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The Execution of Jang Sung-taek: Power Struggle in North Korea?

By Sukjoon Yoon

Synopsis

The recent execution of Jang Sung-taek, hitherto the second most powerful man in North Korea and uncle of its leader Kim Jon-Un raises questions about a power struggle in the leadership and the rise of the military's influence in the state apparatus. Is Kim now in full control?

Commentary

THE SUMMARY execution of North Korea's second most powerful leader Jang Sung-taek, after a hurried trial by a military court for anti-state activities, has turned the spotlight on a likely power struggle among the leadership of the Pyongyang regime. It also shows that the young leader of North Korea is consolidating his position with ruthless disregard for familial connections.

Jang was the uncle by marriage of the young Kim Jong-Un and vice-chairman of the National Defence Council as well as second man in the hierarchy of the Korea Workers Party (KWP) after Kim. Indeed Jang had overseen the transfer of power to Kim Jong-Un after the latter's father Kim Jong-Il fell ill and died in December 2011. Jang, whose base is in the KWP, was appointed Vice-Chair of the NDC and made a four-star general along with his wife, to bolster his position within the military.

Power reshuffle?

Jang and his wife, who is the younger sister of Jong-Il, were most influential in appointing Kim as the new General Secretary of the KWP and installed as Chairman of the NDC with the rank of four-star general as well. In the past two years Jang and his wife were prominent among Kim's closest advisers as Kim assumed his position as Supreme Leader of the country, like his father before him.

Jang's downfall and execution shed new light on the relationship between Jang and his nephew. Jang was known as a reformer and being a pragmatist and was the trusted intermediary in developing economic relations with China, North Korea's only ally. However Kim Jong-Un had recently begun to chart a different course: he declared his intention to strike a balance between North Korea's controversial nuclear weapons programme and Chinese-style economic reform. This followed an unsuccessful visit to Beijing in May by General Choe Ryong-hae, chief of the Korean People's Army (KPA), which signaled an attempt at reconciliation with China. Jang had earlier visited China in August 2012 to promote economic cooperation.

South Korean observers have speculated that Kim's reduced focus on the military represented a humiliation for the KPA. That Kim had also appointed both himself and his aunt, Jang's wife, as four-star generals seem to have been aimed at shifting power from the NDC and KPA towards the KWP, where Jang's power lay. North Korea had also neglected to take advantage of Chinese and Russian technological assistance to upgrade its aging and outdated conventional weapons, leaving the nuclear weapons programme KPA's only real dividend from the military-first policy. The status and influence of the KPA was further reduced by the extent of Kim's control over the organisation, albeit nominally.

Is Jang's execution unusual?

The losers in the struggle for power in the North Korean regime are portrayed as having committed anti-party, counter-revolutionary factionalising acts intended to disrupt the unity and cohesion of the party, KWP. This is typically characterised as undermining popular support for the Kim family leadership and their resistance against imperialism, represented by the United States, Japan, and the South Korean "puppet" government.

All those who fail to uphold the slogan "Isolation is Glorious" are guilty, and therefore deserve execution; though Jang's case is very unusual for the publicity it has received from the North Korean media. The Korean Central Network Agency, as the mouthpiece of the KWP, provided extensive coverage between 8-13 December of Jang's public arrest, his trial by a special military court set up by the army, KPA, and his immediate execution. The Ministry of State Security was responsible for organising this process, though it seems that the KPA was pulling the strings.

Questions about Kim's grip

These unexpected developments have fueled questions about the firmness of Kim Jong-un's grip on power, and the succession struggle which might transpire if he fails to establish full control over the KPA. Jang's ouster was announced at an enlarged meeting of the KWP politburo on 8 December; but this was apparently driven by the Ministry of State Security and the commissioner for political warfare, responsible for monitoring the ideological correctness of the North Korean elite, both KWP and KPA, which strongly implies that the KPA is currently in the ascendancy.

Jang's execution seems to confirm that Kim has now been obliged to side with the KPA, rather than the KWP. Kim has, therefore, probably done enough to avoid any attempt by the KPA to take power away from his family, at least for the present. But if any such challenge does arise, it will likely be from General Choe Ryong-hae.

It is clear that Kim Jong-un prefers "glorious isolation" if this is necessary to retain the support of the KPA. Given his lack of experience, and the need to strike a balance between the KWP and the KPA, it is the KPA that will continue to be a very influential force enjoying robust leverage. Yet the struggle between the KWP and the KPA remains unresolved, with Kim so far unable to establish complete dominance.

The situation in Pyongyang will remain fluid and pose a challenge to North Korea's strategic partner, China, as well as its foes in South Korea and the US. China will need to exercise quiet diplomacy to engage Kim in a strategic dialogue rather than just working level talks, while the US and South Korea will need to be patient to work out a modus vivendi with the Pyongyang leadership.

Captain (ROK Navy Ret.) Sukjoon Yoon is a senior research fellow at the Korea Institute for Maritime Strategy and visiting professor at the department of defence systems engineering in Sejong University, Seoul, Korea.