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Kim Yo-jong: now widely thought of as a possible successor to her older brother Kim Jong-un. EPA-EFE/Jorge Silva

North Korea: the rise and rise of ‘first sister’ Kim Yo-jong

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When the South Korean president, Moon Jae-in, called for an end to the war on the Korea peninsula recently, the initial response was a rebuff from North Korea’s vice foreign minister. This has been the standard response from Pyongyang whenever the idea has been raised of turning the 1953 armistice between the two warring Koreas into an actual peace treaty.

So it was something of a surprise when, the following day, a rather warmer message emerged from Kim Yo-jong, the sister of North Korea’s supreme leader, Kim Jong-un, who declared the idea “admirable”. She specified a number of pre-conditions which would need to be met, though:

What needs to be dropped is the double-dealing attitudes, illogical prejudice, bad habits and hostile stand of justifying their own acts while faulting our just exercise of the right to self-defence.

This is the sort of message one would usually expect to come from Kim Jong-un himself, so it prompted a round of discussion from the media’s Korea watchers as to how much weight the world can give a statement from his younger sister.

Who is Kim Yo-jong?

The supreme leader's sister first came to international attention in 2018, when she became the first member of North Korea's Kim dynasty to visit South Korea in an official capacity. She was part of the nation's delegation to the Winter Olympics in PyeongChang, at which the two countries competed as one team. She held a meeting with President Moon and appeared in photo opportunities alongside US Vice President Mike Pence and the Japanese prime minister, Shinzo Abe. Footage of her dominated coverage in North Korea.

Kim Jong-un's sister heads North Korea's Winter ...



Following what was reported as her diplomatic triumph at the Winter Olympics, her profile grew as she met with the Chinese president, Xi Jinping, and was present at all three face-to-face meetings between her brother and US President Donald Trump.

Little is known about Kim Yo-jong's childhood, though – even her date of birth is clouded in uncertainty. She is the youngest child of former supreme leader Kim Jong-il's relationship with Ko Yong-hui, who was originally from Japan and thus would have been regarded as being from a lower caste in Korea's complex "songbun" system if Kim Jong-il had not removed the official record about her origin. Kim Yo-jong is understood to have attended the same private school with her elder brother in Bern, Switzerland, after which she attended Kim Il-sung University in Pyongyang, where she studied computer science.

By 2009, Kim Jong-il's ill-health made the succession a matter of urgent debate and it became increasingly clear that Kim Jong-un was being groomed to take over the leadership on his death. But at Kim Jong-il's funeral, Kim Yo-jong was photographed alongside senior family members.

She has twice been elevated to the politburo, in 2017 to 2019 and 2020 to 2021. In addition, she is also a leader of the Propaganda and Agitation Department, in which capacity she has boosted the cult of personality surrounding her brother as well as making regular statements about North Korean foreign relations.

She is believed to be married to Choe Song, the younger son of the Korean Workers' Party secretary, Choe Ryong Hae, which gives her another source of political power.

Heir apparent?

How much power does Kim Yo-jong actually wield? One incident from June 2020 shows the extent to which she can exercise her will in North Korea. In retaliation for South Korean defectors' use of balloons to drop propaganda leaflets into the North, she warned that she had ordered the department in charge of inter-Korean affairs to "decisively carry out the next action", adding that: "Before long, a tragic scene of the useless north-south joint liaison office completely collapsed would be seen."

The following day the building was blown up, suggesting that when Kim Yo-jong orders something, it happens.

North Korea blows up border liaison office



Another interesting episode can cast some light over power relations between herself and her brother. In March 2020, Kim Yo-jong issued her first official statement, lashing out at South Korea's presidential office, the so-called Blue House, which had called on the North to halt its live fire exercises. She referred to the leadership as "a mere child" and "a burnt child dreading fire".

Two days later Kim Jong-un sent a message of condolence over the outbreak of COVID-19 in the South. This “underlined his unwavering friendship and trust toward President Moon and said that he will continue to quietly send his best wishes for President Moon to overcome”. The message had Korea watchers confused as to whether the siblings were at loggerheads over North-South relations or whether this was a display of “good cop-bad cop” diplomacy.

This is a family where many of the possible male contenders for power have been executed or assassinated – including Kim Jong-nam, Kim Jong-un’s half brother who was murdered with the nerve agent VX at Kuala Lumpur airport in Malaysia in 2017; and his uncle, Jang Song-thaek, who was reportedly executed by firing squad in 2013 after being accused of being a counter-revolutionary. So the status of Kim Yo-jong’s relationship with her brother is as scrutinised as Kim Jong-un’s physical health when it comes to if – and when – she might be in a position to challenge for ultimate power in North Korea.



Flexing her power: Kim Yo-jong arriving in Hanoi, Vietnam, two days after she ordered the demolition of the inter-Korea liaison office. EPA_EFE/Thai Linh Luong

In North Korea, it seems that to achieve the leadership it’s necessary to seize the grip of the trinity power of the military, party and people. Both Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un became leading figures of the National Defence Commission (NDC) – the military – as well as the party through the Korean Workers’ Party (KWP). They had both developed their cult of personality, giving them access to the people.

Kim Yo-jong may have achieved name recognition in her capacity as a spokesperson on foreign relations and has access to power in the KWP. But she has not yet been appointed to a position at the NDC. If that happens any time soon, it might be a sign that North Korea is preparing for its first woman leader.