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**Still Lips and Teeth?
China-North Korea Relations after Kim Jong-il's Visit to China**

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The Significance of Kim Jong-il's Visits to China

Only nine months after the visits in May and August of 2010, Kim Jong-il yet again made an unofficial visit to China on May 20, 2011. Although it is uncommon for three visits to take place within the span of a year, there exists some precedent for this within the history of China-North Korea relations. Before and after the Korean War in 1950, Kim Il-sung visited China three times consecutively. In 1964 as the Sino-Soviet split was intensifying, it is said that five meetings took place in both Beijing and Pyongyang. Both times were strategically critical moments within China-North Korea relations.

It is generally assumed that Kim Jong-il has been motivated by urgent concerns to make such consecutive visits to China that from a distance look hasty. The issues that North Korea and China currently share can be categorized into three areas: economic aid and cooperation, the leadership succession process in North Korea, and resumption of the Six-Party Talks. These issues are not so different from the agenda that was set during Kim's previous two visits to China in 2010. In fact, economic aid and the Six-Party Talks has been a regular feature of China-North Korea meetings since the Second Nuclear Crisis broke out in 2002. The speculation that Kim Jong-il visited China three times in order to obtain the Chinese leadership's support for the succession process is unbalanced. Neither side

would want the appearance of China intervening in North Korea's domestic affairs. For Beijing, such actions would contradict its own policy of non-intervention as well as weaken its position on Taiwan. North Korea, for its part, would not wish to appear to be publicly seeking China's support that would question the legitimacy of its own Juche ideology that emphasizes independence from great powers.

There is a need to focus on the fact that all these three different issues actually resulted in maintaining and stabilizing the North Korean regime. Compared to his previous visits to China, Kim Jong-il's latest visit in 2011 would appear to be no different. However, during this visit there was stronger public emphasis on the "DPRK-Chinese friendship and traditional alliance." Notably, upon his arrival in Pyongyang, Kim Jong-il held an unprecedented welcoming party and highlighted the successful results of the visit. Kim even heralded China-North Korea relations by declaring it as the "immortal long march."

Despite this rhetoric, there was a subtle difference between the two countries in the way that they emphasized the strengthening of China-North Korea relations. With the pressure of meeting its declared objective of becoming a "strong and prosperous nation" by 2012, Kim Jong-il appears to have judged that the only alternative in resolving the problem of increasing regime instability is through China. In other words, with this visit to China, North Korea sought to mutually reconfirm the reinforcement of China-North Korea relations

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and at the same time, it tried to actively display this friendship. In contrast, China is taking precautions against the possibility that other countries will overestimate China-North Korea relations. For example, the Chinese government made the very unusual gesture of briefing South Korea and other related countries on the contents of the China-DPRK summit immediately following Kim's visit to China. Furthermore, at the 2011 Shangri-La Dialogue held in Singapore, China's Minister of National Defense General Liang Guanglie emphasized that "We have been advising North Korea, via different channels, not to take the risk."¹ While both North Korea and China are greatly concerned about the reaction of other countries, the message the two countries are trying to send are slightly, but clearly different. Such a difference reflects the complicated and delicate nature of China-North Korea relations.

The Significance of the Summit Talks in China-North Korea Relations

The summit talks are certainly a strong indicator for the distinctiveness of DPRK-Chinese relations. The historical background that created this special tradition of diplomatic visits between China and North Korea is actually a paradox because the relationship is the result of implicit mutual distrust. In 1956, Kim Il-sung purged the country of his main rivals including the pro-Chinese Yeonan faction. With the loss of its main human channel in North Korea, China as an alternative sug-

gested holding regular summit talks through mutual visits and in such a way tried to secure its leverage over North Korea. As a result, summit talks through mutual visits have become one of the most important indicators on the state of relations between the two countries.

Leadership visits between the two countries, which began with Kim Il-sung's unofficial visit to China in May 1950, had been almost an annual event until the establishment of diplomatic ties between South Korea and China. There were though several periods where China-North Korea relations were suspended, around the time of the purges of the Yeonan faction in 1956 (1954-1958), during the Cultural Revolution of the mid 1960s (1964-1969), and around the time of Mao Zedong's death (1976-77). These were each periods when China-North Korea relations were strained. However, with the establishment of diplomatic ties between South Korea and China in 1992, the tradition of China-DPRK summit talks were greatly damaged. After 1992, summit talks were virtually suspended until Kim Young-nam, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the Supreme People's Assembly, visited China in June 1999. Leadership visits then resumed after Kim Jong-il's visits to China in 2000 and 2001, and Chinese President Jiang Zemin's return visit in 2001, but they ultimately failed in restoring the tradition of holding annual summits.

Although China-North Korea relations have recovered somewhat in the 2000s, the fact that there are no regular summit meetings that resemble past practices of mutual state visits suggests that the current bilateral relationship is no longer as special as it once was. The content of recent summits has been more like a tug-of-war based on different interests than a relationship that is based on solid mu-

¹ See <http://www.iiss.org/conferences/the-shangri-la-dialogue/shangri-la-dialogue-2011/speeches/fourth-plenary-session/qa/>

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tual trust, worthy of being defined as an “un-defeatable friendship.” Indeed, North Korea has been exploiting its bilateral summit meetings with China as a channel to gain economic aid since the Second Nuclear Crisis began in 2002. For China, however, such aid was considered as an inducement for North Korea’s participation in the Six-Party Talks. In particular, Premier Wen Jiabao’s visit to Pyongyang in 2009 marked a revitalization of China-North Korea relations focused on active communication and management of North Korea. In a sense, China has been expanding its influence over North Korea to manage the unstable regime by actively intervening in the bilateral relationship. Since Kim’s May 2010 visit, President Hu Jintao has proposed that bilateral relations be focused on five agenda topics, which are “communication between the experiences in domestic governance, critical diplomatic issues, international and regional affairs, and party-state rule.”

Yet as mentioned above, within China-North Korea relations there has been a private tug-of-war based on different intentions. Kim Jong-il’s seemingly explicit dependence on Beijing implies that North Korea has much to ask from China such as economic aid which can be viewed as a symbol of support for the regime. Pyongyang needs this kind of support in the process of its leadership succession. On the other hand, the Chinese leadership wants to manage the situation in North Korea in order to prevent any signs of instability and expects a transition toward Chinese-style reforms and opening in the long run. Thus, instead of continuing an exhaustive aid-oriented approach, Beijing is now seeking for a way to nurture a compatible economic model in North Korea and eventually a pro-Chinese regime.

Prospects for Change in China-North Korea Relations

Predicting the course of future relations between China and North Korea will require a closer examination of the previous flows over the past few years. After a prolonged period of lukewarm relations since the Second Nuclear Crisis, China-North Korea relations have improved rapidly since Premier Wen’s visit to Pyongyang in October 2009 as part of the sixtieth anniversary celebration of diplomatic relations between the two countries. Interestingly, the increased tension between North and South Korea following the sinking of the ROK naval ship *Cheonan* and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island brought about closer and stronger ties between North Korea and China. Some voices even called for a restoration of the ‘blood alliance’ between Beijing and Pyongyang, which signifies their inclinations toward traditional affinities. Kim Jong-il’s recent visit to China has also been carried out under this general trend of seeking to revive stronger bilateral links.

North Korea is facing a dilemma between its goals of carrying out its leadership succession process and opening the door to a “strong and prosperous nation” by 2012 under the limits of international sanctions and extreme economic difficulties. In order to resolve this problem, Kim Jong-il expressed his intention to maintain a close relationship with China during his visit as well as gain economic and political support from the Chinese leadership. Likewise, despite the strategic burden, Beijing has also accepted such gestures as regime stability in Pyongyang seems to be necessary for China’s rise and its own power transition in 2012. Such interlocking strategic interests resulted in consecutive summit meetings and

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allowed for North Korea to use China as a lever to sustain its hard line stance against South Korea.

Recently, China and North Korea have clearly been sharing a common interest in regime stability and have therefore been actively promoting the notion of “China-DPRK friendship.” Yet there are differing interests that cannot be easily alleviated between the two states while new developments that can change the characteristics of future bilateral relations are also occurring.

It is likely that future relations between China and North Korea will increasingly resemble an asymmetric dependence structure. As recent China-DPRK summit meetings have so far only occurred through Kim Jong-il’s visits instead of mutual visitation, an unbalanced pattern of North Korean dependence upon China is emerging. Such outright dependence can be seen as a convenient opportunity for the Chinese leadership to expand their influence over the issues related to the Korean Peninsula at the expense of any South Korean leverage over North Korea. Accordingly, a significant change in China’s approach toward the North Korean nuclear issue might also be probable. If Beijing decides that they can manage the security challenges emanating from North Korea more effectively through direct relations with Pyongyang, then their original position toward the Six-Party Talks could also change.

The possibility for a Chinese-led bilateral relationship with North Korea may increase. Unlike Kim Jong-il’s regressive tendencies as seen with the current visits, the Chinese have been pushing for the establishment of a new, future-oriented relationship as they wield a leading role in bilateral relations between China and North Korea. Since Kim’s visit in

May 2010, President Hu Jintao has proposed for new relational norms such as “a shared experience in party-state rule and strengthened strategic communication” for the two states. Premier Wen took another step by openly inducing North Korea toward openness and reform and suggesting the regime should transform. A visible attribute of this difference can be seen in North Korea’s main focus on economic aid and China’s contrasting interest in pushing forward with economic cooperation. From 2005, China has proposed the so-called “three principles of economic cooperation,” as an effort to change the pattern of economic support toward North Korea. The swift progress following the summit meetings in the development of economic cooperation projects between North Korea and China such as the economic zones on Hwanggumpyong Island and in Rason is suggestive of this transition.

Northeast Asia after Kim Jong-il's Visit and Strategy for South Korea

Since the summit meetings between China and North Korea, new developments have occurred in the Northeast Asia region that are worthy of attention. Following Kim Jong-il’s visit to China, North Korea declared a total secession of ties with the Lee Myung-bak administration on May 30, 2011. Subsequently Pyongyang disclosed information about recent secret inter-Korean meetings. The North Koreans argued that despite their continued efforts toward inter-Korean dialogue, the “anti-national and the anti-reunification” policies of the South Korean government forced them to turn toward an offensive posture. In emphasizing their efforts toward improved inter-

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Korean relations, North Korea blamed South Korea for blocking the resumption of the Six-Party Talks. The fact that the North Korean regime has not yet expressed any critical remarks of the United States is suggestive of its future tactics.

At the same time, China is simultaneously sending two different messages to North Korea whereby stating that it will not allow any provocations that may affect its economic development while it also intends to maintain a certain level of continued economic cooperation. As mentioned earlier, through the remarks by defense minister General Liang Guanglie during the Shangri-La Dialogue, the Chinese argued that they are keeping the North Koreans in check while initiating groundbreaking ceremonies for the economic trading zones on Hwanggumpyong Island and in the Rason area as forms of active engagement in economic cooperation. Also, there has been the first strategic dialogue between the Worker’s Party of Korea and the Chinese Communist Party as well.

For the United States, although there have been some signals of change such as U.S. Special Envoy Robert King’s visit to Pyongyang, there has been no overall change in its policy of “strategic patience.” In order to bring about a fundamental change in U.S.-DPRK relations, there needs to be some sign of a resolution on the nuclear issue. The Obama administration will start to improve economic and diplomatic relations with North Korea only after the regime provides visible willingness to adhere to the February 13, 2007 agreement of the Six-Party Talks by following the three-phased approach of “disablement, declaration and verification, and denuclearization,” and work to improve inter-Korean relations. Realistically this would mean that

North Korea would have to effectively abandon its military-first politics, which would be extremely difficult unless a new type of a political leadership emerges. Under the premise that the United States is conducting a hostile policy to North Korea including nuclear threats, the North Korean regime will continue to argue for a need to sign a peace treaty and to hold nuclear arms reductions talks. During his visit to South Korea on June 10, 2011, Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell reconfirmed the U.S. position by stressing the need to improve inter-Korean relations as a means to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue, and urged caution on economic relations between Beijing and Pyongyang by emphasizing the importance of transparency and deliberation in economic cooperation with North Korea.

In such a changing and complex environment, South Korea needs to face up to the reality that being caught up in its own principles can easily lead to a constriction of its position in resolving the problems on the Korean Peninsula. As China’s influence over North Korea grows even stronger, the United States can no longer turn a blind eye to North Korea’s growing nuclear and missile capabilities without having a breakthrough via engagement. Therefore, South Korea must seize the opportunity to pursue an active role by accurately interpreting the changing flow of China-North Korea relations before it is too late. First, it would be necessary to find a long term intervening strategy toward North Korea that can bring about a breakthrough in inter-Korean relations, while preparing adequately against any possible North Korean provocations. There also needs to be a long-term North Korea policy that can bring about a strategic change in the North Korean regime,

along with continued efforts to remind both China and the United States on the importance of improving inter-Korean relations. Currently, China recognizes the fact that the North Korea card by itself cannot bring about both stability on the Korean Peninsula and increased Chinese influence. Therefore it would be important to develop a practical and active diplomacy toward China so that Beijing understands that a strengthened relationship with Seoul would be more effective for the Chinese leadership to realize its policy goals on the Korean Peninsula. ■

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