

North Korean regime executes no. 2 leader Jang Song-thaek

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The sudden purge and execution in North Korea this week of Jang Song-thaek is a clear sign of a profound political crisis in Pyongyang. Jang was widely regarded as number two in the regime and mentor to the young leader Kim Jong-un.

He was publicly humiliated last Sunday with photographs showing him being marched out of an extended meeting of the ruling party's Politburo after being stripped of all positions. He was tried by a special military tribunal on Thursday and immediately executed.

The execution of Jang was accompanied by the release of his supposed "confession" and a lengthy diatribe denouncing him as "despicable human scum" and "worse than a dog." Two of Jang's deputies, Ri Ryong-ha and Jang Su-gil, were also reportedly executed in November.

These executions come amid a broad political upheaval inside North Korea. The *Financial Times* reported yesterday that over the past two years since Kim was installed, around 100 of the country's top 218 officials have been purged from their position.

These factional struggles point to the deep and violent divisions inside the North Korean regime, reflecting its profound economic crisis and fears of social unrest. The state media accused "Jang and his faction" of "attempting to overthrow the state by all sorts of intrigues and despicable methods and with a wild ambition to grab supreme power."

Jang's confession declares that "it was my intention to... become premier when the economy goes totally bankrupt and the state is on the verge of collapse." He added that he planned to present a "reformist" image to win recognition from the international community.

While the words have been put in Jang's mouth, the concern in ruling circles about economic bankruptcy and the collapse of the state are real. The North Korean economy is largely cut off from the world. Over the past decade, first under Bush then Obama, the US has

ratcheted up the pressure on Pyongyang over its nuclear and missile program and tests through a series of new economic sanctions.

The Obama administration's tough stance on North Korea is also aimed at putting pressure on its chief ally, China, and is part of the so-called US "pivot to Asia"—a comprehensive diplomatic, economic and military strategy aimed at undercutting China's regional influence. As well as menacing North Korea economically and militarily, Obama has also hinted at a Burma-style rapprochement if Pyongyang aligned itself more closely with Washington.

The US policy towards Pyongyang poses a dilemma for China. It has been pressuring North Korea to denuclearise to prevent a nuclear arms race in North East Asia and remove a pretext used by the US for its own military build-up in the region. However, Chinese pressure on North Korea threatens to cause an implosion of the regime or to drive it into the US camp—neither of which Beijing wants.

The execution of Jang is an indication that matters are coming to a head. As well as being vice-chairman of the National Defence Commission and head of the state administration, he was also in charge of economic affairs and cooperation with China, North Korea's largest trading partner.

Among the charges levelled against Jang was that he committed "such acts of treachery as selling off precious resources of the country at cheap prices." The accusation is also a thinly veiled criticism of China, which, according to the latest estimates, accounted for nearly 90 percent of North Korea's foreign trade over the past year. Around half of all North Korean exports to China are minerals such as iron ore.

Jang visited China in August 2012 to discuss economic policy with Chinese leaders. Since then, however, relations with China have soured. North Korea proceeded with a rocket launch last December followed by a third

nuclear test in February against injunctions from Beijing not to do so. China joined the US in the UN Security Council in imposing two new rounds of sanctions, to which North Korea responded in April with bellicose, but empty threats, to wage war against the United States. The Obama administration seized on the threats to ramp up tensions in North East Asia, pointedly flying nuclear capable B-52 and B-2 bombers to South Korea and announced the expansion of its anti-ballistic missile systems in Asia.

The new Chinese leadership reacted angrily to the crisis on its doorstep, well aware that the US military actions were a threat not only to North Korea, but China as well. In a public statement in April, President Xi Jinping declared that “no country should be allowed to throw a region and even the whole world into chaos for selfish gains.”

Beijing has subsequently used its preponderant trade position to drive home the message that it wants North Korea to denuclearise. Shortly after Xi’s statement, the Bank of China announced in May that it would be ending business with the Foreign Trade Bank, North Korea’s main foreign exchange bank—a step towards squeezing North Korea’s international financial operations. Figures for the first four months of the year indicated a fall in two-way trade, including in desperately-needed Chinese exports of oil. In September, China published a 236-page list of items banned under international sanctions, indicating that it intended to tighten up on cross-border trade.

China is also pulling out of investment projects in North Korea. Last month *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* reported that the state-run China Merchants Group was opting out of the planned development of the Hwanggumpyong and Rason special economic zones, claiming that “conditions were not mature.” Jang had been closely associated with these special economic zone, which have largely languished due to the lack of Chinese investment.

The economic squeeze from China has been exacerbated by a deterioration of relations with South Korea. At the height of the standoff in April, North Korea shut down the Kaesong special economic zone and withdrew some 53,000 workers employed by South Korean companies. The zone reopened in September, but the loss of foreign exchange earnings for North Korea was substantial. South Korean newspapers reported this week that North Korea has been selling large quantities of gold—another indication of financial crisis in the North.

China is maintaining the pressure on North Korea. In a

pointed comment on November 22, Foreign Minister Wang Yi declared: “China will never allow [anyone] to cause chaos and incidents on our home’s doorstep and will never accept China’s process of development from being disturbed and interrupted again.” He again called for the de-nuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula.

In this context, the execution of Jang, the figure most closely aligned with China, suggests that more is involved in his removal than North Korean leader Kim consolidating his grip on power. Just days after he disposed of his uncle, Kim Jong-un is due to welcome former American basketball star, Dennis Rodman, to Pyongyang on Monday for a third visit.

Rodman’s trip, which has undoubtedly been organised with the approval of the US State Department, is an indication that the North Korean leader might be open to a deal with the US, along the lines of that being struck with Iran. At the end of November, Pyongyang announced the establishment of 14 special economic zones throughout the country. Without a rapprochement with Washington, however, only a trickle of foreign investment would flow in.

Such a deal, or an outright collapse of the North Korean regime, would represent a geopolitical earthquake in East Asia with vast political and military implications.

South Korea responded to the news of Jang’s execution by calling an emergency national security meeting yesterday. Beijing, which may well have had advance notice, staged a training exercise of the PLA’s 39th Army on the border with North Korea last week.

The US is undoubtedly preparing to exploit the situation to its advantage, even if that means further inflaming what has always been a dangerous flashpoint in North East Asia.



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