

**NORTH KOREA 2014: CONTINUED
DOMESTIC INSTABILITY AND
INTERNATIONAL ISOLATION**

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Executive summary

1. The year 2014 imposed tough challenges to Kim Jong-un who ran the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) ill-prepared due to his father's sudden departure. Kim Jong-un's erratic behaviour in 2014, as seen by his month-long mysterious absence from world vision in September, is an indicator that he is an indiscriminate and immature leader.
2. The year 2014 was another year of power consolidation for Kim who has set his sight on realising the "sole Kim Jong-un system". This mission is central to his political agenda in 2014 following the purge of his uncle.
3. His continued leadership reshuffles at the apex of power and continued cruel persecution of senior officials testify that his power consolidation is not over and that North Korea's political succession is still ongoing.
4. Kim Jong-un's two toughest and most controversial decisions in 2013, namely, the third nuclear test and the execution of his uncle, continue to influence North Korea's political environment in 2014. The third nuclear test in April 2013 furthered the country's international isolation.
5. The purge of his uncle Jang Song Taek in December was indicative of his power consolidation at home: he finally got rid of a mentor who interfered with his rule but at an enormous cost of DPRK officialdom, which has not recovered to this date.
6. The nuclear test aroused high negative international response even after a year. China has slapped unprecedented economic sanctions on the DPRK under its UN obligation, successfully preventing Pyongyang from conducting the fourth test in 2014. It had however soured bilateral relations as evidenced by the absence of a Xi-Kim summit, tentatively scheduled in 2014 by Jang's China visit in 2013.

7. In 2014 Kim continues with his dual emphases on domestic policy that he set for the DPRK in 2013: economic reform and military-first policy with nuclearisation as its core. The North Korean economy has made little improvement after a year of reforms due partly to the country's moribund economic system and mainly to the military-first policy that dries national resources and international assistance.
8. Internationally Kim has continued to call for direct contact with Washington resulting in US spy chief's visit to Pyongyang in November; sent his top three aides to Seoul in October; and received Japan's special envoys. However, his efforts did not bear much fruit. Without resuming normal summit contact with Beijing, Pyongyang has achieved little in its reach-out efforts.
9. Washington and Seoul have failed to mount any rapprochement vis-à-vis Pyongyang given the lack of progress in denuclearising the North. Although the South and North did establish unofficial contact at the Asian Games in Seoul, the contact did little to alleviate tension. The limited contact with Japan is largely inconsequential.
10. The overall situation in North Korea continued to deteriorate in 2014: leadership instability lingered on; the economy had barely improved; and international isolation had deepened.
11. South Korea and the United States have thus contemplated "early absorption" through tightening economic and military pressure on Pyongyang. They have formulated coordinated scenario plans to deal with a sudden DPRK crisis. Beijing, too, is hedging against a worst case challenge in Pyongyang.