



INSIGHT: NORTHEAST ASIA

Cameos by Kim Jong Un's daughter stir succession speculation



THE TAKEAWAY

The prominence of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's daughter, Kim Ju-ae, in recent state media and public appearances is fuelling speculation about her potential to be the country's next leader. She is hailed as a princess-like figure by state media, symbolizing the resilience of North Korea's hereditary rule and its 'youthful' future.

IN BRIEF

On November 18, 2022, Kim Ju-ae made her [first appearance](#) in North Korean media, accompanying her father, Kim Jong Un, at a nuclear missile site, which was designed to launch missiles that could strike anywhere in the U.S. mainland. Experts speculate that the sudden reveal of Kim's purportedly 10-year-old second child was meant as an introduction of his eventual successor, while North Korean state media framed her appearance as part of Kim's promise to build nuclear weapons to protect the nation's children, including his own.

Since North Korea's successful test-firing of the Hwasong-17 intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM)

in November 2022, Kim Ju-ae has accompanied Kim to six high-profile events. Of particular note was her appearance alongside her parents at a February 8 military parade in Pyongyang, which showcased the largest number of [upgraded nuclear-capable missiles](#) ever seen at a military parade. She also appeared in 17 pages of a 100-page special [photo album](#) dedicated to the military parade.

Kim Ju-ae was also featured on five of the 11 [new stamps](#) issued on February 14 to commemorate North Korea's most recent ICBM launch, and was described as Kim's "noble child," cementing her prominence. Kim Ju-ae's public appearances at a [soccer game](#) on February 17 to celebrate the birthday of Kim's father, Kim Jong Il, and at the [inauguration of the construction for a new street](#) on February 26 show that she is also trying to connect with the general public.

IMPLICATIONS

Little is known about Kim's family, so Kim Ju-ae's frequent appearances have prompted speculation in South Korea about Kim Ju-ae and her chances

of succeeding Kim, the stability of the regime, and her relation to North Korea's military and nuclear capabilities.

[The North's record-setting number of missile launches](#) and the sudden appearance of Kim's daughter in 2022 may have helped prompt South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol to broach, in January 2023, the idea of South Korea developing its own nuclear weapons. This sort of proposal has generally been taboo in South Korea since the 1970s. The South Korean government went even further in February, however, to advance its position on achieving "peace through strength" by depicting the North as an "enemy" for the first time in six years in its [2022 Defense White Paper](#).

There is also rising public debate about South Korea's potential nuclear armament and the development of stronger ties with the U.S. According to the results of a poll of 1,000 South Korean adults published by the Chey Institute for Advanced Studies on January 30, 76.6 per cent of respondents [agreed that](#) South Korea needs to develop nuclear weapons.

But going from seeking to securing nuclear power would be difficult. South Korea could violate its commitments to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and the 1954 U.S. Atomic Energy Act if it were to use any nuclear materials, equipment, or technology received from the U.S. in military applications, including the development of nuclear weapons.

North Korea is responding strongly to these changes. Kim Ju-ae might be one of North Korea's counterstrategies as the country aims to protect Kim and show the world that it will keep the family in power.

WHAT'S NEXT

1. Succession and a potential family feud

Some experts assert that Kim Ju-ae's appearances are preparatory measures for a fourth-generation hereditary succession to solidify regime unity surrounding Kim and the Mount Paektu bloodline, which refers to the lineage of Kim leaders and their families that started with founder Kim Il Sung. Kim may be preparing his children, particularly Kim Ju-ae, to play specific roles in his regime. This may complicate matters for his sister, Kim Yo Jong, who appeared to have a close relationship with Kim, but has been absent from recent events.

2. Will patriarchy prevail in North Korea?

South Korea's Minister of Unification, Kwon Young-se, [expressed cautiously](#) that it might be difficult for a female heir to lead the regime as North Korea is a very male-oriented and patriarchal society. It is also unclear if Kim has a son. The Ministry of Unification [announced](#) that they were preparing for all possibilities, and will be closely monitoring the Kim family.

3. Women tiptoe to the fore

North Korea now has more women in leadership roles than ever before. Kim frequently appears in public with his wife, Ri Sol Ju. Kim Yo Jong also plays a prominent role as a major power player in Pyongyang. Outside of the family, there is Hyon Song Wol, vice director of the Propaganda and Agitation Department, and foreign minister Choe Son Hui. Given Kim Ju-ae's recent rise to prominence, it is plausible — more so than in past regimes — that, one day, a woman could lead North Korea.

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