

HWANG JANG-YOP'S DEFECTION AND NORTH-SOUTH RELATIONS

by Wook Kim

Hwang Jang-yop and his aide, Kim Duk-hong, safely arrived in Seoul on April 20th. Since walking into the South Korean consulate in Beijing on February 12 to seek political asylum in the South, it took more than 2 months for them to arrive at their final destination. They had to watch patiently five weeks of negotiations between Chinese and South Korean diplomats, and then stay for a month at a hideout in the Philippines. Now that Hwang has finally arrived in Seoul, it seems appropriate to ask what significance his defection has in terms of the stability of the Kim Jong-il regime, and what effects could it have on the two Koreas' policy toward each other. The answers to these questions could shed some light on the directions of North-South Korean relations.

Hwang's Defection: Sign of Regime Crisis in North Korea

Several factors lead one to believe that the defection is a sign of a regime crisis in North Korea. The first and most obvious factor is Hwang's importance within the Kim Jong-il regime. Hwang is the most senior defector from the North Korean system to appear since the 1950s. His official ranking in the North Korean hierarchy is known to be 24th, but this simple number does not indicate his full importance. Hwang is not only one of the three or four individuals who were responsible for the formulation of the ideology of *juche* (self-reliance), but also one of a small group of

power holders in Pyongyang who are entrusted with handling international affairs.

The second factor is the timing of Mr. Hwang's defection. February 16 is Kim Jong-Il's birthday. This event was lavishly celebrated even before Kim Il-sung's death in 1995. It has since become the most important public occasion for expressions of loyalty towards the regime and its leadership. Hwang's action at this time is a powerful message of dissent.

The third factor is the motive behind his defection. Why did he defect? This cannot be known precisely, and there may be some personal motives. Given Hwang's seniority and power, however, it is highly likely that his defection is also related to the critical policy choices which are now overdue in Pyongyang. Up until this time, the regime's inner circle seemed to be united on matters of policy fundamentals and policy directions. Their basic stance was a cautious and managed opening to the world market, improvements in relations with the U.S., but minimal movement on relations with South Korea. These fundamentals now appear to be in dispute. As a foreign policy specialist, Hwang might have despaired at the prospects of reigning in the power of the military, which seems to have exercised something of a veto power since the death of Kim Il-sung.

If one puts these factors together, and adds North Korea's serious economic difficulties epitomized by the food crisis, the Kim Jong-Il regime may be in a serious crisis. Being in a crisis does not necessarily imply that the regime will soon collapse. Without a firm commitment to reform, however, the regime may not be able

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to hold on very long, or its military wing may risk a final confrontation with the South.

Its Effects on the Two Koreas' Policy Toward Each Other

Hwang's defection and his arrival at Seoul could influence inter-Korean relations in two ways: by affecting North Korea's policy toward the South, and by affecting South Korea's policy toward the North. The first direction of influence is relatively easy to follow. North Korea's first reaction to Hwang's defection was typical: denial and reverse accusation. It denied the defection, accused Seoul of kidnapping him, and threatened to retaliate. After a few days, however, North Korea changed its position and announced that it decided to banish him, branding him a coward traitor.

This sudden change seemed to result from two factors. One was the North's urgent need for foreign food aid. Since it was demanding food aid for humanitarian reasons, the North found it difficult to maintain a hard-line position on this supposedly humanitarian issue involving individual freedom. The second and more important factor was that the Chinese government (and the U.S. government to some extent) assured Pyongyang that Seoul would not use the defection for "political purposes."

Up until Hwang's arrival in Seoul on April 20th, these two factors remained intact, and Pyongyang's policy did not seem to be affected by the defection. The South Korean government restrained from publicizing the incident and tried to keep everything in secret. Consequently, Pyongyang did not mention it either and expressed its strengthened willingness to participate in the four-party talks, in return for additional food aid and the lifting of

U.S. economic sanctions on North Korea.

After his arrival, however, the North's policy stance may have changed. The North refused to set specific dates for a preliminary meeting for the four-party talks unless South Korea and the U.S. "guaranteed" massive food aid and the lifting of the sanctions. Of course, this was what Pyongyang had been insisting upon, but many expected it to move forward by tacitly accepting Seoul and Washington's position of not making the food aid an explicit precondition for Pyongyang's participation in the four-party talks. The expectation did not come true, and the negotiations broke down on April 22nd.

It is not clear at present whether the North's refusal was a reflection in any part of Hwang's arrival statement harshly criticizing the political system he had just left. Pyongyang did issue a counter-statement and called Hwang a crazy person, but on the other hand it agreed to a Beijing meeting on May 3rd between the Red Cross representatives from North and South Korea for discussion on how to deliver the South's food aid to the North.

It is amply clear, however, that Hwang's statement and activities in the future could influence the North's policy. Seoul promised not to utilize the defection for political purposes, but the term "political purpose" is ambiguous enough to justify almost anything. There is a chance that Seoul may use the Hwang card for domestic political purposes, if not for the very purpose of explicitly criticizing the Northern system. The intended goal may be different, but it will have similar effects. If that happens, it is certain to have adverse effects on the North's policy toward the South, and thus on inter-Korean relations.

The second direction of influence is more difficult to tell. It largely depends on what information Hwang has on North Korea. If he can

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