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Analysis

North Korea -- Personnel Shifts Underscore New Leadership's Commitment to Party

Personnel moves at the recent Party Conference and spring session of the legislature -- beyond Kim Jong Un's assumption of the top slots -- underscore the new leadership's continued commitment to revitalizing the Party as an institution and its confidence in managing the system. Though state media billed the moves merely as filling vacancies, the leadership quietly elevated or replaced almost one-third of the ruling Political Bureau, many through unannounced retirements or dismissals. The personnel changes occurred in military, internal security, and economic organizations and are not clustered in one area. Though personnel were added to the National Defense Commission (NDC), its relationship to the Political Bureau and Central Military Commission (CMC) remains unclear.

Although foreign media reporting on the North's 4th Party Conference and the subsequent gathering of the Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) focused on Kim Jong Un's taking the titles of first secretary of the Workers Party of Korea and first chairman of the NDC, the regime made significant personnel changes below Kim's level.

These personnel moves build on steps that Kim Jong Il took in his final year to strengthen the Party, and they suggest that the new leadership also sees the Party as an important instrument of governance during the transition. The extent of the changes indicates that the new leadership is confident in its ability to manage the regime and its key stakeholders.

- Almost half of the membership of the Political Bureau that Kim Jong Il put in place at the 3rd Party Conference in 2010 has shifted in one way or another. Four members moved up significantly. Seven appear to have been dismissed. One slipped significantly but still remains on the Political Bureau, and three have died, including Kim Jong Il (KCNA, 11 April).[1a]

- Kim Jong Il began revitalizing the Party's governing bodies in 2010, apparently as part of the effort to facilitate Kim Jong Un's succession. The elder Kim called a Party Conference in September of that year, the first major Party meeting of its kind in almost 30 years (KCNA, 28 September 2010).[2] Kim Jong Un debuted at the Conference, and the regime dramatically expanded the governing Political Bureau, which Kim Jong Il had allowed to atrophy since taking power in 1994.

[a] These assessments are based on state media coverage and leadership turnouts. While state media have reported the promotions, they have not specified the dismissals, and Pyongyang has yet to provide a formal and comprehensive list of the new Political Bureau.

Winners & Losers

Kim Jong Un's aunt and uncle continue their predictable ascent, but others appear to be rising and falling around them. It is difficult to call winners and losers in a closed system like the North's, but several officials clearly have gained status and probably influence.

Chief among them are **Choe Ryong Hae**, who jumped from being an alternate member of the Political Bureau to the top Presidium level. Promoted to vice marshal and director of the army's political department, Choe effectively has become the regime's top military authority after Kim Jong Un (*Rodong Sinmun*, 12 April).[3] He was also named CMC vice chairman. Not a professional soldier, Choe is thought to be very close to the Kim family and a confidante of the late Kim Jong Il.[b]

Kim Won Hong, who was not previously on the Political Bureau, was put in charge of the Ministry of State Security (MSS) and jumped to full membership on the Political Bureau (KCNA, 11 April).[4] Kim's high-profile appointment as head of the MSS is significant because the leadership previously has avoided publicly identifying the official in charge of the secret police.

Vice Marshal **Kim Jong Gak** moved up significantly, becoming a full Political Bureau member (*Rodong Sinmun*, 12 April).[5] He also was made head of the Ministry of People's Armed Forces right before the Party Conference. He appears to have replaced Kim Yong Chun in the leadership constellation.

Party Secretary **Pak To Chun**, a former provincial Party secretary who is now in charge of munitions industries, has also moved up (*Rodong Sinmun*, 12 April).[6] He was promoted from alternate to full member of the Political Bureau, leapfrogging a number of Party heavyweights in the process. He also went from last in the NDC membership rankings to first.

Longtime Kim Jong Il confidante **Hyon Chol Hae** was promoted to vice marshal and made a full Political Bureau member without a stint as an alternate (KCNA, 11 April).[7] He also was named vice minister of defense and put in charge of the Army's important logistics bureau.

[b] See Bradley K. Martin's *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader* (St. Martin's Press, 2004), p. 222

Among those who fell are senior Ministry of State Security Vice Minister U Tong Chuk, who appears to have been dropped from the Political Bureau and the NDC.

- Former defense industries chief Jon Pyong Ho also appears to have been eased out of the Political Bureau, presumably because of age, and replaced by Pak To Chun.

- The regime also seems to be moving in that direction with former People's Armed Forces Minister Kim Yong Chun, who lost the defense chief position but was made a Party department director. Kim is still an NDC vice chairman, but he slipped several spots in the Political Bureau rankings.

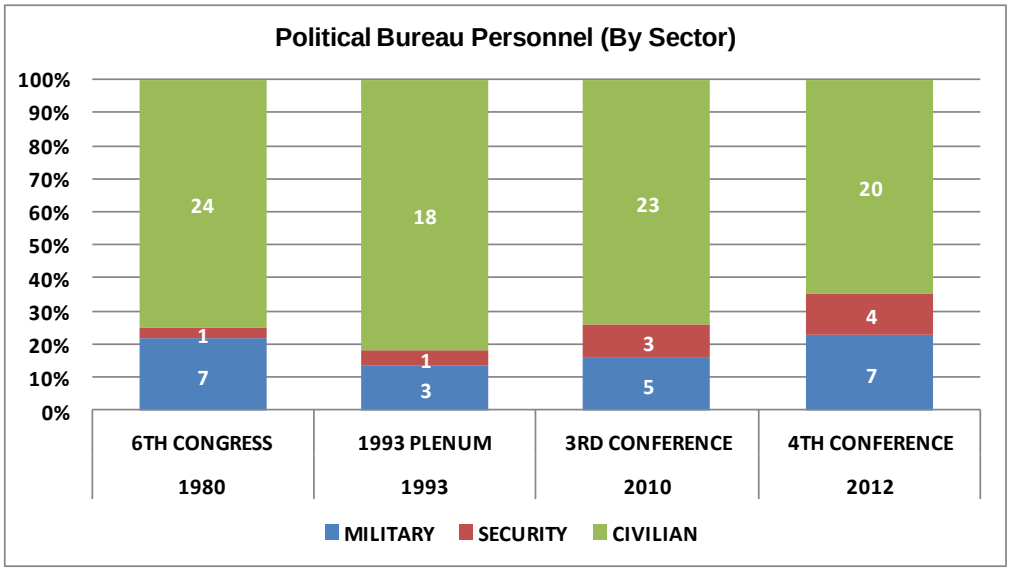
Age likely was a factor in some of the moves, but several older officials held on, and U Tong Chuk's relative youth -- at 69 he was one of the younger Political Bureau members -- did not stop his removal.

Military/Security Balance

The leadership is continuing the trend of blurring the distinction between military and internal security personnel on the one hand and civilian Party leaders on the other. The reason for the blending is not clear, but the regime since 2010 has conferred general-officer rank on several regime civilians.

- This time the regime named Choe Ryong Hae a vice marshal and put him in charge of the Army's influential political affairs department, which Kim Jong Il's trusted military advisor Jo Myong Rok once ran. Though not a professional soldier, Choe effectively now outranks Chief of Staff Ri Yong Ho, calling into question Ri's influence.

- At the same time, the regime has increased the percentage of military and internal security personnel on the Political Bureau to its highest level since before 1980. The two groups now make up more than a third of the total membership. In 2010, they represented a quarter of the group, which was the same share they had after the 1980 Party Congress.



Neither the Party Conference nor the subsequent Supreme People's Assembly clarified the role of the NDC or its relationship with the CMC. As expected, Kim Jong Un took the top NDC position, and the SPA named new lower-level appointments to the commission (Pyongyang radio, 14 April).[8]

- Kim Jong Il fostered the NDC as a key institution of his rule, and the regime portrays it as active in inter-Korean affairs. It has taken the lead in putting out hard-line statements criticizing President Lee Myung-bak's North Korea policy.

- The rise of the Party's CMC, which state media have been portraying as closely connected to Kim Jong Un since his public debut at the 3rd Party Conference, may have undercut the NDC's status to some extent. A Party institution, the CMC is typically listed ahead of the NDC in regime announcements, and the personalities on the CMC, including the new appointments, suggest it is more active and influential than the NDC. CMC members such as Kim Yong Chol and Kim Kyong Ok are known to be prominent advisers to Kim Jong Un.

Elevating Economic Team

Though it has received little attention, the Party Conference also appears to have expanded and added political heft to the regime's economic team. The moves likely reflect Kim Jong Un's increasing interest in the civilian economy, an area that up until recently he seemed only marginally involved with.

- Kim Jong Un's aunt, Kim Kyong Hui, rose, as did her husband Jang Song Thaek, and both have long been associated with economic projects (KCNA, 11 April).[9] Kim Kyong Hui now sits at the top of the full membership of the Political Bureau and was made a Party secretary. Jang has moved up to the full membership from his previous position as an alternate and up one spot in the NDC vice chairmen ranks, passing General O Kuk Ryol.

- The regime also appointed to the Political Bureau two officials from South Hamgyo'ng Province, which it has praised for economic improvements. It also named two new Party secretaries (including Kim Kyong Hui) who likely will have economic portfolios. Almost half of the party secretaries now focus on economic issues.

- Rehabilitated former reformist Premier Pak Pong Ju also moved up to become a full Party director, presumably over the light industry department (KCNA, 11 April).[10] In light of regime leadership's displeasure over Pak's management of the economy under the 2002 economic reforms and the controversy he attracted during his tenure as premier, his gradual rehabilitation underscores the leadership's trust in him and its reticence in disavowing new economic thinking in too strong of terms. His rebound also suggests that the leadership wants to highlight the importance it attaches to loyalty and competence in managing economic issues.

[1] [OSC | | OSC ID: KPP20120411971174 | 11 April 2012 | | KCNA Provides 'Brief History' of DPRK Officials 'Elected to Fill Vacancies' | | (U) | (U) | Pyongyang KCNA in English -- Official DPRK news agency. URL: http://www.kcna.co.jp]

[2] [OSC | | OSC ID: KPP20100928971127 | 28 September 2010 | | KCNA: WPK Conference Held in Pyongyang 28 Sep | | (U) | (U) | Pyongyang KCNA in English -- Official DPRK news agency. URL: http://www.kcna.co.jp]

[3] [OSC | | OSC ID: KPP20120413037001 | 12 April 2012 | | DPRK Party Organ Carries Brief History, Photo of Ch'oe Ryong-hae | | (U) | (U) | Pyongyang Rodong Sinmun Online in Korean -- Website of the daily of the Central Committee of the Workers Party of Korea; URL: http://www.rodong.rep.kp]

[4] [OSC | | OSC ID: KPP20120411971174 | 11 April 2012 | | KCNA Provides 'Brief History' of DPRK Officials 'Elected to Fill Vacancies' | | (U) | (U) | Pyongyang KCNA in English -- Official DPRK news agency. URL: http://www.kcna.co.jp]

[5] [OSC | | OSC ID: KPP20120413037002 | 12 April 2012 | | DPRK Party Organ Carries Brief History, Photo of Kim Jong Gak | | (U) | (U) | Pyongyang Rodong Sinmun Online in Korean -- Website of the daily of the Central Committee of the Workers Party of Korea; URL: http://www.rodong.rep.kp]

[6] [OSC | | OSC ID: KPP20120413037004 | 12 April 2012 | | DPRK Party Organ Carries Brief History, Photo of Pak To-ch'un | | (U) | (U) | Pyongyang Rodong Sinmun Online in Korean -- Website of the daily of the Central Committee of the Workers Party of Korea; URL: http://www.rodong.rep.kp]

[7] [OSC | | OSC ID: KPP20120411971174 | 11 April 2012 | | KCNA Provides 'Brief History' of DPRK Officials 'Elected to Fill Vacancies' | | (U) | (U) | Pyongyang KCNA in English -- Official DPRK news agency. URL: http://www.kcna.co.jp]

[8] [OSC | | OSC ID: KPP20120414029008 | 14 April 2012 | | DPRK Radio Reports on Personnel Appointment From Fifth Session of 12th SPA | | (U) | (U) | Pyongyang Korean Central Broadcasting Station in Korean -- DPRK state-run domestic radio network]

[9] [OSC | | OSC ID: KPP20120411971174 | 11 April 2012 | | KCNA Provides 'Brief History' of DPRK Officials 'Elected to Fill Vacancies' | | (U) | (U) | Pyongyang KCNA in English -- Official DPRK news agency. URL: http://www.kcna.co.jp]

[10] [OSC | | OSC ID: KPP20120411971148 | 11 April 2012 | | KCNA: Members of WPK Central Guidance Body Elected to Fill Vacancies, Elected And Appointed | | (U) | (U) | Pyongyang KCNA in English -- Official DPRK news agency. URL: http://www.kcna.co.jp]

APPENDIX A

WPK CC POLITICAL BUREAU

The Political Bureau is the highest decision-making body in the Workers Party of Korea (WPK). It decides and directs all Party activities and projects between Party Congresses in the name of the WPK Central Committee (CC). With the exception of National Defense Commission Member Paek Se Bong, the entire NDC is represented in the Political Bureau. Photos are in order of formal Political Bureau rank, as reported by state media at the 15 April parade marking Kim Il Sung's birth centennial.

Presidium Members

Kim Jong Un
Apr 2012

Kim Yong Nam
Sep 2010

Choe Yong Rim
Sep 2010

Choe Ryong Hae
Apr 2012

Ri Yong Ho
Sep 2010

National Defense Commission
New Appointment
Promotion

Members

Kim Kyong Hui
Sep 2010

Kim Jong Gak
Apr 2012

Jang Song Thaek
Apr 2012

Pak To Chun
Apr 2012

Kim Yong Chun
Sep 2010

Kim Kuk Thae
Sep 2010

Kim Ki Nam
Sep 2010

Choe Thae Pak
Sep 2010

Yang Hyong Sop
Sep 2010

Ri Yong Mu
Sep 2010

Kang Sok Ju
Sep 2010

Hyon Chol Hae
Apr 2012

Kim Won Hong
Apr 2012

Ri Myong Su
Apr 2012

Alternate Members

O Kuk Ryol
Apr 2012

Kim Yang Gon
Sep 2010

Kim Yong Il
Sep 2010

Thae Jong Su
Sep 2010

Kim Phyong Hae
Sep 2010

Mun Kyong Dok
Sep 2010

Ju Kyu Chang
Apr 2009

Kwak Pom Gi
Apr 2012

Kim Chang Sop
Sep 2010

Ro Tu Chol
Apr 2012

Ri Pyong Sam
Apr 2012

Jo Yon Jun
Apr 2012

APPENDIX A

WPK CENTRAL MILITARY COMMISSION

The Workers Party of Korea Central Military Commission (CMC) is the Party's top military body. Historically, it has overseen the implementation of the Party's military policies, guided the development and production of munitions, and has had command and control over North Korea's armed forces. It is unclear what role the CMC currently plays in management of the military, given the prominence of the National Defense Commission and the enhanced status of the CMC under Kim Jong Un. The current formal ranking of the CMC membership is unclear. Officials are listed in the order reported at the September 2010 3rd Party Conference, with the exception of new appointees, who are appended in the rank order reported at the April 2012 4th Party Conference.

Chairman

Kim Jong Un
Apr 2012

Vice Chairmen

Ri Yong Ho
Sep 2010

Choe Ryong Hae
Apr 2012

National Defense Commission
New Appointment
Promotion

Members

Kim Yong Chun
Oct 1995

Kim Jong Gak
Sep 2010

Kim Myong Guk
Feb 1995

Kim Kyong Ok
Sep 2010

Kim Won Hong
Sep 2010

Jong Myong Do
Sep 2010

Ri Pyong Chol
Sep 2010

Choe Pu Il
Sep 2010

Kim Yong Chol
Sep 2010

Yun Jong Rin
Sep 2010

Ju Kyu Chang
Sep 2010

Choe Sang Ryo
Sep 2010

Choe Kyong Song
Sep 2010

Jang Song Thaek
Sep 2010

Hyon Chol Hae
Apr 2012

Ri Myong Su
Apr 2012

Kim Rak Gyom
Apr 2012

WPK CC SECRETARIAT

The WPK CC Secretariat is the core of Party organization. It discusses and directs personnel issues and all other Party activities and executes Party policies. The current formal ranking of the Secretariat is unclear. Officials are listed in the order reported at the September 2010 3rd Party Conference, with the exception of new appointees, who are appended in the rank order reported at the April 2012 4th Party Conference.

First Secretary

Kim Jong Un
Apr 2012

National Defense Commission

New Appointment

Secretaries

Kim Ki Nam
Oct 2007

Choe Thae Bok
Dec 2001

Choe Ryong Hae
Sep 2010

Mun Kyong Dok
Sep 2010

Pak To Chun
Sep 2010

Kim Yong Il
Sep 2010

Kim Yang Gon
Sep 2010

Kim Phyong Hae
Sep 2010

Thae Jong Su
Sep 2010

Kim Kyong Hui
Apr 2012

Kwak Pom Gi
Apr 2012

APPENDIX A

NATIONAL DEFENSE COMMISSION

The National Defense Commission (NDC) is the supreme organ of the state. The Ministry of People's Armed Forces and Ministry of People's Security fall organizationally under the NDC, and the Ministry of State Security appears to be under Kim Jong Un's direct control as head of the NDC. In April 2012, Kim Jong Un was named NDC first chairman following the ceremonial retirement of Kim Jong Il's title as chairman. Kim Won Hong is the first publically named head of the Ministry of State Security since 1987. Paek Se Bong is the only NDC member who is not on the Political Bureau of the Workers Party of Korea. Photos are in order of formal NDC rank, as reported by state media during the 5th session of the 12th Supreme People's Assembly on 13 April 2012.

WPK Political Bureau | New Appointment

First Chairman

Kim Jong Un
Apr 2012

Vice Chairmen

Kim Yong Chun
Apr 2007

Ri Yong Mu
Sep 1998

Jang Song Thaek
Jun 2010

O Kuk Ryol
Feb 2009

Members

Pak To Chun
Apr 2011

Kim Jong Gak
Apr 2009

Ju Kyu Chang
Apr 2009

Paek Se Bong
Apr 2009

Choe Ryong Hae
Apr 2012

Kim Won Hong
Apr 2012

Ri Myong Su
Apr 2012

Ministry of State Security

Kim Won Hong
Apr 2012

Ministry of People's Security

Ri Myong Su
Apr 2011

Ministry of People's Armed Forces

Kim Jong Gak
Apr 2012