

Prospects for Change in the Beijing-Pyongyang Nexus

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China's Response to North Korea's Second Nuclear Test

Having detonated its first nuclear device in October 2006, North Korea conducted its second nuclear test on May 25, 2009. Having consistently attempted to dissuade the North from such tests, China has been infuriated by the North's defiance of Chinese advice and interests. Immediately after the 2009 test, China released a statement almost identical to the one it announced in the wake of the 2006 test. Beijing's unprecedented wrath and "resolute opposition" to Pyongyang's unmannerly behavior had been clearly expressed in the 2006 statement. In the 2009 statement, the Chinese government "strongly demands" that Pyongyang abide by its non-nuclearization commitments, "stop actions that may lead to a further deterioration of the situation," and "return to the track of the Six-Party Talks." Furthermore, China's subsequent vote in favor of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1874, which was designed to impose tougher sanctions on the Pyongyang regime than its previous resolution passed in 2006, seemed to indicate that China may implement a strategic shift away from North Korea and may also increase its strategic cooperation with the international community in dealing with the North Korean nuclear issue.

Witnessing China's stern behavior toward the North, some China watchers in Washington and Seoul have argued that North Korea's second nuclear test,

along with a series of other provocations in the first half of 2009, which included a rocket launch and a complete withdrawal from the Six-Party Talks, have prompted China to reconsider its long-standing policy of amity toward North Korea. In contrast to its traditional policy, China since the 2009 nuclear test has not hesitated to make it clear in its official statements that North Korea has become a liability than a strategic asset, and that it was not satisfied with North Korea's arbitrary behavior threatening the stability of the Korean Peninsula. Remarkably open discussions about North Korea have also been permitted in the Chinese academia and media. In the debates, some Chinese analysts have criticized their government for its failure to get tough with North Korea; others have also advocated for Beijing to take a firmer stance toward North Korea. These debates seem to be a departure from the traditional brotherly attitudes many Chinese have shared concerning North Korea, and also serve as convincing reasons for many experts to argue that China may change its policy toward North Korea.

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At the same time, however, China has made clear that it intends to continue its traditional policy of friendship toward North Korea. U.S. foreign policy circles have frequently commented that the Chinese leadership has become increasingly angry at the Kim Jong-il regime, especially in the wake of the second nuclear test, and that Beijing is willing and able to use its leverage to pressure Pyongyang to give up its nuclear weapons program. In contrast, however, Chinese premier Wen Jiabao, during his visit to Pyongyang to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of PRC-DPRK (People's Republic of China-Democratic People's Republic of Korea) diplomatic relations, reassured North Korea of its economic patronage by providing a number of economic measures for expanding China's economic exchanges with the North. Furthermore, the recent visit of Liang Guanglie, China's defense minister, to North Korea has also consolidated the Sino-North Korean military alliance. His avowal of "China's willingness to have closer military contacts with the DPRK" must have provided more confidence for the North Korean leaders in dealing with post-nuclear test reactions.

Given this situation, that China's national interest concerning North Korea has been the maintenance of peace and stability is reconfirmed. On the one hand, in order to keep Pyongyang from further undermining peninsular security, Beijing has resolutely opposed North Korea's provocations. China's statements have emphasized its diplomatic pursuit of the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and have also underscored that China, as a great power, acknowledges that it shares responsibility for preserving regional order and stability. On the other hand, China still places more importance on the maintenance of the status quo, in the sense of supporting the North Korean regime itself. China has exerted much more effort on behalf of the North's survival than on behalf of its denuclearization. While China has in principle supported the UN economic sanctions on the North, it has never been sympathetic to the implementation of realistically ef-

fective sanctions. In facing Kim Jong-il's presumed health concerns and subsequent contingencies in the North, however, China has realized that the status quo on the Peninsula cannot always guarantee regional peace and stability. Given that the demise of Kim Jong-il himself is relatively imminent and certainly inevitable, China has to adopt a new approach to North Korea. China's chief concern is to strengthen its economic and military grip over the North with the intention of keeping the regime afloat and its leadership under China's control even after Kim Jong-il has passed from the scene.

Maintenance of the Traditionalist Approach

In the wake of the second nuclear test, the voices supporting a tougher stance on North Korea dominated the Chinese academia and media. The Chinese scholars arguing for a harder line are called the "strategists." In general, the Chinese media coverage of North Korea has become more permissive in recent years. In comparison to the case of *Strategy and Management*, an academic journal forced to cease publication because it published an article criticizing North Korea's leadership five years ago, it is noticeable that negative media coverage and academic criticisms of North Korea have become widespread in public. For example, a strategist wrote that China "cannot tolerate or accommodate" North Korea's "extreme adventurist policy," because Beijing's "core interests" in regional stability lie in the "denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula." If China wants to become a "world power," the strategist added, it will have to "put its responsibilities and duties" to the international community above those to North Korea.

Another case indicating the shift of Chinese public sentiment regarding North Korea can be found in the *Global Times* [*Huanqiu shibao*], a newspaper with nationalist views on international affairs. It conducted a survey of twenty experts on international affairs right after the second nuclear test and found that half of the



respondents supported more severe sanctions against North Korea. It also found that 30 percent of the respondents believed that the Six-Party Talks had failed. Reflective of Chinese domestic trends, China watchers in Washington and Seoul cautiously support such potential changes of policy in China toward North Korea. The China watchers base their current conclusions on two factors. The first is China's domestic change in sentiment against the North. As a Chinese scholar commented, the North Korean nuclear test was a "slap in the face." Observers in China believe that their country has consistently supported and provided assistance to North Korea, but their benevolence has been returned with an unexpected betrayal. The second factor is that China, as a rising power in pursuit of superpower status, is less able to continue to support North Korea's misdemeanors at the cost of international responsibility.

However, the prospects for a change in China's policy change toward North Korea look dim at the moment. First, it is more important for China to maintain peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula than to denuclearize it. Although China has declared that (1) peace and stability and (2) denuclearization are the two most important goals of its policy toward the Korean Peninsula, China places a much higher priority on peace and stability. Second, it is true that there have been a growing number of North Korea experts arguing for China's policy change toward North Korea, but their voices are still in the minority. In general, they are relatively young in age and low in status, and have limited opportunities to take part in the decision-making process. Third, if we review the strategists' argument for policy change, we find that they are not actually intending to implement a fundamental policy change. The key to China's policy change toward the North is whether China accepts the possibility of a North Korean regime collapse. But given the current situation, China would never allow the collapse of the Kim Jong-il regime.

Chinese Interests in North Korea

Despite its official criticism toward Pyongyang's nuclear test and its unprecedented support for the international sanctions against the North, there seems to be only a slim chance that Beijing will push North Korea into a corner or change its traditional policy toward North Korea. Chinese leaders are concerned that imposing too much pressure could result in a loss of its limited leverage over Pyongyang and, to some part, could lead to a hostile relationship with its socialist brother. They are also concerned that excessive pressure could trigger the North to make more dangerous provocations rather than giving in to resume its denuclearization commitments. The most serious threat Chinese leaders are concerned about from North Korea would be regime collapse and a subsequent flood of refugees. Regime implosion could result in a flood of hundreds of thousands of North Korean refugees crossing the border into China's northeast provinces, which represents a tremendous liability for China's consistent economic development and social stability, as well as potentially precipitating a reunification with South Korea and a U.S. military presence on the border of the Yalu and Tumen rivers.

Furthermore, after the second nuclear test, the Chinese decision makers came to reevaluate the North Korean leaders' perception of nuclear weapons. Previously, Chinese policymakers believed that Pyongyang was pursuing its nuclear weapons to gain security assurance, international aid, light water reactors, and ultimately a normal diplomatic relationship with Washington. Sometimes the Chinese sought a justification for North Korea's nuclear development from the presumed U.S. security threat to Pyongyang. But now they have realized that Pyongyang's desire for nuclear capability and international recognition as a nuclear power *per se* are the goals, and therefore are not negotiable. According to Beijing's calculations, if North Korea never gives up its nuclear ambitions, China's pressure for North Korea's denuclearization will likely fail



and ultimately would jeopardize regional peace and stability by provoking Pyongyang to take more dangerous steps. In the same vein, the Beijing government adopts the traditionalists' belief that puts peace and stability as preconditions for denuclearization, in contrast to the strategists' view that emphasizes denuclearization as a precondition for peace and stability.

Most fundamentally, since China hardly perceives North Korea's nuclear capability as a direct and immediate threat to its security, its approach has been sharply different from that of the United States and its allies. Since there is no chance that Pyongyang would use its nuclear capability against Beijing, China has placed much lower priority on Pyongyang's denuclearization than on the North Korean regime's survival and stability. Since North Korea demonstrated through its second nuclear test that it has no intention of giving up its nuclear capability, China has had to refocus its North Korean nuclear policy to one of nonproliferation instead of denuclearization. In fact, Beijing is not as alarmed by North Korea's proliferation potential as most other countries, and it also sees nonproliferation as more of an issue in U.S.-China bilateral relations than as a concern in its own right. China even considers the United States as the major party to the negotiations regarding North Korea's nuclear crisis, while China itself is nothing but a table setter to make the negotiations successful. Given the fact that the United States puts a high priority on issues regarding nonproliferation, Chinese leaders believe that its cooperation on the issue might draw a higher U.S. reward.

Beijing's New Approach to Pyongyang?

However, China's consistent implementation of the traditionalist policy toward North Korea has not always guaranteed the stability of the Pyongyang regime. A major motivation for a new approach has been Kim Jong-il's health problems. As the only decision maker of the North Korean regime and an autocrat of a mo-

nolithic socialist state, Kim Jong-il has enjoyed undisputed despotic power. But it is widely known that he has been suffering health problems since 2008. Although his health has recently recovered to normalcy, future uncertainties regarding Kim Jong-il's health have triggered China to consider a new North Korea policy line in pursuit of the North's stability regardless of Kim Jong-il's presence. In order to further consolidate North Korea's regime stability, China has recently introduced new approaches, more direct and effective for its own interests, to North Korea. Beijing's new approach to Pyongyang has been clarified with the visits of premier Wen Jiabao in October and the defense minister Liang Guanglie in November. As indicated by these two official visits of the top leaders, China has attempted to strengthen its economic and military clout over North Korea.

Wen Jiabao's visit to North Korea served to secure China's economic power there. Premier Wen brought a high-powered delegation to Pyongyang, including Zhang Ping (National Development and Reform Commission Minister), Chen Deming (Minister of Commerce), and Xie Fuzhan (Director of the Research Office of the State Council). He also signed a variety of agreements for expanding bilateral economic interaction, including agreements on economic and technological cooperation, educational exchange, software industry cooperation, tourism, wildlife protection, and a protocol on inspection of exports and imports of goods for purposes of ensuring quality control. No doubt these agreements and the prestige of the delegation demonstrated that China wanted to expand economic interactions with North Korea and also to provide strategic and physical grounds for Pyongyang's economic development. Wen's economic commitment also included substantial forms of economic assistance that have customarily accompanied such high-level exchanges between China and North Korea; all this despite the sanctions enforced by the UN Security Council resolution.

In addition, the recent visit of Liang Guanglie,



China's defense minister, to North Korea has reaffirmed Beijing's military alliance with Pyongyang. General Liang has been quoted as saying the relationship was "sealed with blood" during the Korean War. He also added that "no force on Earth can break the unity of the armies and peoples of the two countries and it will last forever." His emphasis on the tight military alliance between China and North Korea attracts international interest. Recently Chinese leaders have tended to dismiss the Sino-North Korean alliance and instead claimed the bilateral relationship to be a normal state-to-state relationship. Despite the fact that the Sino-North Korean Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance signed in 1961 remained intact, the Chinese leadership's reluctance to recognize it indicated that China wanted to shy away from its responsibility to assist a moribund ally. However, General Liang's recent visit and his comments while in North Korea demonstrate that China wants to reaffirm, strengthen, and expand its military ties with North Korea.

Policy Guidelines for South Korea and the United States

After the second nuclear test, Chinese leaders realized that North Korea's desire to obtain and maintain nuclear capabilities is designed as a way to acquire bargaining chips, but as a way to acquire genuine status as a nuclear power. Although a variety of strategists' opinions to support the tough measures toward Pyongyang circulated among the media and academia, Chinese leaders are still maintaining their preference for the traditionalists' policy line. Concerned that too much pressure may instigate North Korea's regime collapse and domestic instability, the Chinese government has implemented its North Korean policy in pursuit of the maintenance of the status quo. In other words, China has put much higher policy priority on North Korea's regime stability than on North Korea's

denuclearization. With the advent of concerns about Kim Jong-il health and the potential for subsequent exacerbated North Korean emergency needs, China should find a new approach to North Korea. In order to maintain regime stability regardless of Kim Jong-il's longevity, China has been attempting to promote and expand its patronage both economically and militarily. In this perspective, the recent visits of Wen Jiabao and Liang Guanglie reflected China's intentions. But China's new approach to North Korea has caused two problems. First, it may deliver the wrong message to Pyongyang; and second, it may not guarantee the peace and stability of the peninsula for good.

In the wake of the second nuclear test, the Six-Party Talks have been drawn into a stalemate. Although the role of China, as well as North Korea, in causing the stalemate has been emphasized, China has already lost interest in North Korea's denuclearization. Instead, it tends to put more focus on the non-proliferation of the North's nuclear capability. Furthermore, China has stronger interests in North Korea's regime stability. Consequently, North Korean leaders may have gained more confidence following their second nuclear test. But Chinese aid is no guarantee of the North's national security or regime stability. Although China's new approach temporarily helps relieve Pyongyang's economic plight and extend its regime survival, it is out of the question for China to help produce fundamental social stability in the North without denuclearization.

Given the seemingly unalterable and unbreakable bilateral fraternity and mutual dependence between China and North Korea, the potential policy guidelines for South Korea and the United States in a current snap shot are as follows. First, the United States and South Korea have to declare and make certain that they will deal with the North Korean nuclear issue as a foundation of the Six-Party Talks. But it is imperative to make it known that the role of pressuring the North to participate in the Six-Party Talks is not up to China but to the United States. Also, the Six-Party Talks



should be modified in terms of its formats, functions, and leadership in accordance with the restated role of the United States. Second, Washington and Seoul have to realize that they cannot count solely on China to solve the North Korean nuclear issue. In order to produce a successful denuclearization of North Korea, the United States, not China, should take the lead. Third, the five parties except North Korea should coordinate closely. In particular, because they constitute a threat to North Korea as well as being the ones that can actually deliver what the North Koreans ultimately may want, strategic partnerships among the alliance countries, the United States, South Korea, and Japan, should be the basic asset to persuade North Korea to join, and furthermore to make the Six-Party Talks successful. Finally, South Korea has suggested a “Grand Bargain,” which is designed to induce North Korea’s nuclear dismantlement in exchange for multilateral economic assistance and regime stability provided by the five parties. This idea has to be better defined, calculated, coordinated, and communicated in order for it to succeed.■

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