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Power Struggle in Pyongyang

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North Korea's dismissal of Vice Marshal Ri Yong-ho, chief of the Korea People's Army General Staff, suggests there has been more turmoil behind the curtain of power than observers had previously thought. Yet it is unclear whether Ri's removal was due to a more secure Kim Jong-un feeling confident enough to purge even from the innermost circle to further consolidate his power or instead a pushback by older elites challenging a second North Korean dynastic succession.

In either case, additional senior-level purges are likely, potentially even including an attempt to overthrow Kim Jong-un. North Korean leadership instability is worrisome to the United States and its allies, since it increases the potential for volatility, additional provocative acts, or implosion of a regime possessing nuclear weapons.

As such, the U.S., South Korea, and Japan should implement all necessary steps to defend against the spectrum of potential North Korean threats. Pyongyang's attempted launch of a long-range missile in April—another clear violation of U.N. resolutions—along with harsh and detailed threats against South Korea, shows that North Korea has not become any less dangerous under its new leader.

Dismissal from Power. Ri was a fast-rising military officer during Kim Jong-il's rule. He was appointed as head of the General Staff in 2009 and had been expected to remain for several more years. He previously served as commander of the Pyongyang Defense Command, a prestigious corps-sized praetorian guard for the North Korean leader.

More importantly, Ri had been an important component of the leadership transition to Kim Jong-un. In 2010, he was appointed to the inner political circle as a member of the Central Committee Political Bureau Presidium and vice chair of the Central Military Commission and was perceived as Kim's military tutor. Ri was one of eight pallbearers for Kim Jong-il's funeral. During the past two years, Ri accompanied Kim Jong-un on numerous inspection

trips and participated in several important public events, including commemorating the 100th anniversary of North Korean founder Kim Il-sung's birth.

Byzantine Power Structure. The interlocking nature of the North Korean party, state, and military structures creates overlapping, competing allegiances. Senior elites owe their power more to their proximity to the leader rather than from formal titles. Over time, there have also been shifts in influence among the main government power centers. Under Kim Jong-il, power shifted from the Korean Workers' Party (KWP) to the military and the National Defense Commission.

More recently under Kim Jong-un, it appeared that the KWP was assuming greater status, drawing power from the military. Some experts speculated that the KWP's Central Military Commission under Kim Jong-un could eclipse the National Defense Commission as the pre-eminent center of governmental power.

Vice Marshal Ri had a foot in many of these competing camps, being rewarded by both Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un. His titles reflected authority in both the military and KWP, including co-chairing the

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Central Military Commission with Kim Jong-un. As such, it is difficult to interpret whether Ri's removal reflects a further solidifying of power by Kim Jong-un or instead a direct challenge to the new leader. If the latter, it could represent an attempt by senior elites to maintain their positions by forcing a collective political leadership. Alternatively, it could be military leaders resisting a loss of power vis-à-vis the KWP.

Regime Stability Problematic.

During the past two years, hundreds of senior officials have been removed from office, reportedly purged for resisting a second North Korean dynastic succession. Executions and detentions of officials were also used to quell any potential resistance to the new regime, including 60 public executions in 2010.

Given the nature of the informational black hole that is North Korea, little is known of what political wrangling might be occurring behind the curtain. Even the U.S. intelligence community will have difficulty predicting or identifying rapid leadership change.

The North Korean regime has shown remarkable resilience over the past 15 years to overcome domestic and foreign pressures that appeared to portend unavoidable regime collapse. Sudden regime change would be difficult due to the pervasiveness and brutality

of North Korea's security services, which operate not only against the populace but also against the senior echelons of power. Once again, Pyongyang could belie repeated predictions of its imminent demise.

Conversely, sudden leadership change, with its attendant stability risks, remains a real possibility. Even an initially efficacious succession could deteriorate into a power struggle, with fissures among the senior leadership arising over time. Elite resistance to Kim Jong-un's rule could manifest itself in outright opposition or in usurping his power and leaving him a mere figurehead.

Nor does continuity of leadership guarantee regional stability. Belligerent behavior, whether by Kim Jong-un or another ruler, jeopardizes America's interests, and such behavior should be expected, as Pyongyang has routinely used threats, provocations, and military attacks to gain its objectives.

What Washington Should Do.

The U.S. should ensure that it has the capability to meet any threats from a belligerent North Korea—regardless of who is controlling the regime—by taking the following actions:

- Develop multilateral contingency planning for effective crisis response. The U.S., South Korea, and Japan should coordinate their national contingency plans

for North Korean scenarios and conduct joint exercises to identify these plans' weaknesses.

- Affirm unequivocal commitment to defending South Korea and Japan through the promise of extended deterrence comprised of conventional forces, missile defense, and the nuclear umbrella.
- Maintain a robust forward-deployed military presence in South Korea and Japan and fully fund U.S. defense requirements. Reducing U.S. military capabilities undercuts America's ability to defend its allies, deter security threats, and respond quickly to aggressive actions or natural disasters in Asia.

A Deteriorating Situation. The North Korean situation is not static; the country is deteriorating, which in turn increases the risk for sudden change. The leadership succession may be on track, but the U.S. should prepare for an unexpected North Korean collapse that could trigger a series of security, political, and economic challenges.

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