

Impact Players

Hwang Pyong-so

By Andy Lim

Who is he?

Vice Marshal Hwang Pyong-so is the Director of the Korean People's Army (KPA) General Political Department (GPD) and was recently confirmed as a standing member of the Political Bureau Standing Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK).

He is widely seen as the number 2 figure in North Korea because of these two powerful positions in both the party and the military. In his party role his office is in charge of overseeing overall state affairs and in his military post he is responsible for the political management of the KPA. Vice Marshal Hwang is concurrently a member of the Workers' Party of Korea's (WPK) Central Military Commission (CMC), a member of the WPK Political Bureau, a member of the WPK Central Committee and a deputy to the 13th Supreme People's Assembly (SPA).

Prior to his official promotion as the Director of the KPA GPD in May 2014, Hwang had served as the deputy director of the WPK's Organization and Guidance Department (OGD) since 2005. He has risen quickly through the military ranks in the past few years, promoted to the rank of colonel general in April 2011, to the rank of four-star general on April 15, 2014, and finally to the rank of vice-marshal, one of only six to hold that title in the country on April 28, 2014. Hwang has featured prominently with Kim Jong-un in the past few years during his guidance tours. He was part of the high ranking three-member group that surprisingly attended the closing ceremony of the Asian Games in Incheon in October 2014.

He first emerged onto the Pyongyang political elite scene when he began accompanying Kim Jong-il on guidance tours in 2005. Vice Marshal Hwang was born in 1946 and attended Mangyongdae Revolutionary School. He is a graduate of the Kim Il Sung University, where he was reportedly a classmate of Kim Kyong-hui, Kim Jong-un's aunt.

Why has he been in the news?

On April 9, 2015, the Korean Central Television (KCTV) officially referred to Hwang as a standing member of the Political Bureau Standing Committee of the WPK for the first time. This key post was previously held by only three people, President of the Supreme People's Assembly Presidium Kim Yong-nam, WPK Secretary Choe Ryong-hae and Kim Jong-un himself. Analysts believe that his selection may have been made earlier in February 2015 when Kim Jong-un convened an expanded WPK Political Bureau meeting to discuss personnel issues. The KCTV confirmation coincides with the third session of the 13th SPA, which began on April 9. Under the North Korean Constitution the SPA meeting, held twice a year, is responsible for approving North Korea's agenda and priorities for the year. Hwang, as a deputy to the SPA, will likely be featured prominently during the session.

What can we expect from him?

This official confirmation resolves the back and forth on the number 2 position in Pyongyang for the past year, where Hwang and Choe Ryong-hae were both seen as the likely number 2 because of their highly publicized activities. However, do not expect radical changes in policy with this appointment. The recent history of appointments under Kim Jong-un demonstrates a predictable pattern where newly appointed senior individuals do little more than carry out the young leader's policies. Indeed, previous high level officials with deep patronage networks like the executed Jang Song-thaek have been seen as threatening and not included in the power structure.



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