

Two Aims of Kim Jong Il's Trip to China: Tactical Transition and Building a Strategic Base for 2012

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Kim Jong Il has concluded his 7-day tour of China (5.20~26) and returned home. This was his third such tour in a year's time, following visits in May and August of last year. The motivations behind this trip can be broadly divided into two major aims. First, with China's cooperation North Korea seeks to broadcast that it is making a definite transition to a new conciliatory phase in inter-Korean relations and to pressure the other countries in the region to follow along. Second, by reaffirming the strength of its alliance with China in the eyes of neighboring countries, North Korea is ensuring that its strategic basis for survival will remain strong after 2012.

Looking at the first strategic aim, the North's strong offensive moves directed against the South and the outside world in 2009 and 2010 helped it to reaffirm its tactical dominance. By shifting to a pro-engagement phase in 2011, the regime is preparing stable conditions favorable to securing its survival in advance of 2012. With this intent, from the beginning of 2011 – contrary to all expectations in South Korea at the end of 2010 – North Korea launched a charm offensive toward the South. However, with the breakdown in February of the working-level military talks

and the breakdown in April of inter-Korean talks concerning the potential eruption of Mt. Baekdu, it seems that North Korea been unable to manipulate the situation in the way it had hoped. In addition, China has seen little progress on the proposal it made in April for a plan to restart the Six Party Talks via a three-step process (meeting of the Six Party representatives of both Koreas to discuss denuclearization → US-North Korea bilateral talks → Six Party Talks). Thus Kim Jong Il's visit was a chance for North Korea and China to reaffirm their unified position and prepare an advantageous structure within which North Korea can pursue inter-Korean relations and the Six Party Talks. This is apparent from the remarks made by Kim Jong Il at his meeting with Hu Jintao.

"North Korea is presently focusing its efforts on economic construction, for which a very stable surrounding environment is required. We hope for political détente between North and South, and we are still committed to upholding the goal of denuclearizing the Korean peninsula. We desire an early return to the Six Party Talks. Our side has made sincere efforts to improve relations with the South. We are grateful to China for its efforts to restart the Six Party Talks and establish peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula."¹⁾

We can hypothesize three background factors behind North Korea's effort to shift matters into a new phase. First, with its missile test and 2nd nuclear test in 2009, the Cheonan and Yeonpyeong attacks in 2010, and disclosure of its uranium enrichment capability, North Korea feels that it has now accumulated enough cards to recapture a strategically dominant position. In other words, it has boosted its nuclear capability and reaffirmed that it can potentially pose a very real threat to South Korea. The North's provocations and the possibility of strong retaliation by South Korea were particularly effective in stirring US fears of the possibility of a war breaking out by accident. Second, the North has judged that further provocations like the ones made in 2009 and 2010 would not be to its advantage. Following the Cheonan and Yeonpyeong attacks, South Korea's resolve and readiness have grown more robust. Unlike the Cheonan attack, the Yeonpyeong attack had the effect of swaying South Korean public opinion decisively against the North. China is also troubled by North Korea's provocations and, in contrast to its 2010 behavior, since early 2011 China entered a phase of compromise with the US. Together with the US it has emphasized stability on the Korean peninsula, the importance of inter-Korean dialogue, and execution of the 9.19 Joint Statement. In April 2011 China proposed a three-step process for restarting the Six Party Talks, beginning with inter-Korean

1) Cha Dae Woon, "Statements from the DPRK-China Summit Talks," *Yonhap News*, May 26, 2011.

denuclearization talks as the first step. North Korea has interpreted this as a sign that South Korea's position is being given more serious consideration. In 2009 and 2010, North Korea showed off its power to the outside world while internally achieving political success by promoting Kim Jong Eun at the September 2010 Party Delegates' Conference amid an environment of tension and solidarity. In seeking to cement this success, the North has decided that internal stability is more important than external provocations. Furthermore, additional provocations at this time would only exacerbate the internal economic struggles with price fluctuations and food shortages. Third, it feels the need to exploit a weakness that has become apparent on the US-South Korean side. After the North exposed its uranium enrichment capability in November 2010, certain critical voices in the US began expressing doubts about the "strategic patience" policy. The US stance began reflecting this more prominently following the US-China summit in January and the US-China Strategic Economic Dialogue in March. On May 24th US Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Robert King began a five-day visit to the North to assess its food situation. In South Korea, public debate about North Korea policy grew more active as the country marked one year from the start of the May 24 Sanctions Measure against the North and began gearing up for the 2012 presidential elections. If the North's efforts to switch from confrontation to a conciliatory phase become more pronounced, the internal fragmentation within South Korea and the US may be further aggravated.

A second motivation behind Kim Jong Il's visit to China was to reaffirm the strength of North Korea's alliance with China and show it off to neighboring countries, in order to establish a solid support base for the regime's survivability through 2012 and beyond. As is widely known, the year 2012 is expected to be a time when the regional environment surrounding North Korea will be highly uncertain. There will be presidential elections in South Korea and the US, a new leadership will take power in China, and the North must carry out meaningful events and celebrations to mark "the dawning of the *kangsung daeguk* era." It is possible that Kim Jong Il felt that an additional trip to China was necessary in order to preemptively manage the uncertainty that may be brought on by these political changes in various related countries. In order to deal with this uncertainty, the North must first take the lead in transitioning to a new phase on the basis of its strategically dominant position (as described above), and then secure its regime's survival by improving inter-Korean relations and reopening the Six Party Talks. Next, as reflected by the general consensus in South Korea concerning the major goal of this China visit, Kim needed to "secure various aid from China including food relief, activate DPRK-China economic cooperation, and gain approval of the succession system."

So, what progress has Kim Jong Il made towards these two general objectives through this recent visit to China? It would seem that he has achieved very little in terms of actual tangible results. First, he has laid some groundwork towards new breakthroughs on certain issues. For the most part, North Korea and China merely reaffirmed their past positions on inter-Korean relations, the Six Party Talks, DPRK-China economic cooperation, and the succession system. Second, closer DPRK-China relations notwithstanding, the structural and strategic mistrust between the two countries is likely to remain or even intensify in proportion with the strengthening of ties. On Kim Jong Il's part, he may have achieved something through this visit by making it slightly more psychologically difficult for China to betray North Korea, and on Chinese part, she probably succeeded in reaffirming her expectations for North Korea and might have even diplomatically warned of their violations. Third, if China becomes more assertive in trying to control the North's behavior and at the same time fails to appease South Korea and the US, circumstances may grow more disadvantageous for the North. It will become harder for the North to use forceful provocations as a card to pressure South Korea and the US, and they will have to persevere in isolation for a longer period of time. Fourth, if there was any significant achievement from this recent visit, it was to boost the psychological sense of confidence in the internal political stability of the North. The North's propaganda about this visit (and the two visits last year) has emphasized the idea that China made definite promises regarding the survival of the successor regime.

What steps can we expect North Korea to take in the coming months? First of all they will try to secure stronger backing from China and build momentum toward dialogue with the US, while putting the ROK government in a situation where it will feel isolated and be forced to soften its position. Aware that the US and China both desire an easing of inter-Korean tensions and a return to the Six Party Talks, North Korea will expect them to play a role in mediating the disagreements between North and South. While testing whether or not it can separate the issue of the Six Party Talks from the Cheonan/Yeonpyeong issue, the North will probably try to restore ties with South Korean authorities and draw the South into restarting aid. In all these efforts the North will strive to change its own position as little as possible while driving a wedge between South Korea and the US. If this fails, the North will directly attempt to isolate the South Korean government internationally and domestically by pushing for direct dealings with the US, bypassing Seoul. They may also show off their capacity to threaten or pretend to threaten South Korea and the US. If this too fails, the North may once more directly attack the South or show off its increased nuclear capability through another provocation. Even in the process of doing so the North will continue working to expand its various projects for earning foreign currency from

China. They will pursue more money-earning schemes such as closed-off special development zones like Hwanggeumbyeong, admission fees for transit and tourism like Ra-Son special zone, and exports of mineral resources and human labor. The main purpose of such endeavors is to acquire the foreign currency needed to ensure regime survival without enacting real reforms.