

Interpreting North Korea's Dismissal of Army Chief

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In North Korea last week, Ri Yong-ho was dismissed as chief of the General Staff of the Korean People's Army, while Workers' Party First Secretary Kim Jong-un was promoted from general to marshal. Various views have been given on the background of this development.

Any switch to a reform policy is doubted

One view is that the dismissal of hard-line army chief Ri paves the way for the Kim Jong-un regime to shift from the Kim Jong-il approach to a Chinese-style reform and opening-up policy. Some say that the Workers' Party Politburo's decision to fire the army chief indicates a shift from the "Military First" policy to the party's control of the army as seen in the Kim Il-sung period. The Global Times, an affiliate of the People's Daily in China, quoted a professor at the Chinese Communist Party Central School as saying that North Korea's domestic and foreign policies could grow more moderate due to the dismissal of Ri. Similar comments have been seen in Japan.

But I believe the military leadership reshuffle cannot be linked to the Kim Jong-un regime's policy shift. As noted in my past comments in this column, it is true that the ruling North Korean party and military leadership include people who advocate a Chinese-style reform and opening-up policy. They fear that their failure to adopt such policy could cause the Kim Jong-un regime's collapse that could lead South Korea to absorb the North to the disadvantage of their privileged status. These people have had such idea since the Kim Jong-il regime period. But they have remained silent, fearing that their expression of such idea could lead the regime to kill them and their families.

When Kim Jong-il succumbed to a stroke in August 2008, he expected their idea to surface after his death and considered how to lead his successor to prevent the expected development. Therefore, he chose his third son as his successor, instead of his first son Kim Jong-nam known for his reform and opening-up policy. He introduced the system for the Workers' Party Politburo to make key decisions when he convened a meeting of party

representatives in 2010 before his death. Kim Jong-il then attempted to use the party's authority to enhance his successor. As the guardian of Kim Jong-un, he named his younger sister Kim Kyoung-hui as director of the Workers' Party Organization and Guidance Department. Kim Jong-il had doubled as director of the department that had served as the source of his dictatorship authority by controlling personnel promotions and appointments in the party, government and army and by guiding all organizations politically.

Kim Jong-il thus made arrangements against the reform and opening-up policy to prevent any policy shift after his death. The latest army leadership change is not destined to destroy the arrangements. Therefore, it cannot be linked to any policy shift.

An insidious power struggle?

The second view attributes the army leadership change to a power struggle within the Kim Jong-un regime. The struggle is for the position of the closest aide to Kim Jong-un. A spreading rumor in North Korea says the army chief was ousted by Jang Seong-taek, director of the Workers' Party Administration Department, and Choi Ryong-hae, chief of the People's Army Politburo. Jang reportedly ordered Choi to investigate Ri, angering at a boastful remark by Ri's granddaughter at school: "If my grandfather decides to start war, we can do so even today. The honorary general (Kim Jong-un) listens to anything my grandfather says." Based on the relevant investigation report, according to the rumor, Kim Jong-un decided to fire Ri. This rumor could accurately reflect facts.

Will military leaders tolerate the control on the army and the dismissal of the army chief by Kim Jong-un, Jang and Choi who have little military career? Early this year, Western intelligence sources predicted that discontent accumulated within the military could trigger a preemptive attack against any dismissal of any army leader. I would like to closely watch future developments.

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