Signs of a North Korean power shift

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30 July 2012

Seven months after the death of North Korean leader Kim Jong-il, some signs have emerged of a shift within the Stalinist regime under his son and successor, Kim Jong-un, to implement pro-market restructuring along Chinese lines.

The abrupt removal of Vice Marshal Ri Yong-ho as head of the General Staff on July 15 has been interpreted by some analysts as a move by Kim Jong-un and his uncle Jang Song-thaek to tighten their grip over the country's powerful military. Kim Jong-un was elevated to the rank of marshal, effectively giving him overall control of the military.

The Reuters newsagency cited what it regarded as a reliable source indicating that the regime was preparing to implement pro-market agricultural and economic restructuring. The ruling Korean Workers Party (KWP) has created a special "political bureau" to oversee the changes.

Kim Jong-il had adopted a "military first" policy that gave extensive powers to the military hierarchy, including over the economy. "In the past, the cabinet was empty with no say in the economy. The military controlled the economy, but that will now change," the source told Reuters.

General Ri, who was made chief of General Staff in 2009, had been considered a mentor to the young and inexperienced Kim Jong-un. The Reuters source, who has connections in Pyongyang and Beijing, commented: "Ri Yong-ho was the most ardent supporter of Kim Jong-il's 'military first policy'." His removal could clear the way for changes in economic policy.

The *New York Times* on July 20 cited the North Korea Strategic Information Service Centre—a South Korean website run by North Korean defectors—as reporting that Kim Jong-un had stripped the military of its control over key exports, including minerals. "Some people are now attempting to recklessly exploit the country's valuable underground resources on the excuse of earning foreign currency by exporting them," Kim reportedly told the North Korean state media.

Given the opaque character of the North Korean police state, none of these reports can be considered definitive. But the possibility of the regime opening up to the West has resulted in a changed tone in the US and international media, which is commenting favourably on small changes of style—shorter skirts for women and the appearance of Disney characters—since Kim Jong-un took over the reins of power.

The flavour of the media coverage, which is routinely derogatory of the North Korean regime, is expressed in its reports of last week's public announcement of Kim's marriage as indicating a more open public style of leadership than that of his father. An article in the *New York Times* commented that the marriage announcement "seemed to be a continuation of what is either a policy change, or a propaganda offensive, or both."

A CNN blog by former US diplomat Brian Klein entitled "Will Kim Jong-un's leadership be music to US ears?" was cautious, but suggested that "Kim Jong-un may also see quite clearly that relying on China won't ensure his country's future growth or development." Klein proposed an invitation to North Korean musicians to visit New York—a musical version of the so-called ping-pong diplomacy that resulted in a US-China rapprochement in 1972.

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The shift in media emphasis points to US ambitions and possible back-channel diplomatic discussions underway between Washington and Pyongyang. It mirrors the change that took place late last year in relation to the Burmese regime: from international pariah to a new beacon of possible democratic change. In neither case is Washington concerned about the democratic rights and living standards of working people.

As part of its so-called pivot to Asia, the Obama administration is waging a diplomatic and strategic offensive throughout the region to undermine Chinese influence. The establishment of full diplomatic relations with the Burmese regime and the easing of economic sanctions on the country are aimed at weakening its previous economic and political dependence on Beijing.

China's ties with North Korea, however, are much closer than those with Burma. They go back to Beijing's military support for Pyongyang during the Korean War in 1950-53. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union two decades ago and loss of Soviet aid, North Korea has been completely reliant economically and diplomatically on China as the US and its allies escalated the confrontation with Pyongyang over its nuclear programs.

Successive US administrations have kept intense pressure on North Korea by maintaining an economic blockade of the country, in force since the end of the Korean war. The Bush White House effectively tore up the previous Clinton administration's efforts to open up the North Korean economy. Without an end to the US-led blockade, North Korea's tentative steps toward pro-market restructuring have largely foundered.

The Obama administration continued the Bush administration's uncompromising stand on North Korea's nuclear programs and would undoubtedly extract a heavy price from Pyongyang for any, even small, US concessions. Klein stated: "The historical and defence-related issues on the Korean peninsula make for a unique environment, with little resemblance to the Arab Spring."

Other commentators are even more cautious. A lengthy report released last week by the Brussels-based think tank, the International Crisis Group (ICG), concluded that Kim Jong-un had consolidated his grip on power, contrary to the expectation of many Western analysts that the transition to a young, untried leader could lead to a power struggle inside the regime. At the same time, the ICG dismissed suggestions of any major pro-market changes in the near future.

The ICG report drew attention China's decision to boost economic trade and aid with North Korea (DPRK) following the death of Kim Jong–il in December in order to head off possible social discontent. "China's support to North Korea remains robust. In December 2011, it reportedly decided to give 500,000 tons of food and 250,000 tons of crude oil to help 'stabilise the new regime.' On 30 January 2012, the foreign ministry called on the international community to provide North Korea with humanitarian aid. For ten days beginning on 9 January, witnesses reported seeing large number of trucks crossing the China-DPRK border, apparently filled with sacks of rice. Bilateral trade was said to be up by 18 percent that month compared to January 2011," it stated.

While China wants to prevent political unrest in its neighbour, it could also be seeking pro-market restructuring provided it benefits the Chinese economy by giving access to new sources of cheap labour. The ICG report pointed to a recent plan to grant 20,000 North Koreans visas to work in the northeastern province of Jilin.

Beijing is well aware that the US will exploit any opening in North Korea to further isolate China and is determined to prevent that from taking place. While there are no clear signs of a power struggle at present in Pyongyang, that could change if divisions emerge in the regime over where to line up in the intensifying rivalry between Washington and Beijing.

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