons. And, you know, I wanted to dig deeper into that.

I think people forget that North Korea sees what happens on the outside and Libya and Iraq — Libya, especially for Kim Jong-un, I think probably has much more of a personal impact, given the fact that the Arab Spring and Moammar Gadhafi's downfall — spectacular downfall — happened right around the time when Kim was moving toward taking the helm in North Korea. So, the Arab Spring, I think probably showed the North Koreans and Kim Jong-un personally, what happens if you don't repress your population. What happened to Gadhafi probably was

seared into Kim Jong-un's brain about how he was beaten by his own people. Gadhafi had given up nuclear weapons and the U.S. was unable to protect him in that way. Right, so, for North Korea and for Kim Jong-un, the Gadhafi example, I think it was a very salient powerful reminder of what happens when you give up nuclear weapons.

DEWS: So what do you think the current administration in Washington is getting right, and what is it perhaps getting wrong in its current policy approach to the North Korean problem?

PAK: I think maximum pressure and engagement policy is the right way to go. Sanctions have never been as strong as they are now. It used to be that sanctions used to target North Korean entities and individuals who were specifically involved in the nuclear weapons program or the ballistic missile program. But, the sanctions are much broader. They cover secondary sanctions and there's anecdotal information that the sanctions are starting to bite. So I think maximum pressure is the right way to go. We need to make Kim Jong-un make the choice — the strategic choice — of whether he's going to have nuclear weapons or economic development. He cannot have both. So far, Kim Jong-un has not faced the strategic decision. His New Year's address, for example, showed me that he's very happy — he's confident about the nuclear weapons program. The one prong of the Byung policy. But on the other hand, the speech reminded us that he recognizes or at least is aware of the headwind he will face in improving the economy. He talks about how local provinces and cities and counties will have to do more. So he wants them to work harder, longer, and faster. And, you know, I think this Olympic outreach to South Korea — since January 1st — I think is in part a sign that Kim Jong-un feels a need to try to loosen that sanctions implementation.

DEWS: So, speaking of the Olympics, which start as soon as this podcast is being published, do you think it was a good idea for South Korea to let North Korea participate with its athletes in these games to march under this, kind of, unitary flag? And to have — I think — the women hockey players from North and South are competing together on the same team.

PAK: Right. I think the inter-Korean talks are fine. I think they're good. You know, after the white knuckle tension from the fall when people were wondering whether there was going to be a nuclear warfare, it was a relief, you know, for me at least, to have this little bit of breathing space as there were some inter-Korean dialogue. My preference would have been that South Korea kept this to the Olympics. But I do think that President Moon's administration thinks that

inter-Korean dialogue — using the Olympics as the venue — will spur US-North Korea dialogue and therefore we can have talks into nuclearization. But so far, I have seen zero indication that the North Koreans want to talk about their nuclear weapons program. And, I don't see the North Koreans bending at all on this issue. And of course that is the condition for the U.S. to enter into talks with North Korea — that North Korea has to show a sincere desire to talk about nuclear weapons.

DEWS: Let me go back for a second to the military options because there is this idea floating around that there could be what's called a “bloody nose” — conventional military first strike by U.S. and allied forces on North Korea that would somehow deter Kim Jong-un and his regime from doing anything else. Can you talk about what that kind of strike would be aimed at achieving, and what you think the results might be?

JUNG: The idea of the bloody nose conventional strike, based on the recent article, the avalanche of reporting, and analysis on what the administration is thinking — it shows me that this idea of a strike is still evolving and that there is real, robust debate in the administration about a strike. My position is that if Kim Jong-un thinks that it's limited — a limited strike is not going to get denuclearization. On the one hand, what would be good, is that a U.S. strike on North Korea would explode Kim Jong-un's assumptions that the U.S. is unwilling to use military force. So that's good. That might tame his future moves. But on the other hand, he might say, “Okay, let's have talks on nuclear weapons.” But even during those talks, we can't guarantee that he's not going to be covertly developing nuclear weapons. And let's say Kim Jong-un is removed from the picture. I just don't see the next regime — whichever leader comes to power in North Korea — to be giving up nuclear weapons because of the limited strike. Right? I mean, this is why they have nuclear weapons. But I think we have to make sure that North Korea knows that their very reason for having nuclear weapons — that is, to deter the United States — is actually turning into a reason for the United States to try to strike North Korea.

So Kim has to understand this. I hope he understands this. I hope the Moon administration, if there are talks with the North Koreans, that the South Korean government will try to convey this information. That this is not the same administration. The Trump administration has a higher risk tolerance and that a military strike or something that would be very detrimental to the Kim Jong-un regime is under serious consideration.

DEWS: Let's look at the diplomatic side of it for just a couple of minutes. First question is about the U.S. ambassador to South Korea. We don't have one. In fact, Victor Cha was supposed to be the U.S. ambassador. He was, I guess, up for consideration and he's been withdrawn. Is it a problem that the U.S. doesn't have a full time ambassador in Seoul.

PAK: I think it's a huge problem. South Korea always has fears about being sidelined. There was this narrative of Korea passing — that Korea is being sidelined, is being marginalized. And, this in light of the U.S. ambassador to Japan and the U.S. ambassador to China having been in place for a year while South Korea has not had an ambassador for a year and we might not see another ambassador for months. That reinforces this deep longstanding narrative or suspicion in South Korea that the U.S. is passing South Korea by. But I think the ambassador in South Korea is so critically important as we are discussing military strikes, given North Korea's huge advancements in its ICBM programs and its nuclear programs — that we need to have somebody in place to make sure that there's zero daylight between the United States and South Korea on the North Korea issue. As I mentioned in the essay, North Korea is watching us as much as we watch it. And, you know, I don't want this absence of the ambassador in South Korea to be signifying to the North Koreans that there are fissures in the relationship. And I think Washington needs to make sure that there is complete coordination with Seoul on every single issue.

DEWS: And, of course, Japan is one of the critical players in this whole arena. But I want to ask you about China. President Trump has said on many occasions that he thinks China should do more to control North Korea and to do many things that maybe he thinks would help diffuse the situation there. But what can China do, and what does China want to do with regard to North Korea?

PAK: China can do more. I mean, that 90 percent of North Korea's trade is with China. And there's a reason why various administrations have relied on China to do more. China does want denuclearization. but their timeline for denuclearization is different from Washington's timeline. We want it now. China wants it at some point in the distant future, but for now Beijing wants to have stability in the region, and in a way while its views of its relationship with North Korea are slowly changing for the worse for North Korea, Beijing still prioritizes stability over

instability and denuclearization. So that's a big problem. That's a big disconnect between Washington, South Korea, Japan versus China.

DEWS: Jung, I'd like to close this interview with trying to get a sense for our listeners of a personal or first person view of North Korea. It's both, in many ways, horrifying and fascinating to look at this country, its oppressive regime labor camps. Pyongyang is this kind of model city, very restricted — it's fascinating and horrifying at the same time. Have you visited North Korea? And if so, just kind of tell our listeners a little bit about your impressions of it.

PAK: I've never been to North Korea. I'm not sure if I would be wanted, given my background and all of those things, but I wrote about one person in my essay and that's Kim Jong-un, because I believe he calls all the shots — all the major shots, in any case. But it's a country of 25 million people. The vast majority are food insecure — they're living day to day hand-to-mouth and I'm very conscious of the fact that there are these millions of people who are suffering under this regime. And I think it's right and entirely appropriate for the Trump administration to focus on human rights. But we should always remember in this maximum pressure campaign and in our dealings with North Korea to remember that there are millions of people who are also suffering as a result of this brutal regime.

DEWS: I want to thank you for coming by to share your time and expertise today.

PAK: Thank you Fred. It's been a pleasure.

DEWS: You can read the new Brookings essay, *The Education of Kim Jong-un*, by Jung Pak, on our website, [Brookings.edu/NorthKorea](https://www.brookings.edu/NorthKorea). And while you're there, check out some of her other writings and scholarship on North Korea — including a policy brief with Ryan Haas titled, *Beyond maximum pressure: A pathway to North Korean denuclearization*.

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