

Impact Players

Hyon Yong Chol

By Brian Kim

Who is he?

General Hyon Yong Chol is the new Minister of the People's Armed Forces, the North Korean equivalent to a secretary of defense. Hyon is the fourth person to hold the position since Kim Jong-un took power in 2011 and replaces Jang Jong-nam, the outgoing minister who was appointed in May 2013. From July 2012 to May 2013, Hyon was the Chief of the General Staff of the Korean People's Army (KPA), the top military post in charge of KPA units and the day-to-day operations of the military. Additionally, Hyon is an alternate member of the Korean Workers' Party (KWP) Political Bureau, a member of the KWP's Central Committee and the National Defense Commission (NDC).

Presumed to be in his 60s, Hyon entered the political scene only recently when he was elected as a delegate to the 12th Supreme People's Assembly in 2009. Hyon was promoted from two-star lieutenant general to four-star general along with Kim Jong-un in September 2010 and subsequently elected into the KWP's Central Committee at the 3rd Party Conference on September 28, 2010. In July 2012, Hyon was named vice marshal, replacing Vice Marshal and Chief of KPA General Staff Ri Yong Ho, a powerful military commander who has not been seen ever since. Hyon was, however, demoted from vice marshal to four-star general in October 2012 and removed from office as Chief of General Staff in May 2013 shortly after joining the KWP Political Bureau two months earlier. A month later, on June 3, 2013, Hyon was seen accompanying Kim Jong-un as a three-star colonel general, allegedly demoted to commander of the Fifth Corps.

It is believed that Hyon was previously chief of the Reconnaissance Bureau and commander of the 8th Army Corps from 2006 to 2010. Born in North Hamgyong Province, Hyon reportedly joined the military in March 1966.

Why has he been in the news?

Hyon's rise from anonymity is closely linked with Kim Jong-un's ascent to power. Despite his low public profile, Hyon was promoted to four-star general in 2010 alongside Kim Jong-un and named vice marshal in 2012 one day before Kim was declared marshal. Hyon sealed his surprise ascent through the ranks when he was appointed Chief of the General Staff of the KPA in July 2012. His career appeared to take a turn when he was removed from his post in May 2013 and demoted to colonel general. However, his return to Pyongyang as the new Minister of the People's Armed Forces suggests he still remains in favor, and in closer interaction with Kim Jong-un than previously thought. His new appointment was confirmed in a June 25 broadcast by the Korean Central Television (KCTV) which addressed him by his new title.

What can we expect from him?

The position of Minister of the People's Armed Forces has undergone more transition since Kim Jong-un came into power in late 2011 in comparison with the regime of Kim Jong-il, which only cycled through two ministers over a much longer period of 17 years. The Chief of the General Staff has also undergone four reshuffles under Kim Jong-un. Such frequent military reshuffling under Kim Jong-un may suggest the process of power consolidation is not yet complete, and that plans have been altered on more than one occasion.



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