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Kim Jong-un's New Entourage

By Andy Lim

Understanding Pyongyang Inner Circle

Studying Pyongyang leadership is an unenviable task, much like Kremlinologists who received no credit for their work after they failed to predict the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, but it should not be a thankless one. When confronted with a regime as closed and as secretive as Pyongyang's, the only way for scholars to get around the fog is to capitalize on the little information available, although sometimes those information might turn out to be unreliable. That task becomes even more difficult when dealing with a regime in Pyongyang that purges officials on a regular basis, where the term Pyongyang shuffle, a seemingly poor Machiavellian joke is used to demonstrate how quickly people can fall from grace. But this behavior is not entirely unreasonable because we have an actor in the Kim dynasty that has every self-interest to do anything to maintain its power. Luckily for them, they have just the right authoritarian tools of control at its disposal – the ability to purge anyone they perceived to be a threat to their power without substantial consequences.

This piece, in its attempt to examine the up and rising military and party officials who have emerged under Kim Jong-un during the past two years, might seem like a Sisyphean task given the opacity and the quick turnaround rate of purges in Pyongyang. But in trying to understand who in the post-Jang period are most likely to fill the power vacuum besides the Dear Leader, one can piece together how Kim Jong-un reshuffles his key personnel to accomplish his ultimate goal of consolidating his unitary leadership. Whether how long these officials stay in the limelight is not important, but it is rather who and what purposes they serve that demonstrates the bigger picture for regime stability in the Kim dynasty.

Who are they?

These fourteen rising new Pyongyang elites are confidants of Kim Jong-un (KJU), who has consolidated his power further with the purge and execution of his uncle, Jang Song-thaek on December 2013. Their promotions, and their rise, are a preview of the new echelon of leadership who might support him for the years to come.

At the top of this group of close confidants is Vice Marshal Choe Ryong-hae, a man whose meteoric rise has generated some unsavory rumors recently. In addition to Choe, there are a group of men whose rise has become more apparent in the past months. This entourage of people can also be divided into two groups, separated by their appearance with Kim on two occasions – the November 20 National Security Personnel meeting and the November 30 Samgyon field trip, including three officials who were not present in those meetings but are also important because of their perceived status. In addition to the classification of the two groups, this piece is also divided into two sections of time, December 2013 and March-April 2014.

The first section looks at the period after Jang Song-thaek's death (December 2013), when their rise and prominence were undeniable and prompted a much publicized report from the South Korea's National Intelligence Service (NIS) hyping their importance. This section provides the bulk of their biographic details and their path to the spotlight.

The second section looks at them again three to four months after, beginning with the election of the 13th Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) on March 9, 2014 and leading up to the convening of the SPA itself on April 9. The sections are divided by a time skip to demonstrate whether the people profiled here have withstood the test of time, or Kim Jong-un's patience.

Why were they in the news?

Most of these fourteen people profiled in this series were included in the internal report, "An Analysis by the Shake-up of the Power Elite in the era of Kim Jong-un" composed by South Korean intelligence agencies (as reported in *JoongAng Ilbo* on December 15, 2013). The story profiled 52 new "rising stars" and 31 "waning stars" within the Kim Jong-un regime. The "waning stars" are former high-ranking officials who were demoted, purged, or retired in the past two years, and included many of the older elites in their 70s who were important in the previous Kim Jong-il's era. This included 17 senior military officials known as the "generation of the Songun policy" from the Kim Il-sung era, of which 13 were purged, and 4 were

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retired. The report divided the “rising stars” group into three categories, 18 in the WPK group, 25 in the KPA group, and eight in the Cabinet group. Out of the 18 in the party group, 13 were promoted on merit, and included four officials who were singled out as the most notable figures-- Kim Pyong-ho, Pak Tae-song, Hong Yong-chil and Ma Won-chun. With the change of the guard under Kim Jong-un, the average age of the inner circle has been lowered from 76 to 62 years old.

The first group of six military officers profiled here has been in the news because of their close association with Kim Jong-un. Their participation in the November 20 security personnel meeting was only the second time such a meeting has been held since 1993. The timing of the security personnel meeting was conspicuous as it took place around the same time of Jang’s fall from grace. According to *JoongAng Ilbo*, the NIS concluded that these officials were instrumental in the purging and execution of Jang and his confidants, Ri Ryong-ha and Jang Su-kil. During the meeting they swore an oath of fealty to Kim Jong-un by renewing their resolution to establish Kim Jong-un’s “unitary army leadership system in the KPA security organ.” Vice Marshal Choe delivered the opening remarks while Col. Gen. Jo Kyung-chol delivered a report at the meeting. Furthermore, the court tribunal which decided Jang’s fate on December 12 was presided by Kim Won-hong’s Ministry of State Security. Lastly, it was also reported that on December 11, the day before Jang’s execution, Lt. Gen. Ryom had asked for KJU’s permission through *Rodong Sinmun* to have the KPA punish Jang and his faction for their actions. These are indications of the loyalty of these officers to Kim Jong-un.



Memorial service at Kumsusan Palace of Sun, Pyongyang on December 17, 2013 (Photo: Rodong Sinmun)

The memorial service held on December 17 for the second anniversary of Kim Jong-il’s death, aside from the reappearance of Ri Sol-ju and the absence of Kim Kyong-hui, offered us another chance to see who is pictured with Kim Jong-un. Seen with him at Kumsusan Palace of the Sun in Pyongyang were people profiled below, Choe Ryong-hae (standing immediately to the left of Kim Jong-un), Jang Jong-nam, Ri Yong-gil, and Kim Won-hong. Furthermore, at the memorial ceremony held at Pyongyang Indoor Stadium on the same day, there was also a group present prominently at the leadership platform. Once again, there were the usual suspects, Choe Ryong-hae, Ri Yong-gil, Jang Jong-nam (in that order to the left of Kim Jong-un), and Kim Won-hong, as well as Jo Yon-jun.

Post-Jang Song-thaek (December 2013)

Vice Marshal **Choe Ryong-hae (63)**, the Director of the General Political Bureau of the Korean People’s Army (KPA), and a man whose meteoric rise to prominence in the past year is closely tied with the new Dear Leader – Kim Jong-un. North Korean state media coverage of Choe, especially in the post-Jang period, indicates he is likely to become the new No. 2 man in the regime. Born in 1950, Choe is a second-generation Pyongyang elite whose father, Choe Hyon was a key associate of

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Kim Il-sung's, and had formerly served as Minister of People's Armed Forces and as National Defense Committee (NDC) Vice Chairman. But until the rise of KJU, Choe was not part of the leadership circle who served Kim Jong-il. In 2012, he received

various key promotions – Vice Marshal (four-star general), member of the Political Presidium of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) Central Committee, Vice-Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), member of the NDC, and director of the powerful KPA General Political Bureau – which propelled his career and gave him the credentials needed to be Kim's closest confidant. To this day, more than two years after KJU came into power, Choe remains the highest ranking North Korean official to have visited the regime's closest ally, China, when he paid a visit in May 2013. As Kim Jong-un's special envoy, he met with China's new leaders, Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang in Beijing. He gained a reputation among experts as a military hardliner who has played a large role in the recent leadership changes.

1. Military officers

The following are a group of military officers who participated in the 2nd meeting of National Security Personnel on November 20, 2013. Present in this meeting were six men who were pictured prominently with KJU on the first and second page of the WPK party paper *Rodong Sinmun*. They were seated to the left and right of the leadership podium. These six men were Choe Ryong-hae, seated directly to the right of Kim, Kim Won-hong, Ryom Chol-song, Jo Kyung-chol, Kim Su-gil, and Hwang Pyong-so. This group of men are important military officials who are critical to Kim Jong-un's control of the armed forces, and by extension of the regime.

General **Kim Won Hong (67)** is the Minister of State Security, the highest intelligence organ in North Korea, a position which he assumed in April 2012. He became a member of the WPK's Central Committee and the CMC at the 3rd Party Conference on September 28, 2010, where he sat next to KJU. He also became a full member of the WPK Politburo during the 4th Party Conference in April 2012. His rise, like Choe's, is closely tied with KJU's succession process. He previously served as the director of the Military Security Command, before he was appointed as director of the KPA General Political Department's Organization Bureau in February 2009, as part of Kim Jong-il's plan to put in place military officers who would support the successor, KJU.

Lieutenant General **Ryom Chol-song** (age unknown) is a deputy director of the Ministry of People's Armed Forces' General Political Bureau, and the director of the Propaganda Bureau within it. His specific bureau is responsible for the political education of KPA officers and psychological warfare against South Korea. He first began accompanying Kim Jong-un on trips in February 2013.

Colonel General **Jo Kyung-chol** (age unknown) has been the Director of the Military Security Command (MSC) since 2009. MSC monitors the activities and loyalties of the KPA and arrests and investigates military officers and civilians. It is also in charge of Kim Jong-un's personal security as well as other officials' security during guidance tours.

Lieutenant General **Kim Su Gil** (age unknown) is a deputy director of the Ministry of People's Armed Forces' General Political Bureau, and the director of the Organization Bureau within it. His Organization Bureau is responsible for monitoring KPA officer and managing political and social organizations within the army. It also functions as a department within the General Political Bureau to deal with promotions, military awards and job placements. He accompanied Vice Marshal Choe during his May 2013 Beijing trip.

Colonel General **Hwang Pyong-so (66)** is the deputy director of the powerful WPK's Organization and Guidance Department (OGD), which is in charge of military appointments and organization, and the implementation of the leader's teachings. Under Kim Jong-il, who had headed the OGD, it was the most important department within the WPK. Some of that influence had waned under Jang, who shifted some power to his WPK's Administrative Department, but with his demise, the OGD has regained its prominence. Hwang came on the scene in 2005 when he began accompanying Kim Jong-il on guidance tours, which was also the same year he was promoted to his current position within the OGD. Like Kim Won-hong, he was elected as an alternate member of the WPK Central Committee at the 3rd Party Conference in September 2010. Hwang

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was promoted to colonel general in April 2011, and was featured prominently on state media during its coverage of Kim's inspection of the KPA Strategic Rocket Force Command in 2012.



2nd meeting of the National Security Personnel on November 20, 2013 (Photo: Rodong Sinmun)

In addition to these six military officials, there are two more KPA officials of note who wield tremendous influence within Kim's inner circle, Generals Ri Yong-gil and Jang Jong-nam.

General **Ri Yong-gil (60s)** is the KPA Chief of General Staff, a position he assumed in August 2013. Ri was previously identified in March 2013 as the director of the General Staff's Operations Bureau, a powerful position which had direct access to the leader during Kim Jong-il's time. Earlier in his career, he was the commander of the Third and Fifth Corps, the latter situated on the frontlines in Kangwon province. He accompanied Vice Marshal Choe on his trip to China this year, which cemented his status within the KPA.

Colonel General **Jang Jong-nam¹ (50s)** is the Minister of People's Armed Forces since May 2013, replacing Gen. Kim Kyok-sik, who was linked with the Yeonpyeong Island shelling and sinking of the *Cheonan*. Kim Kyok-sik was identified as the KPA Chief of General Staff when he accompanied Vice Marshal Choe on his May 2013 Beijing trip, but he lost that role to Ri Yong-gil in August. However, it has since been speculated that despite his demotion, he continues to play a role within KJU's Personal Secretariat.

Previously Jang was identified as the commander of the First Corps in Kangwon province. His rise within the military has accelerated in the last two years, going from major general in April 2002, to lieutenant general in November 2011, and then promoted two ranks within two years to general in 2013. He garnered public attention in July 2011 when he spoke at a massive rally of 100,000 in Pyongyang against South Korean provocations, and was also one of the four corps commanders who spoke at a KPA rally on the one-year anniversary of Kim Jong-il's death in December 2013.

¹ Demoted to Colonel General since February 2014

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Tour of Samjiyon on November 30 (Photo: Rodong Sinmun)

1. Party Officials

The second group accompanied Kim Jong-un on a trip to the provincial village of Samjiyon on November 30, located near Mount Paekdu, the place essential to the founding myth of the Kim family. It included two members from the first group, Kim Won-hong and Hwang Pyong-so, and five new members, Han Kwang-sang, Pak Tae-song, Kim Pyong-ho, Hong Yong-chil and Ma Won-chun.

Han Kwang-sang (age unknown) is the director of the WPK Finance and Accounting Department, which manages funds and assets for the party and for the Kim family. It is also in charge of the payroll and benefits for central party officials and employees. He is the first director of the department since the purge of Ri Pong Su in 2004, and his public appearance was in January 2010 during Kim Jong-il's guidance tour of Hyangsan Hotel. He formerly served as the vice director of the WPK Finance and Accounting Department, before his promotion to director in the middle of 2013.

Pak Tae-song (age unknown) is the deputy director of the WPK Organization and Guidance Department. He received the Kim Il-sung Order in April 2012. Pak joined Kim Jong-un's guidance tours in August 2012, and in 2013 he appeared with KJU a total of 46 times, on par with the 49 times the deceased Jang appeared with KJU.

Kim Pyong-ho (age unknown) is the deputy director of the WPK Propaganda and Agitation Department (PAD), beginning in August 2012. This department is the primary organ responsible for ideological education, campaigns, and propaganda – Kim Jong-il himself served as director during his succession process. Kim served as deputy general-director of Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) for nine years before being promoted to be the general director of KCNA in February 2010.

Hong Yong-chil (age unknown) is the deputy director of the WPK Machine-Building Industry Department. He began touring with Kim Jong-un on guidance tours in February 2013, mostly to military bases and factories. He reportedly garnered attention when he was bestowed the title of "Labor Hero" – the highest honor in the country – in February 2011 while he was the Party Committee secretary of the Unsan Tool Plant in North Pyongyan Province.

Ma Won-chun (age unknown) is the deputy director of the WPK Finance and Accounting Department and the chief of the Design Office. He is a former architect from the Paektusan Architectural Institute. Ma's first appearance with Kim Jong-un was on May 9, 2012 during his inspection of the Mangyongdae Amusement Park. He has since appeared with him on numerous tours to construction projects like the Masik Pass Ski Resort, Unha Scientists' Street, Munsu Swimming Complex, Mirim Riding Club and many more. The Design Office is responsible for overseeing the designs for facilities used exclusively by the Kim family and Pyongyang elites.

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Lastly, there is another important party official, Jo Yon-jun who was not present on the Samgiyon trip, but whose presence at the December 17 memorial service for Kim Jong-il’s death revealed his growing status within Pyongyang.

Jo Yon-jun (age unknown) is the senior deputy director of the WPK Organization and Guidance Department, and an alternate member of the WPK Politburo.

Table: Key Military and Party Officials in the DPRK Regime under Kim Jong-un

Military Officials		Party Officials	
Name	Title	Name	Title
Vice Marshal Choe Ryong-hae	Director of the General Political Bureau of the KPA, Vice Chairman of the NDC	Han Kwang-sang	Director of the WPK’s Finance and Accounting Department
General Kim Won-hong	Minister of State Security, Member of the NDC	Jo Yon-jun	Senior Deputy Director of the WPK’s Organization and Guidance Department
Colonel General Jang Jong-nam	Minister of the People’s Armed Forces, Member of the NDC	Pak Tae-song	Deputy Director of the WPK’s Organization and Guidance Department
General Ri Yong-gil	KPA Chief of General Staff	Ma Won-chun	Deputy Director of the WPK’s Finance and Accounting Department
Colonel General Hwang Pyong-so	Deputy Director of the WPK’s Organization and Guidance Department	Kim Pyong-ho	Deputy Director of the WPK’s Propaganda and Agitation Department
Colonel General Jo Kyung-chol	Director of the Military Security Command	Hong Yong-chil	Deputy Director of the WPK’s Machine-Building Industry Department
Lieutenant General Kim Su-gil	Deputy Director of the Ministry of the People’s Armed Forces’ General Political Bureau, Organization Bureau	Kim Yo-jong	Chief Secretary of the WPK, Sister of Kim Jong-un
Lieutenant General Ryom Chol-song	Deputy Director of the Ministry of the People’s Armed Forces’ General Political Bureau, Propaganda Bureau		

The election and convening of the Supreme People’s Assembly (March – April 2014)

The elections for the 13th Supreme People’s Assembly on March 9, 2014 offered an opportunity for Kim Jong-un to promote the officials loyal to him, and it gives us a chance to see who still remains relevant of the people profiled here. This was the first SPA elections were held under Kim Jong-un, with a 99.97 percent turnout and 100 percent support for each of the delegate for the 686-member SPA. Kim Jong-un himself ran in the Mount Paektu Constituency No. 111, where he received the complete confidence of his constituents, which included senior officials like Jang Jong-nam and Kim Won Hong. Kim Jong-un made a much-publicized visit with top Pyongyang officials to the Kim Il-Sung University of Politics to cast their ballots. This trip also marked the surprise emergence of another Kim family member, his younger sister Kim Yo-jong.

Kim Yo-jong, at 26 to 27 years of age is the youngest daughter of the Kim Jong-il, and is the only daughter of Ko Yong-hui, Kim Jong-un’s mother. Her appearance with her brother on March 9 was significant not only because it was the first time she

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was listed as an official at a public event, but also because she was listed as a senior official right after Hwang Pyong-so. Since then, she has continued to garner public attention, appearing with her brother and her sister-in-law Ri Sol-ju at a Moranbong band concert on March 22, where she was seated in between Han Kwang-sang and Kim Pyong-ho, which were further indications of her seniority level. At this point it is accepted that she holds the position of chief secretary of the WPK, serving primarily as Kim Jong-un's chief of staff. There are also rumors that she is being primed to assume the role that her aunt, Kim Pyong-hui had served for her brother Kim Jong-il.

The results of the 13th SPA elections saw 55 percent of the delegates being newly elected, with eleven out of the fourteen people profiled here elected to the parliament. The three who were not chosen this time around were Ryom Chol-song, Kim Pyong-ho and Hong Yong-chil, but concurrently it does not mean they are out of favor either. With the exception of Choe Ryong-hae, Ri Yong-gil and Kim Won-hong, elected to the SPA for the first time were officials such as Jang Jong-nam, Hwang Pyong-so, Kim Su-gil, Jo Yon-jun, and Ma Won-chun.

Rumors in Pyongyang

Despite the lack of major surprises in the SPA elections, not all is sunny in Pyongyang's inner circle for the past few months. At the top of these buzz were the rumors from ROK media that Vice Marshal Choe Ryong-hae has been arrested by the Military Security Command on February 21. Though it was never confirmed, Choe did not appear in public from February 16 to March 6, when he finally resurfaced during a visit with Kim Jong-un to a KPA Air and Anti-Air Force Unit #2620 drill, although with a noticeable limp. Furthermore, reports emerged on February 4 that General Jang Jong-nam has been demoted to a three-star, after pictures of him wearing that insignia was shown during a public rally. This comes as a surprise because he was promoted only six months ago to a four-star. The significance of this is not clear because despite his demotion, he still maintains his position as defense minister and was also seen publicly voting for Kim Jong-un on the March 9th SPA elections.

Moreover, two more rumors surfaced just this week, which if true, will see another wave of reshuffling among Pyongyang elites. The first is the rumor from South Korean media that North Korean Premier Pak Pong-ju will be dismissed at the upcoming 1st session of the SPA on April 9, with Kim Jong-un blaming him for failing to improve the North Korean economy. The same report also announced that Kim Yong-nam, the chairman of the Presidium of the SPA, the nominal head of state under the North Korean Constitution responsible for greeting foreign dignitaries, will step down in retirement from his post during the upcoming meeting. The second rumor, if true will reverberate even more in Pyongyang. Citing sources from *Chosun Ilbo*, there is information that some 200 senior officials with ties to the deceased Jang Song-thaek will be purged in the coming weeks as Kim Jong-un continues to consolidate his power. Furthermore there is one person within that group that will raise the most eyebrows if his predicted fate is true, and that person is none other than Choe Ryong-hae again, who had seemingly just escaped from a trip to the countryside just a month ago.

All Quiet in Pyongyang

News coming out of the 1st session of the SPA on April 9, however, struck down those rumors as just another failed attempt to predict what will happen in Pyongyang. This wouldn't be the first time nor the last time when such predictions has gone wrong, but given how things work in Pyongyang, the possibility always remain that those predicted fates can come true at some later point. A case in point is Jang Song-thaek, who was presumed to be safe from his ghastly fate at first because of his ties to the Kim family, but as the world will later find out, no one is safe in Pyongyang from a purge decided from the top.

At the SPA session, Choe Ryong-hae, instead of being purged as the rumors had it, was actually promoted to a higher position. He assumed the seat of vice chairman of the National Defense Commission, a position formerly held by Jang Song-thaek. He now holds a seat along with Ri Yong Mu and O Kuk Ryol in one of the most powerful state institutions in North Korea, further consolidating his status as the number two in Pyongyang. Furthermore, both Kim Yong-nam and Pak Pong-ju retained their respective positions, despite rumors on the contrary. Kim Yong-nam actually delivered a long speech recommending the re-election of Kim Jong-un as the chair of the NDC, which came true after he was successfully re-elected by the SPA.

Other developments of note that occur at the SPA session was the election of Jang Jong-nam and Kim Won-hong, two people profiled here as members of the NDC. They were elected along with new members Pak To-chun and Choe Bu-il to the

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powerful institution. A new foreign minister, Ri Su Yong, the former ambassador to Switzerland was also appointed, replacing Pak Ui-chun to be North Korea's top diplomat. The Ministry of Light Industry, headed by Kim Kyong-hui was abolished at the session, presumably to ease the transition of Kim Jong-un's aunt from the political scene as she is rumored to be in poor health once again.

All of these points to efforts by Kim Jong-un to further consolidate his power by putting people loyal to him in office, but if past patterns are anything to go by, this will not be the last of a reshuffle in Pyongyang, or a purge by Kim Jong-un.

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