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Santa Fe victim Christian Riley Garcia remembered as hero, 'great kid'



Inside C2

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FBI warns Russians hacked hundreds of thousands of routers

(Reuters) - The FBI warned on Friday that Russian computer hackers had compromised hundreds of thousands of home and office routers and could collect user information or shut down network traffic.

The U.S. law enforcement agency urged the owners of many brands of routers to turn them off and on again and download updates from the manufacturer to protect themselves.

The warning followed a court order Wednesday that allowed the FBI to seize a website that the hackers planned to use to give instructions to the routers. Though that cut off malicious communications, it still left the routers infected, and Friday's warning was aimed at cleaning up those machines.

Infections were detected in more than 50 countries, though the primary target for further actions was probably Ukraine, the site of many recent infections and a longtime cyberwarfare battleground.

In obtaining the court order, the Justice Department said the hackers involved were in a group called Sofacy that answered to the Russian government.

Sofacy, also known as APT28 and Fancy Bear, has been blamed for many of the most dramatic Russian hacks, including that of the Democratic National Committee during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign.

Earlier, Cisco Systems Inc said the hacking campaign targeted devices from Belkin International's Linksys, MikroTik, Netgear Inc, TP-Link and QNAP.

An FBI official told Reuters that the kinds of devices known to be affected by the hack were purchased by users at elec-



FILE PHOTO: Man holds laptop computer as cyber code is projected on him in this illustration picture

tronic stores or online.

However, the FBI was not ruling out the possibility that routers provided to customers by internet service companies could also be affected, the official added.

Cisco shared the technical details of its investigation with the U.S. and Ukrainian governments. Western experts say Russia

has conducted a series of attacks against companies in Ukraine for more than a year amid armed hostilities between the two countries, causing hundreds of millions of dollars in damages and at least one electricity blackout. The Kremlin on Thursday denied the Ukrainian government's accusation that Russia was planning a cyber attack on Ukrainian state bodies and private companies ahead of the Champions League soccer final in Kiev on Saturday.

S&P 500 companies return \$1 trillion to shareholders in tax-cut surge

SAN FRANCISCO (Reuters) - S&P 500 companies have returned a record \$1 trillion to shareholders over the past year, helped by a recent surge in dividends and stock buybacks following sweeping corporate tax cuts introduced by Republicans, a report on Friday showed.

Traders work on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange in the borough of New York City, New York, U.S., April 17, 2018. REUTERS/Brendan McDermid

In the 12 months through March, S&P 500 companies paid out \$428 billion in dividends and bought up \$573 billion of their own shares, according to S&P Dow Jones Indices analyst Howard Silverblatt. That compares to combined dividends and buybacks worth \$939 billion during the year through March 2017, Silverblatt said in a research note.

Earnings per share of S&P 500 companies surged 26 percent in the March quarter, boosted by the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act passed by Republican lawmakers in

December.

Companies have been returning much of that profit windfall to shareholders via share buybacks and increased dividends at never before seen amounts, highlighted by Apple's record \$23.5 billion worth of shares repurchased in the first quarter. S&P 500 companies have also plowed some of the windfall from lower taxes into investments toward growth or becoming more efficient. First-quarter capital expenditures totaled at least \$159 billion, up more than 21 percent from the year before, according to S&P Dow Jones Indices. The biggest overhaul of the U.S. tax code in over 30 years, the new law slashes the corporate income tax rate to 21 percent from 35 percent, and charges multinationals a one-time tax on profits held overseas.



FILE PHOTO: People walk by a Wall Street sign close to the NYSE in New York



幹細胞療法 疼痛患者的大福音

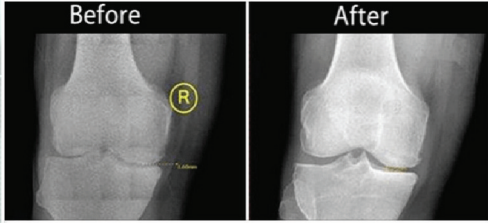
什麼是「幹細胞療法」？

使用「幹細胞」來治療關節炎、膝關節受傷、腰背痛、肩膀痛、手腕或肘部痛、腳痛、足底筋膜炎等各種疼痛，不用開刀就能有效消除病痛。

- 幹細胞(Stem Cells) 是指在原始階段、未分化的細胞，此細胞具備自我更新、分化與再生的能力。
- 幹細胞療法是治療退行性疾病、和慢性疾病的開拓性方法，又被稱為再生醫學，能幫助身體重建修復，啟動抗病與醫療的新契機。
- 我們使用臍帶血幹細胞，由新生兒臍帶血所提煉而出，是目前五種幹細胞來源中最優良的，密度高，修復效果好。能幫助減少發炎、控制免疫系統、和幫助中樞神經系統的再生。
- 幹細胞療法是世界上最自然、最有效的抗炎、抗病毒、抗菌、自我調節、和滋養身體的療法，為身體的免疫系統提供巨大的修復與治療能量來源。
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Santa Fe victim Christian Riley Garcia re-membered as hero, ‘great kid’

By Monica Rhor

Christian Riley Garcia, the 15-year-old who dreamed of enlisting in the Army and died trying to save his Santa Fe High School classmates from gunfire, was honored as a hero and laid to rest Friday with military honors. A service that drew hundreds to Crosby Church was filled with nods to Riley’s patriotism, love of God and devotion to family. An honor guard from Crosby High School’s JROTC presented Riley’s mother with a U.S. flag, which had been tucked into his casket. As the melancholy melody of “Taps” filled the church, the cadets in dress uniforms saluted Shannan Claussen.

As a little boy building a snowman and meeting Santa Claus. As a young man on hunting trips, embracing his little sister, posing in his football uniform.

Rockets coach Mike D’Antoni on the franchise honoring the Santa Fe shooting victims at Thursday night’s Game 5 at Toyota Center. “In every meaning of the word, he truly was heroic,” said Pastor Keenan Smith, who has known Riley most of his life and baptized him five years ago. “In action and in deed, he was courageous in the face of evil. He didn’t flinch.”

The funeral took place a week after a 17-year-old gunman opened fire in the high school, killing 10 people, including Riley, and wounding 13. According to early reports, Riley died while holding a door shut in the school’s art hallway so other students could escape. The gunman fired through the door, striking and



killing him.

“He showed bravery far beyond his years. He took it upon himself to get everyone out first, making himself last,” the family said in an obituary in the funeral program. “He held his ground and held the door to give others a chance to get out. “He was a HERO, he is our HERO.”

The freshman had moved to Santa Fe less than two months ago because his family was building a home there.

Just recently, Riley posed for a picture wearing sunglasses and a blue Nike T-shirt, next to a wooden beam in what would have been his room in his family’s new home. On the wood, Riley scrawled a passage from the Bible: “He said, ‘Be still and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in the earth.’”

In Smith’s eulogy, Riley was also remembered as someone who was “so full of life. He loved so dearly and was loved so dearly and so deeply.”

Next to his coffin, tables held photographs and mementos of the things he treasured: his green and gold Santa Fe football jersey emblazoned with the number 65, a football, a mounted deer.

Riley loved board games, the outdoors and cake. He had just gotten his boating license and relished riding his four-wheeler and being on Jet Ski. He doted on his little sister, Cadence, for whom he would do anything, including donning a plastic Samurai sword and costume to play guard to her princess.

“How he loved her,” Smith said, looking down at the little girl with a bow in her hair. “How she loves him.”



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Editor's Choice



Clowns attend a parade during Peru's Clown Day celebrations in Lima



Pastor Smith speaks during the funeral of Christian Riley Garcia, one of the victims killed in a shooting at Santa Fe High School, at Crosby Church in Crosby



A Fiat Chrysler Automobiles (FCA) sign is seen at its U.S. headquarters in Auburn Hills, Michigan



Family, friends and community members attend the funeral of Christian Riley Garcia, one of the victims killed in a shooting at Santa Fe High School, at Crosby Church in Crosby



Christian Riley Garcia, one of the victims killed in a shooting at Santa Fe High School, is honored by the Crosby High School J.R.O.T.C. during a funeral at Crosby Church in Crosby



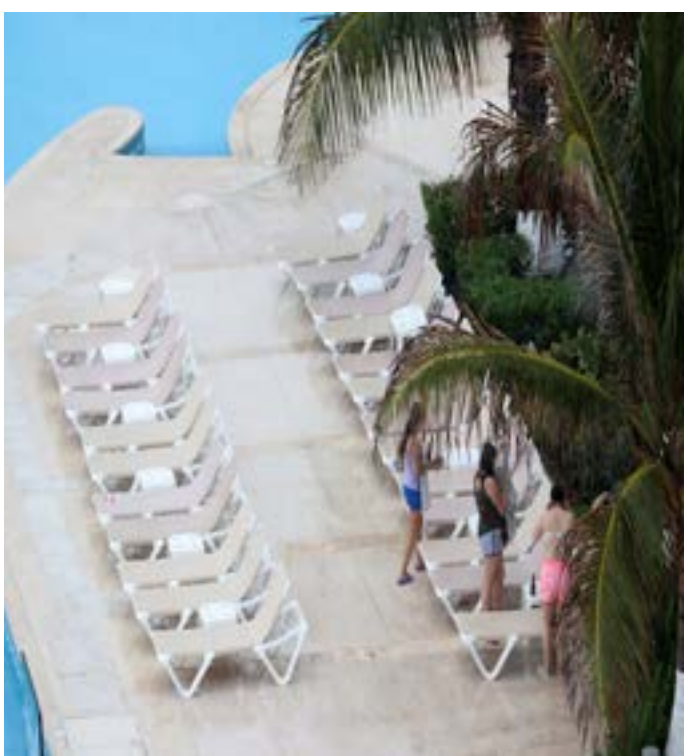
Items are displayed in honor of Christian Riley Garcia, one of the victims killed in a shooting at Santa Fe High School, during a funeral at Crosby Church in Crosby



A 2018 Ram 1500 pickup truck is displayed in front of the Chrysler Warren Truck Assembly plant in Warren, Michigan



Clowns take part in a parade during Peru's Clown Day celebrations in Lima



Tourists pack their things to enter the hotel as subtropical storm Alberto approaches Cancun



Diet sodas are popular beverages all over the world, especially among people who want to reduce their sugar or calorie intake. This article presents the scientific facts about diet sodas and includes the following topics: Diet soda in Nutrition, Weight Loss, Diabetes and Heart Disease, Kidney Health, Preterm Delivery and Childhood Obesity, Other Effects and the Bottom Line. Instead of sugar, diet sodas are sweetened with artificial sweeteners like aspartame, cyclamate, saccharin, acesulfame-K or sucralose. Almost every popular sugar-sweetened beverage on the market has a “light” or a “diet” version -- Diet Coke, Coke Zero, Pepsi Max, Sprite Zero, etc. Diet sodas were first introduced in the 1950s for people with diabetes, though they were later marketed to people trying to control their weight or reduce their sugar intake. Despite being free of sugar and calories, the health effects of diet drinks and artificial sweeteners are controversial.

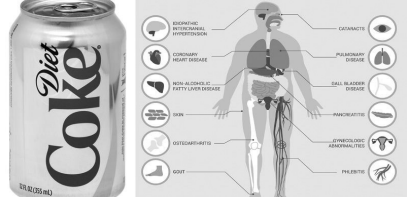
Diet Soda Is Not Nutritious

Diet soda is essentially a mixture of carbonated water, artificial or natural sweetener, colors, flavors and other food additives. It usually has very few to no calories and no significant nutrition. For example, one 12-ounce (354-ml) can of Diet Coke contains no calories, sugar, fat or protein and 40 mg of sodium. However, not all sodas that use artificial sweeteners are low in calories or sugar-free. Some use sugar and sweetener together. For example, one can of Coca-Cola Life, which contains the natural sweetener Stevia, contains 90 calories and 24 grams of sugar.



While recipes differ from brand to brand, some common ingredients in diet soda include:

- **Carbonated water:** While sparkling water can occur in nature, most sodas are made by dissolving carbon dioxide into water under pressure; **Sweeteners:** These include common artificial sweeteners, such as aspartame, saccharin, sucralose or an herbal sweetener like Stevia, which are 200–13,000 times sweeter than regular sugar; **Acids:** Certain acids, such as citric, malic and phosphoric acid, are used to add tartness to soda drinks. They are also linked to tooth enamel erosion; **Colors:** The most commonly used colors are carotenoids, anthocyanins and caramels; **Flavors:** Many different kinds of natural juices or artificial flavors are used in diet soda, including fruits, berries, herbs and cola; **Preservatives:** These help diet sodas last longer on the supermarket shelf. A commonly used preservative is potassium benzoate; **Vitamins and minerals:** Some diet soft drinks add vitamins and minerals to market themselves as healthier no-calorie alternatives; **Caffeine:** Just like regular soda, many diet sodas contain caffeine. A can of Diet Coke contains 46 mg of caffeine, and Diet Pepsi contains 34 mg.



Results of a 10-year study of Diet Coke

Is Diet Soda Good Or Bad For You?

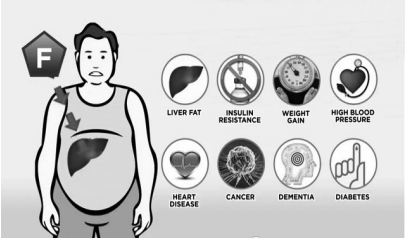
Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor

SUMMARY Diet soda is a mixture of carbonated water, artificial or natural sweeteners, colors, flavors and extra components like vitamins or caffeine. Most varieties contain zero or very calories and no significant nutrition.

WEIGHT LOSS

Effects on Weight Loss Are Conflicting

Because diet soda is usually calorie-free, it would be natural to assume it could aid weight loss. However, research suggests this solution may not be so straightforward. Several observational studies have found that using artificial sweeteners and drinking high amounts of diet soda is associated with an increased risk of obesity and metabolic syndrome. Scientists have suggested that diet soda may increase appetite by stimulating hunger hormones, altering sweet taste receptors and triggering dopamine responses in the brain. Because diet soft drinks have no calories, these responses may cause a higher intake of sweet or calorie-dense foods, resulting in weight gain. However, evidence of this is not consistent in human studies. Another theory suggests that diet soda’s correlation to weight gain may be explained by people with bad dietary habits drinking more of it. The weight gain they experience may be caused by these existing dietary habits, not diet soda.



Experimental studies do not support the claim that diet soda causes weight gain. In fact, these studies have found that replacing sugar-sweetened drinks with diet soda can result in weight loss. One study had overweight participants drink 24 ounces of diet soda or water per day for a year. At the end of the study, the diet soda group had experienced an average weight loss of 13.7 pounds (6.21 kg), compared to 5.5 pounds (2.5 kg) in the water group. However, to add to the confusion, there is evidence of bias in the scientific literature. Studies funded by the artificial sweetener industry have been found to have more favorable outcomes than non-industry studies, which may undermine the validity of their results. Overall, more high-quality research is needed to determine the true effects of diet soda on weight loss. **SUMMARY** Observational studies link diet soda with obesity. However, it’s not clear whether diet soda is a cause of this. Experimental studies show positive effects for weight loss, but these might be influenced by industry funding. **DIABETES AND HEART DISEASE** **Some Studies Link Diet Soda to Diabetes and Heart Disease** Although diet soda has no calories, sugar or fat, it has been linked to the development of type 2 diabetes and heart disease in several studies.

Research has found that just one serving of an artificially sweetened drink per day is associated with an 8–13% higher risk of type 2 diabetes. An observational study in 64,850 women found that artificially sweetened drinks were associated with a 21% higher risk of developing type 2 diabetes. However, the risk was still half that of regular sugary drinks. Other studies have found similar results.



Conversely, a recent review found that diet soda is not associated with an increased risk of diabetes. Also, another study concluded that any association could be explained by the existing health status, weight changes and body mass index of participants. Diet soda has also been linked to increased risks of high blood pressure and heart disease. A review of four studies including 227,254 people found that for each serving of artificially sweetened beverage per day, there is a 9% increased risk of high blood pressure. Other studies have found similar results. Additionally, one study has linked diet sodas to a small increase in the risk of stroke, but this was only based on observational data. Because most of the studies were observational, it may be that the association could be explained another way. It’s possible that people who were already at risk of diabetes and high blood pressure chose to drink more diet soda.



More direct experimental research is needed to determine if there is any true causal relationship between diet soda and increased blood sugar or blood pressure. **SUMMARY** Observational studies have linked diet soda to type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure and an increased risk of stroke. However, there’s a lack of research on possible causes for these results. They may be due to preexisting risk factors such as obesity.

KIDNEY HEALTH

Diet Soda and Kidney Health

Intake of diet soda has been linked to an increased risk of chronic kidney disease. A recent study analyzed the diets of 15,368 people and found that the risk of developing end-stage kidney disease increased with the number of glasses of diet soda consumed per week. Compared to those who consumed less than one glass, people who drank more than seven glasses of diet soda per week had nearly double the risk of developing kidney disease. A suggested cause for the kidney damage is the high phosphorus content of sodas, which may increase the acid load on the kidneys. However, it has also been suggested that people consuming high amounts of diet soda may do so to compensate for other poor dietary and lifestyle factors that may independently contribute to the development of kidney disease. Interestingly, studies investigating the effects of diet soda on the development of kidney stones have found mixed results.

One observational study found that diet soda drinkers have a slightly increased risk of kidney stone development, but the risk was much smaller than for regular soda. In addition, this study has not been supported by other research.



Another study reported that the high citrate and malate content of some diet sodas may help treat kidney stones, particularly in people with low urine pH and uric acid stones. However, more research and human studies are needed.

SUMMARY Observational studies have found an association between drinking a lot of diet soda and the development of kidney disease. If diet soda does cause this, a potential reason could be increased acid load on the kidneys due to its high phosphorus content.

PRETERM DELIVERY AND CHILDHOOD OBESITY

Diet Soda Is Linked to Preterm Delivery and Childhood Obesity

Drinking diet soda while pregnant has been linked to some negative outcomes, including preterm delivery and childhood obesity. A Norwegian study in 60,761 pregnant women found that intake of artificially sweetened and sugar-containing drinks was associated with an 11% higher risk of preterm delivery. Earlier Danish research supports these findings. A study in almost 60,000 women found that women who consumed one serving of diet soda per day were 1.4 times more likely to deliver preterm than those who did not. However, recent research in 8,914 women in England did not find any association between diet cola and preterm delivery. However, the authors admitted that the study may not have been big enough and had been limited to diet cola. It’s important to note that these studies were only observational and offer no explanation of exactly how diet soda may contribute to preterm birth.

WARNING:
Drinking beverages
with added sugar(s)
contributes to obesity,
diabetes, and tooth decay.



Another troubling finding is that consuming artificially sweetened drinks while pregnant is significantly associated with an increased risk of childhood obesity. One study found that the daily consumption of diet drinks during pregnancy resulted in a doubled risk of a baby being overweight at one year of age. Further research is needed to analyze the underlying biological causes and long-term health risks for children exposed to artificially sweetened sodas in the womb. **SUMMARY** Large studies have found associations linking diet soda to preterm delivery. However, a causal link has not been found. Additionally, infants of mothers who drank diet soda while pregnant are at an increased risk of being overweight.

OTHER EFFECTS
Other Effects

There are several other documented health effects of diet sodas, including:

- **May reduce fatty liver:** Some studies have shown that replacing regular soda with diet soda can reduce fat around the liver. Other studies have found no effect.
- **No increase in reflux:** Despite anecdotal reports, carbonated drinks have not been found to make reflux or heartburn worse. However, the research is mixed, and more experimental studies are needed.
- **No strong links to cancer:** Most of the research on artificial sweeteners and diet soda has found no evidence it causes cancer. A slight increase in lymphoma and multiple myeloma in men was reported, but the results were weak.
- **Changes to the gut microbiome:** Artificial sweeteners alter the gut flora, leading to reduced blood sugar control. This may be one way diet soda increases the risk of type 2 diabetes, but more research is needed.
- **Increased risk of osteoporosis:** Diet and regular cola is associated with bone mineral density loss in women, but not in men. The caffeine and phosphorus in cola might interfere with normal calcium absorption.

SODA?



No, thank you!

- **Tooth decay:** Like regular soda, diet soda is associated with dental erosion due to its acidic pH level. This comes from the addition of acids, such as malic, citric or phosphoric acid, for flavor.
- **Linked to depression:** Observational studies have found higher rates of depression among those who drank four or more diet or regular sodas per day. However, experiments are needed to determine if diet soda is a cause.

While some of these results are interesting, more experimental research is needed to determine whether diet soda causes these issues, or if the findings are due to chance or other factors. **SUMMARY** Diet soda may improve fatty liver and does not appear to increase heartburn or the risk of cancer. However, it may reduce blood sugar control and increase the risks of depression, osteoporosis and tooth decay. However, more research is needed.

BOTTOM LINE

Should You Drink Diet Soda?

Research on diet soda has produced a lot of conflicting evidence. One explanation for this conflicting information is that most of the research is observational. This means that it might observe trends, but there is a lack of information about whether diet soda intake is a cause or result of those trends, or just a coincidence. Therefore, while some of the research sounds quite alarming, more high-quality experimental studies are needed before concrete conclusions can be drawn about the health effects of diet soda. Regardless, one thing is certain: diet soda does not add any nutritional value to your diet. So, if you’re looking to replace regular soda in your diet, other options may be better than diet soda. Next time, try an alternative like milk, coffee, black or herbal tea, or water infused with fruits.(Courtesy <https://www.healthline.com/nutrition>)

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North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's maneuvers on the international stage over the last few months have shocked some for their savviness. Kim sent his sister on a charm offensive during the Winter Olympics, cracked jokes when meeting with South Korea's president and knocked President Trump off balance this week by throwing a kink into their planned nuclear summit.

"It's quite remarkable," said Robert Manning, a senior fellow the Atlantic Council. "He's been there for, what, five years, and the only person he's hung out with is Dennis Rodman, and suddenly he's this great statesman."

This year has been something of a coming out party for Kim, who took power in 2011 when his father died.

Though the world knew him for his fiery threats to obliterate the United States, and he entered the U.S. pop culture lexicon in 2014 with Seth Rogen and James Franco's movie "The Interview" — for which Kim threatened "merciless" retaliation — he hadn't stepped foot outside North Korea since becoming its leader.

That changed in March when he visited Chinese President Xi Jinping. A second trip to China in April saw him become the first North Korean leader to travel by airplane in 32 years.



Kim also became the first North Korean leader to step foot in South Korea since the Korean War. In a dramatic ceremony last month carried live on news networks, Kim stepped across the border to greet South Korean President Moon Jae-in. Seemingly spontaneously, Kim then invited Moon to step into North Korean territory for a moment.

Later during the summit with Moon, Kim also joked that he wouldn't interrupt Moon's early morning sleep anymore, a reference to North Korea's barrage of early morning missile tests last year.

"Kim's absolutely been savvy," said Dean Cheng, a senior research fellow at the Heritage Foundation's Asian Studies Center. "That's why his sister was presented to the world at the Olympics. He and Moon were all smiles their summit. He pulled Moon across the border almost playfully. He's certainly better at playing to world media than his father or grandfather."

The charm appeared to work on South Koreans; a Korea Research Center poll after the summit had 78 percent of respondents saying they trusted Kim.

This week, Kim drew a line in the sand for the planned summit with Trump by threatening to cancel if the United States continues to demand "unilateral" nuclear disarmament.

North Korea's statement also blasted national security adviser John Bolton for saying the United States is seeking a "Libya model" with North Korea. Experts say Kim wants nuclear weapons to ensure the survival of his government, so the comments from Bolton were likely received with alarm. Libya's Muammar Gaddafi was ousted from power and killed less than a decade after agreeing to abandon his nuclear programs.



Libya's Muammar Gaddafi

North Korea's threat to cancel the summit prompted Trump to walk back Bolton's comments and offer "protections" if Kim surrenders his nuclear weapons.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo also appeared impressed with Kim after twice meeting him in person, saying that their conversations were "warm" and that Kim "shares the objectives of the American people."

"Mike Pompeo is not a softy, and he seemed to be impressed," Manning said.

"My South Korean friends had a positive reviews, too," Manning added. "They were saying, 'He's just a normal guy, he likes rock music.' ... He's proven to be very skillful, and I think people really underestimated him."

Still, Manning and Cheng both noted Kim went to school in Switzerland, meaning his prowess isn't entirely shocking; he knows how the Western world works.

"The style has changed, but has the substance?" Cheng said. "Underneath the glitzier, glammier, smilier Kim face is the same sort of thing that he has done before and his father and grandfather before him. ... This is a guy who has a pretty long trail of corpses behind him."

Indeed, many are loath to give Kim credit, citing his brutal tenure.

"He has a country that he has driven his people to extreme poverty, particularly contrast that to what we see in South Korea," Sen. Ben Cardin (D-Md.) said. "So his leadership has been disastrous to his people, and he has the distinction of ruling the most oppressive coun-

try in the world. So I give his performances — reflect that. He's a despot."



Sen. Tim Kaine (D-Va.)

Asked about Kim's shrewdness on the world stage, Sen. Tim Kaine (D-Va.) said he's "not sure savviness would be the word I would use," adding he would describe it more as "unpredictability."

"This has been long a feature of North Korea before him, and I don't necessarily see what it's getting him," Kaine said.

Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Bob Corker (R-Tenn.), though, said Kim has been "fairly impressive" on the world stage so far, adding he hopes that helps the effort to get a disarmament deal.

"I think he's been fairly impressive for a person who really hasn't been outside the country much in recent times," Corker said. "So I give him pretty good marks on international public relations."

Corker also said he thinks the Trump administration has no illusions about Kim's skill or his motivations.

"No, I'm not worried about that," Corker said Thursday when asked if Trump is underestimating Kim. "I met Pompeo last night. I think Pompeo, Bolton, Trump — I think they have a pretty clear-eyed view of what they're dealing with."

Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) said it is Kim who is underestimating Trump.

"I think he's playing an old game that won't work with the new president," Graham said. "I think he's making a big mistake to go back to playing the old game. 'Cause here's what's going to happen: If we don't get a deal, and he continues to try to develop his nuclear program, we're going to have a war, and he's going to lose it. He doesn't get that." (Courtesy <http://thehill.com/policy/international>)

Related

Kim Jong Un: Vulnerable Rookie Turned Ambitious Statesman?

Six years after inheriting power from his father, North Korea's Kim Jong Un has established his authority domestically, taken the country to unprecedented nuclear heights, and is now looking to flex his muscles abroad.

Mr Kim's recent "shock visit" to Beijing - traditionally Pyongyang's strongest backer, al-

though the relationship has soured during his time in power - is the first time he is known to have set foot outside the impoverished North since he assumed the leadership.

But Mr Kim, who is in his mid-30s, has repeatedly shown an ability to stamp an outsized footprint on the global stage without ever leaving home.

The third member of the Kim dynasty to rule the North, he has turned his country into a bona fide nuclear power with intercontinental ballistic missiles that he says can reach across the globe, including the United States - with state media regularly picturing him overseeing launches.



And he secured a major diplomatic breakthrough for his ostracized regime last month when US President Donald Trump said he would be willing to hold summit talks with the young leader.

It is a marked contrast to the situation when he took over in his 20s, when he was considered untested, vulnerable and likely to be manipulated by senior figures in an opaque and ruthless country.

But he has proved his mettle in dealing harshly - sometimes brutally - with any sign of dissent, even at the highest levels, while maintaining an aggressively provocative stance with the global community.

At home, Mr Kim has amassed absolute control over both the party and the military, at times ruthlessly purging potential rivals. The most senior victim was his uncle and mentor Jang Song Thaek, who was suddenly executed in 2013, having been denounced by state media as "despicable human scum" and proclaimed guilty of a variety of colourful crimes and political sins.

Then there was the brazen daylight assassination last year of his half-brother Kim Jong Nam, sprayed with a deadly nerve agent as he walked through Kuala Lumpur International Airport, in a hit most analysts say could only have come from Pyongyang.

Human rights groups say abuses are rampant in the North, where between 80,000 and 120,000 prisoners languish in political prison camps. But Mr Kim has also been keen to project a softer side, at least in official propaganda.

Unlike his father Kim Jong Il, who rarely smiled or spoke in public, the carefully vetted images of Mr Kim Jong Un's heavily choreographed appearances show a more garrulous figure, laughing and joking with officers, soldiers and civilians during field trips, as well as

giving speeches to packed halls of party functionaries.



He has noticeably modelled his image on that of his grandfather Kim Il Sung, appearing to mimic his hairstyle, dress, mannerisms and public speaking style. But unlike the North's founder, whose youth was dominated by the anti-Japanese struggle,

Mr Kim Jong Un has led a life of luxury. His mother was Mr Kim Jong, Il's third wife, the Japanese-born ethnic Korean dancer Ko Yong Hui, who is believed to have died of breast cancer in 2004. Much of Mr Kim Jong Un's early history is surrounded in mystery, and even his precise date of birth is unclear.

Mr Kim was sent to school in Switzerland, where he was looked after by his maternal aunt Ko Yong Suk and her husband. The couple fled to US in 1998 to seek asylum. School staff and friends, who were reportedly unaware that he was a member of North Korea's ruling family, remember him as a shy boy who liked skiing. Hollywood tough guy Jean-Claude Van Damme and basketball.

But Mr Kim only entered the public eye in 2008, when his father suffered a stroke and Pyongyang revved up plans for the nation's second dynastic succession. Pyongyang is extremely sensitive and protective when it comes to the image of the ruling family, and Mr Kim's father and grandfather are ubiquitous, their portraits adorning every home and office in the country while their bodies lie in state at the capital's Kumsusan Palace.



Kim Jong Un and former NBA basketball player Dennis Rodman

Despite his overseas education, Mr Kim Jong Un is not known to have made any previous foreign trips since coming to power, and the most prominent American he has met is his basketball idol Dennis Rodman, who has made multiple visits to Pyongyang.

That makes Mr Kim's journey to Beijing a diplomatic "coming out" ahead of planned summits with Mr Trump and South Korea's President Moon Jae In. In a brilliant stroke of diplomacy, Mr Kim put to rest any lingering suspicions that relations between North Korea and China are strained with his surprise visit to Beijing.

Earlier this year, Russian President Vladimir Putin called Mr Kim a "shrewd and mature politician" whose country had come out on top in its nuclear stand-off with South Korea and the US. (Courtesy <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia>)

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