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North Korea's Fourth Nuclear Test and China's Policy on North Korea

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North Korea committed another nuclear provocation at the onset of the year. Countries concerned including South Korea denounced and excoriated this act. While the international sanctions will be introduced through the UN, above all, the world eyes on China's forthcoming steps, with its potent influence on North Korea. Countries in the region, such as South Korea and the U.S., anticipate China's active role in the future. Then, will China take more active and assertive policy against North Korea's fourth nuclear test as expected? The following report will attempt to predict China's response by examining the factors that influence Beijing's decision-making in its policy on North Korea.

U.S.-China Relations and China's North Korea Policy

China's policy on North Korea is generally perceived as a sub-variable of either China's U.S. policy or U.S.-China relations. Hence, considering

U.S.-China relations is crucial in analyzing China's North Korea policy. Since 2010, U.S.-China relations could be defined as one of expanded confrontation caused by the collision between China's rise and U.S. rebalance to Asia. However, being well aware of the difference in national power between itself and the U.S., Beijing has hoped for cooperation rather than conflict with Washington, controlling the pace in flexing its muscles. This is why room for U.S.-China cooperation coexists despite the increase in areas of conflict between the two countries.

Fortunately, the Korean Peninsula stands as a potential area of U.S.-China cooperation instead of Japan or Southeast Asia where Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands and the territorial dispute in the South China Sea complicate the situation. The issue of maritime territory is regarded as China's core interest related to nationalism and maritime security (including the economy sector) while the issue of North Korea is of lower policy priority. In spite of this, events such as North Korea's third nuclear test and the escalation of tensions on the Korean Peninsula have mounted pressures on China over the security against the U.S., having partially provided the justifications for U.S. rebalance to Asia. This is because, even though the U.S. expansion of missile defense system and the fortification of ROK-U.S. alliance and U.S.-Japan alliance have the deterrence against North Korea as the objective, China inevitably views this consolidation of U.S. security framework as either containing or restraining itself.

As China is willing to evade conflicts with the U.S. in multiple regions, it readjusted its strategy from the lower priorities among its list of interests and designed a policy of participating in sanctions against North Korea's military provocations and preventing further provocations. For instance, the Xi Jinping leadership has adopted a hardline stance against North Korea after the third nuclear test. This enabled China to establish the image as "a responsible power" in the international community and to enlarge the space for cooperation with the U.S.

Management of Uncertainty

Another factor as vital as the U.S.-China relations in China's North Korea policy is North Korea's uncertainty and instability. Uncertainty denotes China's predictability or controllability on North Korea's behavior. Instability signifies the stability of the North Korean regime, encompassing the conceivable negative impact incurred by the regime collapse or contingency scenario in North Korea.

Since North Korea's third nuclear test, the uncertainty factor has gained more importance than the instability factor for China. Pyongyang boasted autonomy vis-à-vis Beijing through the third nuclear test. That is, China failed to exert its influence on the nascent Kim Jong-un regime. Meanwhile, Kim Jong-un substantiated the regime stability, simultaneously implementing the reign of terror and policies to improve people's living standards. Thus, China approached with a hardline attitude in the context of actively managing uncertainty without any particular concern over North Korea's instability. It actively joined the UN sanctions regime after the third nuclear test, and the central government unconventionally directed sincere implementation measures for sanctions to the local governments and relevant government branches. Until recently, highest-level political exchanges between Pyongyang and Beijing have de facto suspended and bilateral trade, investment, and people-to-people exchanges all contracted.

Liu Yunshan's visit to North Korea in October 2015 could also be interpreted as China's uncertainty management policy. In September of that year prior to the U.S.-China summit, North Korea threatened the international community that it could test long-range missiles or nuclear weapons. As a response, Chinese President Xi Jinping pressured North Korea by vehemently expressing the opposition to any nuclear tests or long-range missiles with President Obama and sent a high-level figure to North Korea in a preventative attempt to cope with the crisis arising from North Korea. In fact, after the visit, there were positive expectations on China's

efforts to manage North Korea, as the nuclear issue was not in the limelight in Kim Jong-un's New Year's address.

Fourth Nuclear Test and China's Choice

Given China's path in its North Korea policy, North Korea's fourth nuclear test came as a shocking news for China as well. China was stabbed in the back by North Korea to the extent that the Foreign Ministry spokesperson acknowledged, "the Chinese side knew nothing about the nuclear test beforehand." In other words, China's measures on preventative management of North Korea's uncertainty totally collapsed.

Now, China also needs to ruminate on a new policy on North Korea. There will be heated discussions within China's policy-making group. Nevertheless, in the circumstances where the structure and factors that affected the existing decision-making have largely unchanged, Beijing has a limited number of cards in its hand. The fourth nuclear test raised the North Korea uncertainty factor. Nonetheless, other factors remain static. Rather, the instability factor could be considered to a smaller degree since the stability of the Kim Jong-un regime has solidified. Therefore, it is possible to estimate that China will maintain the present cooperation framework with the U.S. and partake in the international sanctions against North Korea in terms of managing North Korea's uncertainty. Above all, with China's increased need to raise its influence on North Korea, Beijing's sanctions on North Korea will certainly tighten, and one could carefully lay predictions that it will impose informal unilateral sanctions.

Notwithstanding these points, there are limitations to China's sanctions and pressures. North Korea instability factor plays in Beijing's decision-making over North Korea policy. Regarding the North Korea issue, China is most concerned with

possible situations caused by growing North Korean regime's instability such as engagement in a war on the Korean Peninsula, escalation of tension on the Peninsula, a massive number of refugees, and proliferation of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction. Accordingly, China will initiate sanctions on North Korea to manage the uncertainty but not to an extent that might engender instability in North Korea.

On one hand, other possibilities should be contemplated. While it is true that North Korea is being viewed as a strategic liability among the Chinese policy-making group, it is still the mainstream view that the U.S. is responsible for solving the North Korean nuclear issue. China's policy-making group and public opinion believe that the U.S. lays responsibility on China when it has the key to solving the issue. Due to this, China has weak motivation for active sanctions on North Korea and low commitment to solving the issue.

Subsequently, China may have concerns on the changes of the political environment in Northeast Asia after the fourth nuclear test. If the U.S. utilizes the crisis management over North Korea as a strategy to strengthen containment against China, it is likely that the view of "North Korea as an asset" and anti-American sentiments may surge among the Chinese policy-making group. For example, China may observe the bolstering ROK-U.S.-Japan trilateral security cooperation as an explicit endeavor to hold China in check beyond deterring North Korea; China may fail to draw South Korea to its side with the terminal high-altitude area defense (THAAD) system deployed on the South Korean soil; and the ROK-U.S.-Japan-led sanctions on North Korea may stir instability of the North Korean regime. This will cement the accelerating confrontation structure of China-Russia vs. U.S.-Japan in Northeast Asia and China will consequently embrace North Korea as part of a balance-of-power approach.



Eventually, while China will somewhat coordinate with the relevant countries, such as South Korea, the U.S., and Japan over the sanctions on North Korea, it will face structural limitations in choosing high-level coercion. In the near future, it is highly likely that Beijing will stress the calmed and restrained response of the neighboring countries and the existing three principles on the Korean Peninsula — denuclearization, peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, and resolution through negotiations and dialogue — and pursue an independent policy. In particular, it will probably avoid taking resolute countermeasures in accordance with the U.S. policy or by the U.S. pressure. This is the reason why we should be wary of excessively hopeful expectations on China's active role in imposing sanctions on North Korea.

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