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Execution of middle to senior officials in North Korea are common and normally do not send disturbing signals beyond the country's borders. The execution of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's uncle last month, however, was no normal execution. It shocked the world.

The uncle, Jang Song-Thaek, was married to Kim Jong-un's aunt and Kim Jong Il's sister, Kim Kyong-Hui. He was, therefore, a part of the Kim family and should have been in the inner circle. In the last one year, however, he seems to have gradually fallen out.

Yet, when Kim Jong-Il died in November, 2011 and was succeeded by his son, 28 year old Kim Jong-un, Jang Song-Thaek appeared on the scene, acting as regent to the young Kim Jong-un. Jang was quickly seen as the No.2 in the leadership. This was somewhat of an aberration for the Kim dynasty, as there has never been a second in command. A No.2 is usually a designated successor to the top leader, and the Kim dynasty simply cannot take such a risk. That does not mean that Jang was eliminated for this reason only. There may be several reasons. Jang Song-Thaek's crimes listed by the state media were mainly economic, one of which was selling coal at a cheap price, since Jang had become an economic czar. He controlled North Korea's foreign business or, rather, foreign earnings by various means.

Although no country was named as the recipient of Pyongyang's coal export, most of it went to China. There were several other charges of economic malpractice including one that related to the Rason Special Economic Zone involving China.

The unprecedented publicity given to Jang Song-Thaek's execution (by firing) along with that of his close associates was a message to China. The North Korean Military strongly disapproved Jang trying to implement Chinese type of economic reforms at Beijing's persuasion. If Pyongyang lost in these deals, it meant China gained by manipulation and Jang was a willing collaborator of Beijing in exploiting North

Korea.

North Korea was in the path of a controlled economic reform initiated by Kim Jong-Il during his last years. Jong –Il quietly visited China several times and was also taken to China's Special Economic Zone in Shenzhen. It would be interesting to recall that during his return from China by train on such a visit in 2004, there was a major electrical explosion in a North Korean railway station. But the explosion occurred just after Jong-Il's train had passed through. The incident was hushed up lest foreign intelligence agencies monitoring North Korea suspected it was an attempt on Kim's life by North Korean hardliners in the army. The hardliners were against the kind of economic reforms that China had undertaken as this policy would weaken their power.

In the last three to four years China-North Korea relations have shown increasing strains. Especially after a North Korean torpedo sank a South Korean frigate killing 45 sailors, and artillery bombing of a small South Korean Island, Chinese strategic and policy experts openly called for downgrading relations with Pyongyang. In their analysis China was losing more than gaining in this relationship.

But the Chinese leadership and the communist Party, while constrained, continued to keep the Pyongyang regime afloat. The Chinese sent messages of disapproval by periodically reducing oil supply. North Korea depends on China for 90 per cent of its energy needs and 50 per cent of food. But they are also aware that in pursuing an earlier strategy of using North Korea as an instrument of strategic threat to the US and Japan, Beijing had dug itself into a hole.

A recent article by retired Chinese General, Wang Hongguang which appeared in the *Huanqiu Shibao* briefly, described the dangers of radioactive fallout on China from North Korea's nuclear and missile programme. The Korean denuclearization talks appear to have receded further. The stability of North Korea is in Beijing's interest for more than one reason including ideology.

Beijing continues to send messages of disapproval to Pyongyang's dangerous policies. No Chinese leader attended the commemoration of the second anniversary of Kim Jong-Il's death. The Chinese ambassador was the only one to attend. This is a very big comedown in the relationship.

The worst possible message China sent to Pyongyang following the Jang Song-Thaek incident was a small report in the Hong Kong daily *Wen Wei Po*. **The report said that Jang and his partners were not executed by firing, but they were stripped naked and fed to 120 hound dogs kept hungry for three days.**

This report has generally been dismissed and not picked up by the mainland media either. This is not surprising. *Wen Wei Po* is not “just” a Hong Kong tabloid. It is China owned and is very much used by Beijing in media warfare and sending messages. Jang and his partners may very well have been executed by a firing squad. What *Wen Wei Po* said was what Beijing thought of the North Korean regime. That these people were still in the medieval age and deserve no empathy.

But the Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson describing the executions briefly as an internal affair of North Korea and hoping for stability says China cannot do anything more at the moment.

“Dear leader” Kim Jong-Il was interested in opening up North Korea. Except for energy, North Korea is sitting on billions of dollars of raw materials. He died and could not take his dreams forward.

Kim Jong-un is only thirty and celebrated his birthday this month with a visit by an American basketball team, playing exhibition games. This is the second visit of this team led by a former NBA star Denis Rodman.

Are these toys given to the thirty year old leader to play with, while the army keeps its tight control? Was Jang Song-Thaek eliminated, not for corruption but for trying to open up North Korea’s economy and introducing economic reforms? Time will tell, as they say.

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