

North Korean Regime Change by Ralph A. Cossa

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Those hoping for regime change in North Korea may have just gotten their wish . . . it's just not the type of change they had been hoping for.

The purge and subsequent quick execution of North Korea's number two leader, Jang Song-thaek, proves once again the dangers associated with being next in line in an authoritarian society. Even being the number one guy's uncle (by marriage, not by birth) cannot save you.

What all this means for the stability of the regime and for its future policy is anyone's guess, and it's important to remember that when it comes to North Korea, we're all guessing. The frustrating part about analyzing North Korean actions is that every event has at least two equally plausible but diametrically opposed explanations. The experts seem divided between those who think that Jang's removal from power reflects Kim Jong-un's total control – he is now secure enough to remove the mentor his father chose for him – and those who believe that it reflects just how unstable and insecure the 20-something leader really is. I'm inclined toward the latter but we need to see who else is purged or rehabilitated; over 40 percent of the senior leadership has been removed or retired in the not quite two years since Kim Jong-un has come to power, including some potential Jang rivals who might now make a comeback. Clearly the last shoe has yet to fall.

One thing is sure: the previously purged Jang won't be making a comeback. Putting him to death – common for lower-ranking individuals but rare for senior leaders, especially members of the ruling family – could show how insecure Kim is about his ability to truly neutralize his once-powerful uncle. Remember the old maxim about “killing the chicken to scare the monkeys”? Kim went straight for the monkey. Can you imagine how scared the chickens must now be?

While much remains to be sorted out, what seems clear (at least to me) is that “Chinese-style reform” has become increasingly unlikely for North Korea. Jang had long been seen as its number one advocate; the Chinese treated Jang like a visiting head of state when he visited Beijing in 2012. While there, he reportedly assured the Chinese leadership that, in return for Chinese support for the new boy leader, Kim Jong-un would, with Jang's encouragement and supervision, eventually take the North down the Chinese path.

In all likelihood, this line of thinking has been at least temporarily discredited. Even if his purge was all about power and personalities rather than policy, it would be very

dangerous for others to be seen as supporting Jang's policy prescriptions at this time. If reports that China received no advance warning of this event and that some Jang supporters are seeking asylum in China are true, this bodes ill not only for the China model, but perhaps for the overall Sino-North Korean relationship as well. The fact that Jang's long list of sins included selling North Korean assets too cheaply to China must be additional salt in China's wound.

Chinese colleagues sometimes tell me, only half jokingly, that they want to bring their children to North Korea to let them see what China was like in the old days, before Deng Xiaoping led the country down the path of reform. Many in China seemed to believe (or at least hoped) that Jang Song-thaek would turn out to be the North's Deng Xiaoping. Recall it was the twice-purged Deng who pulled off his own internal coup in 1976, bringing about the regime change in China that ousted the so-called “Gang of Four,” led by Mao's widow Jiang Qing.

While others will watch closely for changes in North Korean policy as a result of Jang's purge and execution, it is the change we are not likely to see that could be most significant. The chances of Deng-styled reform in North Korea may have just died along with Jang. Imagine China's fate if the Gang of Four had prevailed. This may have been what just happened in Pyongyang.

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