

Expectations on China and its Limits

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It may be the wishful illusion. This is the thought that comes to mind when watching people's expectations that China will help in inducing change within NK. With China's approval, the United Nations (UN) Security Council at last announced a resolution regarding North Korea's third nuclear test, imposing tighter sanctions against the North than in the past. Nevertheless, it is still a wishful illusion if believing that China would actively implement the resolution of the UN Security Council. In fact, some people are fired up for the delicate change of public opinion in China. There have been not only a lots of anti-North Korea protest in China but also severe criticism was brought up by one of Chinese party theorist that saying 'China should give up North Korea. However, it seems China's policy towards North Korea will not be different from that of the past.

China is considered as the only country that can move the position of North Korea. There are several evidences that are on the surface which shows China has leverage over North Korea. For instance, North Korea relies on China for 70-80% of its trade on China and China provides oil and food aid to North Korea. Such seemingly evident leverage of China over the North is the reason why people demand that China exercise its influence over North Korea. Last February, the U.S. House of Representatives demanded that China put pressure on North Korea by means of reducing its economic aid and trade volume. On February 15, U.S. Department of State Spokesperson Victoria Nuland emphasized

that, although the U.S. is considering imposing unilateral sanctions against North Korea, such sanctions would be more effective if China also takes part. South Korea is no exception. After North Korea's third nuclear test, the South Korean media has frequently asserted that China should exert its influence over North Korea. Experts are yet again asserting that China is the only country that can influence North Korea to move towards denuclearization.

However, it seems China itself does not have the will to exert its influence over North Korea. Technically speaking, upon close examination, one could even say that China does not have any leverage over North Korea. This is because there is a significant gap between our expectation of China's role in the North Korean problem and what the Chinese themselves see as their role in the issue. Almost all sanctions against North Korea, which require China's cooperation, ultimately threaten the stability of the North Korean regime. Such measures were devised since they are believed to be a minimum requirement for affecting the North. Thus, we can toss the question whether North Korea might collapse or not if the sanctions were to be prolonged.

It seems that China has no intention of coordinating policy of sanction with other nations. The reason is that the instability of North Korea is what China fears the most. In general, experts seem to be in agreement on the issue that the critical interest of China is the survival of North Korean regime. It is commonly perceived that China does not want the situation of influxing of large numbers of North Korean refugees crossing the border as well as of sharing border with Korean Peninsula allied to the United States. This is why China's policy behavior has been predictable to this date. China not only condemned North Korea's nuclear issue but also casted his vote for the imposing sanctions against North Korea from time to time in the UN Security Council. However, China has always opposed or has been reluctant in implementing sanctions on the North. At all times, China has provided the North food and oil aid. With its stance on North Korea's third nuclear test, that sanctions against the North should not exacerbate conditions on the Peninsula, China's steps in the coming days is predictable.

Such actions of China can be understood as the result of China's principle that the North Korean problem and the North Korea's nuclear problem should be dealt separately. Zhang Xinsen, the first Chinese ambassador to South Korea, mentioned China's priorities regarding its policy towards the Korean Peninsula; its first and foremost priority is maintaining peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, second is maintaining amicable relationship between China and North Korea, and last is the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. In its meeting convened after North Korea's second nuclear test, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China reaffirmed North Korea's strategic meaning to China and China's principle of dealing the North Korean problem and North Korea's nuclear problem separately. In short, China is considering the survival of the North Korean regime as its foremost priority. Under such context, hoping for China's active participation in implementing sanctions against the North that may result in the collapse of the regime is futile

Experts are analyzing conditions for China's change of thought. Some say that, if the Chinese leadership judge that North Korea's behavior could harm China's interest, then China might consider changing its

policy towards North Korea. Furthermore, experts assert that the nuclearization of Northeast Asian countries, such as Japan, could also harm Chinese interests. As a matter of fact, with the ongoing territorial disputes between China and Japan, a nuclear Japan may pose significant threats to China. During an interview with South Korea's Dong-A Daily News on February 15, Steve Chabot, the newly-appointed Chairman of the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, mentioned that U.S. should put pressure on China by utilizing the rising demands for nuclearization within Japan and South Korea. However, China knows that the U.S. will not let Japan and South Korea to go nuclear. Many people within the U.S. oppose South Korea's nuclearization. President Barack Obama's State of the Union Address in 2013 is also an indicator of U.S. priorities. Although Obama did strongly condemn North Korea's third nuclear test, he did not mention any possibility of nuclearizing its allies. He only emphasized that the U.S. will strengthen its missile defense (MD) system to protect the countries that are threatened by the North, and that it will continue its non-proliferation efforts regarding nuclear materials and weapons of mass destruction.

In the end, China knows that it cannot take any measures that might threaten North Korea's regime survival, even if North Korea conducts nuclear test or missile test. Some call this China's dilemma. However, there is a more fundamental reason. China does not think that North Korea's nuclearization disturbs the balance on the Korean Peninsula. This is why China is inclined to turn blind eye on North Korea's behavior. South Koreans believe that North Korea's nuclearization will disturb peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. However, just as the U.S. does not consider Israel's nuclearization as a disturbing factor of the balance in the Middle East, so does China with North Korea's nuclearization.

North Korea knows such strategic judgments of China better than any other country. North Korea, to say the least, knows that China will not use North Korea's nuclear test or its nuclearization as an excuse to threaten the regime's survival. Thus, North Korea acts upon its knowledge that China will not impose sanctions against the regime. China knows such thoughts of North Korea. Further, China knows that U.S. will not allow nuclearization of both South Korea and Japan. Thus, China believes that even if it does not participate in the international community's efforts to impose sanctions against North Korea, it will not suffer from any damage.

What is important is accepting what we should know. It would be naïve to think that what China cannot, and will not do will still be realized if we insist upon it. We should stop putting our reckless expectations on China and judge China's foreign policy maneuvering room cold-headedly. Although it may not be easy, if South Korea wants to induce China's cooperation in handling the North Korean problem, it has to make China perceive that South Korea has wider options than it thinks South Korea has. If not, South Korea should lower its expectations and try to induce China's limited cooperation such as prohibiting articles related to the development of nuclear weapons and not about North Korea's giving up of nuclear weapons or facilitating change within North Korea. Only after making such efforts, South Korea should look for its chances to build and accumulate trust with China. © KINU 2013

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