

North Korea's Third Nuclear Test and Policy Cooperation between South Korea and China

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Interviewee

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Since the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2094 was unanimously adopted on March 7, North Korea has continued to increase tension on the Korean Peninsula with threats to “scrap” the armistice and cut off the South-North hot line. The EAI invited Myeong-Hae Choi, research fellow at the Samsung Economic Research Institute, to assess the prospective plan and policy that China and South Korea will have to implement in response to Pyongyang’s recent provocations.

Q1: What are the strategic interests of Pyongyang and Beijing regarding the issue of nuclear tests and how do they differ?

A1: “The significant difference lies between the essence of North Korea’s and China’s diplomatic strategy: Nuclear diplomacy vs. *Status quo plus*. Thus, the North’s advancement in developing nuclear missiles will cause difficulty for China to devise its policy on the North.”

- The North Korea-China relationship has always gone back and forth between friendliness and hostility. From 1964 to 1970 when the Sino-Soviet conflict escalated after the Cultural Revolution, Kim Il-Sung never visited China. Moreover, since the South Korea-China diplomatic relations were established in 1992, North Korea had cut all ties with China for almost seven years. Then starting from 2010, Kim Jong-Il paid a visit to China four times in two years, which showed off the strong bond between North Korea and China to the international community. Therefore, the importance lies not in the short-term behavioral pattern between the two countries but in the structural difference between the essence of the North Korean and Chinese national strategy.
- The uncertainty in the future of the Korean Peninsula forces China to view issues of the North with a “crisis-managing” point of view. “Crisis-managing” does not simply mean preventing a war but finding the equilibrium point between maximizing “strategic gains” (i.e. maintaining Beijing’s monopolistic influence on the Korean Peninsula) and minimizing “strategic losses” (i.e. sudden collapse of the North Korean regime and unification through the absorption by the South, thus alienating Beijing). As a result, China pursues the “*status quo plus*” which gradually improves the situation on the Peninsula by maintaining peace and stability in the region while staying in a close relationship with both Seoul and Pyongyang. In order to do so, China pursues the “2(South-North Korea)+2(U.S.-China)” format in dealing with issues over the North Korean problem, with the intention of relaxing the tension on the Peninsula first and then searching for a long-term solution through the bilateral cooperation between the United States and China.

This product presents a
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- However, China's "*status quo plus*" approach may yet reflect a strategic dilemma currently faced by China. China manifests its objective to resolve the North Korean problem insofar as to maintain peace and stability on the Peninsula, but at the same time, to not harm its own strategic and geopolitical interest in retaining its power over the region. Depending on the situation, therefore, Chinese policy on the Korean Peninsula may look ambiguous or even contradictory as China prioritizes "careful management" over the "final settlement" of the problem.
- This ambiguous stance of China is well displayed in the issues regarding North Korea's nuclear weapons. During George W. Bush's second administration, China assumed an active role as a "stakeholder" in dealing with the North Korean nuclear problem, only to witness its status over the North Korean problem dramatically decline after North Korea's first nuclear test in 2006. During the negotiation process after the test, Pyongyang directly engaged with Washington, which made the negotiation format "2(North Korea-U.S.)+0," and excluded China from the discussion. This caused China not to repeat the same mistake; when North Korea attempted its second nuclear test, China chose to maintain its balance over issues on the Peninsula. Although the process took nearly a year to restore the relationship between Pyongyang and Beijing after the first nuclear test, there was less time – four months – to recover bilateral relations after the second nuclear test with Wen Jiabao's visit to North Korea. Since then, China has emphasized its role as a balancer over the North Korean issue. While it tries to enhance economic cooperation and diplomatic communication with Pyongyang under the banner of "traditional friendship," Beijing reiterates the value of the Six-party Talk as an effective management system in the region.
- For North Korea, however, China's "*status quo plus*" format means containment policy towards North Korea. An ideal international political system for Pyongyang consists of heightening its geostrategic value between the United States and China while competing for influence in East Asia. North Korea has tried to disrupt Chinese efforts to establish multilateral arrangements (i.e. three, four, and six-party talks) since 1980, which signifies Pyongyang's deep suspicion of China's strategic intent. North Korea has preferred bilateral talks with the United States to multilateral containment based on the belief that establishing strategic relations with the United States through the bilateral talks better serves North Korea's objectives. In addition, reliance on China has never been among North Korea's strategic options. Rather, Pyongyang has repeated its "opportunistic" provocations in order to increase its strategic value among the great powers in the region or attempted to secure its independent leverage through developing nuclear weapons.
- To boost its bargaining power with the United States, North Korea is likely to make a tremendous effort to develop ready-to-use nuclear weapons. North Korea's ability to use nuclear weapons enables the North to overcome the unbalanced military power between the North and South, hence creating a 'political and psychological safe zone' for its survival. The best scenario for North Korea is to gain the recognition from the United States as a *de facto* nuclear power status. Thus, Pyongyang will seek to negotiate with Washington under the banner of "nuclear disarmament" rather than "denuclearization." In order to achieve this, North Korea will try to negotiate with the United States by reducing the number of its long-range missiles; dispelling the U.S. concerns over nuclear proliferation; recognizing U.S. hegemony in Northeast Asia; and even suggesting that the North will join the efforts of the United States to balance China.
- As North Korea expands its stance as a nuclear power state, China will have a harder time coining its strategic policy towards the North. China does have a number of various measures to impose sanctions against North Korea. But if China decides to impose such sanctions, not only will China's influence on North Korea be significantly reduced, but China will also face difficult consequences of regime instability in the North or strains in North Korea-China relations. On the other hand, it is difficult for China to discuss the North Korean issues in terms of unification in the absence of shared vision among the concerned parties on the future of the Korean Peninsula. Strategic maneuverability of China

as a “manager” of the Korean Peninsula problems will shrink dramatically if the vicious cycle of North Korea strengthening its nuclear capability, the United States, South Korea, and Japan imposing more strict sanctions against North Korea as a response, and North Korea attempting more serious provocations continues.

Q2: What is Xi Jinping’s call on China’s policy on North Korea?

A2: “Before any new policies are established, China’s new government takes into account the policies of the former administrations. The basic principle of separating the North Korean nuclear issue and other North Korean problems will be maintained under the new government. China will also use both sanctions and engagements towards the North to improve its bargaining power vis-à-vis the North and the United States.”

- International community has high expectations for the Xi Administration’s new policy on the Korean Peninsula. In fact, the Chinese public has shown considerable changes in opinions regarding the North Korean issue. Majority of the Chinese public argue that China needs to take a tougher stance with North Korea rather than working as a mere mediator. Many believe that China should urge the North to ‘normalize’ itself by all means necessary. Some even raise voices that Beijing should help topple the Kim Jong-un regime by instigating pro-China factions in Pyongyang or supporting unification through the absorption by Seoul.
- However, it is doubtful that those public opinions will lead to a new policy discussion. Rather, the degree of severity in China’s denunciation of the North’s nuclear tests has lessened. China’s official remark on the North’s first nuclear test was that the North has “outrageously and brazenly” (*hanran*, 悍然) carried out a nuclear test by itself. However, the condemning comments similar to those after the first nuclear test were nowhere to be found when the North carried out its third test. China first “firmly required” the North to comply with the international rule of law after the first and second nuclear tests, but later simply “urged” the North to comply after the third nuclear test. This clearly shows that the Chinese government’s official discourse does not fully reflect the changes in public opinions.
- In China, the newly-designated government cooperates with the incumbent and decides future policy directions before a new administration comes into leadership in order to maintain the stability of its government following a leadership-shift. It is known that around July 2009, the fourth and fifth generation of Chinese leadership had met to decide on the future policy direction regarding North Korea. Therefore, regardless of Xi Jinping taking on Chinese leadership, the core essence of China’s policy on the North, which separates the North Korean nuclear issues from the rest of the North Korean problems, will remain mostly unchanged.
- The basic principle of China’s North Korea policy is to maintain the long term goal of denuclearization on the Peninsula as the North’s nuclear weapons program threatens stability in the region. However, since the North is unlikely to give up its nuclear weapons, China instead emphasizes the management of the nuclear problem through the Six-party Talks as a realistic solution. North Korea’s geostrategic value is so important that for China, it is crucial to strengthen normal relations with the North.
- The Chinese government will comply with most of the United Nations Security Council’s resolution to impose sanctions against the North, especially regarding North Korea’s involvement in illegal transactions. However, there is only a slight chance of China complying with some of the sanctions that could possibly break down the North Korea-China relationship, such as financial sanctions or strict cargo checks on boats and planes. Along with keeping the promise with the United Nations, China will continue on the North Korea-China economic cooperation projects that

were exempted from the sanctions and maintain the mid- and long-term engagement stance towards North Korea. Using a good mixture of sanctions and engagements towards the North, China will try to improve its bargaining power vis-à-vis both North Korea and the United States.

Q3: How should South Korea respond?

A3: “Neighboring countries share a high degree of fatigue in dealing with North Korean issues, which makes the role of South Korea very important. Seoul needs to show its willingness to solve the problem and prove its ability to manage this volatile situation by proposing a viable solution.”

- Following North Korea’s third nuclear test, neighboring countries in the region share a high degree of fatigue in dealing with North Korean issues. In China, even though the test provoked heated discussion among the public, the government is only maintaining the previous position without showing any sign of pursuing an active role to solve the problem. Thus, it is unlikely that China would make additional efforts on its own regarding the North Korean issues other than complying with the resolutions supported by the international community.
- South Korea’s role is crucial in this regard. Seoul needs to show its willingness to solve the problem and prove its ability to manage the volatile situation by proposing a viable solution. Above all, South Korea should understand the strategic calculation behind China’s policy on North Korea and needs to make efforts to engage China by mitigating Beijing’s concerns over instability on the Peninsula. In doing so, South Korea should send a clear message that even though Beijing and Seoul share a common interest in ensuring peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, this does not preclude all the necessary measures of self-defense in responding to Pyongyang’s premeditated provocation. Therefore, it is necessary for South Korea to continue to assure and persuade China that South Korea needs to secure enough deterrence capability in order to respond to North Korea’s nuclear threat.
- China is struggling to come up with alternative options in regard to its North Korea policy. South Korea should take the initiative and constantly assure China that the future dynamics surrounding the Korean Peninsula would not necessarily have negative effects on China. At the same time, it is important to create momentum in pursuing various types of multilateral cooperation such as South-North-China, South-North-Russia, or South-China-Russia multilateralism. Now is the time when the diplomacy that is based on specific and itemized, rather than generalized, strategies is needed. South Korea needs to search for a step-by-step approach, which focuses on viable measures that could prepare against unpredictability in North Korea’s future and prompt positive changes on the Peninsula.

About the Interviewee

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Myung-Hae Choi received his Ph.D. in political science from Korea University, and is currently serving as a research fellow at the Samsung Economic Research Institute (SERI).