

The Implications of Jang Sung-taek's Execution: Can North Korea Transform Itself?

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Interviewee

Richard Bush

The execution of Jang Sung-taek in December 2013 by his nephew, the young North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, sparked fears among the international community that it signaled the end to any hope for reform inside the beleaguered country. There have also been concerns among the international community that the deadly purge could create instability that manifests itself in another nuclear test or conventional arms provocation against South Korea. Following the first part of a Smart Q&A mini-series on Jang's execution [held by Ezra Vogel](#), Richard Bush of The Brookings Institution visited the East Asia Institute on January 23 to discuss the implications of North Korea's recent internal political moves on the future path of the regime and their effect on U.S.-China cooperation. He concludes with an analysis of the U.S. policy of "strategic patience" toward North Korea.

Q1: What strategic path do you think Kim Jong-un will take following the execution of Jang Sung-taek?

A1: "Kim Jong-un probably has greater self-confidence and feels greater freedom of action."

- After ridding the regime of Jang and those in his circle of power, Kim Jong-un may be tempted to pursue some kind of provocation in order to demonstrate to the North Korean military that they are true partners with him. Kim may feel that he owes the military a debt for their support, or that he must satisfy the military if he wishes to pursue a balance of the military-first (*Songun*) policy and economic development. If either case is correct, then he must determine how to best reward the military, whether through a larger budget, further emphasis on the nuclear program, or a conventional-weapons provocation against South Korea. However, any provocation will carry negative consequences.
- There is a possibility that Kim will continue to pursue only economic development that channels benefits directly to elites in Pyongyang. It is easy to channel rewards solely to the political elite, and the regime has been successful in maintaining stability in the past through this method. It is far more difficult to conduct economic development that aids the entire society because that kind of progress does not reap immediate rewards. It is unclear what role Jang played as a conduit for North Korean elites' perks, but the regime will most likely follow a mixed course of action: continued funneling of benefits to elites along with some economic development aimed at benefiting society as a whole. The success of this policy will determine future plans.

This product presents a policy-oriented summary of the Smart Q&A.

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Q2: With the removal of Jang Sung-taek, do you foresee an increase in the chances that North Korea will pursue some provocative action in the near future?

A2: "China will be urging restraint on North Korea and trying to persuade the regime not to engage in these sorts of activities."

- It is not clear if Jang played a role of moderation within the regime, but conventional wisdom suggests that his removal could lead to a new round of nuclear testing or a limited conventional military strike. China will continue to advise North Korea to avoid provocations, but Chinese leadership is uncertain how much influence it has over the regime in the absence of Jang. Therefore, the U.S. and South Korea must assume that some of the factors that would limit North Korean aggression have been removed and subsequently strengthen deterrence capabilities. It is necessary to remind North Korea that any kind of provocation will have consequences.

Q3: What is your forecast for U.S.-China cooperation regarding North Korea in the coming year?

A3: "One key test in the U.S.-China relationship with respect to North Korea is the unknown of what North Korea is going to do in the security field."

- If North Korea does not conduct any kind of provocation in the near future – a nuclear test, missile launch, or limited conventional military attack against South Korea – or engage in harsh rhetoric, then the U.S. can gain some confidence that China is successfully restraining North Korea. The U.S. and China, however, differ on the purpose of any kind of negotiations. The U.S. seeks to pursue a more pragmatic course that emphasizes all talks should be productive and work toward an outcome. Furthermore, the U.S. believes that if it is not evident that talks will lead to a near-term outcome, then it must have confidence that they are moving in a direction that is amenable to U.S. interests. For greater U.S.-China cooperation on the issue, the U.S. needs to know that when North Korea makes commitments, it will abide by them.
- The U.S. has an appreciation for China's efforts to create a diplomatic track for nuclear negotiations with North Korea. There is a chance for progress if the two countries can discuss Chinese ideas for resuming the Six-Party Talks and alternate negotiation channels in-depth. It is important for the U.S. to encourage China that it can trust U.S. intentions and commitments. But, for the U.S., it would be easier to come to the negotiation table if North Korea was willing to discuss terms that the U.S. could find at least slightly attractive.

Q4: Is it possible to alter China's North Korea policy in a significant way?

A4: "Certain kinds of economic sanctions could create difficulties for China itself."

- In the past, China has seemed to be the most cooperative when U.S.-South Korea responses to North Korean provocations make China more vulnerable. One example is the Banco Delta Asia affair in 2007, in which the U.S. Treasury Department ordered all U.S. banks to sever ties with the bank for conducting transactions with North Korea. The Treasury blacklisting was effective in punishing North Korea for its money laundering, but it also created complications for China. It forced Chinese banks to choose between access to the U.S.-based international financial system or continued support of North Korea's trade. Through its past responses, China has shown that it will choose to favor its own security and economic growth over backing North Korea's unchanging current policies.

Q5: Have the Six-Party Talks become primarily a conflict management tool for North Korea? Why has the U.S. placed difficult conditions on North Korea in order to return to the Six-Party Talks?

A5: “The Six-Party Talks’ stated purpose is not for conflict management. ... [No need to] degrade this potentially useful mechanism by converting its [denuclearization] purpose.”

- Unfortunately, the Six-Party Talks have become a conflict management tool, which was not the original intent of the negotiations. The Talks’ fundamental goal of denuclearization has been lost as North Korea has pursued a series of actions that altered them into a venue for tempering a number of non-nuclear disputes. The purpose of the Six-Party Talks is more profound and more fundamental. It is crucial to maintain that original purpose in order to preserve the integrity of the Talks.
- Conflict management is necessary but should not be discussed at the Six-Party Talks. The U.S., rather, initiated the Leap Day Agreement as a conflict management tool in order to create understandings that would stabilize the relationship between the U.S. and North Korea and its neighbors. Regrettably, North Korea immediately violated the Leap Day Agreement, which has hampered attempts to create management tools outside of the Six-Party Talks. There is a significant amount of conflict management conducted through regular diplomacy as well, which further emphasizes the need to focus the Six-Party Talks back toward – and solely on – denuclearization.

Q6: How do you evaluate South Korean President Park Geun-hye’s policy of a “Trust-building Process on the Korean Peninsula,” also known as *Trustpolitik*?

A6: “In the United States, there is a lot of confidence in President Park’s approach to North Korea in that it’s based on principles [and] the long-term goal of denuclearization.”

- The U.S. has faith in Park’s North Korea policy because it is focused on achieving the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. The policy will also look for incentives that can create steps forward in inter-Korean relations, rather than avoiding all possibilities that require providing assistance to North Korea such as occurred during the previous Lee Myung-bak administration. It will maintain openness toward creating channels into North Korean society that can fulfill the human rights objectives upon which the U.S. places high priority. Overall, South Korea should remain confident that the U.S. will support it in this effort.

Q7: Are there any alternatives to the current U.S. policy toward North Korea of ‘strategic patience’?

A7: “If there is to be an adjustment in ‘sharpening choices,’ it is probably in the direction of increasing the disincentives and making life a little bit more difficult for North Korea.”

- The objective of the U.S. policy of ‘strategic patience’ or ‘sharpening choices’ is to change the policies of North Korea, which will take a long time to come to fruition. It will not produce effective results overnight, requiring the U.S. side to articulate its positions clearly and commit to a steady course of action. It is necessary to remain patient to achieve any changes in North Korean behavior, but this kind of ‘long game’ is difficult for a democratic society to pursue due to the nature of a democracy’s ever-changing leadership. Therefore, it is important to not substantially alter this policy just because there were no short-term changes witnessed.

- ‘Sharpening choices’ also requires a mix of incentives and disincentives in order to produce desired changes in North Korea’s actions. The U.S. hoped that the Leap Day Agreement would shape a set of circumstances that would force North Korea to come in line with international norms. The initiative failed, but it was better to try and not succeed rather than allow the situation to remain stagnant. Another option in adjusting ‘sharpening choices’ in order to propel North Korea toward beneficial changes is to increase disincentives that make life harder for the regime. The U.S., along with its allies, could strengthen unilateral sanctions against North Korea, which has already been discussed among the academic community.
- For the short term, however, it is unlikely to see a policy change in North Korea due to the recent leadership transition to Kim Jong-un. Due to the sudden succession of Kim following the death of his father, one can least expect any kind of new policy direction at this time because Kim feels an obligation to continue his father’s policies and needs to balance the different institutional forces within the regime while he builds his own power base. If there will be a fundamental policy change that is compatible with U.S. and South Korean interests, it will occur after Kim understands that it is self-contradictory to pursue economic development in tandem with the continued strengthening of the nuclear weapons program. This dual-path policy will not work and must be discarded, but it is not surprising that the regime persists in this course of action.

About the Interviewee

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