

North Korean official defects as US pressure on Pyongyang intensifies

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South Korea reported on August 17 the defection of one of the highest-ranking officials from North Korea to do so in recent years. Thae Yong-ho was the deputy ambassador at Pyongyang's embassy in Britain. This latest defection is a sign of the deepening crisis in the regime, which is under mounting economic and political pressure due to increased sanctions and isolation spearheaded by the United States.

According to South Korea's Unification Ministry, Thae arrived in South Korea with his wife and son. Thae, 55 years old, was a well-known official from Pyongyang's elite, having been stationed in Britain for ten years and charged with promoting North Korea's image in the West. He had studied in Denmark and was married to a relative of Oh Paek-ryong, who was an associate of the regime's founder, Kim Sung-il, a sign of the family's official prestige.

A slew of high-ranking defections have taken place in recent months. A South Korean official told Reuters defections in 2016 through July totaled 814, an increase of 15 percent over the corresponding months of 2015. Among them was an unnamed official from the North's Office 39, who had been in charge of raising funds in Europe. He disappeared in June, according to South Korea. He is now being sheltered by a European government, along with his two sons, after reportedly taking \$400 million.

These events are being watched closely in Washington, where the pressure on North Korea has been ratcheted up as part of the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia," directed against China, which has been the North's key ally. US strategists calculate that a collapse of the North Korean regime would present Beijing with major problems.

The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a Washington-based think tank, wrote in an article last Thursday: "The spate of high profile

defections, including Thae Yong-ho, from the ruling class and elite groups in North Korea may indicate greater amounts of dissatisfaction with Kim Jong-un and the regime. This is significant because Kim Jong-un relies on the elite class to maintain power and control in North Korea. If increasing numbers of elites make a rational choice to abandon North Korea because of fears of punishment and an uncertain future, the Kim Jong-un regime will be in significant trouble."

North Korea responded bitterly to the defection announcement, calling Thae a criminal. The state-run Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) reported Pyongyang had informed Britain that: "The fugitive [Thae] was ordered in June to be summoned for embezzling a lot of state funds, selling state secrets and committing child rape." Britain has not responded to the claims.

Sanctions and economic isolation are taking their toll on North Korea. According to the South's Bank of Korea in July, the North Korean economy shrank 1.1 percent last year, the first contraction since 2010.

The Pyongyang regime has reportedly carried out a number of executions of officials in recent years. Much of the information regarding these stories comes from the South's notorious National Intelligence Service, raising questions about their veracity. However, it is known that in 2013 Kim Jong-un had his uncle, Jang Song-thaek killed, the highest ranking official purged. Jang was politically close to China and supposedly favored pro-market reforms along the lines of those pursued for decades by the Beijing regime.

Since Pyongyang's fourth primitive nuclear weapon test in January, Washington, along with Seoul, has exploited the regime's militaristic bluster by ramping up the pressure. In March, the United Nations imposed harsh, new sanctions that included bans on exporting gold and coal, among others, that will further damage Pyongyang's

economy. Then, in July, the US leveled sanctions specifically against leader Kim Jong-un for the first time, as well as ten other officials.

The US has long sought to destabilize the North Korean regime. In 1994, Washington and Pyongyang signed the Agreed Framework under which the US stated it would supply oil, as well as construct two light water reactors, in exchange for Pyongyang shutting down its nuclear reactor at Yongbyon. The Bush administration, however, effectively scuttled the Agreed Framework and ramped up the military threats against North Korea by branding it as part of an “axis of evil” together with Iran and Iraq.

Under subsequent six-party talks that included both Koreas, the United States, Japan, China and Russia, Pyongyang closed its Yongbyon reactor—a fact confirmed by the International Atomic Energy Agency in 2007—in return for pledges of aid. The Bush administration reneged on this agreement by demanding tougher inspections in 2008. Since then, under Obama, Washington has demanded that North Korea acquiesce to all of its demands in exchange for returning to talks.

Washington and Seoul have also provocatively ramped up military tensions with the North. In July, the two agreed to station an anti-ballistic missile system in South Korea, which has led to sharper tensions with China. Last November, the two allies signed the Operation Plans 5015 (OPLAN 5015) that changed their military strategy to an explicitly offensive one, under which pre-emptive attacks would be carried out, alongside strikes to assassinate high-level officials, including Kim Jong-un.

Such moves would ultimately be aimed at China, allowing Washington to put troops on the border with Manchuria and ramp up its war preparations against Beijing, risking a descent into a full-fledged conflagration. Much like in Eastern Europe today, South Korean and Western companies would also turn the North Korean working class into a source of cheap labor.



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