

North Korea's Recent Moves Alters the Situation in Northeast Asia

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North Korea had escaped the international media's focus for some time since the Islamic State and Ukraine captured global limelight. But recently North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, who pulled off a 40-day vanishing act before resurfacing, has sparked widespread speculation. Furthermore, in October, three senior North Korean leaders, including the country's No. 2 Hwang Pyong-so, made a whirlwind visit to the South and held a luncheon meeting with South Korean Prime Minister Chung Hong-won and other officials, which revealed that relations between the two Koreas might be thawing. These moves have again drawn the world's attention to North Korean politics and the evolvement of international relations in Northeast Asia.

Last year Kim Jong-un, born in 1983, speedily executed his uncle Jang Song-thaek, then the country's No. 2, and brutally purged his children, brothers and grandchildren. The direct relatives of Jang, including even young children, were put to death by Kim's order. However since September 3rd, this tyrannical and ostentatious leader was uncharacteristically shy from public view; he was absent from both the second session of the 13th Supreme People's Assembly on September 25th and a meeting held by the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) on October 7 to mark the 17th anniversary of late leader Kim Jong-il's election as WPK's general secretary. He even failed to attend the WPK's 69th anniversary, nor did he visit the shrines of his father and grandfather. North Korea's introduction of a ban on new travel passes to leave or enter the

country's capital Pyongyang on September 27th further fueled speculation about the stability of Kim's regime.

On the other hand, however, after eradicating Jang's faction and its remnants, Kim's government has, contrary to its previous practices, kick-started its own "global diplomacy." Like Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's government, Kim's regime has been busy sending global-trotting delegations to visit countries all over the world. In his trip to China, North Korean Premier Choe Yong-rim met with several Chinese leaders in Beijing before visiting Shanghai and Jiangsu. Foreign Minister Ri Su-yong, who was sworn in less than six months ago, has visited the U.S., Russia and five countries in Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia since August 10th. He even made a 10-day visit to Siberian provinces to further strengthen trade relations between North Korea and Russia through a series of economic cooperation projects.

It is noteworthy that shortly before Ri visited Russian, he led North Korea's delegation to attend the General Assembly of the United Nations (UNGA) in New York. It was the first time since 1999 that a North Korean foreign minister attended the annual forum, a 15-year hiatus. At the UNGA Ri met with UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, President of the General Assembly Sam Kutesa, and the presidents of South Africa, Mongolia, and Indonesia. He also held talks with the foreign ministers of Qatar, Egypt, and Spain, and even tried to make contact

with American officials in the hope that he may attend a meeting presided over by US Secretary of State John Kerry. The US delegation, however, rejected Ri's overture. In the meantime, Kang Sok-ju, international affairs secretary of the WPK Central Committee, began a tour to Germany, Belgium, Switzerland, and Italy, which would be closely followed by Ri's visit to Switzerland. These diplomatic gestures have attracted intense international attention.

Moreover, as Japan eased sanctions on North Korea, the Japanese and North Korean governments had held director-general-level talks in Shenyang, China on September 29th. The diplomatic negotiation was attended by Junichi Ihara, director-general of the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau, and Song Il-ho, North Korea's ambassador for normalization of ties with Japan. On the agenda was the abduction of Japanese nationals by North Korean agents, but it was reported that the representatives also reached an agreement on the implementation of a series of plans to improve bilateral relations.

What's more surprising is that Hwang Pyong-so, vice chairman of North Korea's National Defense Commission, Choe Ryong Hae, WPK secretary, and Kim Yang Gon, director of the WPK United Front Department, chartered a plane for a whirlwind one-day visit to South Korea on October 4. They held a luncheon meeting with South Korean Prime Minister Chung Hong-won and other officials. The delegates agreed to resume senior-level talks in late October or early November, a sign that there may be a thaw in inter-Korean relations. Hwang assumed the directorship of the General Political Bureau of the Korean People's Army in May, which put him

in charge of North Korea's 1.2 million-strong military. Hwang, who was just elected as vice chairman of North Korea's National Defense Commission by the country's Supreme People's Assembly on September 25th, is currently North Korea's No. 2 after Kim Jong-un. Sending such a high-level delegation to visit the South has been interpreted as North Korea's intention to improve bilateral relations.

The unusual frequency of North Korea's diplomatic activities shows that the country is about to change its foreign policy tack. Whether the cause was Kim's shifting attitude or some seismic change in North Korea's political situation is uncertain. Mired in the quagmires of the Middle East and Eastern Europe, the U.S. has hoped that China and South Korea will take over the handling of North Korea's nuclear threat. Indeed China has taken some preliminary steps to help stabilize the situation on the Korea peninsula over the past one year. Now that inter-Korean relations have seen some progress, one could surmise that tensions on the Korean peninsula will continue to abate and that the six-party talks would restart before long. **B**

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