

China-North Korea Relations: Jang Song-thaek's Purge vs. The Status Quo¹

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SOURCES:

- "Jang Song-Thaek's Shadow Over China-North Korea Economic Cooperation," *Phoenix Weekly*, January 6, 2014.
- "Kim Jong-un's Execution of Jang Song-thaek Has Errors of Cultural Revolution; Xi Jinping May Be Disgusted," *Ta Kung-Pao*, December 17, 2013.
- "Editorial: North Korea Criticism of Jang Song-thaek Not Necessarily An Accusation Of China," *Global Times*, December 19, 2013.
- "After The Great Changes in North Korean Personnel," *Caijing*, January 20, 2014.
- "Zhang Liangui: North Korea and the Situation in Northeast Asia After the Jang Song-thaek Affair," *Gongshi Wang*, January 22, 2014.²

After succeeding his father, Kim Jong-il, in December 2011, Kim Jong-un has quickly established himself as a defiantly independent leader beholden to no foreign power, much to Beijing's dismay. As China-North Korea relations have worsened during the younger Kim's two years in power, punctuated by a nuclear test in February 2013 and two missile tests in April and December 2012, Chinese opinion of Kim Jong-un has turned as well. The Chinese media has seized on the ailing relationship by pushing the steadily growing bounds of debate as Chinese government censors allow more sensitive discussions and direct opinions to flow into the public arena. The purge of Jang Song-thaek, Kim Jong-un's uncle and most important supporter, took the world by surprise and left Chinese commentators contemplating the trajectory of the China-North Korea relationship moving forward.³

Jang's purge was first reported through the South Korean National Intelligence Service on December 3rd, 2013 but only confirmed by North Korean state media on December 9th.⁴ He was executed on December 12th for being a

¹ For recent *China Analysis* coverage of China-North Korea relations, see:

Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, "Chinese Perspectives on North Korea's Economic Reform," *China Analysis*, Asia Centre, September 26, 2012.

See also: Antoine Bondaz, "Reassessing China-North Korea relations," *China Analysis*, Asia Centre, October 24, 2013.

² Zhang Liangui is a professor at the Central Party School in Beijing. Unless otherwise noted, quotations attributed to Zhang are from this January interview.

³ Jang's most important official title was Vice Chairman of the National Defense Commission of North Korea, and was widely viewed as the de facto number two leader behind Kim Jong-un.

⁴ "North Korean leader's uncle removed from power: spy agency," *Yonhap*, December 3, 2013.

See also: Choe Sang-hun, "North Korea Says Leader's Uncle Was Executed as a Traitor," *New York Times*, December 12, 2013.

“traitor to the nation for all ages who perpetrated anti-party, counter-revolutionary factional acts in a bid to overthrow the leadership of [the Korean Workers’] party and state and the socialist system,” among other crimes.⁵ Although Kim purged several high-profile officials before Jang, Jang’s execution was a disturbing action for Chinese observers who viewed him as the necessary counterbalance to the young, inexperienced, rash and even brazenly insolent Kim. The Chinese commentary reflected herein tracks the reaction to the purge, assessments for bilateral economic cooperation and diplomatic relations, as well as reverberations for China’s own domestic politics.

Jang’s Crimes Threaten Economic Cooperation

Chinese reaction to the purge universally featured prominent coverage of the potential implications for Sino-North Korean economic cooperation. China and North Korea’s economic cooperation expanded dramatically under former leaders Hu Jintao and Kim Jong-il, highlighted by two joint development agreements, the Rason Economic and Trade Zone (罗先经济贸易区, *luoxian jingji maoyi qu*) and the Hwanggumpyeong and Wihwa Islands Economic Zone (黄金坪、威化岛经济区, *huangjinping, weihuadao jingji qu*). As mainland owned but Hong Kong-based magazine *Phoenix Weekly* noted, these zones served former Chinese president Hu Jintao’s initiative to revive the lagging economies of China’s northeastern provinces, Jilin and Liaoning, through access to crucial seaports and importing natural resources. Specifically, the Rajin port in the Rason Zone leased two piers for 50 years to Chinese companies to be used primarily to ship coal down to Shanghai and other coastal cities.⁶ Throughout this period of increased cooperation, Jang was the most prominent North Korean official touting bilateral economic ties, best reflected in his August 2012 official visit to Beijing which focused on economic cooperation in the two zones. This visit was especially important since it is so far the most important delegation for economic affairs to visit Beijing under Kim Jong-un.⁷

The nature of Jang’s criminal charges intimated a close link between his work on economic cooperation with China and his purge. As the state-run newspaper *Global Times* and *Phoenix Weekly* both noted, this was highlighted by the Kim regime’s specific official accusation against him of the “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.”⁸ *Global Times* cited two general reasons for concern over the purge: that Jang was the person responsible for China-North Korea economic cooperation; and that his main crime was “selling out the national interest,” including selling coal and selling off the Rason Zone. *Global Times* concluded that the “buyer” was obviously China, and

Phoenix Weekly quoted Yanbian University expert Jin Qiang as saying “the foreign country North Korea pointed to was clearly China.” *Phoenix Weekly* itself echoed these concerns by linking Jang’s intimate connection to the two zones with his crimes, and added that another reason for concern was that Jang was a “China hand” (中国通, *zhongguo tong*) and trusted by the Chinese government. As the number two in North Korea, Jang was the most important official to visit China since Kim Jong-il died, leaving a vacuum for Beijing’s interlocutors. Jin Qiang also said that Jang’s criminal charges were a way for North Korea to convey its displeasure with China. Central Party School professor Zhang Liangui asserted that economic cooperation was not solely Jang’s initiative and obviously had to be approved by the rest of the top leadership, but Jang is being blamed for these issues retroactively as part of the purge after his fall from power.

This connection between Jang and Chinese trade and investment in the two zones created fears that the purge may be an excuse for Pyongyang to renegotiate those agreements. Reflecting local concerns over the future of economic cooperation as a way to improve northeast China’s lagging economy, Yanbian University professor Yin Chengxuan told *Ta Kung-Pao*, a mainland-owned newspaper in Hong Kong, “North Korea is attempting to fully revise the past China-North Korea economic cooperation agreements under Jang Song-thaek relating to developing Hwanggumpyeong, Rason and minerals.” Many commentators had stern warnings for North Korea in the event it tried to alter in any way the cooperation agreements signed under Jang. In the same article, Renmin University professor Cheng Xiaohu added that the agreements must be honored, and if North Korea attempted to change these, “it would impact their economic cooperation.” *Global Times* said that China could not be too polite to North Korea, and must stand firm if North Korea has any intent to change the Rajin port agreement. It further added that “Chinese society would not tolerate any reason for North Korea to go back” on its deals with China, or else it would be a heavy blow to support for North Korea policy. Zhang Liangui asserted that while China’s stated policy is non-interference, China might adopt a different attitude if certain actions impact its interests: “If [North Korea] unilaterally tears up the agreement, Chinese companies will suffer a great loss and this will impact China’s national interests, so China must have an opinion. As for if this is an issue worth intervening over, that depends on defending the national interest.”

Despite Shock, Trust And Avoiding Rush to Judgment Are Key

While the suddenness of the purge was a bombshell, Chinese commentators were not surprised by the move itself and cautioned others against drawing any early conclusions. Mainland magazine *Caijing* cited Peking University professor Cui Yingjiu in saying that “Kim Jong-un’s dismissal of Jang Song-thaek was inevitable, it just came earlier than predicted.” Zhang Liangui added that “a country can only have one political center,” so as Jang’s power declined, Kim’s power grew—a law of politics.⁹

⁹ This is an excerpt from another interview of Zhang Liangui. See: “Zhang Liangui: As Jang Song-thaek’s power is weakened, Kim Jong-un’s Power Will Inevitably Increase,” *Phoenix Online*, December 3, 2013.

⁵ “Traitor Jang Song Thaek Executed,” *Korean Central News Agency*, December 13, 2013.

⁶ Mathieu Duchâtel and Phillip Schell, “China’s Policy On North Korea: Economic Engagement And Nuclear Disarmament,” Rep. (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute), December 13, 2013: 39.

⁷ For more about Jang’s visit and the agreements, see: Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, “Show Me the Money: Evaluating Jang Song-thaek’s Search for Economic Cooperation in Beijing,” *SinoNK*, August 19, 2012.

⁸ “Traitor Jang Song Thaek Executed,” *Korean Central News Agency*, December 13, 2013.

Speaking the day the first reports surfaced in the South Korean press, Director of Korean studies at the state-run Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Pu Jianyi¹⁰ did not think the reports were credible and Zhang Liangui noted the rumors were unreliable, yet Chinese observers were reliant upon South Korea for non-official information.¹¹ Cui noted that Jang played an instrumental role in helping the younger Kim to consolidate his power after his father's death, but didn't anticipate Kim consolidating it so quickly. Speaking before Jang's execution, Zhang Liangui explained that since Jang controlled North Korea's intelligence and had many supporters, Kim Jong-un would likely take "decisive measures," namely execution, to deny Jang's followers any hope.¹² While no commentary objected to the execution on humanitarian grounds, Zhang in his January interview said he was "extremely shocked" by the "brutal methods" employed to resolve the issue. Articles often noted that Jang was the most recent in a long string of purges, as *Caijing* reported that four of the eight palm bearers at Kim Jong-il's funeral, widely seen as the appointed supporters of Kim Jong-un, had already been purged before Jang. Yet *Caijing* asserted the surprise at Jang's purge far surpassed that towards any of the previous four.

Beyond his economic crimes, the editorials debated the "real reason" for Jang's purge. *Phoenix Weekly* and *Caijing* cited foreign media reports claiming the unofficial reason was his relationship with Kim Jong-nam, Kim Jong-il's oldest son and thus Kim Jong-un's older half-brother, stemming from allegations that they cooperated in plotting a coup together to overthrow the ruling Kim.¹³ This contrasts with Western reporting that the purge was due to disputes over profits from North Korean exports.¹⁴ Zhang Liangui avoided questions about Kim Jong-nam and said Jang was purged for three reasons, echoing North Korea's official list: political reasons, namely grabbing power and having a faction; economic reasons, for overextending his hand and controlling too much; and his lifestyle of women and drugs. Zhang ultimately concluded it was political reasons that were Jang's downfall.¹⁵ *Phoenix Weekly* cited

¹⁰ Pu Jianyi is Director of the Center for Korean Peninsula Issues Studies at the Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, under the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

¹¹ Pu was quoted in the article about Zhang Liangui's interview. See: "Zhang Liangui: As Jang Song-thaek's power is weakened, Kim Jong-un's Power Will Inevitably Increase," *Phoenix Online*, December 3, 2013.

¹² This is an excerpt from another interview by Zhang Liangui. See: "Jang Song-thaek's Fall is a Mystery, Expert Says 'Execution' Is Relatively Likely," *Beijing Youth Daily*, December 11, 2013.

¹³ Of note, Kim Jong-nam lives in China, mainly Macau, but reportedly spends time in Beijing as well. The popular rumor suggests Kim Jong-nam was passed over for succession, despite Asian tradition of succession by the oldest son, because he was caught attempting to visit the Japanese Disneyworld on a fake passport. He spoke out against the hereditary succession to his younger brother and also said the North Korean government would not last long.

See: "Doubts on North Korea From Dead Leader's Son," *Associated Press*, January 18, 2012.

See also: "Jang executed for meeting with Kim Jong Nam, says expert," *NK News*, December 13, 2013.

See also: "Kim Jong-un's Older Brother 'Lying Low,'" *Chosun Ilbo*, December 11, 2013.

¹⁴ Choe Sang-hun and David E. Sanger, "Korea Execution Is Tied to Clash Over Businesses," *New York Times*, December 23, 2013.

¹⁵ "Jang Song-thaek's Fall is a Mystery, Expert Says 'Execution' Is Relatively Likely," *Beijing Youth Daily*, December 11, 2013.

many scholars as saying North Korea had no right to be upset with China and that the accusations of Jang selling off resources and sovereignty were not true.

The surprising purge naturally left scholars debating the outside world's understanding of North Korea and how well analysts can assess the country's leadership, calling for patience in assessing the final outcome and impact of the purge. *Caijing* cited an unnamed NGO worker in North Korea as saying that North Korea's behavior is always unexpected and leaves observers and government analysts confused. Zhang Liangui described North Korea as mysterious.¹⁶ In contrast, *Global Times* asserted that even though Kim Jong-un has done things that shock the world, "his political logic for consolidating power has been clear." Cui Yingjiu told *Caijing*, "the correctness of the decision will require several months of observation" to reach a final conclusion. *Global Times* claimed that it is too early to guess North Korea's real attitude towards economic cooperation, while *Caijing* attempted to establish a benchmark for future events by asserting that Kim's treatment of Jang's faction will be a telling sign for the world.¹⁷

The shock of the purge served to remind scholars that North Korea is still the world's "hermit kingdom" and China must rely on trust for many agreements with the North. Seeking to delve beyond the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' party line that relations were normal and the event was simply North Korea's "internal affair" by interviewing one Peking University scholar anonymously, *Ta Kung-Pao* cited the scholar as saying "Kim Jong-un has likely lost the Chinese leadership's trust," echoing sentiment from *Phoenix Weekly*.¹⁸ *Ta Kung-Pao* placed the anonymous scholar's more blunt comments in contrast with the standard refrain from Wang Junsheng, a Chinese Academy of Science researcher, who said "China won't interfere with North Korea's internal affairs [and] the Jang Song-thaek affair won't impact China-North Korea relations." *Ta Kung-Pao*'s anonymous scholar asserted that Chinese leaders value stability above all else, so they will be watching Kim's next move. *Global Times* asserted that the damage to China's trust had already occurred and the way for North Korea to avoid prolonging the damage is to answer the world's questions. Yet revealing the underlying thinking in Beijing, one diplomatic source told *Ta Kung-Pao* that "even though it's hard to trust Kim Jong-un, it's even harder to find a replacement."

Domestic Politics Plays Both Ways

Chinese analysis focused not only on the implications for North Korea's domestic politics, but also the possible reverberations across the border in Beijing and broader Chinese society. Striking its typical mix of party-line rhetoric and nationalism, *Global Times* did follow the government

¹⁶ "Jang Song-thaek's Fall is a Mystery, Expert Says 'Execution' Is Relatively Likely," *Beijing Youth Daily*, December 11, 2013.

¹⁷ Of note, South Korean media reported Jang's family was also killed, including children, keeping with an established practice in North Korea to kill three generations of purged officials' families. See: "All relatives of Jang executed too: sources," *Yonhap*, January 26, 2014.

¹⁸ For an analysis of China's official reaction to the purge, see: Mu Chunshan, "China's Official Response To Jang Song-Thaek's Execution: An Analysis," *The Diplomat*, December 21, 2013.

line that the purge was North Korea's "internal affair," yet stayed true to its nationalist roots by adding, "but the vast majority of the Chinese public is disgusted."¹⁹ At the same time, *Global Times* attempted to blunt the criticism of North Korea by claiming Pyongyang likely did not intend to insult the Chinese public so the impact on China was merely a negative side effect. Going beyond the government line to explain why the Jang affair should be left alone as North Korea's internal affair, *Ta Kung-Pao* drew lessons from China's support for a failed coup against North Korea's founder and Kim Jong-un's grandfather, Kim Il-sung, in 1956, known as the August Faction Incident (8月宗派事件, *bayue zongpai shijian*).²⁰

Ta Kung-Pao linked the execution and China's Cultural Revolution, asserting that some believe Chinese President Xi Jinping was likely disgusted with Jang's purge due to his own history during the Cultural Revolution. The editorial recalled Xi's father, Xi Zhongxun, an ally of Deng Xiaoping and a Politburo member from 1982 to 1988, was attacked as anti-party during the Cultural Revolution, causing hardship for his family. The article did not mention that due to his father's own purge, Xi Jinping was sent to the countryside for six years and his older sister reportedly committed suicide during the Cultural Revolution. The article bordered on sympathizing with Jang, saying he was treated like many Chinese politicians and scholars who were forced to wear the hat of "anti-party" (反党, *fandang*) and "counter-revolutionary" (反革命, *fan geming*) during the Cultural Revolution and became victims. Zhang Liangui's interviewer drew a connection between the Jang affair and China's most famous purge, that of Mao Zedong's second appointed successor, Lin Biao, in 1971 during the Cultural Revolution.²¹ Lin died when his plane crashed while he was fleeing the country, reportedly after a failed coup attempt. His political purge came only after his death, when he was denounced by Mao as counter-revolutionary, but many Chinese people pinpoint the Lin Biao affair as one pivotal moment when they lost faith in Mao and the ideals of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Zhang responded that "one possibility" was that the North Korean would lose faith in the Kim regime's propaganda, but that the lack of information on public opinion makes it difficult to determine.

The Chinese coverage was also marked by what was ignored. Likely owing to Jang's prominent role in the economic and political more than the military sphere for China-North Korea relations, as well as remaining censorship issues within domestic media, the impact was not discussed in terms of military-to-military relations or the North's nuclear program. Despite long-standing Chinese fears of the United States' intentions towards North Korea

vis-à-vis China dating back to the Korean War, the issue of U.S.-China relations and U.S.-North Korea relations were both avoided. This reflects the commentators' focus on the domestic and bilateral implications for North Korea's stability, economic policies and relationship with China rather than external issues.

The Future Is Still Bright

While there was some hesitation over the short-term trajectory of economic relations, most analysts think the long-term outlook is inevitably positive. Renmin University professor Jin Canrong asserted to *Ta Kung-Pao* that "North Korea's domestic stability is more worrying than China-North Korea relations." *Global Times* did not think the economic relationship would change, since it flows from the political relationship and that will remain unaffected by the execution. Zhang Liangui asserted that Jang's downfall would have an impact, especially if the economic agreements do not continue, but observers must watch for the North's new policies. Speaking to *Phoenix Weekly*, Jilin University professor Zhang Huizhi said North Korea only has one country interested in developing Rason, namely China, due to geographic reasons and its own conditions. Zhang Huizhi added that the overall relationship would definitely be impacted, but only to a limited degree since the purge was the result of an internal power struggle. Zhang Liangui noted that if North Korea tears up the Rason agreement with its closest partner, then no other country would dare venture into North Korea. *Global Times* agreed that North Korea cannot replace China—so as long as Beijing doesn't interfere in Pyongyang's internal affairs and Pyongyang feels safe, North Korea would not damage their relationship. Jin Qiang told *Phoenix Weekly* Rason was progressing well but asserted the Islands zone was "waiting on the tone" of the leaders. Jin Qiang cautioned that if the purge of Jang's associates extends to North Korean officials in Rason, then the economic relationship will be impacted by the damage done to personal relationships. Jin Qiang found hope in the 14 new zones announced in October 2013 as evidence of Kim Jong-un's focus on economic development and reform, concluding in the long run that Jang's purge won't affect Kim's economic policies.

Global Times ended on a positive note with a veiled threat, concluding their analysis had been pessimistic and China "trusts Pyongyang to have enough strategic clarity" to maintain the relationship and honor past economic agreements.

¹⁹ For a translation of selected online Chinese reactions to the purge, see:

Tanya, "Kim Jong-un's Uncle Purged and Executed, Chinese Reactions," *China Smack*, December 17, 2013.

²⁰ For more information about the failed coup attempt and China's involvement, see:

James Pearson, *New Evidence on North Korea in 1956*, Rep. (Cold War International History Project: Washington, DC), 2007.

²¹ For more information on Lin Biao's career and death, see:

Orville Shell, "A Chinese Puzzle Missing Some Pieces," Rev. of *The Conspiracy And Death Of Lin Biao*, by Yao Ming-le, *New York Times*, May 15, 1983.

See also: Qui Jin, *The Culture of Power: The Lin Biao Incident in the Cultural Revolution*, (Stanford University Press: Stanford), 1999.