IN DECEMBER 2013, North Korea stunned the world by announcing that Jang Song Thaek, Kim Jong Un’s uncle and presumed mentor, had been purged and executed on charges of “anti-party, counter-revolutionary factional acts” and “attempting to overthrow the state.”

Jang had been chief of the Central Administrative Department of the Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK) and vice chairman of the National Defense Commission, and was widely seen as the No. 2 in the country’s leadership after Kim Jong Un. Observers in the international community as well as in South Korea saw Jang as a “guardian” of First Secretary Kim Jong Un, and so the possibility of changes in North Korea’s political system and ripple effects on policy directions after the purge drew great interest.

For their part, North Koreans themselves expressed shock, but it was at learning that there were “factional acts” against the leadership of the Party. Chosun Shinbo, the Japan-based newspaper that is seen as reflecting the North Korean position, noted that “if common people in Chosun [North Korea] were shocked by the incident, it was not because of the purge or execution of factions, but because of the fact that there were those in hiding who attempted to overthrow the regime by going against the monolithic leadership of the Party.”

Although North Korea was quick to publicly release the decision on Jang by the Political Bureau of the Party Central Committee and the judgment of the Special Military Tribunal of the Ministry of State Security, details on the background of the purge are still hard to come by. Some observers suggest that there was a power struggle between the party and the military. However, to examine the Jang Song Thaek incident correctly, it is important to note that he began to be excluded from major decisions in late 2012. More importantly, identifying the significance of the purge requires examining the true nature of the incident from a historical perspective and conducting a comprehensive analysis based on that examination.

CONSIDERATION OF THE MONOLITHIC LEADERSHIP REGIME

When we consider the past power succession from Kim Il Sung to Kim Jong Il, it can be argued that the position of supreme leader in North Korea is perfected by the integration of “institutional leadership” and “personality leadership.” According to this standard, it can be said that Kim Jong Un established “institutional leadership” by succeeding to the highest positions in the WPK, administration and military in April 2012, and has started the process of building his “personality leadership.”

That process took place alongside his consolidation of the party’s “monolithic leadership” and came into full swing on the occasion of the fourth Conference of Party Representatives held in April 2012. Kim Jong Un revised the supreme role of the party as “unifying the entire society under the flag of Kim Il Sung-ism and Kim Jong Il-ism” and suggested “further strengthening the monolithic leadership regime of the party” as the most important task. This means firmly setting “revolutionary rules and orders in the entire party where all party members act as one under the monolithic leadership of the party center.”

As a first step, Kim Jong Un began to restructure the bloated military during the Kim Jong Il era. To achieve this, he strengthened the WPK’s guidance over the military and transferred the right to engage in trade from the military to the cabinet. On June 2, 2012, the official newspaper of the WPK, Rodong Shinmun, warned of any moves against reforming the military, saying, “Now the problem is not the threat from outside enemies but bureaucratization of, and becoming an aristocrat by the cadre who had grown up in [a] socialist cradle.” Because resistance from the military continued, Kim Jong Un dismissed Ri Young Ho, Chief of the General Staff of the Korean People’s Army (KPA), in July 2012 and replaced a generation of officers to seize control of the military.

The next step was to strengthen control of the WPK. To that end, North Korea held the Fourth Conference of Cell Secretaries of the Workers’ Party on Jan. 29, 2013. Its purpose was to establish the “monolithic leadership regime” within the WPK by strengthening the party’s basic organizations and collecting bottom-to-top criticisms. In this process, the most prominent criticisms were “Sedo” (wielding one’s power) and “bureaucratism.” At the conference, Kim Jong Un mentioned the word “Sedo” for the first time, saying “Sedogun [groups wielding power] and bureaucrats are the main target to fight against by the party.” The WPK’s monthly magazine on political theory, Geulloja (Workers), has raised the issues of “Sedo” and “factionalist acts” repeatedly since May 2013.

Here, the point is that the term “Sedo” targeted Jang Song Thaek and his confidants from the beginning. This interpretation is confirmed by the fact that “Sedo” and “bureaucratism” were mentioned when Jang Song Thaek was criticized for “factional acts according to his desire and will” early in 2003 under the regime of Kim Jong II. In the mid-1990s, Jang was the first vice director of the WPK’s organization and guidance department and was seen by those outside the country as being the de facto No. 2 leader. How-
ever, at the end of 2003, he was dismissed and had to go through self-criticism and a “revolutionization” course at the Kim Il Sung High Party School. Given that past, when Kim Jong Un used the term “Sedogun,” it referred to Jang Song Thaek and his confidants, representing a warning about excessive acts of power wielded by the administration department of the WPK. The decision adopted at the meeting of the Political Bureau of the Party Central Committee on Dec. 8, 2013, in fact said, “Jang Song Thaek and his faction committed anti-party and counter-revolutionary factional acts, undermining the unity of the party and hindering the task of building up the party’s monolithic leadership regime.”

Ultimately, the most significant reason for Jang’s purge was his “factional acts” that undermined “the monolithic leadership regime” built around Kim Jong Un, although various other charges were mentioned at his trial.

**FROM ARREST TO EXECUTION**

Jang Song Thaek was one of the cadres receiving the most attention from the beginning of the Kim Jong Il era. After being appointed as the first vice director of the WPK’s organization guidance department in 1995, he frequently accompanied Kim Jong Il on his on-the-spot “guidance tours.” Despite having had to undergo a “revolutionization” course due to his “factional acts” in 2003, the outside world saw him as the presumed no. 2 leader in North Korea.

He returned to the WPK as first vice director of the Central Committee in January 2006 and was promoted as chief of its Central Administrative Department in December 2007. More important, he was elected as a member of the National Defense Commission in April 2009, and the next year was given three additional posts — vice chairman of the National Defense Commission, alternate member of the Party Political Department and member of the Central Military Commission of the party. From that time, some profit-making businesses governed by the military were transferred to the Party Administrative Department under Jang’s control.

Finally, in April 2012, when Kim Jong Un was officially inaugurated as the WPK’s First Secretary following the death of his father in December 2011, Jang Song Thaek became a member of the Party Political Department. In 2012 alone, Jang accompanied Kim Jong Un on his on-the-spot guidance tours 106 times, demonstrating he was the leader’s closest confidant. In November 2012, Jang was appointed chairman of the National Sports Commission, giving him a total of eight posts including vice chairman of the National Defense Commission, member of the Party Political Department, member of the Central Military Commission of the WPK, marshal of the Korean People’s Army, chief of the Central Administrative Department of the WPK, presidium of the Supreme People’s Assembly and chairman of the National Sports Commission. No one doubted that Jang Song Thaek was the No. 2 man in North Korea. The judgment of the Special Military Tribunal of the Ministry of State Security also stated, “Jang Song Thaek received higher offices and more trust than before from comrade Kim Jong Un.”

However, Jang’s heyday was about to run out. After he was appointed chairman of the National Sports Commission, the political status of the Party Administrative Department began to decline. Jang’s influence suddenly fell in 2013. The number of times when he accompanied Kim dropped. The rare occasions when he accompanied Kim were limited to sports events or art performances. It was the beginning of his exclusion from the major decision-making processes of the state. When Kim Jong Un convened the “leaders’ council on national security and foreign affairs” to discuss key policy decisions relating to nuclear tests on Jan. 26, 2013, Jang was not invited. When military tension between the two Koreas spiked in early 2013, it was hard to see Jang at any public
The party has recognized and closely followed Jang Song Thaek and his followers’ anti-party and counter-revolutionary factional acts for a long time. The party warned several times, but they didn’t accede to the party’s demand and clearly overreached themselves. Therefore, the party could no more look on with folded arms and had to make a decisive blow at extremely dangerous factional acts emerging within the party by eliminating Jang Song Thaek and purging his faction.

The first crisis to befall Jang came in May 2013. Between May 13, when he was seen accompanying Kim Jong Un to a Korean People’s Army orchestra concert, and June 10, when he made a field visit to the Pyongyang International Soccer Academy, Jang was not seen at any public event.

The judgment against Jang sheds some light on the timing of this development: “Jang Song Thaek instructed his stooges to sell coal and other precious underground resources at random, which fell into brokers’ tricks and great debt. Jang had no scruples about committing such acts of treachery as selling off the land of the Rason economic and trade zone to a foreign country in May 2013 by lending it for a period of five decades under the pretext of paying debts.” It was clear that there were problems in Party Administrative Department 54, under the control of Jang Su Gil, a close confident of Jang Song Thaek. In fact, those who were in charge of international business engaged in by Department 54 were summoned to Pyongyang in September 2013. Three months later, in August, another major negative incident took place. On Aug. 28, 2013, Kim Jong Un watched the final match of the “Hwaebul (Torchlight) Cup” men’s soccer match at Kim Il Sung Stadium. Then, after the game was over, the winning team was changed suddenly on charges that some players participated illegally. North Korea immediately released the news, although it did not need to. Given the nature of the North Korean system, it was the kind of thing that could become a “political problem.” It was disturbing news for Jang Song Thaek, because he was chairman of the National Sports Commission. Still, no significant change was yet detected in his status at that time.

RESISTING AN ORDER
A very serious incident occurred in early November when the Party’s first vice director Ri Ryong Ha and vice director Jang Su Gil were arrested. The decision of the Political Bureau of the Party Central Committee said: “The party has recognized and closely followed Jang Song Thaek and his followers’ anti-party and counter-revolutionary factional acts for a long time. The party warned several times, but they didn’t accede to the party’s demand and clearly overreached themselves. Therefore, the party could no more look on with folded arms and had to make a decisive blow at extremely dangerous factional acts emerging within the party by eliminating Jang Song Thaek and purging his faction.”

The “overreaching acts” of Jang Song Thaek’s group referred to an “armed conflict” over the jurisdiction of the Nampho Fishery Trading Company in early November 2013. The trading company in Nampho Special City was originally controlled by the military, but after Jang Song Thaek became vice chairman of the National Defense Commission, he handed the fishing and trading rights to the Party Administrative Department (Department 54). At the request of the military in 2013, Kim Jong Un ordered that the rights be returned to the military in the name of “the Supreme Commander’s order.” However, when the military went to retake the company, vice director Jang Su Gil resisted, saying the permission of Jang Song Thaek was necessary. During the conflict, a gunfight broke out between the company’s security guards and the military.
was a material incident where the order of the Supreme Commander was resisted by force. This provided “decisive momentum” leading to the arrest and execution of Ri Ryong Ha and Jang Su Gil, and the subsequent arrest of Jang Song Thaek. Because the money that Jang’s department earned was also used in national economic development, acts such as selling off natural resources at giveaway prices, offering mine development rights in return for investments, lending land in the Rason special economic zone for a long period in order to raise funds and other past acts of corruption by Jang Song Thaek could be considered just extra accusations. Maybe Jang could have gone through another “revolutionization” course to clean up the mess. However, from the moment when a “joint investigation” of the WPK’s organization and guidance department and the Ministry of State Security revealed “counter-revolutionary acts disobeying the orders of the Supreme Commander,” including instances where Jang was called “No. 1 comrade,” there was no way out for him.

**END GAME FOR JANG**

On Nov. 18, 2013, Jang Song Thaek was put under house arrest while Ri Ryong Ha and Jang Su Gil were formally arrested. Jang Song Thaek’s last public activity was a meeting with Japanese Councilor Antonio Inoki on November 6. Ri Ryong Ha and Jang Su Gil were interrogated on charges of “arrogations,” “factional acts,” and “disobedience of the party’s monolithic leadership regime.” They were also criticized for “attempting to rule as a party over the party and a cabinet over the cabinet hidden behind Jang Song Thaek’s back.” The two confidants were executed in front of the party’s high-ranking officials around November 27, after their interrogation.

On December 8, the Workers’ Party held an extended meeting of the Political Bureau of the Party Central Committee and criticized Jang for his “anti-party and counter-revolutionary factional acts.” The meeting condemned him on charges of hindering the party’s monolithic leadership regime, distorting the party’s lines and policies, corruption and illegality and moral hazards. He was arrested on the spot.

Four days later, on December 12, Jang Song Thaek was sentenced to death at the Special Military Tribunal of the Ministry of State Security for conspiring to overthrow the state and was shot to death along with seven confidants in front of about 300 party cadres. It took less than a month from his house arrest to execution. One interpretation is that North Korea tried to minimize the political ripple effects of the incident by handling the process openly and swiftly, from the party’s criticism of Jang Song Thaek to the final judgment.

**THE IMPACT ON THE KIM JONG UN REGIME**

The key accusations against Jang were his “anti-party, counter-revolutionary, factional acts.” In North Korea, Jongpyeong, or sectarian elements, means a group of people who pursue the interests of an individual or faction while splitting and destroying the WPK and its revolutionary campaign. As North Koreans understood from their own history, Jongpyeong was basically rooted out of the WPK after the first Conference of Party Representatives in 1958. The “factional acts” referred to in this latest case can be interpreted as Jang Song Thaek creating a “group of people” who followed him and then “revolted” against the leadership of Kim Jong Un and the WPK. In this regard, given the nature of the North Korean system, it was a natural response for the party to expel Jang Song Thaek on charges of “anti-party and counter-revolutionary factional acts.” Jang lost his post for two years over the same charges in 2003.

But this time North Korea didn’t stop there, but held the Special Military Tribunal of the Ministry of State Security. A new charge of “conspiring to overthrow the state” was added and Jang was sentenced to death and publicly executed. Behind this swift and decisive move, there is a hidden intention to deal sternly with anyone and any group that stands in the way of establishing the monolithic leadership regime of Kim Jong Un.

The international community expressed shock at the execution, because it was the first time North Korea had conducted a purge so publicly, although there have been a number of political purges in its history. Some even argued that the “execution of Jang Song Thaek is [a] violation of international human rights law.” North Korea has held special tribunals and publicly executed people by firing squad in cases of “anti-party and counter-revolutionary acts” before. While it is a common practice in North Korea, the international community sees it as inhumane and difficult to accept.

North Korea quickly went back to normal after the purge of Jang Song Thaek. Most South Korean and international media assumed many more would be arrested, pointing to certain figures seen as Jang’s confidantes. There were even reports that some had already sought asylum. However, most of the figures referred to in media reports were seen attending public events later. The reality is that the “Jang Song Thaek line” was, in effect, dissolved through the two years of “revolutionization” that was imposed on cadre affiliated with Jang on charges of “factional acts” in 2003. Therefore, it is likely that the number of people who will face political challenges in connection with the Jang case will be much smaller than expected.

The case is more likely to lead to consolidation of Kim Jong Un’s regime than to its instability, as can be seen from similar cases since the 1950s. In his 2014 New Year’s address, Kim Jong Un said that “by detecting and purging anti-party and counter-revolutionary factions at the right time and with the right determination, the party and the revolutionary rank and file are now further solidified and our single-minded unity is 100 times strengthened.” It is expected that the purge will not be extended to the party and the military in general, because it was not caused by a power struggle with the military, represented by Choe Ryong Hae, director of the General Political Bureau of the Korean People’s Army. Rather, because the purging of Jang Song Thaek signals the decline of the second generation, the third generation — in their 40s and 50s — is expected to emerge as a key power group in the party, administration and military through a generational shift. In addition, the policies of economic development and special economic zone expansion promoted directly by Kim Jong Un have been further stepped up in the wake of the purge.

It is reasonable to say that what North Korea achieves in economic development in the next two to three years will determine the future stability of the Kim Jong Un regime. That is why North Korea has to dedicate itself to building its economy and attracting capital from outside. To that end, a peaceful external environment is needed. Given these considerations, North Korea is expected to proactively seek improvements in inter-Korea relations and a resumption of the Six-Party talks in the wake of the elimination of Jang Song Thaek.

Chang-hyun Jung is publisher of Minjok 21, a Korean monthly magazine on inter-Korean relations, and an adjunct Professor at Kookmin University. This article was translated from Korean by Eunji Kang, who worked for Minjok 21 as a reporter for five years and is now a freelance translator.