

Prospects for North Korea's Internal Policy Following the North Korea - China Summit

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From May 3-7, North Korean National Defense Council Chairman Kim Jong Il made an unofficial visit to China and held a summit meeting with Chinese leader Hu Jintao. Kim Jong Il reached an agreement with the Chinese side on five points for strengthening “strategic communication.” To summarize the Chinese side of the declaration, Premier Hu Jintao announced the following five actions for peace, stability, and prosperity in Northeast Asia: 1) continuing high-level exchanges; 2) improving communication on affairs of mutual interest such as domestic and foreign issues, international and regional circumstances, and national governance 3) deepening economic cooperation and trade; 4) expanding exchanges in culture, education, sports, etc. 5) strengthening cooperation on international and regional problems, including Northeast Asian peace and security. Kim Jong Il fully agreed with these points however, it is likely that China brought up the Northeast Asian regional stability issue while the North Korean side emphasized economic cooperation and exchanges.

Of course, the contents of this agreement are basically an extension of the debate and its conclusion, which erupted last May and July within the Korean Workers Party and the Chinese Communist Party. Following China's support of the UN resolution sanctioning North Korea after its second nuclear test in May 2009, it was reported that there was serious internal debate within North Korea on what to do about North Korea-China relations. While details are lacking, when examining subsequent events it appears that Pyongyang came to the decision to strategically develop the bilateral relationship with its northern neighbor. This is supported by the remarks made by Chairman Kim Jong Il in early September of last year, in which he emphasized Chinese - North Korean economic cooperation and increasing international trade and foreign investment. In particular, over the course of this debate which continued until March of this year, as the actual possibility of a North-South summit disappeared, the “pro-China group” (which emphasizes China - North Korea relations) grew dominant while the “federation group” (which emphasizes

North-South relations)weakened.

Following North Korea’s second nuclear test, there was a strong internal debate within the CCP concerning North Korea’s succession system and its reform and opening. The “traditionalists,” who stress maintaining traditional cordial relations with North Korea, gained dominance over the “strategists,” who sought to make North Korea into a “normal” nation. Concerned about North Korea’s instability and the limits of its influence over North Korea, Chinese leaders began building a new framework for Chinese-North Korean relations which separated the nuclear issue from the North Korean issue. China’s “New North Korea Policy” was concretely defined through meetings between Chinese diplomats and the CCP’s Central Foreign Affairs Leading Group (headed by Hu Jintao). As a result of these meetings, the phrase “ties forged by blood” was resurrected and it was formally announced that “the firm policy of the Chinese Communist Party and government” was to develop the China-North Korea bilateral relationship. This was again confirmed in early October during Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao’s visit to Pyongyang. Soon after the Prime Minister’s visit, a foreign ministry vice-ministerial bureaucrat who had previously served at the Chinese embassy in Pyongyang explained “the principle of separating politics from economics” (i.e., separating the nuclear issue from economic cooperation) in China’s North Korean policy at an unofficial seminar for researchers involved with Korean issues. This was confirmed by the Chinese Ambassador to South Korea, Cheng Yonghua, in an interview with *Yonhap News* on December 15. In the interview, Ambassador Cheng stated that “North Korean - Chinese economic cooperation is a separate issue from the UN Security Council’s sanctions on North Korea.” Furthermore, “as neighbors with a history of friendly relations, North Korea and China are engaging in normal economic cooperation, which should not be conflated with the UN sanctions.” Around this time, there were continuous exchanges between high-level Chinese and North Korean party, state and military officials.

On February 11, 2010, the head of the CCP Foreign Affairs Bureau, Wang Jiarui, met with Chairman Kim and passed on a handwritten letter from Premier Hu Jintao. In response, on February 23rd North Korean Foreign Secretary Kim Yong Il met with Hu Jintao and passed on a handwritten letter from Kim Jong Il as such, it was only a matter of time before a North Korea - China summit would be held. It can therefore be inferred that the agreement emerging from this summit was a result of the internal debates within both countries and the public and private discussions held between both governments.



Through this summit, North Korea achieved a degree of success on three key issues of concern. First, it appears to have gained tacit approval from the Chinese on its succession plans. Chairman Kim stated that “the traditional friendly ties between our two countries forged by our forbearers have endured the hardships and trials of the times. Furthermore, these ties must not change with the passing of time or the change in generations.” Premier Hu responded, “It is our shared historical responsibility to ensure that our amicable relationship develops with the times and is carried forward from generation to generation.” Phrases like “generational shift” and “from generation to generation” are deemed to refer to the succession issue.

Second, while agreeing to the denuclearization of the peninsula via the 6-Party Talks process, North Korea is seen to have gained China’s tacit approval towards a 4-Party discussion on a peace treaty for North Korea. At the summit, both sides had “a frank exchange of opinions on the international and regional situation, including the issue of the 6-Party Talks.” As a result, “[China and North Korea] acknowledge that a peaceful, stable, and prosperous Korean peninsula is in the best interests of China, Korea, and all the countries of East Asia.” Furthermore, both sides affirmed that “We are committed to working for the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula as stated in the 9.19 Joint Declaration.” In particular, Chairman Kim clarified that “There is no change in our commitment to a nuclear-free Korean peninsula” and “we wish to work with the other countries to create conditions conducive to re-starting the 6-Party Talks.” This is a reconfirmation of the settlement mediated by China earlier this year to restart the 6-Party Talks process via the sequence of: US - North Korea bilateral talks → 6-Party preparatory talks → 6-Party Talks. To be more specific, North Korea not only clarified its position on denuclearization but it also secured Chinese support on the issues of holding 4-Party talks to discuss a peace treaty and lifting the UN Security Council sanctions.

Third, it appears that the North Koreans were able to secure Chinese investment to construct the lacking infrastructure that has been hindering Chinese - North Korean economic cooperation. In this regard, Prime Minister Wen Jiabao elaborated, “The potential for Chinese - North Korean trade cooperation is great, and both sides desire to work together to actively promote collaborative projects, accelerate construction of essential facilities (infrastructure) in the border region, and seek new methods and areas for collaborative efforts to improve the lives of people on both sides.”

However, North Korea also had to accommodate Chinese demands in order to obtain these results. China’s most important demand was restraint on North Korea’s part on actions that are increasing tensions on the peninsula. Chairman Kim accepted Premier Hu Jintao’s proposal, pledging to maintain “communication through flexible or prescheduled talks on issues of mutual concern to



both countries' governments and diplomats, international and regional affairs and national governance," adding, "we must strengthen cooperation on international and regional issues and protect regional peace and stability." This implies that North Korea has promised to act with an appropriate amount of restraint in the future when performing a third nuclear test or launching additional long-range missiles. Thus, North Korea has reduced the likelihood of armed conflict with the US or South Korea and has left open the option of negotiations with both countries. It should be highlighted that this agreement between China and North Korea occurred at a time when the growing opinion within North Korea is that "It is meaningless to have more fruitless discussions with the US and South Korea" and those who promoted agreements with the US and North-South summits have lost influence. This seems to imply that the supporters of a hard-line policy towards the US and South Korea have lost ground, thus contributing to the security on the Korean peninsula. As a result of this agreement, North Korea was not only able to address some of its domestic problems but also opened the possibility of restoring its relationship with the US and South Korea.

At this point, North Korea will most likely accelerate its plan for passing on the leadership to Kim Jong-Un. At present, Kim Jong-Un is said to be active in the National Defense Commission and involved in the affairs of the overall government. It appears that Chief of Administration Chang Sung-Taek and the head of the light water industry, Kim Kyung-Hee, are powerful supporters of Kim Jong-Un, while Hyun Chul-Hae and Ri Myung-Su, directors of the National Defense Commission, are acting as advisers. At the beginning of this year, party members were instructed to write "letters of fidelity" to the successor, and projects that idolize Kim Jong-Un have been systematically carried out. Hereinafter, in addition to the military and the government, Kim Jong-Un is likely to become involved in the affairs of the party to further expand his influence.

The handling of the *Cheonan* incident will also be a crucial variable in determining North Korea's future. However, North Korea is continuing to insist that it was not involved in the incident and has tried to change its present situation by restarting the 6-Party Talks. China has already secured agreements from the other countries involved in the 6-Party Talks regarding its three-part plan of US-DPRK talks → preparatory talks → actual talks. On April 29th, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Chinese cabinet minister Dai Bingguo spoke by telephone to discuss re-opening the talks. It is also most likely that the 6-Party Talks will be discussed again at the US-China strategic economic dialogue scheduled for May 24-25. It is also possible that the preconditions North Korea stated at the North Korea-China summit to resuming the 6PT, e.g., second round of bilateral talks with the US, presenting the 4-Party Talks plan, removing the UNSC sanctions, etc., were resolved by China's *ex-post facto* guarantees. This means that China is shouldering much of the



responsibility to start the 4-Party Talks, in order to restart the 6PT. North Korea seems to be predicting that by mid-June, details of the Cheonan incident will become clear, and by late-June to early-July, the political situation will be favorable to resuming the 6PT. If this is the case, there may be renewed calls for North-South talks in the latter half of the year.

From a long-term perspective, Chinese-North Korean economic cooperation will proceed progressively. China is promoting the Chang-Ji-Tu development plan for economic cooperation between both countries. If China is successful, it is most likely that construction for the necessary infrastructure will begin in the latter half of the year to link China's northeast region and North Korea's far-north region.

China's Chang-Ji-Tu development plan is to connect Changchun, Jilin and the Tumen River Basin into an economic development beltway by 2020 to revitalize China's three economically stagnant northeastern provinces. To realize this plan, China will need to acquire an East Sea port for which North Korean cooperation is essential. In detail, it appears that China has been given the green light to construct an economic beltway that connects the Tumen River border areas of Jilin Province with Rajin and Chungjin, to develop the areas of Wihwado and Hwanggum-pyeong in the Amnok River basin, and to construct a new Amnok River bridge that connects Dandong in Yonyeong Province with the Sinuiju area.

When examining the overall situation, it appears that North Korea has made a "strategic decision" to resolve its problems regarding the succession issue and rebuilding its security and economy by using Chinese - North Korean economic cooperation. In the short-term, North Korea will likely make moves to gain economic benefits through its partial opening and acquisition of foreign capital. Even if the *Cheonan* incident is announced as being caused by North Korean actions, it will likely have a limited impact on the carrying out of the recent agreement between North Korea and China or North Korea's behavior. However, because the US and South Korea have taken the position of resolving the *Cheonan* incident before resuming the 6PT, the resumption of the 6PT will be determined in part by the outcome of the US-China strategic dialogues.

