

Prospects for China's North Korea Strategy in the Post-Kim Jong-il Era and Implications for South Korea*

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This paper asserts that with the advent of the post-Kim Jong-il era, China will advance from its previous role of mere balancer and seek to become a more active manager in pursuit of its own national interests. China hopes for a softer, more stable North Korean regime, so that a mutually beneficial partnership can develop between the two states. China believes that it must adjust and take on a new role in the process of North Korea's "normalization." China also expects that by adopting this new role, it can restructure North Korea into a strategic buffer zone in the long term. This Chinese perspective can be seen as not merely an attempt to manage the situation, but rather a visionary approach toward the North Korean issue. This is expected to spark considerable controversy within South Korea concerning its Chinese policy. From a progressive viewpoint, the new Chinese approach concerning the stabilization of the North Korean region, the softening of the North Korean regime, and the development of mutually beneficial relations, resembles the Sunshine Policy of South Korea in certain aspects. But from a conservative perspective, while there has been a noticeable shift in China's attitude toward North Korea, there is no detectable change in its actual North Korea policy. For the conservatives, China's approach to North Korea is likely to be seen as an attempt to expand its influence on the Korean peninsula for self-gain. These changes will be intertwined with the political schedule of South Korea and may incite social controversy over what kind of strategic position South Korea should occupy between the U.S. and China.

Key Words: post-Kim Jong-il era, North Korea-China relations, role of China, new strategic buffer zone, South Korea's China policy

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Introduction

Since 2000, every time North Korea became a diplomatic issue, controversy would erupt in China over whether North Korea was a “strategic asset” or a “strategic burden.” But this previous dichotomy now seems to be moving toward common ground after the missile launches and nuclear tests conducted in 2006 and 2009. For China, which has aimed to create a stable and peaceful international environment in order to coexist in harmony with the international community, North Korea is increasingly seen as a “strategic burden.”¹

Experts who had thus far claimed that North Korea could be a “strategic asset” are now gradually moving away from this position to advocate the traditional buffer zone approach.² In other words, North Korea is no longer evaluated as a “strategic shield of defense” that will prevent South Korea, the U.S., and Japan from hindering China in any way. Whatever the intentions of North Korea, the general opinion is that North Korea’s “adventuristic” actions are causing “strategic losses” for China. That is, because North Korea is “ignoring China’s desire to build a harmonious Northeast Asia by maintaining peace and stability on the Korean peninsula” and engaging in provocative actions, China now stands in a difficult position on the international stage. Also, there are some who claim that North Korea’s development of nuclear weapons and missiles will spur on the development of stronger missile defense capabilities in South Korea, the U.S., and Japan, and conversely weaken the nuclear deterrent of China.³ Some have even suggested that the real security threat to

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1. You Ji, “Understanding China’s North Korea Policy,” *China Brief*, Vol. IV, Issue 5 (March 4, 2004); Jay Solomon, “China’s Anger at North Korea Test Signals Shift,” *The Wall Street Journal*, May 29, 2009; John Pomfret, “A Changing Chinese Tune on North Korea?” *Washington Post*, June 2, 2009; “Must China Revise its North Korean Policy?” *Fenghuang [Phoenix] TV* (March 11, 2012), <http://blog.ifeng.com/article/16739884.html>.
 2. On this tendency, refer to Heungkyu Kim, “From a buffer zone to a strategic burden: Evolving Sino-North Korea relations during the Hu Jintao era,” *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (March 2010), pp. 57-74.
 3. “North Korea lets ordinary Chinese down,” *Global Times*, June 2, 2009; “China

North Korea comes not from outside but North Korea's adventurist actions themselves.⁴

But simply from this point of view, although North Korea has already become a burden for China, the "North Korean problem" has the potential to go beyond the confines of North Korean-Chinese bilateral relations and become an impetus for changes in the future strategic environment of Northeast Asia. Therefore, China cannot completely lower the banner of "traditional friendly relations" with North Korea. Chinese experts claim that China must maintain "friendly relations" with North Korea in order to preserve its diplomatic role and influence and in this way steer the future path of the Korean peninsula according to its own pace.⁵ Maintaining "friendly" relations with untrustworthy neighbors will incur diplomatic costs from the negative reactions of neighboring states, as well as the economic costs of providing aid, but the bilateral relationship will inevitably continue, considering the absence of workable alternatives.⁶ That is, North Korea's internal instability and the associated future uncertainty are the factors that perpetuate China's "uncomfortable cohabitation" with North Korea.

From a long-term perspective, China's most serious concern is not which position it should take on the "North Korean nuclear issue," but the uncertainty of the unfolding situation on the Korean peninsula. With the possibility of abrupt changes in North Korea's future and

needs 'Plan B' for N. Korea conflict," *Global Times*, May 31, 2009; Willy Lam, "Beijing Mulling Tougher Tactics against Pyongyang," *China Brief*, Vol. IX, Issue 12 (June 12, 2009).

4. "North Korea must stop playing nuclear games," *Global Times* (Editorial), May 13, 2010.
5. Shin Sang Jin, "An analysis on China's changing view on North Korea: In-depth interviews with North Korea experts," *Tongil jungchaek yungu* [Unification Policy Studies], Vol. 17, No. 1 (2008), pp. 265-291; Scott Snyder, *China's Rise and the Two Koreas: Politics, Economics, Security* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2009), pp. 149-157.
6. You Ji, "Hedging Opportunities and Crises against Pyongyang's Hereditary Succession: A Chinese Perspective," *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (2011), pp. 55-87.

changes in the geopolitical order of Northeast Asia in the post-Kim Jong-il era, the end state of the Korean peninsula is extremely uncertain. China has always emphasized that the South Korean-U.S. military alliance is not the only method of “managing” that uncertainty.⁷

From China’s perspective, waving the banner of “traditional friendship” with North Korea is a means of ensuring that future developments on the Korean peninsula do not disrupt the strategic interests of China.⁸ China’s “traditional friendship” with North Korea, on the one hand, acts as a “soft balancing mechanism” against South Korea and the U.S., preventing future events on the Korean peninsula from unfolding in a way that is detrimental to the security and national interests of China, while on the other hand serving as a “management mechanism” to control the unexpected behavior of North Korea by emphasizing mutual information sharing and cooperation.⁹

The uncertainty that afflicted the North Korean regime after the death of Kim Jong-il must have heightened China’s need to maintain “friendly relations” with North Korea.¹⁰ For one thing, China is desperate to prevent North Korea’s internal instability from spreading across its borders. In order to make sure that incidents like the Cheonan sinking and the Yeonpyong Island attack do not occur again, China must maintain channels of communication with North Korea. Fur-

7. This point was brought up in a commentary by a spokesperson of China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. *Xinhua* (May 27, 2008), http://big5.xinhuanet.com/gate/big5/news.xinhuanet.com/world/2008-05/27/content_8264427.htm.

8. Shi Yinhong, “China and the North Korean nuclear issue: Competing interests and persistent policy dilemmas,” *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (March 2009), pp. 33-47.

9. Choi Myeong-hae, *Joonggook bukhan dongmaeng guangae: Bulphunhan dongguei yueksa* [The Chinese-North Korean Alliance: The History of an Uncomfortable Cohabitation] (Seoul: Oreum, 2009).

10. North Korean-Chinese relations have grown very close since fall 2009, in part due to the instability within the North Korean regime after the deterioration of Kim Jong-il’s health. Shi Yinhong, “Meiguo zai dongbeiya: Quanshi zhendi de suishi gonggu” [The U.S. in Northeast Asia: A Temporary Solidification of Established Powers], *Xiandai gouji guanxi* [Contemporary International Relations], No. 1 (2012), pp. 10-12.

thermore, in light of its long-term strategic rivalry with the U.S., China believes that “friendly relations” with North Korea must be maintained.¹¹

However, the Kim Jong-un regime has proclaimed that it will continue to carry out Kim Jong-il's final instructions. In 2012, North Korea announced through its “New Year's Joint Editorial” that Kim Jong-il's legacy (achievements) and final instructions (policy) will be “unconditionally adhered to and cherished.” More than anything, “nuclear weapons and satellites” are said to be the highest priorities of Kim Jong-il's legacy.¹² The launch of the “Kwangmyongsong-3” rocket was part of North Korea's current effort to carry out these final instructions.

Will China continue to maintain the same type of relationship with North Korea that it had during the Kim Jong-il era, with the same economic and diplomatic costs?¹³ Will there be any detectable changes in China's North Korean policy? In regard to these questions, there is some disagreement among China experts as to whether China should completely reestablish its North Korean strategy in the post-Kim Jong-il era. But most experts do agree that a new approach must be considered.¹⁴ In that case, what role will China play in dealing with the North Korean problem? The answer depends on what role China has played up to the present moment, and how much that role will change in the future.

This paper argues that since the end of the Cold War, China has

11. Lee Hee Ok, “China's perspective on the Kim Jong-un regime,” *Dongasia Brief* [East Asia Brief], Vol. 7, No. 1 (2012), pp. 62-67; Andrei Lankov, “Chinese Interest on the Korean Peninsula and the Future of North Korea,” *EAI Issue Briefing*, No. MASI 2012-02 (March 19, 2012).

12. *Rodong Sinmun*, Commentary on December 28, 2011.

13. China's past tactics were aimed at buying peace on the Korean peninsula; this was a type of bribery. Zong Hairen, *Aimei de quanli jiaojie* [An Ambiguous Change of Power] (Hong Kong: Mingjingchubanshe, 2003), p. 285.

14. Refer to information from a seminar hosted by the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) on the topic of “The new circumstances and strategic influences of Northeast Asia,” *Xiandai gouji guanxi* [Contemporary International Relations], No. 1, pp. 1-21.

played the role of by-stander, “stakeholder,” and balancer in regard to the North Korean problem. This paper will also present the case that in the post-Kim Jong-il era, China will take one step further from its past role of mere balancer to seek a more active role of manager in pursuit of its own national interests. And it will also argue that, by taking on this new role, China will expect to reshape North Korea as a new strategic buffer zone in the long term. In the second chapter, the evolution of China’s role in the North Korean problem will be laid out. In chapters 3 and 4, the goals of the North Korean strategies devised by China and the specific approaches it takes to realize those goals will be presented. In the last chapter, we will examine China’s strategic approach to North Korea in terms of its future implications for the debate over South Korea’s China policy.

China’s Transformed Role

During the first North Korean nuclear crisis in the 1990s, China was virtually a by-stander. At the time, China clearly expressed its opposition to Western pressure and sanctions against North Korea, rather than bearing the diplomatic responsibility of mediating between North Korea and the U.S., and reacted passively to the situation by adopting measures that helped to stabilize the surrounding political situation. China intervened only in a limited capacity, just before the conclusion of the North Korea-U.S. Geneva Agreement.¹⁵ Considering the deterioration in North Korean-Chinese relations after China and South Korea normalized diplomatic relations, it is not surprising that North Korea had misgivings about China’s role as mediator.¹⁶

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15. Banning Garrett and Bonnie Glaser, “Looking Across the Yalu: Chinese Assessment of the North Korea,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 35, No. 6 (June 1995), pp. 528-545; Joel S. Wit, Daniel B. Poneman, Robert L. Gallucci, *Going Critical: The First North Korean Nuclear Crisis* (The Brookings Institution, 2004).
 16. Samuel S. Kim and Tai Hwan Lee, “Chinese-North Korean Relations: Managing Asymmetrical Interdependence,” in Samuel S. Kim and Tai Hwan Lee (eds.), *North Korea and Northeast Asia* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002).

China's new active diplomatic role emerged after the second North Korean nuclear crisis, when Hu Jintao's "New Thought Diplomacy" coincided with the U.S.' "outsourcing" of the North Korean nuclear problem to China.¹⁷ But China was willing to at least serve as an "honest mediator" between North Korea and the U.S. during the first Bush administration.¹⁸ During the second Bush administration, the diplomacy and security team led by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and advisor Philip D. Zelikow turned away from the previous hardline stance toward North Korea and proposed a new broad approach. Writing in 2007, Zelikow recalled that in 2005 he had presented two approaches. One was diplomatic, and the other was defensive. The diplomatic strategy involved recognizing that the North Korean problem was an opportunity to bind powerful potential rival states into a common front in Northeast Asia, and the defensive approach focused on responding to the various "outlaw strategies" that North Korea relied on for its economic survival.¹⁹

It is well known that the U.S. had an in-depth discussion with China concerning the "future of North Korea" during Secretary Rice's visit to China in March and July, and also during the first Chinese-U.S. senior dialogue in August.²⁰ Through these meetings, the U.S. brought up China's status as a responsible "stakeholder" in dealing with the North Korean nuclear problem.²¹ China responded actively and posi-

17. Hunabashi Yoichi (translated by Oh Young Hwan et al.), *Kim Jung-il choihuei dopak* [Kim Jong-il's Last Gamble] (Seoul: Joong Ang Daily Co. Media, 2007), pp. 395-404, pp. 434-440.

18. Refer to the media interview by Yang Xiyu, who had served as the director of the Korean Affairs Section of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and had also successfully served as the Chinese representative to the Six-Party Talks. "Exclusive interview with North Korea expert Yang Xiyu, Duowei News," *Duowei Xinwenwang* [Duowei News], May 9 and May 16, 2009.

19. David E. Sanger, "U.S. Said to Weigh a New Approach on North Korea," *The New York Times*, May 18, 2006; Robert B. Zoellick, "Long Division," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 26, 2007; Philip Zelikow, "The Plan That Moved Pyongyang," *Washington Post*, February 20, 2007.

20. Glenn Kessler, "Zoellick Details Discussions with China on Future of the Korean Peninsula," *Washington Post*, September 7, 2005.

21. "Wither China: From Membership to Responsibility?" Speech of Robert B.

tively to the U.S.' new approach. Consequently, China behaved in a very proactive manner during the fourth round of Six-Party Talks in 2005, in a departure from its passive diplomacy of the past, and played a decisive role in producing the September 19 Joint Statement, which promoted the implementation principle of "words for words" and "actions for actions."²² At the same time, China actively participated in U.S. measures to apply pressure to stop North Korea's illegal actions.²³ Rather than playing the role of a "honest mediator," China seemed to be utilizing the North Korean nuclear problem to enhance its own relations with the U.S.²⁴

In reaction to China's new diplomatic tendency to lean toward the U.S. on the nuclear issue, North Korea took an extreme hard-line stance by conducting a nuclear test in October 2006. China responded by publishing an angry commentary claiming that "denuclearization and the deterrence of nuclear proliferation on the Korean peninsula is the consistent policy of the government of China ... and North Korea has recklessly (*hanran*) conducted these experiments." China also voted in favor of UN Resolution 1718, marking the first time in the history of North Korean-Chinese relations that China agreed to impose sanctions on North Korea.²⁵ But China could only watch as the diplo-

Zoellick, Deputy Secretary of State, before the National Committee on United States-China Relations, New York, September 21, 2005, <http://www.ncuscr.org/articlesandspeeches/Zoellick.htm>.

22. On the changing role of China, refer to Anne Wu, "What China Whispers to North Korea," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (Spring 2005), pp. 35-48; Bonnie S. Glaser and Wang Liang, "North Korea: The Beginning of a China-U.S. Partnership?" *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (Summer 2008), pp. 165-180; Thomas J. Christensen, "Will China Become a 'Responsible Stakeholder?': The Six-Party Talks, Taiwan Arms Sales, and Sino-Japanese Relations," *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 16 (Fall 2005), pp. 2-6; Lin Limin, "Chaohe weiji guanli yu zhongguo de waijiao juece" [Managing the North Korean nuclear crisis and China's diplomatic choice], *Xiandai guoji guanxi* [Contemporary International Relations], No. 8 (2006), pp. 32-38.
23. Gregory J. Moore, "How North Korea threatens China's interests: Understanding Chinese 'duplicity' on the North Korean nuclear issue," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2008), pp. 9-10.
24. Shi, "China and the North Korean nuclear issue," p. 39.
25. Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Answers given by Ministry of Foreign

matic influence it had expended suddenly evaporated. Ironically, the North Korean nuclear weapons tests gave new momentum to the nuclear negotiations, and the leading role that China had played in the Six-Party Talks was now pushed to the backbench by the North Korean-U.S. bilateral negotiations.²⁶

North Korea's nuclear weapons tests have shown that China's previous approach of intervention under a cooperative regime led by the U.S. was ineffective. After the North Korean nuclear tests, voices of self-criticism arose within China arguing that the North Korean nuclear negotiations had fallen into a pattern of "2+0" (the U.S. and North Korea, with China excluded), and China's standing in regard to the North Korean problem was weakened as a result. Since North Korea's second nuclear weapons test in May 2009, the mainstream opinion has been that China must not make the same mistake it made during the second Bush administration, of losing its sense of balance.²⁷ After North Korea's first nuclear test in October 2006, China invested an entire year to restore relations with North Korea, but after the second nuclear test it took only four months for the relationship to be mended with a visit by Premier Wen Jiabao to North Korea. Additionally, the instability of North Korea's internal affairs due to the deteriorating health of Kim Jong-il was another factor making the restoration of Chinese-North Korean relations more urgent.²⁸

Since then, China has sought to strengthen its strategic position in relation to North Korea through its role as balancer, controlling the uncertainty of the present and future of the Korean peninsula, and also to focus more on the stable management of the situation rather than trying to devise an ultimate resolution.²⁹ During Kim Jong-il's

Affairs Spokesperson Liu Jian-Chao during official briefings" (October 10, 2006), http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/chn/pds/gjhdq/gj/yz/1206_7/fyrygth/t275579.htm.

26. Shi, "China and the North Korean nuclear issue," pp. 40-41.

27. *Huanqiu Shibao* [Global Times], June 2 and June 4, 2009.

28. Shi, "Meiguo zai dongbeiya," pp. 10-12.

29. *Huanqiu Shibao* [Global Times], July 11, 2011.

visit to China in May 2011, an editorial in the *Huanqiu Shibao* (Global Times) commented that with stronger communication, the highest-level officials of China and North Korea can act as “balance weights” when the political circumstances on the Korean peninsula periodically fall into vicious cycles, and this can stop uncontrollable situations from occurring.³⁰ To this end, China has emphasized to North Korea the need to maintain diplomatic communications and economic cooperation in the name of “traditional friendship”; to the other states involved, it has highlighted the utility of the Six-Party Talks as a mechanism to manage unstable circumstances. This decision was based on China’s judgment that there is little chance of North Korea surrendering its nuclear weapons, and any negotiations with North Korea on the matter would be fruitless. China sees the Six-Party Talks as a mechanism to manage the actions of not only North Korea but also South Korea and the U.S. From China’s perspective, if each party can be at least tied down within the framework of discussions, then any unexpected situation can be prevented.³¹

China’s Strategic Goals and New Roles in the Kim Jong-un Era

Considering China’s geopolitical relations and historical experience, it is quite certain that China prefers to maintain the *status quo* on the Korean peninsula. But this does not mean there is no possibility of change. In more precise terms, China’s Korea policy can be summarized as “*status quo plus*.” In other words, China’s strategic interests (creating a stable security environment for the purpose of economic development and maintaining relative influence) are best served by prioritizing

30. *Huanqiu Shibao* [Global Times], May 21, 2011.

31. ICG, “Shades of Red: China’s Debate over North Korea,” *Asia Report*, No. 179 (November 2, 2009); Jin Canrong, “Dongbeiya xin bianju yu ‘hou Jinzhengri shidai’ de chaoxianbandao” [The political currents of the recently changing Northeast Asia and the Korean peninsula of the ‘post-Kim Jong-il era’], *Xiandai guoji guanxi* [Contemporary International Relations], No. 1 (2012), p. 4.

peace and stability on the Korean peninsula and maintaining “friendly” relations with both North and South Korea, as change occurs gradually on the peninsula. To actualize these goals, China has implemented policies that supported North Korea’s regime survival and reform, while continuing to develop relations with South Korea, establishing its dominant influence on the Korean peninsula, encouraging the functional integration of North and South Korea, and supporting denuclearization on the Korean peninsula.³² From this strategic perspective, it seems accurate to say that for China, North Korea is “an issue that requires skillful management, rather than a problem that must be urgently resolved.”³³

It can be said that since the U.S.-China rapprochement in the 1970s, China’s Korea strategy has consistently focused on strategic management.³⁴ Under this basic theme, China has played the roles of bystander, stakeholder, and balancer since the end of the Cold War, as mentioned above. But China has continued to express concerns that its room to maneuver is limited by the policy dilemmas caused by North Korea, and now it is faced with the unexpected situation of Kim Jong-il’s death.³⁵

It seems that China’s North Korea strategy in the post-Kim Jong-

32. Avery Goldstein, “Across the Yalu: China’s Interests and the Korean Peninsula in a Changing World,” in Alastair Iain Johnston and Robert S. Ross (eds.), *New Directions in the Study of China’s Foreign Policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), pp. 139-143; David Shambaugh, “China and the Korean Peninsula: Playing for the Long Term,” *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 26 No. 2 (Spring 2003), pp. 44-45.

33. You Ji, “The Military Aspects of China’s Strategy of Peaceful Development and Increasing Chinese Influence on the Korean Peninsula,” *Junyack yungu* [Strategy Analysis], Vol. XIV, No. 2 (2007), p. 76.

34. Samuel S. Kim, “China’s Conflict-Management Approach to the Nuclear Standoff on the Korean Peninsula,” *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2006); Quansheng Zhao, “Moving toward a Co-Management Approach: China’s Policy toward North Korea and Taiwan,” *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2006).

35. “North Korea must stop playing nuclear games,” *Global Times* (Editorial), May 13 2010; “Why China can’t persuade N. Korea alone,” *Global Times* (Editorial), March 19, 2012.

il era will be to maintain the basic strategic management direction which it has consistently implemented in the past. But some China experts also claim that after the death of Kim Jong-il, China needs to take on a more active role than the past. Considering the stiff competition between China and the U.S. which is likely to intensify in the future, North Korea's geostrategic values will remain valid for some time to come.³⁶ It is also quite true that North Korea has utilized these geostrategic considerations as part of its China policy.³⁷ This implies that China will continue to face a policy dilemma over the North Korean problem. But there are also voices that argue that now that Kim Jong-il is dead, China must not continue to be dragged around by North Korea as it has in the past. In other words, China must avoid the vicious cycle of North Korean provocations leaving little room for it to maneuver. China believes that it must take the lead at least in North Korean-Chinese relations.³⁸ In order to do this, China must go beyond the passive balancer role and seek to become a "constructive manager." In other words, China should not stop at being a mere mediator, but become an "important manager with a constructive significance for the purpose of peace, stability, and prosperity on the Korean peninsula." This means that China uses its influence work to gradually change the circumstances on the Korean peninsula in a way that better reflects its national interests.³⁹

36. On China's geostrategic interests concerning the Korean peninsula, refer to Shen Dingli, "North Korea's Strategic Significance to China," *China Security*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Autumn 2006), pp. 19-34; Toshi Yoshihara and James Holmes, "China, a Unified Korea, and Geopolitics," *Issues & Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (June 2005), pp. 119-169.

37. Chung Jae Ho and Choi Myeong-hae, "Uncomfortable Allies or Uncertain Neighbors? Making Sense of China-North Korean Relations, 1949-2010," *Pacific Review* (forthcoming in 2012).

38. Cheng Xiaohu, "Chaoxian fashe weixing yao mao sizhong fengxian" [North Korea's launching of missiles must face four risks], *Jingji guancha* [Economic Observer], March 26, 2012, <http://www.eeo.com.cn/2012/0326/223513.shtml>.

39. Refer to comments by Zhu Feng and Zhang Pohui on *Fenhuang* [Phoenix] TV, March 12, 2012, <http://blog.ifeng.com/article/16739884.html>; Tang Yongsheng, "Yingdui bandao jushi keneng bianhua de youguan sikao" [Responses to

It seems that China expects North Korea to be restructured as a new strategic buffer zone in the true sense of the word. Actually, from China's point of view, it can hardly be said that North Korea has functioned effectively as a buffer zone protecting China's security and economic interests. The very definition of buffer zone implies that it only functions properly if it is stable, soft, and costless (or beneficial). China hopes for a softer, more stable North Korean regime, so that a mutually beneficial partnership can develop between the two states. And it believes that its own role should accommodate this process of "normalization" of North Korea.⁴⁰

This new perception of China's was clarified during the two North Korean-Chinese summit meetings in 2010. At the first summit meeting on May 5, 2010, China recommended that both sides communicate matters such as "important issues on domestic politics and diplomacy, international and regional matters, and experiences in Party politics and governance," and emphasized its willingness to introduce "its experiences of reform and construction."⁴¹ During the August 27 summit in *Changchun*, the Chinese side mentioned an economic trade partnership where both states can benefit and learn from China's experiences of reform and open policy. The Chinese leaders highlighted the "necessity of cooperation with the outside world for economic development, and not just autonomous rejuvenation."⁴² These statements by the Chinese leadership mean that China is clarifying its intention to actively engage in North Korea. In the future, China can be expected

possible changes on the circumstances of the Korean peninsula and some observations], *Xiandai guoji guanxi* [Contemporary International Relations], No. 1 (2012), pp. 14-15.

40. Jin, "Dongbeiyi xin bianju," p. 4; Tang Yongsheng, "Yingdui bandao jushi," p. 15; Liu Xinghua, "Chaoxian zhengju yu zhongguo de dongbeiyi zhanlue" [The political circumstances of North Korea and China's Northeast Asia strategy], *Xiandai guoji guanxi* [Contemporary International Relations], No. 1 (2012), p. 19.

41. International Department of Communist Party of China (May 7, 2010), <http://www.idcpc.org.cn/duiwai/niandugaikuang/2010/100507.htm>.

42. International Department of Communist Party of China (August 30, 2010), <http://www.idcpc.org.cn/duiwai/niandugaikuang/2010/100830.htm>.

to actively move away from its previous tactic of using bribery to manipulate North Korea, and shift to strengthening strategic communications on domestic and diplomatic matters. It will also move away from the practice of providing aid without compensation and move toward closer cooperation on economic trade, while pressing the North to make progress on reforms and opening.

China's Future Approach to North Korea

Stabilization of the North Korean Region

In order to realize the strategic goals of China's North Korea policy, stabilization of the North Korean region is paramount. China believes that controlling the external security environment around North Korea requires maintaining internal stability inside the North. Considering the fact that the China's highest priority for the Korean peninsula is maintaining peace and stability, it is urgently needed to give prompt support for the North Korean power succession. Also, in China's view, North Korea must be prevented from inciting trouble outside its borders in a bid to divert attention away from its own internal insecurity. Also, China must demonstrate to the international community that its relations with North Korea remain unchanged in order to preemptively restrict the maneuvers of other interested states.⁴³ As such, China believes that it can manage the situation within the realm of predictability by preemptively restricting the maneuverability of not just North Korea but all interested states. This shows a general policy trend

43. On the cessation of discussions between the U.S. and China concerning the rapid changes in North Korea since 2009, Chinese theories on providing food aid and the need to immediately accept the North Korean power succession after the death of Kim Jong-il, and China's call to neighboring states for calm and restraint, and other factual matters, refer to Scott Snyder and See-won Byun, "New Challenges in the Post-Kim Jong-il Era," *Comparative Connections* (Pacific Forum CSIS) (January 2012); "China provides half a million tons of food and crude oil to China," *Yonhap News*, January 30, 2012.

of "quick actions, passive attitude."⁴⁴

China's viewpoint is reflected in its statement concerning North Korea's launch of the "Kwangmyongsong-3" rocket. The Chinese government did not respond positively to North Korea's claim for its right to peaceful use of outer space.⁴⁵ And unlike in 2009, when there was an intense back-and-forth debate for two weeks, this time China quickly agreed within three days to adopt the UN Security Council Chairman's Statement denouncing the launch, sending a clear message to North Korea.⁴⁶ But China also repeatedly stressed that, regardless of which side is right or wrong, it will not support any one-sided action that may cause instability.⁴⁷ It is said that Hu Jintao, in a March 26 meeting with Lee Myung-bak, expressed deep concerns about North Korea's plans to launch long-range missiles, and China, "through constant communication, urged North Korea to surrender its satellite launch plans and instead focus on the development of public welfare."⁴⁸ But press reports from China only mentioned that "The current situation on the Korea peninsula is extremely complex and sensitive. We hope that this hard-won easing of the Korean situation does not revert back to the past."⁴⁹ On March 20, deputy minister

44. "China's N. Korea initiative on right track," *Global Times*, December 21, 2011; Cheng, "Chaoxian fashe weixing yao mao sizhong fengxian."

45. When North Korea launched its "Kwangmyongsong-2" rocket in April 2009, it commented that "launching a satellite, missile testing, and nuclear weapons testing are all distinct activities, and each state has the right to peacefully utilize outer space." "Spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Jiang Yu Official Briefing," April 7, 2009, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/chn/gxh/tyb/fyrbt/jzhsl/t556297.htm>.

46. "Pyongyang must remember to heed China's advice," *Global Times*, April 17, 2012.

47. Refer to Wang Wenwen, "Launch unlikely to drastically alter Korean affairs," *Global Times*, March 19, 2012.

48. "China urges North Korea to cease missile launch, focus on development of public welfare," *Yonhap News*, March 26, 2012.

49. "Hu Jintao receives South Korean president Lee Myung-bak" (March 26, 2012), *Xinhua*, http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2012-03/26/c_111703307.htm.

of China's Ministry of Foreign affairs, Fu Ying, summoned the South Korean ambassador to China and requested "calm and restraint." At the same time, China strongly criticized North Korea. On the day that North Korea proclaimed its plans for a missile launch, deputy minister Zhang Zhijun of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs summoned Ji Jae Ryong, the North Korean ambassador to China, and sent a message of "caution and concern." This was a very rare occurrence in the history of North Korean-Chinese relations. The *Huanqiu Shibao* commented that "The state that suffers the most losses is ultimately North Korea. By cunningly using the strategic environment of Northeast Asia, a small state has implemented the diplomatic strategy of a large state. (But) what North Korea must understand is that, while this type of behavior may seem to put China in a difficult situation, ultimately the negative consequences will boomerang back to North Korea." But the commentary also added that "North Korea is China's friend in the twenty-first century. China will not make myopic mistakes concerning North Korean-Chinese relations."⁵⁰

Softening of the North Korean Regime

Considering China's new Korea policy of "status quo plus," the gradual reform and opening of North Korea is in keeping with China's national interests. Since the end of the Cold War, Chinese leaders such as Deng Xiaoping have endeavored to make clear that Chinese-style reform and opening would be beneficial for North Korea.⁵¹ From this, it can be assumed that China does not want the post-Kim Jong-il regime to ultimately revert to the past or establish a "dynastic regime." China seems to expect the emergence of a "collective leadership regime"

50. *Huanqiu Shibao* [Global Times], March 30, 2012.

51. Shen Jingguo (ed.), *Gongheguo waijiao fengyun zhong de Deng Xiaoping* [Deng Xiaoping in the Dynamic Political Situation of Republic Diplomacy] (Haerbin: Heilongjiang renminchubanshe, 2004), pp. 383-384; Refer to the interview with Ambassador Zhang Ruijie, who had served under five of the top leaders of China since the reform and opening of 1978, including Deng Xiaoping, Li Xiannian, Zhao Ziyang, Zhang Zemin, etc., *Seoul Daily*, September 7, 2005.

Table 1. Differences in the Diplomatic Messages of Consolation sent by China after the Deaths of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong-il

Death of Kim Il Sung (July 1994)		Death of Kim Jong-il (December 2011)
A list of signatures of national leaders including Zhang Zemin (CCP), Li Feng (government), Chao Shi (parliament), and the personal signature of Deng Xiaoping (senior advisor)	Format of message of consolation	Joint statement from the four branches of power, namely the CCP, parliament, government, and military
International Department of CPC (CCP)	Channel for message	Ministry of Foreign Affairs (government)
Emphasis on Kim Jong-il: "The North Korean people unite around the Workers' Party with comrade Kim Jong-il as chairman..."	Content of consolation	Emphasis on the Workers' Party of Korea: "the people of North Korea unite around the Workers' Party of Korea, under the leadership of comrade Kim Jong-un,"
Dispatched Ding Guangen (Politburo member), Wen Jiabao (Politburo candidate member), and Wang Ruilin (first assistant director of the General Political Department of the People's Liberation Army)	Dispatching consolation emissaries	None
12 days	Period of mourning	None

Source: *JoongAng Sunday*, January 1, 2012.

where some alternative internal policies can at least be discussed. Considering China's historical experiences, it expects that these political conditions are required for reform and opening. China's expectations were reflected somewhat in its condolence diplomacy following the death of Kim Jong-il. China's quick gestures to embrace North Korea and requests to neighboring states for restraint after Kim Jong-il's death in December 2011 may be partly interpreted as preemptive measures

to stabilize the Korean peninsula, but there is also an element of expectation of change in North Korea's regime. China's expression of condolences on Kim Jong-il's passing differed in content and format from the message it sent to North Korea after the death of Kim Il Sung in July 1994.

In terms of content, when Kim Il Sung died, Kim Jong-il the "individual" was emphasized, whereas after the death of Kim Jong-il the role of the Korean Workers' Party was highlighted. It seems that China is expressing a wish that the power of the individual leader will be checked by the organs of the Party and the state. From this perspective, it is significant that the general director of Organization Department of Central Committee, Li Yuanchao, paid a visit to North Korea in June 2011, following Kim Jong-il's visit to China in May. The purpose of Li's visit was to lay the systemic foundation for inter-Party exchanges by establishing an "inter-Party strategic communication" mechanism, an issue that was agreed upon by the leaderships of both North Korea and China. China even included a statement expressing hope that the final injunctions of Kim Jong-il would be upheld, but this did not seem to imply that China was encouraging North Korea to revert to a monarchical dynastic regime and destroy any political possibility of devising alternative policies. China had already mentioned, during Choi Tae Bok's visit to China in October 2010, that North Korea's succession system of elites represented a "new central leadership group of the Workers' Party of Korea."⁵² China does not want power divided within North Korea to the point of breeding instability within the political regime, but it generally wishes to see at least some political breathing space so that internal debate concerning the necessity of reform and opening can be fostered.

Also, judging from the form of the consolation message and its intended recipient, China also seemed to be trying to shift its relationship with North Korea from a "special relationship" to normal state-to-state relations. In 1994, the consolation was sent to three indi-

52. International Department of Communist Party of China (October 2, 2010), <http://www.idcpc.org.cn/dongtai/101002.htm>.

viduals at the highest levels of the North Korean government, but the 2011 message was sent to official institutions of the Party and state. The message also implied that China wants to change its relationship with North Korea into one between two sets of official institutions (Party, government, military); in other words, normal state-to-state relations based on national interests. We can infer from this that it has become difficult for China to maintain the old-style "special relationship" with North Korea based on inter-personal friendships.

Promoting Mutually Beneficial Relations

Since Premier Wen Jiabao's visit to North Korea in October 2009, China has tried to stabilize the situation by inviting the relevant states to hold dialogues within the framework of the Six-Party Talks, while encouraging change within North Korea by allowing it to smoothly participate in development strategies for Northeast region of China. Through this process, China has sought practical gains such as economic development in the Jilin Province area. China's utilization of North Korea's Rajin port was a factor behind the short-term success of the "Chang-Ji-Tu Pilot Area Development Initiative," and is also meaningful in the long term as it paves the way for North Korea to become an important member of a Northeast region economic zone that connects China, Japan, and the Primorsky Krai of Russia.⁵³ In this way, through the Hu Jintao-Kim Jong-il summit in Changchun in August 2010, China changed from its previous North Korean economic cooperation principle of "government leadership, civilian participation, and market principles" to "government leadership, preference for corporations, market principles, and mutual benefits."⁵⁴

But North Korea is not equipped with the basic conditions to guarantee the success of the gradual systemic transition so hoped for

53. Choi Myeong-hae, "The DPRK-PRC Joint Projects in Rason and Hwanggeum-pyong," *SERI Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (October 2011), pp. 130-136.

54. International Department of Communist Party of China (August 30, 2010), <http://www.idcpc.org.cn/duiwai/niandugaikuang/2010/100830.htm>.

by China. A type of leadership which has no choice but to find its legitimacy in its revolutionary legacy rather than pragmatic reforms, a monolithic and centralized form of governance unlike China's fragmented and decentralized system, and an economic foundation that makes the accumulation of capital difficult, are all factors that stand to hinder gradual systemic change in North Korea. Therefore, rather than follow China's path, i.e., beginning with reforms and opening in the agricultural and external economic sectors and then expanding and intensifying those results into state-owned corporations, it would be most appropriate for North Korea to concentrate its capital and technology into a few core strategic industrial sectors to pave the way for a new North Korean economy. But one advantage that North Korea has over China in terms of preliminary conditions is that it has access to the export markets of South Korea and Japan. If this asset is properly utilized and North Korea's economy is incorporated into the economic network of Northeast Asia, thereby lending it export competitiveness, then swift economic growth may be possible.⁵⁵

The Special Economic Zone system offers a model for economic development that guarantees the stability of the regime and also meets the conditions of North Korea. In July 2010, North Korea launched the Joint Investment Committee, an organization devoted to implementing joint development projects with China in the Hwanggeumpyong and Rason areas. In November the same year, North Korea and the Commerce Ministry of China signed the "Joint Development and Management Agreement for the Rason Economic Trade Zone and the Hwanggeumpyong-Wuihwado Economic Zone." In order to guarantee the implementation of these treaties, the central governments of North Korea and China created the "North Korean-

55. Kim Byung Yeon, "Political conditions for socialist economic reforms and regime change: Precedents of the former Soviet Union, East Europe, China, and the potential for implementation in North Korea," *Begyo gyungjae yungu* [Comparative Economics Analysis], Vol. 12, No. 2 (2005), pp. 215-251; Wang Zaibang, "Chaoxian pingwen guodu de jingji shehui jichu" [Economic and social foundations for a peaceful and stable transition of North Korea], *Xiandai guoji guanxi* [Contemporary International Relations], No. 1 (2012), pp. 7-8.

Chinese Joint Guidance Committee," which in February 2011 laid out concrete plans in the "Joint Development and Plan Summary for the Rason Economic Trade Zone and the Hwanggeumpyong Economic Zone." In June 2011, the North Korean and Chinese governments held a ground-breaking ceremony for the joint development of the Rason Economic Trade Zone and the Hwanggeumpyong Economic Zone. It was the first time the two states committed to jointly developing an area as an economic zone at the central government level.⁵⁶

The "Joint Development General Plan Summary" crafted by the two governments presents a broad vision that goes beyond mere economic cooperation. The two sides agreed on "overall planning, government leadership, joint development, business focus, market management, and mutual benefits and cooperation" as principles for development. This implies that corporations will be the primary agents in managing the project under free market principles, but the two governments will take responsibility for joint development. Alongside these principles, development goals have been clearly set: "improving the industrialization level and public standard of living of North Korea, raising North Korea's capacity for earning foreign currency and producing quality goods, and transforming the comparative resource advantages such as manpower, land, and minerals into comparative economic advantages." The intention of this is to move away from simple economic aid and provision of food and energy, to connect development in North Korea's special zones to its overall industrial development, so that the very structure of North Korea's economy can change.⁵⁷

56. Choi Myeong-hae, "The DPRK-PRC Joint Projects in Rason and Hwanggeum-pyong," pp. 130-136; Gordon G. Chang, "Implications of China's Economic Penetration of North Korea," *China Brief*, Vol. 11, Issue. 13 (July 15, 2011).

57. Zhang Yushan, "Chaoxian jingji zhengce de bianhua dui changjitu tongdao jianshe de yingxiang" [Influence of changes in DPRK's economic policy on construction of Chang-Ji-Tu passage], *Dongbeiyi Luntan* [Northeast Asia Forum], No. 4 (2011), pp. 87-95; Zhang Dongming, "Duiyu zhongchao chanye kaifa yu hezuo wenti de jidian sikao" [A study on industrial development and cooperation between China and DPRK], *Dongbeiyi Luntan* [Northeast Asia Forum], No. 5 (2011), pp. 12-21; Lin Jinshu and He Fanglong, "Changjitu xiandaoku yu chaoxian luoxianshi de jingmao hezuo" [Economic cooperation

China's expectations for North Korea's special economic zones are rising despite the news of North Korea's "Kwangmyongsong-3" rocket launch. The Chinese media noted that while North Korea was announcing its satellite launch, it was also carefully experiencing changes. For instance, it had formally announced laws concerning the Hwanggeumpyong and Wuihwado special economic zones,⁵⁸ including various pro-investment measures such as repealing income taxes for businesses that invest in North Korea. China emphasizes that North Korea's dependency on it should be transformed into a motivating force for reform, with a focus on normalizing the state.⁵⁹

Implications for South Korea

Recently, some Chinese scholars have claimed that China's North Korea policies must be approached through the prism of Korean unification. That is, China's Korea policy must be directed towards unification. To this end, China must develop economic and trade relations with North Korea and utilize this as an engine for growth in China, while at the same time establishing a North Korean-Chinese relationship that is more predictable in the long term by encouraging North Korean reform and opening. There are even suggestions that peaceful unification of the Korean peninsula is the most ideal scenario for China's development, and that it may be advantageous to use the entire Korean peninsula as a buffer zone for China. This would require the normalization of North Korea through stronger relations with China, as well as improved relations with South Korea, and stronger strategic communication with the U.S.⁶⁰

between Chang-Ji-Tu Pilot Zone and Rajin-Sonbong], *Yanbian daxue xuebao* [Journal of Yanbian University], No. 2 (2011), pp. 14-18.

58. "North Korea Announces its Hwanggeumpyong, Wuihwado Special Economic Zone Law," *Hankook Daily*, March 19, 2012.

59. "N. Korea's nuanced change to be encouraged," *Global Times*, April 16, 2012.

60. Tang, "Yingdui bandao jushi," pp. 14-15; Jin Qiangyi, "Juejie Chaoxianbandao wenti de fangfa, shijiao ji lujing xuanze" [Resolving the issue of Korean peninsula:

This view by China may be not just a simple means of “managing the situation,” but rather a visionary approach toward the North Korean problem. This is expected to spark considerable controversy within South Korea concerning its Chinese policy. For progressives, China’s approach, which focuses on the stability of the North Korean region, the softening of the North Korean regime, and mutually beneficial relations, is somewhat similar in premise to South Korea’s former “Sunshine policy.” Therefore, they will claim that a long-term platform for strategic cooperation with China is necessary.

But for conservatives, while the change in China’s perception of North Korea is noticeable, a real change of its North Korea policy would be harder to detect. In reality, the various approaches devised by China to gain leadership in North Korean-Chinese relations are not specific policies. The inherent instability within North Korea, and the uncertainty surrounding the international political circumstances of Northeast Asia involving the strategic rivalry between the U.S. and China, will perpetuate the policy dilemma faced by China. From a conservative perspective, this may seem a selfish attempt by China to expand its influence on the Korean peninsula. The first concept that Chairman Hu Jintao proposed during the March 26 summit between South Korea and China, “the strengthening of political and strategic mutual trust,” may hint at the possibility of deepening mistrust between South Korea and China in the future.⁶¹

On the other hand, it is still unclear whether the Kim Jong-un government will respond positively to China’s new approach. North

Method, prospective, and path selection], *Dongbeiyu luntan* [Northeast Asia Forum], No. 2 (2012), pp. 47-56. But considering North Korea’s history of “enjoying” geopolitical games with nuclear weapons, its “adventurism,” and its tendency to respond sensitively to reform and opening in keeping with its conservative government creed, it seems unlikely that North Korea will simply accept China’s demands. It is difficult to predict North Korea’s response and China’s counter-response at the present moment, but this will no doubt be an important topic for research on the currents of Northeast Asian politics.

61. *Xinhua* (March 26, 2012), http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2012-03/26/c_111703307.htm.

Korea certainly will feel the need to make some gesture corresponding to China's interests in order to procure the minimal amount of outside material goods needed to secure its power succession. But there is also a possibility of North Korea moving away from China's interests, in the event that discord arises in the process of economic aid and cooperation between China and North Korea. During the May 2011 summit meeting, Kim Jong-il proposed elevating the status of economic cooperation between the two states, while Wen Jiabao promoted the idea of economic cooperation for mutual benefit and proposed allowing active participation by corporations.⁶² This can be interpreted as North Korea's effort to procure "magnanimous" development aid through industrial loans from the central government, which is at odds with China's emphasis on cooperation based on the market economy and guided by provincial governments. If China continues to be parsimonious in providing development aid to North Korea as it struggles to establish its power succession, then we cannot rule out the possibility of North Korea engaging in more provocations and drifting away from China's interests.⁶³ This is the most significant dilemma for China in its economic cooperation with North Korea.

For China, North Korea remains a strategic burden and an uncertain neighbor rather than a mutually beneficial partner. Also, taking leadership in its bilateral relations and promoting changes in North Korea seems like it is still beyond its capabilities. China's strategic intentions for the Korean peninsula will remain unclear to South

62. *Xinhua*wang (May 26, 2011), http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2011-05/26/c_121463025.htm.

63. The Chinese Ministry of Commerce estimates that China's investment in North Korea reached 12.14 million dollars in 2010. This is merely 30% of the amount reached in 2008 (41 million dollars) when Chinese investment peaked. In 2010, Chinese investment in North Korea was merely 0.017% of China's total direct foreign investment. Considering Kim Jong-il's efforts to promote economic cooperation through frequent visits to China right before his death, it is noteworthy that China's actual direct investment in North Korea is much smaller than expected. Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Republic of Korea) Northeast Asia 2nd Department, "Bi-weekly analysis of Chinese politics" (2011-6), quoted from p. 4.

Korea for a long time to come. Entangled with the circumstances of South Korea's domestic politics, these issues will spark more social controversy concerning the strategic status of South Korea in relation to the U.S. and China.

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