

North Korea's Kim Yo-jong will not automatically succeed brother

Despite the fevered media speculation that 31-year old Kim Yo-jong, sister of medically embattled North Korean leader Kim Jong-un will automatically succeed his brother if he were to succumb to his unconfirmed illness – it is highly unlikely that she will do so. A 3-man elite military council is more likely to temporarily emerge with the help of China. Yo-jong is a very junior member of the ruling party elite. She has no independent base among the masculine hyper- militarized nomenclature who sustain the hermitic regime. She is seen by many in the elite military as too inexperienced (and the wrong gender) to automatically inherit the crown. Little is known about Kim Yo-jong's political views, and it would be challenging for her to be accepted in a strong patriarchal society where old age is revered. Yo-jong is associated with the Trump-Kim rapprochement, at odds with the pro-Chinese military elites.

Kim Jong Un is believed to have undergone a heart surgery and subsequently became severely ill. Hardly unexpected for a 36-year old man who is chain-smoker, severely obese (BMI of 45) and is enduring a 14-year UN sanctions regime which has gradually tightened and resulted in a crippling economic situation made worse by the unquantifiable impact/magnitude of COVID-19.

If Jong-un dies suddenly a deadly protracted power struggle will likely emerge within the upper echelons of the ruling party with contenders such as speaker of the North Korean 'parliament', and Vice Chair of the Military Commission, Choe Ryong-haeon more likely to succeed Jong-un in a 3-man style council. Since the founding of the nation in November 1948, the Kim dynasty has ruled with an iron fist and Kim Jong Un – the third generation – has been in charge since he took over from his father, Kim Jong Il – who died after having a stroke (also a heavy chain-smoker). Jong-un's efforts to generationally transform the country are yet to bear fruit as nearly all of the elite members of the regime are much older conservative men. Unlike Prince Mohammad bin Salman in Saudi Arabia, Jong-un has yet to stamp his personal authority on the party, bureaucracy or military.

With total economic collapse lurking, the politburo of the Korean Workers party is more likely to break the regal family tradition and appoint a series of more 'experienced hands' in a 3-person council if Kim Jong-un were to succumb to his illness.

Trade data for Jan and Feb 2020 (combined due Chinese Lunar New Year) offers dire reading for North Korea: Chinese export dropped 24% year on year to \$198m and import slumped 74% to mere \$10m (note that the base year 2019 was already badly affected by UN sanctions). The coming months are hardly expected to offer better reading given the COVID-19 impact.

Sebastian Spio-Garbrah,
Chief Analyst & Exec. Chairman
Toronto, Canada
+1 647 808 9671
Sebastian@daminaadvisors.com

Alex Wark,
Partner, Business Development
London, UK
+ 44 7779 656 878
Alex@daminaadvisors.com

Lars Henriksson
Partner, Asia
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
+ 60 11 1166 5199
Lars@daminaadvisors.com

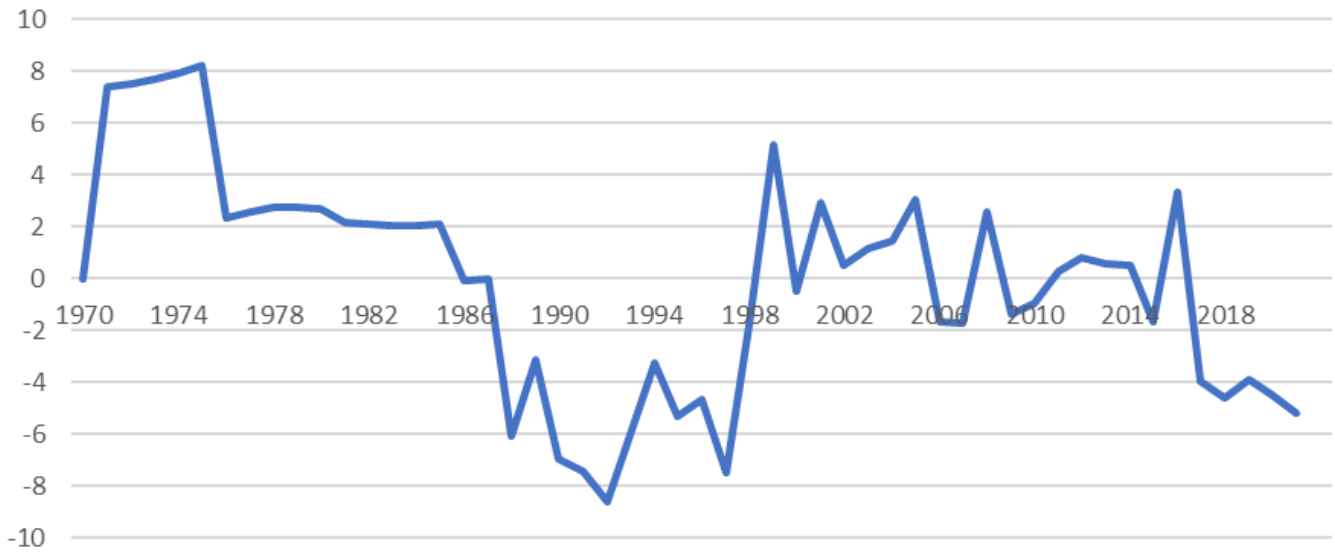
Yaz Sheherezade
Research Director, MENA
London, UK
+ 44 7493 13 7894
Yasmine@daminaadvisors.com

Evan Rolfe
Associate Director
London, UK
+ 44 779 4633 673
Evan@daminaadvisors.com

Elliot Chapman
Associate Director
London, UK
+44 753 8960 826
Elliot@daminaadvisors.com

Michele Boaretto
Analyst, Euro area
London, UK
+ (39) 370 371 5620
mboaretto@daminaadvisors.com

Annual Rate of North Korea GDP Per Capita at constant 2015 prices - US Dollars



Source: UN/ DaMina Advisors

Contact DaMina for a more detailed briefing from our risk analysts:

Alex Wark,
Partner, Business Development
London, UK
+ 44 7779 656 878
+1 647 808 9671

Alex@daminaadvisors.com
research@daminaadvisors.com

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