

North Korea's Choices: Between a Rock and a Hard Place

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The situation within North Korea is abnormal. Just 2 months after the last session of the Supreme People's Assembly was held in April, they held another SPA session, electing Jang Sung Taek as a vice chairman of the NDC and making sweeping personnel changes in the cabinet, beginning with the premier. Most analysis has suggested that this was done to support the succession system and get control over the popular resentment which has followed the failure of the currency reform, but doubts persist as to whether those were the sufficient reasons for going so far as to convene an emergency session of the SPA and elevate Jang Sung Taek to the status of "Second-in-Command." If it was done for the sake of the succession, then it is curious that Kim Jong Eun was not in attendance. Further, there are doubts about whether or not the death by car crash of 1st Vice Director of the Guidance Department Yi Jeh Gang, who played a pivotal role in establishing Kim Jong Eun as successor, was truly coincidental. These suspicions are amplified if one considers the late April death by heart attack of Yi Yong Chol, another 1st Vice Director of the Guidance Department, and the unusual announcement in mid-March of the retirement of Kim Il Chol, Senior Vice Minister of the Ministry of Armed Forces, from all of his posts due to old age.

In regard to these suspicions, a deeper analysis of Chairman Kim Jong Il's China visit is needed. Chairman Kim visited China in early May (5.3-7), at the peak of suspicions about North Korea's involvement in the Cheonan sinking. While hosting him with the highest ceremony, China also appears to have expressed some key concerns. From the Chinese perspective the Cheonan tragedy is a serious issue which has harmed China's top strategic priority in Korea, that of stability, and so China most likely urged the prevention of similar tragedies in the future. In Premier Hu Jintao's 5-point proposal to Chairman Kim, the inclusion of items on "strategic communication on internal and external issues and on matters of national governance" and "stronger cooperation on international and regional issues" can be considered a reflection of these concerns. Prime Minister Wen Jiabao went one step further, saying he "would like to discuss China's experiences in reform and

opening.” Considering that Kim Jong Il has a well-known aversion to the term “reform,” Prime Minister Wen’s statement has a deliberate aspect. In short, the Chinese leaders fear that as long as the North Korean regime’s rigidity continues, similar tragedies will continue to damage stability on the peninsula. In this context, they may have expressed skepticism about the current succession plan.

It appears that Kim Jong Il cut short his trip out of pique at the attitude of the Chinese leadership. The North Korean media did not report on the China-DPRK summit with Premier Hu until a day later, and Chairman Kim departed without a send-off party, returning slowly from Beijing to Shenyang.

Shortly after Kim Jong Il returned home, on May 12th, North Korea announced “success in achieving a nuclear fusion reaction” this has been interpreted as an expression of displeasure at the results of the DPRK-China summit. Global society rejected their claim as groundless, but China did not conceal its discomfort. In another unusual move, in late March North Korea repositioned mortars and other heavy weapons along the DPRK-China border, and then 3 Chinese were shot to death along the border by North Korean sentries. The Chinese Foreign Ministry strongly criticized North Korea for the deaths.

Internally, North Korea is already plagued by a public backlash due to insufficient foreign exchange and the failure of the currency reform. Over the last 2 years, as it has squandered its foreign currency on missile launches, nuclear tests, and massive imports of luxury items, and as aid and economic cooperation with South Korea have decreased, North Korea has seen its foreign exchange reserves plummet by \$1 billion. On top of that, Kim Jong Il’s worsening health has had an adverse impact on the crisis-ridden North Korean government.

Finally, North Korea overreached with the attack on the Cheonan, and rather than overcoming its difficulties it has been driven into an untenable position between a rock and a hard place. Externally, it is becoming more isolated than ever. While China has not criticized it directly, presumably it has serious concerns about North Korea’s behavior, and if so they may have jeopardized their last remaining lifeline. On May 28 Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao and South Korean President Lee Myung Bak held a one-on-one meeting for 1 hour and 40 minutes mainly to discuss the North Korean issue, which made the North Koreans understandably uneasy. South-North tensions are high, and efforts to reopen DPRK-US negotiations or the 6-Party Talks have come to a standstill. US Secretary of State Clinton has called the North Korean act “unforgivable” and is pursuing stronger sanctions. Japan has independently implemented sanctions of its own, and the international



community is cooperating on working out additional North Korea sanctions. In addition to the chronic food shortages, popular unrest, exhausted foreign exchange reserves, the failed currency reform, and absolute ruler Kim Jong Il's failing health, North Korea now faces increased international isolation and China's pessimism, leaving it in a highly dangerous position. In such a situation the elites may become highly agitated. Thus Chairman Kim Jong Il needed to take swift action to shore up the stability of the regime. It appears that he has entrusted the task of regime stability to his most trusted supporter, Jang Sung Taek. Apparently he also needed to make a show of gathering public support by convening the SPA. In particular, the formality of having Jang Sung Taek appointed by Kim Jong Il himself to the post of NDC vice chairman probably indicates an intention to further empower Mr. Jang.

It is unclear whether Jang Sung Taek's role includes establishing the succession of Kim Jong Eun, but right now for Kim Jong Il regime stabilization is a more urgent issue than the succession plans. At present it appears that the succession effort has slowed, as the driving forces behind it tried and failed to push through an impossible currency reform in order to raise government funds, and it has been cautiously noted that the effective failure of Kim Jong Il's China visit may have further weakened the Kim Jong Eun succession plan. Considering the execution of Director of Planning and Finance Pak Nam Gi, who led the currency reform, together with the fates of Yi Jeh Gang, Kim Il Chol, and Yi Yong Chol, we can catch hints of some problems with the succession structure.

This recent SPA session can be seen as a contradiction of the urgent situation the regime faces. Retreat is not an appropriate option for North Korea when it is backed into a corner. Through military provocations against the South they are trying to raise tensions, boost internal solidarity, and increase the fear of war among South Koreans in order to sow domestic discord. But this will only serve to further strain the regime's already exhausted condition. If we effectively manage the situation on the basis of solid ROK-US cooperation and avoid making misjudgments, while cooperating with China and acting honorably, then North Korea must inevitably change its behavior. After all, time is on our side.

