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The news that Kang Myong-do defected from the DPRK is not significant for what he said at a news conference about Pyongyang's alleged possession of five nuclear bombs. Rather, if he is who he says he is, then Kang is no ordinary North Korean. He was one of the members of the ruling clan. Hence, according to ROK laws, he faced the prospect of trial in the ROK because the National Security Law of the ROK still treats all the North Korean leaders as criminals. In this vulnerable position, he must have been very susceptible to what the KCIA pressure.

His story is tantamount to to saying that Kim Il Sung was a malicious liar in all his pronouncements about the nuclear weapons in the DPRK. Unfortunately for Kang, it is actually not very difficult to show from basic physical principles that it is highly improbable that the DPRK could have produced, extracted, processed and machined into warheads enough fissile material from its small plutonium production and research reactors. Nuclear physics do not bend to the will of political leaders, not even to that of Kim Il Sung or his son. Also, it is very unlikely that someone of Kang's stature (or even his father, and least of all, military friends) would have access to this kind of information in the DPRK. Such information is highly compartmentalized all the way to the very top on a "need to know" basis. Every nuclear

weapons program in the world has been organized this way, and the DPRK's is no exception. Moreover, if Washington and Seoul really viewed Kang's testimony as credible, then the United States would not be about to commence talks with Pyongyang. Instead, it would be boosting its forces to offset the DPRK's alleged nuclear capabilities.

The real meaning of this defection is that within the inner circle, there is growing disenchantment with the Kim family rule--including that of the former Kim senior. Premier Kang Song-san, his father-in-law, is No.3 man in the North Korean government. Obviously, personal loyalties are not as firm as one might expect. It seems possible that Kang Song-san will be removed from his position shortly, and Yon Hyun-muk might be reappointed as the Prime Minister of the DPRK again.

Also this defection may turn out to become a new bone of contention and finger-pointing between the old guard and the younger elite members. On the one hand, Kim Jong-il is likely to use this opportunity to increase his pressure on the old-timers (one of whose kids, born with silver spoon, proved to be unloyal to the regime) by saying that it is time for them to go.

On the other hand, since Kang Myong-do is of middle age, hardliners would try to exploit this situation to give the whole new generation of politicians a black eye and to stall important policy changes, proposed by leaders who "lack patriotism, display "lackeyism" towards foreigners, and undermine the foundations of the system laid down by the Great Leader".

As a result, the power struggle within the North Korean leadership which everybody has been awaiting for so long but which has not materialized so far may erupt and intensify rapidly, even destabilizing the regime.

The main beneficiaries of the defection are those circles in Seoul that knew all along that Kang Myong-do had arrived in Seoul in late May this year. They held him in custody and under interrogation until now and decided to release the news of his defection only today--on the eve of the DPRK-US third round of high level talks.

Of course, a defection of such magnitude becoming public is likely to throw off balance the current leadership in Pyongyang. Kim Jong Il may be forced to react promptly by reshuffling top Cabinet posts on the eve of or right after the talks with the US side. Consequently, less attention would be devoted to the talks themselves, which may leave North Korean negotiators with less clear political support and instructions from home. Hence, their hands may be tied and they may be less flexible. As a result, the third round of US-DPRK talks could fail and end up in growing

US suspicions over the North Korean nuclear intentions. At least, this outcome may be the goal of those who kept Kang sequestered while he was being debriefed and prepared for the public announcement.

Secondly, this revelation gives more ammunition to hawks on the US side to press the Clinton administration to get tough with Pyongyang because Mr. Kang Myong-do "confirmed" that the DPRK already had five nuclear bombs and because Mr. Kim Il Sung is alleged to have lied to President Carter when he said that the DPRK neither had the capability nor intention to build a nuclear weapon.

In short, the timing of the release of the news of Kang's defection is obviously intentional. It is the KCIA's second recent attempt to provoke the North (the first one was the release of documents on the origins of the Korean war which accused Kim Il Sung of starting the war and consequent description of him as a war criminal). These conservative elements aim at destabilizing the current regime in Pyongyang. It is clear that these political forces do not appreciate the fact that the succession appears to be proceeding rather smoothly in the DPRK. And the fact that the North has not replaced Kang's father even though it would have known about his son's defection since May indicates that either Kang Jr. is not who he says he is, or if he is, that the North Korean ruling circles are unruffled; or that Kang Jr. is who he says he is, but may have had mundane, non-political reasons to defect.

Moreover, these elements of South Korea's establishment resent the fact that the US continues to talk to the North even when the South-North talks have been put on hold indefinitely because it is below Kim Yong Sam's dignity to sit down to talk with Kim Jong-il who has not consolidated his power yet. It may signal the revival of pull-again, push-again policies which the Kim Yong Sam administration pursued vis-a-vis the US in 1993. This time around, the United States is unlikely to allow the South to stall the US-DPRK talks again.

Ironically, the ROK's actions are actually forcing the Clinton administration to decide what it really wants on the Korean peninsula--confrontation or detente. If the first, then it will follow the South's lead. If it is the second, then it will follow American interests and move to an officially recognized, two-Korea policy. Russia could do it, China could do it, Japan is happy to do it if the United States takes the lead. Doing so is what used to be called leadership during the Republican presidential era in the United States.

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