

Chairman Kim Jong Il's China Visit and the Future of China-DPRK Relations

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National Defense Commission Chairman Kim Jong Il visited China and held a summit with Chinese Premier Hu Jintao on May 5th. As in the past, China's Xinhua News Agency announced the fact of Chairman Kim's visit and the China-DPRK summit only after the Chairman had completed his sojourn on May 7th, and North Korea did not report on the substance of the summit until May 9th. Yet this China visit and summit differ from those of the past in various ways.

First of all, China's influence over North Korea has grown significantly second, as a consequence of its economic troubles North Korea has adopted a "cream diplomacy" towards China; third, the summit revealed several irreconcilable differences of opinion between China and North Korea. Based on these points, I would like to examine the results of this summit and analyze the outlook for future China-DPRK relations.

1. Background to the Visit: China Summons Chairman Kim Jong Il

Looking at both countries' situations at the time of this visit, which one would appear to have more pressing needs? Premier Hu requested Chairman Kim's visit a year ago by personal letter and verbal message, asking that he "visit China at the earliest convenient time."

However, this visit by Chairman Kim hardly occurred at a "convenient" time. First of all, the visit had to be conducted with the utmost degree of security and control, and inevitably the sight of his limping figure exposed his many health problems, so China must have been particularly insistent in requesting this visit. Second, amid fears that the 6-Party Talks might be further postponed due to the unexpected *Cheonan* incident, there was an urgent need for North Korea's highest leadership to go directly to China and confirm their commitment to restarting the talks, as well as their position on the *Cheonan* sinking. With suspicions growing about North Korea's involvement in the sinking,

South Korea and the US have claimed a “*Cheonan* investigation first, 6-Party Talks second” policy, saying they will consider reopening the talks only after they have definitively determined whether or not North Korea was responsible for the sinking. In addition, at the China-ROK summit in late April, President Lee Myung Bak requested to Premier Hu Jintao that China take a constructive role regarding the incident, promising that he would show China firm evidence on the *Cheonan* sinking; in response Premier Hu expressed his regrets for the *Cheonan* victims.

2. The China–DPRK Summit: Substance and Key Features

Lack of agreement in many areas

The actual substantive portion of the May 5th China-DPRK summit lasted one and a half hours. China announced the results on May 7th; in contrast, North Korea made its own announcement of the results two days later, on May 9th. Why was this? Analysis suggests that it was because there were more mutual disagreements than agreements at this summit. Particularly, there were differences of opinion between the two sides regarding North Korea’s participation in the 6-Party Talks, what position to take on the *Cheonan* incident and rising North-South tensions, and the scale of Chinese economic aid to North Korea. Also, even though there was no major incident in North Korea, Chairman Kim Jong Il cancelled his plans to attend the theater with Premier Hu Jintao.

China’s increasing involvement in North Korea

Regarding the May 5th China-DPRK summit, Xinhua News Agency reported that both leaders “agreed to strengthen strategic communication on points of mutual interest including major issues in each country’s domestic and foreign affairs and the international and regional situation.” This statement definitively reveals China’s increased involvement in North Korean affairs. Previously China has said that if it failed to respect North Korea’s pride and independence relations between the two nations would fall apart, and it takes pride in its consistent policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries. This statement marks the first time since China established diplomatic relations with South Korea in 1992 that it has officially agreed to a policy of communication with another country on internal affairs of mutual interest, this time with North Korea’s leader. Not only has this damaged China’s vaunted policy of non-interference, it suggests major internal problems which could harm China-DPRK relations.



What is the reason for this? Is it China's way of stressing that it will not continue to provide unconditional aid unless North Korea adopts Chinese-style reforms? Or does it mean that North Korea must consult with China on its succession arrangements?

First of all, there is no basis for concluding that North Korea has obtained the implicit consent of China on the succession issue. It appears that China has not involved itself in North Korea's succession plans. Also the statement about "developing our relationship over the generations" which both sides agreed upon merely referred to the traditional relationship between the two countries and was not a statement of support for the succession. So which internal issue does China want to emphasize? China has assessed that North Korea's internal situation is unstable and that its regime's very existence has been threatened, and thus they are stressing the need for mutual cooperation while hinting at the possibility of attaching political demands to economic aid.

In response to this, will North Korea accept or reject the Chinese position? It appears that the schedule was cut short because Chairman Kim Jong Il was unable to confirm this point with Premier Hu Jintao. North Korea wants continued economic and political support from China, but at the same time it does not welcome Chinese interference in its internal affairs. Thus despite China's increased influence, China-DPRK political relations have grown more difficult.

Failure to produce a proposal for the 6-Party Talks

Regarding the 6-Party Talks, beyond statements of principle such as "No change in our commitment to the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula" and "We wish to create conditions favorable to restarting the 6-Party Talks," China was unable to extract any concrete statements from North Korea to give way in the standoff. Further, North Korea failed to give China any confidence about its non-involvement in the *Cheonan* incident. North Korea's exceedingly vague, theoretical statements must have disappointed China, which had labored industriously to bring it back to the 6-Party Talks. North Korea must feel unhappy about the suspicions of China, its neighbor and closest ally, that it was responsible for the *Cheonan* incident. North Korea was hoping their agreement would include several statements that it could use to its advantage. Perhaps this is why Xinhua's announcement of the meeting failed to include even a line about how improved North-South relations contribute to peace and stability in Northeast Asia and the Korean peninsula.



3. Outlook for China–DPRK Relations

While China and North Korea's economic cooperation continues to expand, their political and strategic relationship is growing more distant, and thus it is difficult to foresee the 6-Party Talks progressing in any substantive way. Further, it will be tough to break the North-South relationship out of its current deadlock and confrontational state.

China's management of the North Korean situation with a focus on economic cooperation

Immediately after Chinese Premier Hu Jintao took office in 2003, he advocated expanded economic aid to North Korea and establishing a comprehensive relationship of cooperation, and proceeded to increase exchanges and investment in the country. And yet, thanks to North Korea's two nuclear tests, not only has the China-North Korea relationship steadily deteriorated, but also there has been no significant progress on getting North Korea to give up its nuclear program. In short, it appears that a problem has emerged in China's foreign policy leadership. With about 2 years left for Hu Jintao in office, China's North Korea policy is likely to proceed with a mind to restoring North Korea's internal order, which has been destabilized by Chairman Kim's illness, and preparing for the post-Kim Jong Il era. Thus they will likely emphasize economic cooperation for the purposes of China's economic benefit and North Korean stability, while exercising more restraint in applying real pressure on North Korea to denuclearize.

Increased limitations in the China-DPRK political and strategic relationship

Since China suggested to North Korea an agreement on internal issues, China-North Korea relations will likely be unable to develop politically or strategically. Because North Korea will be unable to follow the strategy of reform and opening that China wants it to take, China's involvement in North Korea will face limitations, and the international community's support for China's approach to North Korea is likely to wane.

Postponement of the 6-Party Talks and continued deadlock in North-South relations

North Korea will continue to develop its nuclear arsenal, and the 6-Party Talks may be held in the latter half of this year. However, because China wants to avoid increased pressure on North Korea by the international community or the use of its own influence, for practical purposes we can expect



little real progress from the talks. Under these conditions it will not be easy to change North Korea's unyielding stance towards South Korea, and inter-Korean relations are likely to remain stagnated.

