



Kim Jong Eun and Ri Yong Ho (2d Right) shortly before Ri Yong Ho's sudden dismissal from all posts due to "illness". Photo courtesy KCNA

In examining North Korea's militarized political culture, evoking Stalinism is never necessarily an inappropriate baseline for analysis. However, there are also times when old Chinese strategic philosophies prove their merit as a framework for understanding North Korean politics. Today's saying in point: 兔死狗烹: "When the hares have been caught, the dogs are boiled," or, in other words: "Trusted aides are eliminated once they have outlived their usefulness." It may be that Ri had served his purpose.

Whether or not he has been properly "boiled," Kim Jong Un's formerly close advisor Ri Yong Ho is assuredly no longer in the hunt in North Korea. Arriving to examine the case of Ri Yong Ho is Dr. Nicolas Levi, who brings as ever his in-depth knowledge of the DPRK ruling elite along with a look back at the now-purged General's May 2012 voyage to Laos and its implications. -- Adam Cathcart, Editor-in-Chief

Ri Yong Ho: North Korean Scapegoat?

by Nicolas Levi, Ph. D.

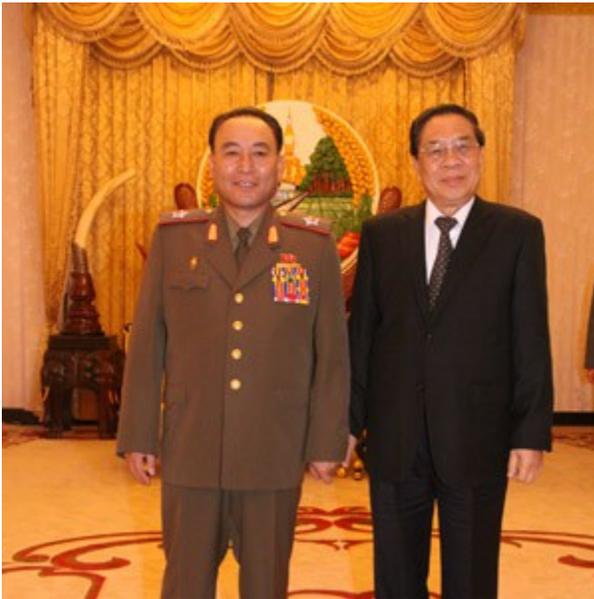
Kim Jong-un has strengthened his grip on North Korea's military by sacking his former protector and promoting a lesser-known military figure, Hyon Yong Chol. On July 15, Ri Yong Ho was relieved of all his Party duties (Politburo Standing Committee membership, Politburo membership, and Party Central Military Commission vice-chairmanship) and subsequently replaced by Hyon Yong Chol, who is not well-known outside North Korean leadership circles. What does this step mean for the North Korean leadership? And why was Ri Yong Ho sacked? Here are some thoughts:

According to [the Chosun Ilbo](#), Ri Yong Ho, the former Chief of Staff of the Korean People's Army, may have been attacked last week then injured or even killed during an incident. Some intelligence analysts believe Ri was injured or killed in the confrontation. While this colorful story cannot be confirmed, it may explain why Ri Yong Ho so abruptly disappeared, and was so quickly replaced by Hyon Yong Chol. Hyon, who is known to be a member of the Jang Song Taek faction,

used to cooperate with Jang Song Kil, a deceased and former general of the North-Korean army and Jang Song Taek's brother. This report seems to be mostly fantasy, but it is possible.

As recently as 8-11 May 2012, Ri was trusted enough to lead a delegation to Laos. Even though the trip did not receive much international attention, North Koreans are not often sent abroad and only a very select few are trusted enough to lead a delegation abroad. While in Laos, Ri met with the [Lao President](#) Choummaly Sayasone, Prime Minister Thongsing Thammavong, and Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of National Defense Lieutenant General Duangchay Phichit. According to other sources, Ri also visited a dam and the Lao Military Academy.

The Lao are likely wondering if any of the agreements signed are still valid. If the agreements come to fruition, it is likely the case that Kim Jong Eun purged Ri. If everyone from the Korean People's Army (KPA) who was with Ri on that visit "disappears" it is more likely that Ri was perceived as trying to lead a coup or take some kind of action inimical to Kim Jong Eun. "Guilty by association is guilty enough" seems to run through the Songbun system in North Korea.



Lao President (Right) and Ri Yong Ho in Laos. May 2012. Picture courtesy Lao Voices

However, other analysts lean toward the idea that such an open power struggle was rather impossible. Ri Yong Ho probably played a leading role in preparing the rocket launch that was intended to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the birth of Kim Il Sung in April. That same launch would have also announced to the world Kim Jong Eun was fully grasping all the levers of power. However, in my opinion, Ri Yong Ho was only an advisor to Kim Jong Un; that's why he was directly removed by Kim Jong Eun.

Party, Army, and Precedent | The army is also an organization where the leadership changes with unpredictable regularity. Analyzing what happened during the last years, we notice many important generals were removed and disappeared for a few months or years. For example, O Kuk Ryol, Kim Il Chol, Kim Kyok Shik, and Kim Jong Jun. Kim Il Chol was a retired KPA Vice Marshal

and National Defense Commission who disappeared from the political scene in 2010. O Kuk Ryol also disappeared for a few months in 2010.

Another element which may confirm the previous mentioned theory is the fact that there is no factionalization within the army. All factions were removed and purged by Kim Jong Il. The Workers' Party absolutely rules North Korea; thus, while the KPA (Korean People's Army) is very strong, it is also politically reliable and the army of the Party.

There are a multitude of other reasons that may factor in: Kim Jong Un may have removed Ri Yong Ho because he wanted to show that he's a strong and confident leader who can get rid of anybody he wants; he needs to reinforce his image as a mysterious leader; he needs to be substantively different, not just different in appearance. Appearing with figures of Mickey Mouse and Winnie the Pooh during a musical show and cranking the theme from *Rocky* may pre-sage change, but these are ultimately smoke and mirrors (literally), not thunder and lightning. Sacking the highest ranked military officer and one who was appointed by his father indicates firm veto control, while appointing a new highest ranking military officer indicates freedom of action, in addition to veto authority.

In my eyes, no matter the reasons for Ri Yong Ho's disappearance, Kim Jong Un proved he is confident and that he is the one with the power, control and authority to make such decisions in North Korea. In the meantime, keeping an eye on his colleagues who went to Laos with him, and the agreements signed while there, may be one of the few data points we have which could give further indications for what the purge was all about.



Ri Yong Ho leading a delegation to Laos. Did this foreshadow going away? Period.

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