

North Korean Politics as Blood Sport: China May be a Target Too

Doug Bandow, Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute

January 9, 2014

North Korea has never been an easy ally for the People's Republic of China. With the execution of Jang Song-taek, Kim Jong-un's uncle and supposed mentor, Beijing's uncertain clout in Pyongyang is at risk. The PRC could be the big loser as the Jang purge expands.

"Dear Leader" Kim Jong-il has been dead barely two years, but his son appears to have turned politics there into blood sport. A fall from grace in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea never was pleasant, and three generations of a family were punished when anyone challenged or betrayed the regime. Public executions occurred whenever a fall guy was required.

Nevertheless, while family members, including Jang under both Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, were commonly sidelined, they never were publicly executed. Even non-family members were typically said to have retired because of health when they were purged.

Now the game has changed. Maybe Kim Jong-un decided it was time to dispense with his regent, and do so in a manner which left no doubt about who was in charge. Perhaps Jang openly challenged Kim, learning that lese majeste was a death offense. Or Kim might have been pushed by another faction—in this case Jang rival Choe Ryong-hae and the military, which Jang is thought to have challenged—to eliminate its most dangerous rival.

Although Kim appears to be in firm control, the circumstances are extraordinary, meaning the system may be more fragile than it appears. A quick execution is as much a sign of weakness as strength, suggesting the need to dispatch a dangerous rival who might gather support. Undertaking a broad and deadly purge—already hundreds of Jang family members and allies are said to have been arrested or recalled from overseas—creates not only uncertainty but desperation, which might spark unexpected resistance.

The most obvious concern over the DPRK concerns a foreign policy which has gotten more erratic and confrontational since Kim Jong-il's death. Kim regularly employed brinkmanship as policy, but always seemed to know just when to stop. Kim Jong-un has demonstrated no such

limits. His latest threat of war against South Korea went by fax to Seoul. The possibility of mistake or miscalculation seems much higher.

There also is rising doubt as to the PRC's ability to offer a moderating influence on Pyongyang. China's relationship with the DPRK never has been easy. Kim Il-sung never gave Beijing due credit for saving him after his invasion of South Korea misfired. Kim eventually purged North Koreans friendly to China. Relations gyrated wildly over the years, hitting a low when the PRC recognized South Korea in 1992. Still, Chinese energy and food aid has been essential, and most recently Chinese investment has provided the DPRK an economic lifeline. Pyongyang has never felt free to entirely ignore Beijing's sentiments.

However, there has been a hardening of attitudes in the PRC. Academic and popular sentiment has turned against the North, and even the government appears to have stiffened its attitude. President Xi Jinping has held a summit with South Korea's President Park Geun-hye, but not yet with Kim Jong-un.

Nevertheless, until now the North continued to seek support from China. Choe Ryong-hae traveled to Beijing in 2013, while Jang led a large delegation in 2012. The PRC is building another bridge over the Yalu River to expand commerce. Various commercial deals and special zones appeared to be moving ahead.

But now Jang is gone.

Jang was widely thought to play an important role in economic affairs and place greater emphasis on economic development, which probably meant support for economic liberalization. The PRC long had encouraged the North to take this route, making Jang was a natural ally.

Moreover, Jang had established a strong relationship with Chinese officials over the years. Bilateral deal-making seemed to accelerate in Kim Jong-il's final years, when Jang played an important leadership role. In 2012 the latter headed a large delegation which discussed expanding special investment zones with Beijing's support. Many North Koreans linked to Jang were in business in the PRC. All told, reported the Wall Street Journal, Jang "was seen by Beijing as the most pro-China and pro-business figure in the North Korean leadership."

It is widely presumed that Jang was removed for political reasons. Yet the bill of particulars included several economic charges.

For instance, Jang was accused of having "seriously obstructed the nation's economic affairs and the improvement of the standard of people's living" and "making it impossible for the economic guidance organs including the Cabinet to perform their roles." It is hard to believe that Jang was thwarting reform; in fact, the Politburo accused him of preventing the development of "Juche" fertilizer, iron, and vinalon industries, which sound more old school than new reform.

Even more telling, Jang's indictment includes the charge of "selling of precious resources of the country at cheap prices" and having "made no scruple of committing such act of treachery in

May last as selling off the land of the Rason economic and trade zone to a foreign country for a period of five decades under the pretext of paying those debts.” Moreover, corruption was charged involving a 2011 project at Rason.

Of course, China is the “foreign country” cited.

The charges could merely reflect a “kitchen sink” quality, but they seem too specific for Beijing’s comfort. Pyongyang might believe Jang gave sweetheart deals to Chinese allies without the PRC government’s knowledge, but that seems unlikely. After all, the unnamed foreign country presumably benefited from the treacherous land sale and rewarded Jang in return.

Perhaps the charge is simply a tactic to reduce Chinese economic influence. But that also is bad news for the PRC. Already Chinese firms have found the DPRK to be a difficult partner at best. The business environment is likely to get much tougher.

Admittedly, so far nothing has obviously changed. Reported the Associated Press: “Even as Pyongyang was announcing Jang’s purging, North Korean and Chinese representatives were signing contracts on cross-border high-speed rail and highway connections.” One North Korean economic official announced “It’s just the same as before.” Still, past deals might be governed by inertia, with change to come. Zhu Feng of Peking University observed: “the negative impact must be tremendous.”

Former Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell recently pointed to “indications that China has grown steadily more concerned by” events in the DPRK. Chinese with whom I spoke in early December admitted that they could only speculate. But none believed that it would be easier for the PRC to negotiate with North Korea. And if the North really is targeting Beijing along with Jang, relations could deteriorate quickly.

North Korea’s urge to purge should prompt more rethinking in Beijing about the North Korea “problem.” The PRC should explore options with South Korea and America, including taking a much tougher policy toward the DPRK in return for allied attention to Chinese concerns over economic costs, refugee flows, and security issues.

The North is a geopolitical tragedy, with the latest purge in Pyongyang highlighting the regional uncertainty created by this small and impoverished state. There are no good options, but Jang’s execution demonstrates that even China is not exempt from paying a high price if North Korea goes wrong. The DPRK’s neighbors need to work together to ensure a stable and peaceful future no matter what.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is the author of Tripwire: Korea and U.S. Foreign Policy in a Changed World (Cato) and co-author of The Korean Conundrum: America’s Troubled Relations with North and South Korea (Palgrave/Macmillan).