

Kim Jong-un Regime: Reorganization of Power and Diagnosis of Crisis Factors

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The 4th Party Delegate's Conference and the 5th session of the 12th Supreme People's Assembly held in April 2012 had finalized the reorganization of power within the Kim Jong-un regime. On December 30th, 2011, immediately after the funeral of Kim Jong-il, Kim Jong-un was appointed the Supreme Commander of the Korean People's Army (KPA), and through two political events in 2012, he was installed as the First Secretary of the Party and the First Chairman of the National Defense Commission (NDC). Thus, Kim Jong-un had been promoted to the top position of three major organs of power - the Party, government and military - and established his reputation as the leading figure in North Korea. In addition, the late Kim Jong-il was immortalized as the "Eternal General Secretary of the Party" and the "Eternal Chairman of the National Defense Commission." Despite their different titles, Kim Jong-un essentially wields the same level of authority as Kim Jong-il.

While Kim Jong-un's succession process officially concluded only four months after the death of his father, Kim Jong-il's succession extended over a period of four years. Furthermore, Kim Jong-il had invested more than twenty years in preparation for his forthcoming succession, so he was already a leading authority figure by the time of Kim Il Sung's death. He was promoted to the Supreme Commander of the Korean People's Army in December 1991, providing him three years of experience before his official transition to absolute power following the death of Kim Il Sung in 1994. Kim Jong-il further consolidated his authority when he was appointed General Secretary of the Party in October 1997 and Chairman of the National Defense Commission later in September 1998.

During the succession period, Kim Jong-il formed personal connections and a basis of Party support through his own efforts, including the support of Kim Il Sung's first revolutionary group as his foundation which further solidified his power. In contrast, Kim Jong-un did not have the time to establish his authority, so it can be inferred that the power structure was quickly reorganized following Kim Jong-il's unexpected death. The people who are identified as the young leader's supporters are, in fact, acknowledged as "Kim Jong-il's people" whose loyalty may be in question. Thus, Kim Jong-un's succession is not yet complete and considered to be at a "superficial level," so he needs to establish a substantial power base. The quick succession process can be a subtle way of insinuating Kim Jong-un's weak influence.

Even though Kim Jong-un's succession was officially formulated by his predecessor, the process was prepared during the Kim Jong-il era and led by his people. It seems that Kim Jong-un's role in policy and administration has not been quite satisfactory, and his ability to properly adjust to this environment is in question due to his overall lack of experience. In contrast to Kim Jong-il who focused on economic inspections, Kim Jong-un's excessive interest in the military inspections and exercises correlates with his unstable power base. His preference strongly indicates his dependence on the military force to stabilize his power. However, it is difficult to comprehend Kim's plans in regards to economic issues due to the fact that there is currently no concrete solution to the crisis. This differs from Kim Jong-il's agenda, which was mainly focused on addressing the economic problems.¹⁾

The attempted launch of the long-distance rocket, *Unha-3*, is a demonstration of Kim Jong-un's weak governance. It appears that Kim Jong-il had prepared the launch but was unable to initiate it due to time constraints. It was impractical to publicly launch the satellite rocket due to the high risk of failure, as observed in South Korea's failed attempts. By exhibiting this event to the public, the world is focused on Kim Jong-un's command, so it can be inferred that he used the launch to secure his authority as the de facto leader of North Korea. Furthermore, it can be implied that he will avoid responsibility should the rocket launch fail.

Although it was a pre-scheduled launch, the use of the rocket was a blatant violation of the 2.29 US-North Korea Agreement, suggesting the absence of policy direction in North Korea. Thus, the contradiction between the 2.29 US-North Korea Agreement and the rocket launch indicates disorder within the government. Although the Kim Jong-il regime also had inconsistencies in regards to South Korean policy and foreign policy, the difference is that Kim Jong-il still had distinctive policy goals.

Jang Song Taek's Domination over the Military and Public Security

- 1) Kim Jong-un had participated in 35 public events from earlier this year to April, 22 of which were military-related activities. In contrast, he had only one economy-related inspection. In 2011, Kim Jong-il's engaged in 145 public events; there were 61 economy-related inspections, 39 times more than military-related activities. Kim Jong-un did not participate in touring the Hee Cheon power plant, which is a symbol of a Strong and Prosperous Nation, while Kim Jong-il visited this construction site 8 times. Instead, Kim Jong-un inspected the KPA Navy Unit 155. This unit is politically symbolic in that it captured the USS Pueblo in 1968. *ChosunIlbo*, April 9, 2010.

A structural change among the powerful elite is an inevitable byproduct in replacing the top leadership position. In order to secure power, Kim Jong-un must establish a foundation based on his direct lineage. However, this process will cause changes in the configuration of the elite class. In April 2012, two political events in Pyongyang demonstrated the structural changes of power in the regime with Kim Jong-un's uncle, Jang Song Taek, emerging as a central figure as Vice-Chairman of the NDC.

Jang Song Taek, who is universally recognized as Kim Jong-un's most influential supporter and had registered himself as a Politburo member at the Party Delegate's Conference, previously kept a low profile. Moreover, it is significant to note that Jang Song Taek's people have been promoted to the leadership positions in the military and public security since earlier this April. As North Korea utilizes the Military-first Policy as the base of the ruling system, domination over the forces is of the utmost importance. Furthermore, the public security authorities must gain control over the elite and public in a time of erratic power politics during the succession period. Since Jang Song Taek and his supporters have dominated the military and public security organizations, changes in the North Korean government since April can be perceived as "the reorganization for Jang Song Taek's authority and of Jang Song Taek" under the guise of strengthening the Kim Jong-un regime.

First, it is important to note the rapid ascent of Choe Ryong Hae. As the second son of the former Minister of the People's Armed Forces, Choe Hyon, and Jang Song Taek's right-hand man, he became a Politburo member of the standing committee and the Vice-Chairman of the Central Military Commission with Kim Jong-un at the Party Delegate's Conference. Choe Ryong Hae, who supported Jang Song Taek's return into politics, started his career as the Hwanghaebuk Province Party Secretary. At the 3rd Party Delegate's Conference in 2010, he was chosen as a member of the Politburo Standing Committee, Party Secretary of the labor organization, and KPA General in the Central Military Commission. In addition to his promotion within the Korean People's Army, he was appointed as the Director of the General Political Bureau on April 7, 2012, a position which is held in the highest esteem within the North Korean government. Choe Ryong Hae was also a member of the NDC during the Kim Jong-il era under the Chief of the General Staff of the KPA, Ri Yong Ho, who was the most influential person in North Korea at the time. The North Korea media reported on "onsite inspections" of the military construction on two separate occasions, implying an elevated status. Since reporting on leaders of the North Korean government or military were restricted to only the Supreme Leader and Prime Minister Choe Yong Rim, the report on Choe Ryong Hae was unprecedented.²⁾

Just prior to the 4th Party Delegate's Conference, Kim Won Hong, the former Deputy Director of the General Political Bureau of the KPA and a confirmed supporter of Jang Song Taek, was positioned to be the Chief of National Security. It is noteworthy that Kim Won Hong was given this position ahead of Ri Myong Su, Chief of Public Security, who is also close to Jang Song Taek. At this Party Delegate's Conference, both Ri Myong Su and Kim Won Hong became Labor Party Politburo members and Ri Myong Su also joined the Central Military Commission. Thus, the leaders of two organizations that

2) *Korean Central News Agency*, April 15, 2012.

monitor the military and public are Jang Song Taek's supporters. Along the same lines of the 12.12 coup, one of the main factors Director Chun Doo-hwan was able to disregard the top officials' directives was due to his dominance over the military public security agency.

With Choe Ryong Hae at the top, the rise of Jang Song Taek and Ri Myong Su shows that Jang is determined to dominate the military and public security forces. Through the recent reorganization of power, Jang Song Taek concentrated on seizing actual power through his supporters while minimizing exposure. He believed that his own promotion would make him the target so he controlled behind the scenes during the reorganization process. In addition, Kim Kyong Hui, Kim Jong-un's aunt and Jang Song Taek's wife, was promoted to Central Party Secretary, which can be considered part of the Jang Song Taek group's procedure of consolidating of power.

The Elder Group's Decline

Unlike Jang Song Taek's rise to power, the elders from the Kim Jong-il era have not been presented. During the 4th Party Delegates Conference and Supreme People's Assembly, there have been some personnel changes among the elders, but most appear to be an act of respecting their positions while withholding their power. In the case of five members of the Politburo Standing Committee are ranked in the order of Kim Jong-un, Kim Yong Nam, Choe Yong Rim, Choe Ryong Hae and Ri Yong Ho. Considering the fact that Kim Yong Name and Choe Yong Rim are relatively old since they were born in 1925 and 1930 respectively, they do not have actual power as opposed to Choi Ryong Hae who had recently been promoted.

As Kim Won Hong was assigned to the Chief of State Political Security Department (SPSD), the First Vice-Minister Woo Dong Cheuk, who previously held significant influence over the SPSPD, has recently refrained from making appearances at main events. Kim Jong-il left the position of Chief of SPSPD vacant and managed it himself, while Woo Dong Cheuk acted as the unofficial head of the SPSPD. It is noteworthy that Ri Yong Ho, a dominant military figure who acts as the KPA Chief of General Staff, is ranked after Choi Ryong Hae in the recent North Korean broadcast. The key members of the military during the Kim Jong-il regime include Kim Yong Chun who handed over his status as Minister of the People's Armed Forces to Kim Jeong Gak, a former First-Vice Minister of the General Political Bureau, and has been less involved in practicing actual military authority. Kim Yong Chun, Ri Yong Ho and Woo Dong Cheuk were members of the so-called "eight guards of Kim Jong-il's hearse." Thus, the outline of power demonstrates a significant change since the death of Kim Jong-il to the present.

During and after the Party Delegate's Conference, Hyon Chol Hae also moved his position from NDC Political Chief to Ministry of the People's Armed Forces (MPAF) General Rear Service Department Chief. He wielded power as a top ranking official in the KPA General Political Bureau, but drifted away from politics to participate in the reorganization of power. The same applied to Oh Kuk Ryol. He did not stand out during the restructuring of power among the elites but placed his name on the Party Political Bureau Office at the Party Delegate's Conference.

These points demonstrate the possibility that there are changes in the military, and the authority is being restructured around Jang Song Taek, an influential guardian of Kim Jong-un. Although Jang Song Taek avoided a direct attack or personal action against the elders or other dominating figures, he brought the military and public security organization's core members to his side, so it can be inferred that he is trying to consolidate his power base. Of course this process has been reflected in Kim Jong-un's official approval in addition to his direct and indirect intentions.

Possibility of Power Struggle

The rapid rise of Jang Song Taek's coalition foreshadows a dynamic change in the military. Domination over the army is not guaranteed by appointing a civilian, Choe Ryong Hae, but requires a stable and complex ruling system based on a commander, division commander and others in core positions. Thus, central positions in the field army, including the commander and division commander, may be in the process of personnel change, and as a result, it is possible for Jang Song Take to accelerate the expansion of his own party.

It is also important to pay attention to rumors concerning the North Korean military purges, which were carried out earlier this year. The key point of this rumor is that the number of generals who were executed this year was at "double-digits," and they were punished for a display of inappropriate attitude during Kim Jong-il's mourning period.³⁾ It is a known fact that some of the leading members of military, including the MPAF Vice-Minister and Front Lines Commander, are on the list. Since North Korea is dependent on military support, it is difficult to execute a number of generals, lest it incite an antiestablishment movement or a coup. In particular, when North Korea is in a delicate situation due to the power succession, the execution of generals can be demoralizing and this action is not appropriate during the mourning period. This can signify the reshuffling of authority within the North Korean military. This, along with Choe Ryong Hae's rise, may indicate personnel changes in the MPAF for positions that include commander, front lines commander and division commander.

In addition to the rumors of a purge, another detail to note is that Kim Jong-un canceled a purge on six individuals, whom Kim Jong-il ousted last February.⁴⁾ This was an unexpected outcome since he emphasized Kim Jong-il's final injunctions and held him in the highest esteem as the "Eternal General Secretary of the Party," and the succession process was still ongoing. Among the six, the First-Deputy of the Ministry of People's Safety, who was executed by a firing squad, is included. This is part of the Kim Jong-un regime's new leadership strategy to expand its power, by reinstating those who were expelled from competition. Thus, it is more appropriate to perceive his recent actions as a restructure of authority than an act of "benevolence."

We need to focus on North Korea's criticisms against Ri Jeh Gang, who was a direct competition to Jang Song Taek under the Kim Jong-il regime.⁵⁾ As the First Deputy-Director of the Party's Organization and

3) *Yonhap News*, March 22, 2012.

4) *Yonhap News*, May 2, 2012.

Guidance Department, Ri Jeh Gang initiated surveillance on residents, violent suppressions on dissidents, and capital punishment onto numerous people under Kim Jong-il's commands. The criticisms against Ri Jeh Gang are linked to Jang Song Taek's followers, who were previously ousted by Ri and granted amnesty and restoration of their authority. Thus, the recent turn of events is worth noting. The recent purges had been initiated by Jang Song Taek and are part of the Kim Jong-un regime's reorganization of power.

The problem is whether the current or scheduled progress on publicizing the Kim Jong-un regime under the guidance of Jang Song Taek's group will proceed smoothly or not. North Korea's leading organs of power, which maintained their unity during the Kim Jong-il regime, will inevitably encounter turmoil and factionalism due to the rise of Jang Song Taek's group. Reorganizing power is only an opening act. The change of structure within the military under the Military-first Policy and the authorities' reactions to their expulsion from power will have significant effects on the future of the Kim Jong-un regime's stability.

Choe Ryong Hae's military takeover does not yet mean that he has absolute command over the lower branch, and it is especially difficult to assess whether authority over the field army, which supervises troop movements, has been finalized. Kim Jong-un's promotion of 70 officers to generals on April 14, 2012 can be interpreted as an act to form royal guards.⁶⁾ However, it is nearly impossible to actually dominate the military because leading figures including Kim Jong-un, Jang Song Taek and Choe Ryong Hae are not from the military. Due to the characteristics of the military institution, control over the military can be earned solely through long-term experiences and personal connections. Thus, they need to implement a personnel change among the field army commanders in order to directly manage the armed forces. Therefore, those controlling the armed forces and human resources will inevitably evoke turmoil within the army.

In the case of Kim Jong-il, he secured his control, minimized breaks within the leadership with his strong authority and prevented factionalism due to his personally established connections. In contrast, Kim Jong-un's hold of power is not secure and his authority over the public and associates is weak. Most importantly, the main problem is that he does not have a network that he has personally formed. Friendly physical contacts during Kim Jong-un's onsite guidance reflect his insecurity.⁷⁾

Thus, the possibility of conflict due to the personnel reform is within the military, public security authority and administration remain high. The process involves the expulsion of dozens of key members

5) Ri Jeh Gang died of a mysterious car accident in June 2, 2012, a week before Jang Song Taek's NDC Vice-Chairman promotion. *Yonhap News*, June 2. 2010.

6) *Rodong Shinmun*, April 14, 2012.

7) After Kim Jong-il's death, Kim Jong-un demonstrates public action, and at onsite guidance tours, he engages in physical contact with others, an act which Kim Jong-il never partook. He walks around holding hands with army generals or placing his arms around them during photo shoots, which vastly differs from Kim Jong-il's actions. In Pyongyang on April 15, Kim Jong-un's public speech on the formal inspection of the KPA exceeded expectations.

from authority and vigilance against potential counterattacks. If the counterattacks do occur, it is possible that they will be initiated by Jang Song Taek or his people, not by Kim Jong-un. There is a possibility that the existing power will attempt to form a method of directly reporting to Kim Jong-un and use this strategy to pressure Jang Song Taek's followers. Most importantly, Kim Jong-un is too weak to control the process of restricting the authority, while Jang Song Taek group's authority is not completely recognized. Thus, it can be inferred that the North Korean regime's centrifugal forces are increasing due to the power structure and potential turmoil among the ruling elites.

The Kim Jong-un Regime's Crisis Factors

The change in the ruling system is driven by either external factors, such as wars and international relations, or internal factors, such as coups and rifts from among the dominant or resistant forces from the bottom-up. Examples include East Germany losing the support of the Soviet Union, the collapse of the Iraqi government due to the outbreak of war, and the change in the ruling institution in Afghanistan due to a variety of external factors. Intervention and the effects of external influences were important factors in the recent Jasmine Revolution of the Middle East. Thailand, a country that frequently experiences military coups, restructures its government organization when cracks appear within the leadership. The Philippines' civil revolution against the Marxist dictatorship and the Iranian Revolution, which overthrew the Pahlavi administration, share the same characteristic: the revolution was fuelled from the bottom-up.

Recent events, including the Jasmine Revolution in the Middle East, demonstrate changes to autocratic institutions around the world, but North Korea continues to be an exception. North Korea has an enduring dictator that is ruled by force because the country lacks a fully developed infrastructure and civil society. North Korea's Military-first Policy is not a specialized political system but another expression for martial law and state of emergency. North Korea is a country that relies on military force as well as oppressive social control and human rights abuses to maintain the dictatorship. Furthermore, the North Korean leadership's strong cohesion amongst the Party and the core supporters are important factors that upheld the regime. In order to gain the elites and core supporters' loyalty, special favors must be offered with benefits in return, but citizens people view this as an exploitation of their supplies.

The internal and external changes correlate with the changes in the Kim Jong-un regime. North Korea has been relatively free from external threats. During the Cold War, North Korea shared an alliance with China and the Soviet Union, and after the Cold War, China acted as a reliable protector state to secure North Korea's external threats. Despite the international sanctions against North Korea, China chose to not implement the provisos. China's support and aid remain one of the most important factors that ensure the survival of the Kim Jong-un regime; however, recent Chinese variables are showing signs of change.

China's rise as a member of the G2 places a burden on China in the changing world order, and as a consequence, it is more difficult for North Korea to receive China's absolute support due to its actions against international stability. China's contrasting reactions during the past and recent North Korean long-range rocket launches and nuclear tests are testament to it. This suggests that China, a country that

is fully integrated into global capitalism, is considering the hefty costs and drawbacks of a “dangerous North Korea.” Furthermore, international restrictions on long-range rocket launches will either trail or be amended, and standards will be raised should the 3rd nuclear test take place. Recently, South Korea’s staunch attitude correlates to the same context. Although a direct armed threat from North Korea does not exist, the North Korean ruling system has been weakened by external factors.

Internally, a rift in the North Korean leadership is inevitable due to the restructuring of power and it is difficult to assess whether Kim Jong-un can control the conflict. A structural change initiated by Jang Song Taek’s group will likely trigger a power struggle within the leadership, and it is doubtful that Kim Jong-un, a new leader and weak authority figure, can suppress or control the dominating opponents. The special benefits to the core supporters are a main factor in maintain the system, but it is in a difficult situation due to the lack of imports. They are currently restricted by international sanctions and the inter-Korean embargo. Recently, there has been a restriction on the supplies to local Party executives and the military, which has made it difficult for the core supporters to continue receiving their special benefits.⁸⁾ Since it is difficult to resolve, this situation may foreshadow the weakening of the Kim Jong-un regime’s foundation and loyalty.

Along with the decrease of special benefits to the core supporters, the long-term financial difficulties created complex problems in security resources as a means to maintain social control. The increase of defectors crossing the border indicates the limitations of livelihood available in North Korea. In addition, North Korea’s control systems appear to be failing, as there is a proliferation of corruption and bribery among border guards and executives. The debilitation of social control creates strong resistance among the grassroots. The rumors concerning the recent SPSD executive’s murder reflects the current predicament.⁹⁾ Since monitoring citizens is the vanguard of maintaining control, attacking public security executives is regarded as a serious political crime. This demonstrates the people’s anger and deprivation.

The progress of grassroots resistance is connected to the fact that people’s patience with the financial difficulties is at its limit. At least hundreds of thousands to millions die from starvation, which is attributed to and further aggravated by the financial crisis. The spread of an underground economy created by the economic crisis has contributed to the formation of the rich, and thus, the gap between the rich and the poor function as a new social conflict. There is a chance that the North Koreans will rescind their trust on public authorities due to the failed currency reform and expect an accelerated North Korean social crisis and an ongoing social schism.

8) In April, the food supply for executives of the National People’s Congress had completely ceased, and the Security Executives of the Party had only enough food for themselves and not their families. With the exception of the SPSD, all of the local administrations’ food supply was discontinued, and from early April, the General Military implemented a one-day supply - an emergency food supply system. *Radio Free Asia(RFA)*, May 3, 2012.

9) Since Pyongyang displayed relatively weaker public order, Pyongyang’s Public Security Inspector was murdered in early 2012, and it is a known fact that in 2011 the Public Security Chief (Police Chief Class) was also killed. At Yanggang Province in June 2011, the Chief Lecturer (Brigadier Class) of the Kim Il Sung University was murdered. *Dongailbo*, April 2, 2012.

Meanwhile, North Korean authorities proclaimed 2012 as a year of hope and the first year of the strong and prosperous nation, evoking the people's patience. However, the strong and prosperous nation slogan that North Korea advocated was marred by the failure of the long-range rocket. Furthermore, public politics lose its significance in the face of a long-term economic crisis and a forced austerity. Despite attempts to sugarcoat the Kim Jong-un regime and the rocket launch, the people have reached their limit and have expressed their grievances.

There appears to be a fundamental limitation to the Kim Jong-un regime's ability to manage the increase of internal and external threats. First, Kim has not yet initiated movement on any new ideas or taken a political step towards economy recovery. This strongly indicates an absence of a central agenda that can unify North Korea. The young Kim emphasizes the final injunctions of Kim Jong-il; however, in reality, the Kim Jong-il regime lacks any recognizable achievements in which the North Koreans can find assurance. Many suffered through the Arduous March during the Kim Jong-il era, so his injunctions have difficulty gaining the people's trust.

There are various crisis factors in the Kim Jong-un regime, and they represent the advent of fundamentally different circumstances in comparison to the Kim Jong-il regime. Unlike his predecessors, Kim Jong-un has no political experiences, so his authority and administrative abilities are very weak, which may also imply a lack of political charisma. Consequently, Kim will have difficulties in managing complicated crises efficiently and control the power struggle in the leadership. Due to the deteriorating external environment surrounding the Kim Jong-un regime, it is possible that internal factionalism and grassroots resistance may develop. In such situations, the trigger that causes regime change is the most important. Unlike his predecessors, Kim Jong-un is likely to show his limitations should a catalyst for change be activated.