



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Kim's replacement of the military leadership - a paranoid attempt to strengthen the army's loyalty



North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has replaced his first general and leading officers in the general staff whilst ordering troops to "gird for a war".

This indicates that Pyongyang's combativeness, which was already intensified even before the turbulence in the military leadership, has been rapidly increasing.

General Pak Su-il was in charge of the Korean People's Army for just 7 months. As is customary, neither the reasons for his replacement nor his future fate have been disclosed.

The announcement from the session of the Central Military Commission presided over by Kim only mentions changes in the army at the very end, which should give the impression to the people that it is a formality and a matter of protocol.

Even in North Korea, where they are the consequence of a single man's decision, such drastic changes in military command are far from usual.

The replacement of the Chief of the General Staff after only a 7-month term, along with his closest allies, is particularly unusual.

A proven loyalist in charge of the army

The fate of deposed General Pak is unknown, and there will likely be no news of him for some time. It is also possible that the general will emerge in one of the future reorganisations of the military leadership, which was typical in some previous similar cases.

The career of his successor as Chief of the General Staff, Vice Marshal Ri Yong-gil, is just such an example.

This old and experienced officer originally served as North Korea's first general, but after he was demoted in 2016, word spread that he had been executed.

His absence from significant events was later interpreted as the result of corruption and "factional conspiracy"-related purges.

But after a series of ups and downs during a lengthy career of surviving at the top of the military, Vice-Marshal Ri has finally been promoted to the highest military post.

Kim likes to replace generals

The fact that North Korean leader Kim does not hesitate to make such significant changes to the military hierarchy implies that the recent shift is more a product of his internal mechanics of rule.

When Vice Marshal Ri Yong-gil replaced the current, newly appointed Chief of General Staff from the same position in 2016, it was the fourth time in under 5 years that Kim Jong Un had been in power that the army chief had changed.

His predecessor and father, Kim Jong Il, changed "only" 3 chiefs of the general staff during his 17 years in power.

In his previous incarnation, which spanned from 2012 to 2016, the new first North Korean general was depicted by the state media as a significant member of leader Kim Jong-Un's

inner circle during those early years of his rule.

Therefore, his return suggests that Kim Jong-un is changing the military leadership to strengthen its loyalty and prevent any thought of disobedience.

The new Chief of the North Korean General Staff is practically rehabilitated and, as such, is a guarantor of the complete loyalty to the leader of the nation and the Commander-in-Chief.

“Kim Jong Un frequently rotates leadership posts below him to prevent the emergence in North Korea of anyone like Yevgeny Prigozhin, who challenged Russian President Vladimir Putin’s authority after amassing personal control of financial assets and loyalty among armed forces”, said Leif-Eric Easley, professor of international studies at Ewha Womans University in Seoul.

The significant change in the North Korean army's senior ranks corresponds with Pyongyang's sharply heightened war rhetoric, aggressive acts, threats to shoot down US reconnaissance planes, and retaliation for the US nuclear submarine's arrival in neighbouring South Korea.

This year is symbolically very significant for national combat self-confidence, as the 70th anniversary of the armistice in the Korean War was recently marked, and the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Republic is coming up in September.

Both major anniversaries are marked with lavish military parades and displays of national military power, as the most important social bonding factor. In this respect, the role of the army leadership serves to unite the nation further around the supreme leader and the army as his principal lever of influence.

A response to the rapprochement of the US, Japan and South Korea

The shift in Pyongyang comes ahead of a significant summit of its principal “enemies” – the US, Japan and North Korea – next week at Camp David.

US President Joe Biden, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and Japanese PM Fumio Kishida will meet for the first independent summit.

The summit at Camp David aims to resolve long-standing disputes between Seoul and Tokyo over events that occurred during Japan's colonial occupation of the Korean Peninsula at the turn of the 20th century.

By doing so, the 3 allies will put past disputes aside and commit to cooperation regarding the current security challenges in East Asia and the Pacific, principally brought on by China and North Korea.

This is a development that Pyongyang does not like, so it heightens the local population's feeling of threat and, as a result, intensifies the combative rhetoric, which was present even at the most recent Central Military Commission meeting, where the military leadership was replaced.

“The present situation, in which the hostile forces are getting ever more undisguised in their reckless military confrontation with the DPRK, requires the latter’s army to have more positive, proactive and overwhelming will and thoroughgoing and perfect military readiness for a war”, Kim's high command announced.