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Kim Jong-il's Visit to China and Its Implications

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Background and Significance of Kim Jong-il's China Visit

The North Korean leader Kim Jong-il embarked on a secretive trip to China on May 3, 2010. The five day visit was his first to China in four years and his fifth so far. Kim's recent visit to China does not seem to be that much different from previous summit meetings between North Korea and China. Although North Korea's nuclear test in 2009 did not provoke a longer than normal suspension in bilateral exchanges, in essence, progress has been made since the resumption of bilateral diplomatic visits in 2000. The key agenda of the recent summit has been consistent with the principle in which China provides economic assistance in exchange for North Korea's return to the Six-Party Talks. This principle has been the backbone of Beijing's North Korea policy, which has been in place since the outbreak of the second nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula in 2003. Furthermore, this secretive trip to China looks very similar to Kim Jong-il's last four visits to China, where he toured the industrial regions that have benefited from China's economic reform and opening.

There has been a lot of controversy and diverse assumptions on the reason for Kim's visit to China. This is particularly attributable to the complicated and delicate nature of inter-Korean relations even though this China-DPRK summit shares many similarities with those of the past. Therefore, it is necessary to

understand the political and security environment of the Korean Peninsula in which Kim Jong-il decided to make such a critical strategic decision to travel to China.

The visit and the resulting bilateral summit were a successful conclusion to the longest gap in China-DPRK relations since the revival of bilateral ties at the beginning of 2000. Similarly, this summit carries special meaning considering the current deadlock of the Six-Party Talks that has gone on for the past eighteen months. What is more significant is the fact that Kim Jong-il's trip immediately followed South Korean President Lee Myung-bak's official visit to China on April 30, amid the escalating tensions in inter-Korean relations over the North Korean torpedo attack on the *Cheonan*. Moreover, North Korea is facing dire domestic circumstances primarily caused by the health problems of Kim Jong-il, the succession issue, instability following the disastrous currency reform of late 2009, and its failing economy struggling under United Nations sanctions.

The fact that the China-DPRK summit took place in such a complex environment indicates that a wide range of current issues were involved and it would have a greater impact for stability on the Korean Peninsula. North Korea's actions immediately following the bilateral summit with China should be closely examined as it could help South Korea predict how the *Cheonan* incident will develop. There were no official reports or any specific details of the conversation available for the

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public due to the opaque nature of the talk. Therefore, it is necessary to scrutinize as well as analyze any subtle moves by both countries that might reflect any possible major agreements between the two sides.

There are three major questions that need to be answered when evaluating this recent summit in China. First, what is the significance of the summit regarding China-DPRK relations and Beijing’s policy toward North Korea? Second, did North Korea and China agree on the North’s return to the Six-Party Talks in exchange for Chinese support for its regime? If so, what is the prospect for the resumption of the Six-Party Talks? Third, what impact will this summit have on ROK-China relations in light of the fact that the summit meeting took place while the South Korean-led international investigation into the cause of the *Cheonan* sinking was in progress?

China’s Policy toward North Korea and the Bilateral Relationship

Kim Jong-il’s secretive trip to China in the immediate aftermath of the *Cheonan* incident has intensified the debate over the current status of China-DPRK relations. On the surface, China-DPRK relations have recently appeared to be weakening and adrift. After North Korea’s nuclear test in 2009, China took up an unusually hard-line against Pyongyang by supporting the United Nations resolutions condemning the North. In response, the North Korean regime criticized strongly these resolutions as a “scheme of the United States and its blind followers”, which included China.

However, China did not carry out strict sanctions against Pyongyang directly. In fact, quite the opposite, China has increased its

economic exchange with North Korea. In 2008, North Korea’s trade dependency on China reached the seventy percent mark. In addition, these two countries further strengthened economic cooperation as traditional allies, manifested recently by Premier Wen Jiabao’s visit to North Korea in 2009 and now by Kim Jong-il’s trip to China.

The hidden side to the paradoxical China-DPRK relations lies in the strategic disparity between China’s short-term strategy toward the North Korean nuclear issue and its long-term strategy for the overall problems of North Korea. Considering China’s foreign policy strategy toward North Korea, its main interest is upon maintaining a stable pro-China regime without nuclear weapons in Pyongyang. The underlying assumption of this strategy holds that North Korea’s nuclear problem should not adversely affect the rise of China. Beijing is concerned that North Korea’s development of nuclear weapons as well as the regime’s instability might create major impediments to China’s peaceful rise as a global power. Accordingly, China is attempting to use the Six-Party Talks to prevent the North Korean crisis from worsening the security environment in East Asia in the medium to long term. As China views the North Korean nuclear crisis as fundamentally a bilateral issue between North Korea and the United States, the Chinese government believes that its role in resolving the nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula is somewhat limited.

On the other hand, Beijing is continuing bilateral economic exchanges and cooperation with North Korea in order to pursue its fundamental interests and long-term strategy. This is instead of pushing Pyongyang to adopt the Chinese model of economic reform. Through this strategy, China is hoping to

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counterbalance its weakened influence over Pyongyang in case of the normalization of DPRK-U.S. relations as well as to maintain the stability of the North Korean regime as a pro-China policy in Pyongyang. As seen in the previous four visits of Kim Jong-il to China, this visit also focused on the successful experience of economic reform in Dalian, Tianjin, and Zhongguancun. During the visit, Premier Wen Jiabao explicitly pointed out that China will continue its full support for North Korea's economic development and hopes to introduce China's experience in economic development and reform. In order to pursue these long-term strategies, China needs to continue its economic cooperation with Pyongyang despite the ongoing tensions of the nuclear crisis.

China might have allowed this visit mainly due to its security burdens arising from the instability of the North Korean regime in the immediate aftermath of the *Cheonan* sinking. Although North Korea is currently perceived as a strategic burden to China, it will be difficult for Beijing to completely discard the North Korea card which has the potential to turn into a strategic asset in the long term. Consequently, China is attempting to manage any security burdens that North Korea might create in the short and medium term while maximizing the value of North Korea by stabilizing the reclusive regime to be more pro-China. Moreover, this carefully calculated strategy by China adequately addresses any possible changes in regional security relations in the event North Korea makes the decision to denuclearize.

Prospects for the Six-Party Talks after the China-DPRK Summit

Kim Jong-il might have expected to make substantial gains from China during the visit such as economic assistance and cooperation, support for the regime and Pyongyang's succession plan, and possibly a chance to provide explanations on the *Cheonan* incident from the North Korean perspective. In contrast, China did not expect much from Pyongyang during the summit meeting with Kim Jong-il. North Korea's return to the talks seems sufficient enough for China's national interests as indicated during Premier Wen Jiabao's visit to Pyongyang in 2009. Accordingly, the question of whether the two leaders were able to reach a bilateral consensus that reflects their interests remains the focus. If this is the case, the participants of the Six-Party Talks will soon begin their diplomatic efforts to resume the Talks at the working level. Overall, China-DPRK relations are expected to be stable in the foreseeable future.

This recent visit did not see any significant progress on the Six-Party Talks when compared to the discussions during Premier Wen Jiabao's visit to Pyongyang in 2009. During Kim Jong-il's visit in May, the two leaders merely reconfirmed their shared effort toward the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula within the framework of the September 2005 Joint Statement. In contrast to the previous summit meetings, China did not clearly specify its economic assistance in response to North Korea's return to the Six-Party Talks. Although it has been widely believed that China's President Hu Jintao and Kim Jong-il agreed on economic cooperation in five areas including economic reform, it still lacked substantive details. Specific plans and the

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scale of Chinese economic assistance have not been made public following this summit in May. Considering the fact that this recent visit was the first in four years, the outcomes are unexpectedly vague. Despite the persistent Chinese efforts to persuade the North to return to multilateral talks since 2003, Pyongyang has remained resistant to China's persuasion. This clearly shows the difficulty in resuming the Six-Party Talks through bilateral negotiations between Beijing and Pyongyang.

Yet, it is still too early to conclude that the prospects for the Six-Party Talks are dim. There are many factors that can help restart the Talks. Although the *Cheonan* incident placed China in a dilemma on how to respond, its consistent support for the resumption of the talks remains unchanged. The Obama administration has also explicitly expressed support for the talks under his initiative for a nuclear-free world and implicitly encouraged China to play a role in the resumption of the Six-Party Talks. In this regard, Beijing has long been a traditional mediator between Pyongyang and Washington to successfully resume the Talks. On April 29, shortly before the China-DPRK summit meeting, State Councilor Dai Bingguo and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton shared a telephone conversation on the resumption of the Six-Party Talks. With the results of the China-DPRK summit, it is now time to invite China and the United States to move forward to resume the Talks. The Strategic Economic Dialogue 2010 on May 24 between China and the United States serves as a good indicator of the prospects for the Six-Party Talks. Similarly, there is a high possibility that the leaders of China and North Korea would discuss preconditions for the North's return to the Talks. Kim Jong-il specifically mentioned that he hoped regional

powers would create a favorable environment that might lead to the resumption of the Talks. This is indicative of Pyongyang's willingness to participate in the Talks with Chinese help as a mediator after the difficulties surrounding the *Cheonan* incident have concluded.

The *Cheonan* incident is undoubtedly an important variable for the resumption of the Six-Party Talks. China does not want the tensions over the warship incident to escalate, which might cause regional instability. However, China will be somewhat compelled to support the United Nations Security Council sanctions against Pyongyang given the definitive and undisputable forensic evidence accusing Pyongyang that has been widely accepted at the international level.

Implications for ROK-China Relations

Kim Jong-il's visit to China surprisingly created some ripples in ROK-China relations. With this, the Lee Myung-bak government now faces an important, yet unexpected, diplomatic test. The series of events following the *Cheonan* sinking with South Korean President Lee Myung-bak's visit to China followed by Kim Jong-il's visit, created the unusual perception that the two Koreas were in a diplomatic competition over China. This diplomatic competition looked even more abnormal considering the fact that ROK-China relations can no longer be defined as a zero-sum game. South Korea and China have cooperated in an array of policy issues since 2003 after acknowledging that North Korea's nuclear program posed a serious threat to both countries. In fact, this shared threat perception against Pyongyang's nuclear program contributed toward strengthening bilateral ties between

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Seoul and Beijing.

After South Korean President Lee Myung-bak took office in 2008, South Korea and China elevated bilateral relations to the level of strategic partnership. Despite improving relations, the two governments have displayed diverging interests on key strategic issues including the North Korean nuclear crisis and *Cheonan* sinking. In the wake of warship incident and the China-DPRK summit, South Korea should reevaluate the “China factor” on the Korean Peninsula and examine how to manage Chinese variables in the multifaceted and complex dynamics of international relations in the East Asia region.

Above all, the Lee Myung-bak government needs to review its eighteen year history of ROK-China relations. Although the two countries have shown drastic developments in the bilateral relationship over the past eighteen years, beneath its blooming façade is the need for greater mutual understanding and trust. This has mainly generated some of the current diplomatic problems between Seoul and Beijing. Therefore, mutual understanding between the two countries should come first. In this regard, the South Korean government needs to assess China’s North Korea policy and China-DPRK relations from the rational and objective perspectives rather than through wishful thinking.

In addition, South Korea needs to make an effort to take the lead in the North Korean nuclear crisis. Despite a series of diplomatic mishaps between Seoul and Beijing, there is an increasing need for both countries to cooperate more closely on North Korea issues. However, South Korea should abandon its wishful thinking so that it can make more use of China’s knowledge and leverage on North

Korea for its own interests. Instead, Seoul needs to secure its own set of information, diplomatic channels, and leverage on North Korea, preferably superior to those of China. With such tools, South Korea should seek a more active role when it comes to persuading participants of the Six-Party Talks over the resumption of dialogue or sanctions against Pyongyang. The North Korean nuclear crisis has resulted in the increased influence of China on the Korean Peninsula, which conversely has decreased South Korea’s role as inter-Korean relations deteriorated. Another zero-sum game between Seoul and Beijing vying for North Korea will only exacerbate South Korea’s already declining foothold, particularly in pursuing its long-term goal of unification on the Korean Peninsula. South Korea should focus on diplomacy to ensure its own strategic values and status in possible future power struggles between China and the United States. ■

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