

Prospects for Change in the North Korean Power Structure following the 3rd Session of the 12th Supreme People's Assembly

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On June 7th, the 3rd Session of the 12th Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) was held in Mansudae Hall in Pyongyang. Since the Kim Jong Il government system was officially inaugurated in 1998, the SPA has consistently been held just once each year, with the exception of 2003, and so this session has somewhat of an "emergency meeting" flavor. The full list of attendees was not released, but the unusual presence of National Defense Council (NDC) Chairman Kim Jong Il contradicts this emergency atmosphere. Chairman Kim did not make an appearance at the 2nd SPA Session last April. Considering that Chairman Kim did not attend the 2nd Session even though it dealt with the important issues of last year's budget and constitutional reform, it would be reasonable to conjecture that his presence at this session has some special significance.

At any rate, the personnel changes enacted at this session are as follows. At the proposal of the Political Bureau of the Party Central Committee, Cabinet Premier Kim Young Il was recalled and replaced with Choi Young Rim, and at the proposal of NDC Chairman Kim Jong Il, Jang Sung Taek was promoted to Vice Premier of the NDC. At the same time, various Cabinet positions were replaced. The vice premiers were reshuffled considerably. Kwak Bum Gi, O Su Yong, and Pak Myong Son were removed, while Kang Neung Soo, Kim Rak Hee, Ri Tae Nam, Jeon Ha Chol, Cho Byong Joo, and Han Kwang Bok were newly appointed as vice premiers. New Vice Premiers Cho Byong Joo and Han Kwang Bok will concurrently serve in their existing posts as Minister of Machinery Production and Minister of the Electronics Industry, respectively. Additionally, Ahn Jeong Su was appointed Minister of Joint Ventures, Jo Young Chol was appointed Minister of Foodstuffs and Daily Necessities Industry, and Pak Myeong Chol was appointed Chairman of the Physical Culture and Sports Guidance Commission. So, what was the "special" significance of this session? It can be broadly divided in two separate aspects: the governing aspect and the power

structural aspect

First, looking at the governing aspect, this recent replacement of the premier and vice premiers, as well as the changes in cabinet positions in the economic area, reflect Chairman Kim's changes to the internal governing structure. Previously Kim Jong Il has focused on military business and entrusted other tasks, such as the economy, to the Cabinet. Reasoning that if the military falls apart, everything else will collapse also, Chairman Kim has consistently acted in ways which emphasize his "Military-First" policy while disregarding economic problems. But after concluding the rocket launches and the 2 nuclear tests, his governing behavior has gradually begun to show signs that he is turning his attention to economic matters. This change in governing behavior can be seen as an expression of a certain degree of confidence in the military structure, including the nuclear program; however it also reflects a strong dose of anxiety that they can no longer afford to ignore the economic problems. This recent change of Cabinet officials in economic fields appears to be part of a series of moves to emphasize the theme of devoting every effort to "resurrecting the economy" under the banner of "constructing a strong economic nation." Increasing the number of vice premiers from 5 to 8 and replacing the heads of certain departments connected with the people's livelihoods (Light Industry, Foodstuffs and Daily Necessities Industry, etc.) basically indicates an intention to focus more directly on the economic drive to achieve the goal of building "A Strong and Prosperous Nation" by 2012. But it cannot be denied that, most of all, these personnel changes are simply a desperate attempt to overcome the worsening public opinion in the aftermath of the currency reform. Following up on the purge of KWP Planning Director Pak Nam Gi with the dismissal of Premier Kim Young Il, the leadership has implemented this personnel reshuffling as punishment for the failed currency reform.

Second, promoting Jang Sung Taek to NDC vice premier after just 14 months of membership can be seen as one aspect of the structural changes to the Kim Jong Il government. From its consolidation period (1994-1998) through its publicly official period (1998-2009) the regime enjoyed a stable grip on power, both in principle and in reality. During the consolidation period, in the name of the "Arduous March," all-out efforts were made to build up power around Kim Jong Il, and as a result a power structure developed which was rooted in the NDC. The NDC emerged as the highest organ of real power, and as chairman of the NDC Kim Jong Il naturally became the supreme ruler of the country. Subsequently in the publicly official period, Kim Jong Il cemented his support base as absolute ruler through the development of nuclear weapons and missiles under the *songun* policy. By developing nuclear weapons and missiles Chairman Kim increased his bargaining power internationally, and at the same time firmly established his own leadership ability not only as head



of state but also as the supreme military commander, and thus succeeded in constructing a stable power base.

Chairman Kim’s confidence in these results can be seen in the constitutional reforms passed at the 1st Session of the 12th SPC (April 9th, 2009). In the revised constitution, the powers of the NDC and its Chairman were greatly increased through the creation of additional articles on the NDC chairman and constitutional elevation of his status. Constitutionally, by naming the NDC Chairman as the “highest leader” and “highest commander,” and by making explicit mention of the “*songun* ideology,” the NDC Chairman was given institutional authority equivalent to that of the President, Kim Il Sung this demonstrates his confidence in his hold on power.

Furthermore, the NDC, Kim Jong Il’s base of power, was made more pluralistic and less heavily dominated by military personnel, and grew in membership. The authorities named several new members to the NDC including Jang Sung Taek, Kim Jong Il’s brother-in-law and a key Party figure in charge of security (the National Security Agency, the police, etc.), First Vice Director of the Munitions Industry Ministry Ju Gyu Chang, First Vice Director of the General Political Department Kim Jung Gak, and National Security Agency Vice Director Wu Dong Cheuk. Thus the NDC grew in numbers and its membership became more diverse. By supplementing the NDC with important people from the public order and state security organizations, including “heavyweight” Jang Sung Taek, these measures appeared to reduce the relative influence of the military establishment and implement a system normalization effort centered on the KWP.

Examined from this angle, Party Administrative Director Jang Sung Taek’s membership in the NDC has special significance. This is mere speculation, but Director Jang appears to be at the center of the effort to normalize the system around the KWP. In other words, through Jang Sung Taek, the authorities are attempting to establish a normalized system centered on the Party. This is one of the essential conditions for maintaining power. In the process of taking a stronger and more overt hold on power, it will be necessary to expand the role and function of the military, but there is an ever-present fear that long-term dependence on the military could cause it to emerge as a threat to power. In order to maintain the military’s fidelity to Chairman Kim Jong Il as his “guns and bombs,” it must be controlled and encouraged by the efforts of the Party. Putting the NDC under the command of the Party through Jang Sung Taek appears to be Kim Jong Il’s gambit for maintaining a secure hold on power. Here, “maintaining a secure hold on power” is another term for the effort to establish a succession system. If Kim Jong Eun has indeed been pegged as the successor, then it appears that Jang Sung Taek, through his roles in the Party and the NDC, has been entrusted with



the responsibility of establishing a secure succession system.

In particular, we should note that the personnel changes enacted at this 3rd Session of the 12th SPA show a strong drive toward system normalization centered on the Party. This is notable in connection with the recent moves by the Party Central Committee to take a more active role, as can be seen in the announcement of the decision to “recall the cabinet premier and hold an election at the proposal of the Party Central Committee Political Bureau.” The reappearance on April 14th and May 1st of the slogan “Let us defend the Party Central Committee, led by Kim Jong Il, with our lives” is most likely related to this. Meanwhile, the appointment of several high Party officials to new positions as vice premiers and cabinet members, and key Party figure Jang Sung Taek’s appointment by the direct proposal of Kim Jong Il himself to the position of NDC vice chairman, suggest that we can anticipate a shift in the power structure of the central Party.

