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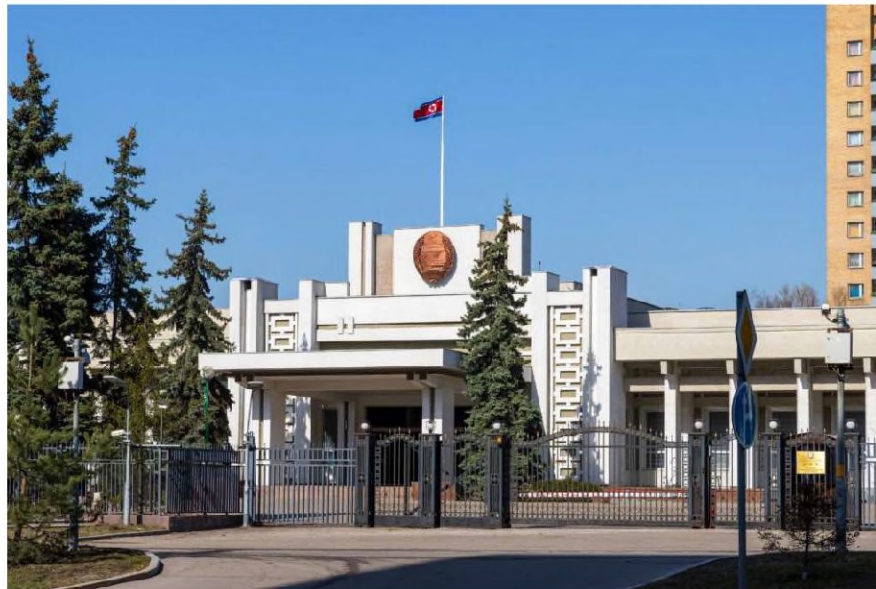
THE PENINSULA

Senior North Korean Officials Who Successfully Defect Are Principally Diplomats Abroad

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Author: [Robert King](#)

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The overwhelming majority of refugees [who flee North Korea](#) are generally those who live in border areas adjacent to China and do not have prominent government or economic positions. Few are from Pyongyang because it is very difficult for citizens to travel within the country unless police and internal security officials approve the travel. Meanwhile, crossing the demilitarized zone along the 38th parallel is extremely difficult because land mines are planted in that border area, and border guards are ordered to kill illegal border crossers.

The few senior government officials who have managed to escape generally are officials in the Foreign Ministry who are living abroad on diplomatic assignments. One of the top priorities of the sizeable security forces attached to every North Korean embassy abroad is to prevent North Korean personnel from escaping. In most cases, the official's children, spouse, or other close family members are required to remain in North Korea—almost as hostages—to ensure that diplomats serving abroad will return to Pyongyang. There are frequent stories of parents, children, or siblings who are imprisoned, executed, or otherwise punished if a relative defects while serving in a post abroad.

Concerns of losing diplomats abroad put a serious strain on North Korea's internal security forces. Currently, Pyongyang has [diplomatic missions](#) in 46 countries and international organizations, which represents a decline from 53 diplomatic posts in 2022. By

comparison, South Korea maintains 166 resident embassies, consulates, and permanent missions, all significantly larger than North Korean posts in the same locations.

The Recent Defection of a North Korean Diplomat in Havana

The most recent defection by a North Korean diplomat involves Ri Il-kyu, who served in the North Korean embassy in Havana, Cuba, as the counselor for political affairs, a very senior political position in the embassy. He slipped away from the embassy in late November 2023. His presence in Seoul was only made public on July 16 of this year when an interview with him was published.

His defection came just a few weeks before Cuba and South Korea established full diplomatic relations in February of this year. The Cuban government's decision to establish diplomatic ties with South Korea was a blow to the North Korean leadership, as Pyongyang and Havana have had a close relationship largely based on both countries' strong hostility toward the United States.

With full diplomatic relations established between Seoul and Havana, Kim Jong-un would likely have been looking for a North Korean embassy official to blame. It is possible that Ri knew about South Korean efforts to establish diplomatic relations with Cuba last November. Because this could have serious consequences for him and his family, Ri arranged their departure from Havana and moved to Seoul before the public announcement.

In press interviews after his defection was made public, Ri Il-kyu provided significant information about North Korean diplomats who were removed from office "with extreme prejudice" because Kim Jong-un was unhappy and blamed the Foreign Ministry for the failure of the second US-North Korea summit in Hanoi in February 2019. Ri Il-kyu confirmed that former Foreign Minister Ri Yong-ho (2016-2019) was sent to a prison camp in December 2019 on charges that he accepted bribes from a North Korean diplomat serving in Beijing, but his real "crime" was that he was the most senior official held responsible for the failed Hanoi Summit.

Furthermore, Ri Il-kyu discussed the execution of Deputy Foreign Minister Han Song-ryol by firing squad in February 2019, taking place shortly before the Hanoi Summit. Han was previously the second most senior North Korean diplomat at the North Korean mission to the United Nations (UN) in New York City and became vice minister of foreign affairs dealing with US issues when he returned to Pyongyang in 2013. Han's execution took place at the military academy on the outskirts of Pyongyang, and senior Foreign Ministry officials were required to attend. Ri Il-kyu said, "For days, those who watched it could hardly eat anything." At that time, Ri Il-kyu was preparing for his departure from North Korea to assume his post in Havana and was not there to witness the execution, but he received first-hand information from those who did.

Other Senior Diplomats and the Danger to Their Families

Although Counselor Ri Il-kyu's defection is the most recent case of a senior North Korean diplomat defecting while serving abroad, he follows various other senior officials who have slipped away. The highest-ranking diplomat who fled North Korea while serving abroad is Thae Yong-ho, a member of the North Korean Foreign Ministry who was deputy chief of

mission (second in charge) at the North Korean embassy in London. He and his family slipped away from their residence in London and successfully fled to Seoul with South Korean help in 2016.

While most senior North Korean refugees have lived quiet lives in South Korea, Thae was immediately given considerable attention as the most senior North Korean official to escape, and he was quite willing to speak out and participate in public events. In 2020, he was elected to the South Korean National Assembly under the United Future Party for the affluent Seoul district of Gangnam, serving as an engaged member of the National Assembly. Although Thae was unsuccessful in his campaign for reelection to the National Assembly during this year's legislative election, he was subsequently named secretary general of the Peaceful Unification Advisory Council, a post that holds the rank of vice minister. Thae is the first North Korean refugee to hold this senior ranking in the South Korean government. Ji Seong-ho, who is also a refugee from North Korea but not a North Korean diplomat, also served as a member of the National Assembly from 2020 to 2024. He did not represent a particular constituency but was elected on the party slate.

Other senior diplomats have also defected to South Korea. In September 2019, North Korea's chargé d'affaires (acting ambassador) to Kuwait, Ryu Hyun-woo, went to the South Korean embassy in Kuwait and requested asylum. Although he and his family left Kuwait in 2019 and resettled in South Korea soon after, his presence in South Korea was not officially made public until January 2021. Kuwait is important for North Korea because the third largest number of North Korean workers abroad are in Kuwait—some 10,000 North Korean laborers. Only China and Russia have more North Korean workers than Kuwait. The workers are poorly paid, live and work in harsh conditions, and the North Korean government expropriates the lion's share of their pay.

In November 2018, North Korea's chargé d'affaires in Italy, Jo Song-gil, and his wife disappeared with no indication of their whereabouts. This occurred shortly before they were expected to return to Pyongyang. In October 2020, a South Korean National Assembly member stated that Jo and his wife had been in South Korea since July 2019, under the protection of the South Korean government.

Jo's defection emphasizes the risks and dangers of dealing with the brutality of the Pyongyang regime, particularly with regard to the treatment of diplomats and their families. The Italian Foreign Ministry issued a statement that it had received notice from the North Korean Embassy on November 10, 2018, that the ambassador and his wife had left the embassy. The Ministry was informed that Jo's daughter had returned to North Korea, accompanied by female staff from the North Korean embassy, after she "requested to be reunited with her grandparents." Neither Seoul nor Rome made this information available for over a year out of consideration for Jo's family members living in North Korea. There is no information about his daughter's whereabouts or the condition of family members still in North Korea.

There May Be Others

Out of concern for family members still in North Korea and the brutality that the Kim regime is known to use against individuals based on the actions of their relatives, the South Korean government tends to keep information about the defection of senior diplomats highly confidential. After his election to the National Assembly in 2020, Thae Yong-ho expressed concern about keeping information confidential: "For diplomats who have

family members living in North Korea, to reveal their news [of defection] is a sensitive matter. That is why other former North Korean diplomats are living in South Korea without revealing their identity and the South Korean government does not reveal it either.”

The plight of high-level North Korean defectors and their relatives back in North Korea shows that for the Kim regime, everyone—from ordinary citizens to formerly favored regime elites—is seen as a potential existential threat. In such a context, human rights abuses are ubiquitous.

Robert R. King is a Non-Resident Distinguished Fellow at the Korea Economic Institute of America (KEI). He is former U.S. Special Envoy for North Korea Human Rights (2009-2017). The views expressed here are the author's alone.

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