



CARNEGIE-TSINGHUA
CENTER FOR GLOBAL POLICY

Transcript

CHINA IN THE WORLD PODCAST

Host: **Paul Haenle**

Guest: **Zhu Feng**

Episode 1: Rumbblings from North Korea

December 23, 2013

You are listening to the Carnegie–Tsinghua “China in the World” podcast, a series of conversations with Chinese and international experts on China’s foreign policy, international role, and China’s relations with the world, brought to you from the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center for Global Policy located in Beijing. I’m Paul Haenle, the director of the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center, and I’ll be your host today.

Haenle: I’m here at Peking University, and I’m thrilled to be joined by leading Chinese security expert, Dr. Zhu Feng. Zhu Feng is a professor in the School of International Studies and deputy director for the Center for International and Strategic Studies at Peking University. Zhu Feng is also a senior research fellow at the Center for Peace and Development of China. His recent publications include “International Relations Theory and East Asian Security, Beijing People’s University Press, 2007” and “China’s Ascent: Power, Security, and Future International Politics, Coedited with Professor Robert Ross, Cornell University, 2008”. Dr. Zhu Feng, thank you for joining us today.

Our topic today is North Korea and how recent North Korean developments might impact China’s relations with its neighbor. On December 13, four days after he was arrested and removed from all positions, Kim Jong-un’s uncle and regent Jang Sung-taek was executed for plotting a military coup. Jang Sung-taek was described in state media reports as “an anti-party, counter revolutionary, factional element, and a despicable political careerist and trickster, and a despicable human scum worse than a dog.” He was accused of trying to steal power from Kim Jong-un. Jang Sung-taek played a key role in consolidating Kim Jong-un’s power following the death of Kim Jong-Il, his father, and his execution came as a surprise to many North Korea watchers. Zhu Feng, why was Jang Sung-taek purged, and what might it mean for North Korea? Is this a sign of Kim Jong-Un’s strength or of his weakness or vulnerability?

Zhu: Okay, first of all thanks Paul. For your question, my personal thought is that Jang’s purge is completely a consequence of an intensified power struggle or power competition between the military faction and the nonmilitary faction. Jang was really regarded as the number two figure in some sort of civilian sector around leader Kim Jong-Un. Then why was he purged in that way? So brutal, so reckless. I think there must be some sort of uncompromisable, some sort of power competition between the two groups, and the military hardliners may have felt that Jang was a big obstacle they needed to remove. But given his family connection and some sort of overarching influence in the North Korean power system, I think the purge sent a message clearly, killing him and burning him very quickly. I think that’s sort of very relentless, and a reckless purge shows some sort of growing anxiety in the military hardliners, and my view is that they think unless they let Jang Sung-taek completely finish, then there will not be (a path to) their victory in the power race.

So then I think that is the main motive, but the problem is what kind of role did Kim Jong-un really play? Everybody knows that without his consent I don’t think such a purge would be achieved, but I think now, so far, we need further information to clarify. For example, the purge is definitely by Kim Jong-un’s personal inspection or he will also be somehow manipulated by his military hardline colleagues. So we still have to wait and see. Anyway, I don’t think that Kim Jong-un really, really knows what he did—wisely or smartly—because the concept of the purge is a very severe from the break of his family legacy because, I think, since the late ‘60s there was quite little killing to some sort of family neighbors and very close colleagues, even by his grandfather. His father also—I haven’t seen any single case of killing the family neighbors. So

that purge will be a big break from family legacy and also will cause a rippling effect in the system. So then I think it's really, really a big mistake that he has made.

Haenle: You know, the execution and Jang's rule struck me as well as different for a number of reasons, of which you have alluded to some. I believe it was the first time that the regime has admitted to the killing of one of the members of the ruling family, which seems to undermine the unity at the top, and it is also not common for the regime to publicly announce the execution of a top government official. As you know, Jang Sung-taek was arrested in front of an extended meeting of the Korean Worker's Party Politburo and was later publicized on TV. Why do you think it was so different this time, and does this bold display of brutality give leaders in Beijing confidence in Kim's consolidation of power, or does it make leaders in China more concerned about the young and inexperienced leader and his ability to be trusted?

Zhu: Yeah, well Paul, the way of Jang's purge, in one explanation of the purge was that it was special for Uncle Jang, but, I think, why such a rally? I think that, given the DPRK's history, this is a mistake again. I think the main reason is Kim Jong-un and his military hardliners would like to take down and purge Jang in a way (that is) irreversible and in a way to say that after his purge Jang will totally disappear. Then, I think this kind of very, we say, brutal purge is also a bigger thing, not for Jang only. His cronies, his followers and even his family also will suffer some sort of what we say purge. So then, this way of the purge is unbelievably, we say, bloody and brutal just tells us it's a thousand things wide, not a thousand thing individual, also will be rooted out. So I think that's some sort of message we can take out of this kind of approach.

Haenle: Jang Sung-taek had a reputation here in China as a trusted interlocutor who favored Chinese-style economic reform and an expanded China-North Korea trade relationship, but it seems that China may have been attacked indirectly several times in the allegations against Jang Sung-taek. He was accused of selling off precious resources of the country at cheap prices. He was accused of selling off the land of the Rason Economic and Trade Zone to a foreign country, likely China in this case. Do you think this purge was in any way directed towards China? What effect will it have on China's relations with North Korea, and how important was Jang Sung-taek to North Korea's relationship with China?

Zhu: No, I don't think that the purge was definitely has something to do with China, but indefinitely or implicitly, of course, Jang Sung-taek's purge has already had something, we say, with China. For example, if we read some sort of the criminal charges against Jang, a lot of the items being announced as crimes that Uncle Jang committed were because of his economic and commercial relations with China. For example, he was cheaply selling out the mining rules and he just kept the very valuable land sources on easy lease to the Chinese. So we can see that the association of Jang's purge with the China factor is very clear there. But the problem is that it's still too early to say what kind of impact it will it genuinely cause for China-DPRK relations. For example, will the young leader like to reverse the policy of economic experiments or announce some sort of member of special enterprise zones or would he like to close the experiment again? I think it is still too early to say what sort of real impact will be caused for DPRK-China relations. But I think the association is very clear.

Haenle: Some are predicting that North Korea, Kim Jong-un will commit further provocations early in 2014, possibly a fourth nuclear test to further prove his consolidation of power. In the context of working in the Six Party Talks and China-U.S. cooperation on North Korea, will this be a beneficial, will this be an opportunity for the United States and China to work closer together or will this drive the United States and China apart? How will China respond to a further provocation, given the current situation in North Korea?

Zhu: Well, I think it's a good question. First of all, whether or not Pyongyang will provoke the West again, trying one more nuclear test or, you know, provoking the south by creating some sort of new atomic incidents, like such a test—personally I think it quite less likely because we see the purge of Uncle Jang. These are big events. I don't think the system—also now it's very quickly—you don't know if there's some adverse implications of such a purge. So what I can see for sure is that the young leader has to back away from, some sort of a pulling down very, you know, slowly impact this power system. Then, he will be well-placed for a new placement and to just stabilize some sort of policy circle on a policy course by actually some sort of new instruction. So I think the domestic agenda will be unbelievably full after Jang Sung-taek was purged. So I don't think the young leader will be destructive, provoking a very reckless relationship with the international community.

On the other hand, I think that if the young leader would like to provoke once again, it would completely alienate the rich. It could make China not just angry but very irritated. So then, I think that would be particular sign of something very similar for DPRK-China relations. So then, my judgement is that the young leader may now know how unhappy China has been, and if he is a little bit sane, I don't think under the present circumstances he also would like to just keep China away. So then, such a new nuclear test or missile test—or whatever sort of actions he may take soon—I don't think that will be very likely. So then, given this, whatever North Korea will be doing after Jang's purge, I really, really hope that China and the United States [will] just sit together at this, passing some sort of joint discourse. If North Korea will collapse, it [will] most definitely be from domestic instability. Whatever the purge will implicate for the young leader's regime or the DPRK, the purge will definitely indicate growing instability. So, there's a lot of uncertainties we can easily put into the perspective. So then it's high time for Beijing and Washington to recognize how big the mistake has been over the DPRK. So we need to intensify our cooperation and collaboration.

Haenle: Thank you. So for my last question I would like to take a step back and look at it more broadly. As you know, North Korea emerged as a key area for U.S.-China cooperation under this new type of “major country relations” framework that Xi Jinping proposed at the Sunnylands summit with President Barack Obama in June 2013. I anticipate that these two leaders will meet again in a similar type of blue-sky format where they can talk very broadly about their views of the world, and I imagine that North Korea will come up again. How would you suggest that the two leaders talk about North Korea? What are the greatest inhibitors to greater cooperation between the United States and China, and, if you look at this challenge from a long-term perspective, where do you think it could go, given greater U.S.-China cooperation?

Zhu: Yeah, and I think for the long-term east Asian security the flashpoint is not the DPRK only, but we also see the escalating tension between China and Japan over territorial disputes. Now we will see some sort of vulnerability race in regards to the operational stability between the Chinese

navy and the states. So then we see the complexity between the power relations of U.S.-China relations, it's big (one) with a lot of examples. Now it's deeper. So then, I'm really looking forward to the upcoming summit meeting between President Obama and Xi (and that it) will help boost their mutual understanding and, of course, bring about some sort of affable cooperation roadmap and then that both sides will improve and hopefully the both sides will drive along some sort of successful story of their cooperation in the settlements of the regional flashpoints.

So then, whatever the next summit meeting will be about, I really hope that the DPRK issue will be sitting at the same table because Washington and Beijing have a lot in common now not just in keeping things manageable but also affable to denuclearization. So [as for the] DPRK issue, I really hope it will become some sort of new approach for both leaders to build up their trust and very, very explicitly and genuinely discourse and real will to cooperate. If we think about, for example, what kind of inhibitor to their cooperation [exists], we can easily figure out a couple of contending concerns. For example, to what extent Beijing will raise the stick high in getting North Korea to accept some sort of cooperation or some dimension that's real. And there's a question also coming over about how both sides can reach the same end game in North Korea if some sort of domestic components come along. But anyways, I think we need some sort of strategy to understand. We need honesty in collaborating on the contentions and concerns in a way [that is] very honest and very, very candid. So if both leaders could just move that way, we will see North Korea be a very interesting driver for security cooperation, and such cooperation also will help build trust and make major power relations truly better and better in (pursuing) the solution to the other issues. So personally I would like to see the DPRK issue help break new ground for major power relations between Beijing and Washington.

Haenle: Zhu Feng, thank you very much for spending time with us today. It's always a pleasure. That's it for this edition of the Carnegie-Tsinghua "China in the World" podcast. If you'd like to learn more about China's relations with North Korea, you can find analysis on the subject by me and other Carnegie-Tsinghua scholars at the Carnegie-Tsinghua website at www.carnegietsinghua.org. Thanks for listening, and be sure to tune in next time!