

The China-North Korea Summit: Evaluation and a Strategic Direction for South Korea

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North Korean National Defense Chairman Kim Jong Il visited China (May 3-7) and held a summit with Chinese leaders (May 5-6). This summit has caught the world's attention as it occurs at a time when North Korea is internally suffering from economic recession and food shortages in the wake of the currency reform, while North-South relations have reached peak tensions amidst suspicions of North Korean involvement in the sinking of the *Cheonan* (March 26) and the North's freezing of South Korean private assets at the Mt. Kumgang resort, and internationally the 6-party talks aimed at resolving the North Korean nuclear issue have been stalled now for over a year and a half. Meanwhile, the decision to hold a China-North Korea summit immediately following the China-South Korea summit (4.30) without giving us any prior notice has stirred the indignation of the South Korean people and government.

What has each side gained from this secretive summit meeting? North Korea seemed to concentrate on easing its economic troubles and buttressing its durability as a socialist state, while China focused on boosting its standing as a supreme power in the region. For North Korea, which opened up its military rice storehouses during the spring austerity season of April ~ May, to deal with the shortages of food and materials following the failed currency reform, it will desperately need economic aid from China, which it relies on for over 75% of its trade. In the political area as well, Chairman Kim needed to show off to domestic and external observers that he is alive and well, and to secure the succession plans. And in security matters, they need China to act as a buffer against international pressure following the *Cheonan* incident. For China, if it can prevent North Korea from making provocations and restart the 6-party talks which have been put off for over a year and a half, the resolution of the nuclear issue and peaceful management of regional affairs will greatly boost China's political standing in the international community, as well as show off its influence on the Korean peninsula.

So, did both sides achieve their intended goals? The results can be called a partial victory. They succeeded in showing off to the world their close alliance, but neither side can be completely satisfied with the substance of that alliance. In North Korea's case, they showed that the China-North Korea "blood alliance" trumps the China-South Korea "strategic cooperative partnership." Key expressions such as "Friendly relations passed down from generation to generation" can be viewed as a sign of China's implicit approval of the succession system. However, the fact that North Korea was unable to extract the usual promises of large-scale unconditional economic cooperation, despite its pressing economic problems, can only be seen as a failure. For China, which as always displayed its highest level of pomp and ceremony for Chairman Kim's first visit in 4 years and 4 months, it was a spectacle of hospitality. Most of China's highest leadership (9 members of the Political Bureau Standing Committee of the Party), dividing their roles, variously headed the welcoming reception (Deputy Prime Minister Li Keqiang), the leadership summit (Premier Hu Jintao, Vice-President Xi Jinping), the banquet (Standing Committee member Li Changchun etc.), the joint meeting (Secretary of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress Wu Bangguo, Prime Minister Wen Jiabao), the inspection of industrial sites, and the farewell sendoff (Premier Hu Jintao, Chairman of the People's Political Consultative Conference Jia Qinglin).

However, in examining the summit results it is possible to detect subtle frictions and conflicts between the two sides. After finishing his welcoming speech, Premier Hu pressured Chairman Kim, saying "I would like to propose cooperation in 5 areas." These consisted of continued high-level exchanges, improved strategic communication, more substantial trade cooperation, expanded cultural exchanges, and stronger international/regional cooperation. Of particular interest is the weight attached to strategic communication. Premier Hu remarked, "Both our countries should have frequent and regular communication of substantial depth on issues of common interest, such as major issues in internal and external affairs, the international and regional situation, and the governing experiences of the party and state." China, whose foreign policy since the 1950s has been based on the 5 principles of peaceful coexistence, which include non-intervention in internal affairs, is breaking the taboo in making this very strong demand that North Korea must give prior notice of major internal and foreign policy issues and communicate on the governing experiences of the party and state. Of course, the "Mutual Cooperation and Communication System" between China and North Korea is established in the "Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance between China and Korea"(1961.7.11) Article 4 ("Both parties will continuously cooperate on all important international issues of mutual interest."). But this "communication system" was limited to international issues of a certain high level. This is because Article 5 clearly specified the limits of the "communication



system,” proscribing non-intervention in “internal problems” and the greatest possible amount of economic and technical assistance in mutual “issues in the work of socialist construction.” However, this time China appears to be overstepping those limits. This can be seen as China’s response to North Korea’s 1st and 2nd nuclear tests, its long-range rocket launches, its unilateral currency reform, and its reversion to an extremely conservative, reform-resistant socialist economic system.

In this context, Prime Minister Wen Jiabao, who in the past relented from using the words “reform” and “opening” out of consideration for North Korea’s situation, appears to have now brought these concepts to the fore. He put it fairly gently, saying “Just as before, China supports North Korea’s economic development and improvement of its people’s economy.” But, he then clarified, for this purpose “I would like to discuss China’s experiences in reform and opening.” Further, in response to Chairman Kim’s statement that “We welcome investment in North Korea by Chinese businesses,” Prime Minister Wen made proposals for “speeding up construction of basic facilities in the border regions” and “research and discussion on new areas and forms of cooperation,” implying that without substantial improvements in North Korea’s systems and infrastructure, expanding investment will not be easy.

Ultimately it appears that North Korea failed to gain definitive guarantees of large-scale economic aid and investment from China. On the other hand, China did manage to show off to the world its influence on the Korean peninsula. Using North Korea’s economic and political dependency to the fullest, China proved that it could resurrect the 6-party talks and spur North Korea to reform and open up, while also displaying China’s status in regard to South Korea through the use of equidistance diplomacy in its handling of the *Cheonan* incident. However, the failure to elicit a clear statement from North Korea on re-opening the 6-party talks reveals the limits of its influence. North Korea’s sudden surprise announcement that it had succeeded in achieving a nuclear fusion reaction (5.12) can be seen as a display of its dissatisfaction with this summit and the international community. This is reminiscent of North Korea’s *Taepodong* missile launch (2006.7.5) and its 1st nuclear test (2006.10.9) which followed after the 4th China visit (2006.1). Here, North Korea is saying that it is developing not merely nuclear bombs but also hydrogen bombs, and it is challenging the world to respond.

In this situation, what policy direction should we take? This year, 100 years after the disgrace of annexation and 60 years after the start of the Korean War, which path should we choose? Should we return to a triangular power confrontation, as in the old Cold War paradigm of South Korea-US-Japan



vs. North Korea-China-Russia? Or should we strive to overcome the US-China power rivalry and the shock and anger of the *Cheonan* incident in order to reverse the direction of our history of hardship and division?

First, to put it plainly, we must develop a strategy for responding to China's rising influence. The situation on the Korean peninsula is both a national issue, which the Korean people must take the principle role in resolving, and also an international issue which involves the interests of four regional powers. Thus we must not only consider North Korea's political system and its South Korea strategy, but also have a keen understanding of the Korea policies of the four regional powers and take a balanced approach to handling them. In particular we must not forget that China, 20 years on from its decision to adopt reforms, remains a Communist nation with dreams of becoming a "21st century socialist world power." Further, even 60 years after the Korean War broke out, we cannot overlook the fact that China fought alongside North Korea in that conflict and even today supports North Korea's arguments. We should always bear in mind that China's number one priority is neither North Korea's nuclear issue nor its human rights situation, but China's own stable development it is for this purpose that it seeks peace and prosperity in the region. We must maintain a level-headed awareness of the political, military, and diplomatic influence of China, which will continue to grow ever larger, fueled by the world's 2nd largest economy with over \$2 trillion in foreign exchange reserves, and make thorough preparations in response.

Second, we must make clear our position on peace in East Asia, and be flexible in its application. We must make clear that we will not tolerate any actions which damage stability on the Korean peninsula or peace in East Asia. If it becomes apparent that North Korea was responsible for the sinking of the *Cheonan*, we must petition the UN Security Council while also taking decisive measures under consultation with the other members of the 6-party talks. In this process, US-South Korean policy coordination and strengthened Chinese-South Korean cooperation will be of utmost importance; using these, we must obtain North Korea's apology and punishment of those responsible, as well as absolute assurances that such an incident will not happen again. However, if North Korea's involvement is not conclusively proven, then the US and China will need to make strategic decisions and hold dialogues for dealing with Korean peninsula issues in the context of maintaining global influence and regional stability, and we cannot exclude the possibility that the US and North Korea may reopen a dialogue or the 6-party talks may be restarted. In that case, we must take care lest our government, in eternally opposing the reopening of the 6-party talks, becomes isolated by the international community. While managing the situation on the peninsula in order to resolve the *Cheonan* incident and prevent a recurrence of such a tragedy, we must continue to work to achieve



our ultimate goal of peaceful reunification. Last April 29th, and again on May 11th, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and CPC Central Committee member Dai Bingguo spoke by telephone to discuss the *Cheonan* incident and the 6-party talks. The US and China plan to hold strategic economic talks this May 24-25, at which time they will again likely discuss the *Cheonan* incident and the 6-party talks. Actually, the fact that North Korea's future and the outlook for the Korean peninsula have been objects of US-Chinese discussion since 2005 is very troubling. Previously, a number of great power agreements which excluded Korea, like the Taft-Katsura agreement of 100 years ago, the US-Russia secret treaty (1905.7.29), the 2nd UK/Japan alliance (1905.8.12), and the Russia/Japan Pact (1905.9.5), forced our country to unknowingly accept the Japanese Protectorate Treaty (1905.11.17), leading ultimately to the disgrace of the Japanese annexation (1910.8.29). We must remain vigilant to ensure that we do not repeat that kind of humiliation.

Third, we must keep a persevering attitude. Some have argued that in response to the *Cheonan* incident, we should take military action to punish or attack North Korea; but we must remember that we do not have the right to unilaterally take over wartime operational control of the military. Others insist that, even so, we must have a war in order for the North and South to recover their senses and create a situation of peaceful coexistence; but we need to recognize that if a war breaks out on our peninsula it could lead to the mutual destruction of both sides. Through this summit, North Korea seems to have re-discovered the limitations of its "move away from South Korea, befriend China" approach, and now we need to lead them to the "befriend South Korea, work with China, make peace with the US" direction. For the present, while coolly and calmly dealing with the *Cheonan* incident and China-North Korea relations, we must carefully develop a comprehensive and even-handed national strategy for Korean peninsula issues and proceed with the attitude of "treading steadily as an ox, watching keenly as a tiger," to use a Chinese expression. With our tears, we must sow the seeds of peace and unification.

