

The United States and China: “Same Bed, Different Dreams” and the Denuclearization of North Korea

Lee Ki-Hyun

Research Fellow, Center for International Relations Studies, KINU

Online Series CO 13-17

Opinions regarding the outcome of the U.S.-China Summit held on June 7-8 are divergent. In general, the American media seems to be dissatisfied with the outcome. It appears that President Obama was disappointed with the lack of agreement despite efforts to address China's infringement of intellectual property laws and cyber security issues. On the other hand, Chinese media outlets deemed the Summit a success, stating that it has allowed President Xi Jinping to lay the foundation for a new great-power relationship dynamic with the U.S. However, these divergent assessments may not hold any profound implications. This is because from the outset, the Summit was not intended to produce agreements on any specific issues. The biggest purpose of the talks was not to agree upon a resolution for distribution to the press like in other summits. Rather, it was for both countries to mutually exchange positions and preferences on major issues. In other words, the focus was for the leaders of both countries to share thoughts on their respective agendas, positions on key issues, and identify political threats and limitations. Therefore, the Summit was held in a relatively informal ‘no necktie’ setting, where the two leaders took walks and had discussions in a comfortable manner. However, a meeting that engages two of the world’s greatest powers – the G2 – can never be as comfortable as intended. Various awkward situations arose: there was no meeting of the first ladies, China rejected the U.S.’ arrangement for accommodation, and instead of comfortable person-to-person discussions, the general mood of the Summit was one of high-level formalities.

Obama and Xi Jinping's divergent dreams

Throughout the Summit, there were frequent moments of uneasiness between the two leaders. President Obama wanted to discuss very specific issues, such as North Korea's nuclear weapons, nuclear proliferation, climate change, cyber security, intellectual property rights, and he even emphasized human rights; a topic that China feels most sensitive about. However, President Xi Jinping's response to these agendas was mostly ambiguous, and in some cases, he simply did not address the agenda points at all. Rather, he emphasized the new U.S.-China relationship in a broader sense. President Xi Jinping said "the Pacific Ocean is large enough to include both China and the U.S. and I wish to draw a large blueprint for mutual cooperation and development," and provided his general opinions on the future and development of U.S.-China relations.

One Chinese media source commented that the talks brought up memories of the Summit held between Mao Zedong and Nixon 40 years ago. At the time, similar to President Obama, President Nixon had gone to great lengths to prepare for the Summit in order to seize the direction of the talks. However, Mao Zedong got the head start with his first words, "let us not focus on specific problems, but discuss the philosophical context (implying U.S.-China relations)," and "Premier Zhou Enlai will take care of the specific problems." It is not certain whether President Xi Jinping desired to follow the footsteps of Mao Zedong, but it is apparent that he had ambitions to shake the framework of U.S.-China relations.

President Xi Jinping wanted to raise issues regarding the rules of the game in U.S.-China relations. Up until now, the rules had followed the G2 logic. In other words (in the writer's opinion), if China accepts the U.S.' leadership, then China will be treated in a manner fit for a runner-up. This rule contains a tacit agreement that China will fulfill the expected responsibilities and duties, and that it will not covet the vested interests of the U.S. However, it appears that China was not happy with this rule, or found it burdensome. China is not willing to bear the responsibilities and roles (or yield) as a runner-up within the G2 framework, and it has avoided this by claiming that it is impossible to bear these as a developing nation. Instead, China has claimed that the rules are unfair, and focused on using the U.S.' relative decline as an opportunity to enhance its national interests. In fact, China has displayed assertiveness in its foreign movements such as expanding its military presence in Asia, and infringing upon U.S. interests. From the U.S.' perspective, China was clearly breaking the rules. The U.S. was not willing to give up its interests easily, and as it returned its focus on Asia, the region has been witnessing growing strategic conflicts (as well as cooperation) between China and the U.S.

Therefore, by referring to the vastness of the Pacific, China is asserting that its national interests do not overlap with those of the U.S., and rather than playing by the rules set by the U.S. (which China deems unfair), the two states should forge a new set of rules and play the game as equals. In other words, China is expressing its desire to be treated as a rule maker, and that the U.S. is not the only state that gets to set the rules. However, the U.S. seems to have little interest in China's desires. During the Summit, President Obama neatly stated in terms of the new U.S.-China relations, "China's peaceful rise would also help the U.S." It may be likely that President Obama wants China to abide by the former rules of the

game. This is why China has emphasized the issue of setting new rules while the U.S. focused on specific issues to discuss how China will perform in accordance with the original rules. If China's goals are in sync with that of the U.S., we can hope for a new form of cooperation between the two nations. However, could it be said that perhaps the leaders of both countries are striving for divergent goals?

Each side interpreted the outcome of the Summit in accordance with their respective goals. While it became known that the two leaders exchanged opinions on various political and economic issues, the only tangible outcome on paper after the two-day meeting was a joint agreement on climate change. The fact that it was documented means both parties consulted one another every single sentence, which leaves little room for subjective interpretation. However, other than this joint statement, many issues were eventually presented during separate press briefings by the spokespersons of the respective leaders. Therefore, much guesswork is required to figure out exactly how much consultation and common grounds were reached. There were some discrepancies in each state's understanding of the results of the Summit. For example, China states that the two sides agreed on a dual leadership status in U.S.-China relations, that it expressed its resolve to protect its territorial sovereignty with regards to the issue over the Diaoyu Islands and the South China Sea, and that it has pressed the U.S. to stop exporting weapons to Taiwan. On the other hand, the U.S. affirmed that China has agreed to look into problems concerning cyber security, that China has expressed its desire to engage in dialogue to resolve the conflict between China and Japan, and emphasized that the two states agreed to cooperate on denuclearizing North Korea. In other words, the Summit confirmed once again that although the two states were working together, they were actually striving towards different goals.

A consensus on North Korea's denuclearization?

If the outcome of the Summit is still up for interpretation, then what can be said about the two states' views on the denuclearization North Korea? Most importantly, it appears that the two leaders agree, to a large extent, on the need for North Korea's denuclearization. President Obama emphasized that the issue of North Korea's nuclear weapons and missiles is a task that requires the cooperative efforts of both states, and although President Xi Jinping did not explicitly mention North Korea's nuclear weapons, he agreed to strengthen cooperative exchanges in dealing with important issues in the region. Common grounds regarding the North Korean nuclear issue can also be noted from the respective state's briefings. According to the U.S., both leaders share the view that North Korea must be denuclearized and that cooperation and dialogue will be strengthened in order to achieve this. China also stated that both leaders share the same position and goal regarding the North Korean nuclear issue.

Nevertheless, these developments must be seen in a critical light. The two states have agreed on the goal of North Korea's denuclearization and their respective positions numerous times. However, this Summit did not bring about any new resolutions or new common grounds; it was rather a reaffirmation of previous agreements. Moreover, it is questionable whether a consensus was reached on the means of denuclearizing North Korea. For the U.S., the North Korean nuclear issue was an important agenda high on the priority list, such that China's cooperation would have meant a great deal. In addition, the U.S.

repeatedly emphasized that the resumption of the Six-Party Talks, or talks or negotiations aimed to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue would need to be preceded by genuine actions from North Korea for denuclearization. However, the agenda of North Korea's nuclear weapons program was not included in the official assessment comments during China's briefing. In response to a reporter's question regarding the North Korea problem, China simply stated that the two states came to a consensus regarding their positions and goals. Moreover, China stated that, regarding the agenda of North Korea's nuclear weapons program, resuming dialogue is the most urgent matter at present, and it called for the U.S.' cooperation in order to achieve this.

Without doubt, the fact that the two governments reaffirmed the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula is an encouraging development. Strictly speaking however, when it comes to finding specific means for realizing denuclearization, the United States and China are both reverting to their original stances without indicating any new positions. Particularly from China's perspective, it may reach the conclusion that it can shoulder less of the burden and instead, the U.S. should carry more responsibility, because North Korea suggested returning to talks and created soft-line conditions prior to the U.S.-China Summit. Furthermore, China has consistently emphasized the need for all stakeholders to make efforts to resolve the problem, because it perceives the tension and threat on the Korean Peninsula as having stemmed from not only North Korea, but also the U.S. In particular, given that North Korea has accepted China's proposal and expressed its desire to return to the talks, there is a possibility that China may shift the responsibility onto the U.S. and expect the U.S. to take the next step in resolving the North Korean nuclear issue.

In sum, although China and the U.S. have both agreed on the framework of North Korea's denuclearization, they have not yet come to an agreement on the specific means of realizing that goal. Yet it is difficult to affirm how the current situation will change depending on North Korea's future direction. However, unless clues to resolving these problems are found, both the U.S. and China may request one another to shoulder more responsibility and change one's stance. This is why it would be advisable to refrain from reaching hasty expectations of mutual cooperation. © KINU 2013

* The views expressed in this paper are entirely that of the author and are not to be construed as representing those of the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU).