


Policy Forum 06-77A: Are North Korea and China Drifting Apart after the Missile Test?

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Essay by Suh Bohyuk

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I. Introduction

Suh Bohyuk, a former expert advisor at the National Human Rights Commission of Korea (NHRC) and now instructor of HUFs and other university, writes, "Sino-North Korea relations may be neither

strongly attached nor completely broken, standing between such geographical reasons and different political decisions of the two countries. More profound discussions are needed about what significances such two-faced Sino-North Korea relations would have on peace on Korean peninsula."

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II. Essay by Suh Bohyuk

- Are North Korea and China Drifting Apart after the Missile Test
by Suh Bohyuk

The predominant view on last month's North Korea test-firing is that it has not only raised the level of hostility between North Korea and the US, but has also cooled down the North Korea's relations with China. North Korea did not inform China about the missile test-firing in advance. China voted for the United Nations Security Council's Resolution on North Korea, although it took a less aggressive stance than Japan did toward the issue. China is also said to have frozen North Korean accounts at one branch of a Chinese bank, which is clear enough to give the impression to North Korea that it has joined the US's financial sanctions against North Korea.

It is undeniable that relations between China and North Korea have worsened with the test-firing. The spokesman of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, Liu Jianchao acknowledged, on his visit to South Korea last August that "the differences of opinions between China and North Korea occurred due to the test firing" and this "brought about negative impact on the political situation of the Korean Peninsula." Considering the recently released reports on North Korea's possible nuclear test as well as the stable relations between China and the US, the analysis seems persuasive that North Korea and China are becoming estranged day by day. However, it is difficult to see how distant the two countries' relations are, and to predict how they will end in future. To think about such questions, we should first look at the background of how China came to submit the Resolution to the UN.

Warning North Korea while Keeping the US in Check at the Same Time

The current relation that China is having with the US is more stable than ever before. Even though trade friction between the two countries has always existed since 1990, due to their differences in their speed of economic development and in the position each country holds in the world economy, such friction has not caused any political conflicts so far. In addition, China has been supporting the US anti-terrorism foreign policies since 9.11, and the US has also been cautious not to worsen the Sino-Japanese relations while strengthening its alliance with Japan in the Asian Pacific region. Sino-Japan relations have been normalizing since last May of this year. Japan has resumed its low-interest loans and grant-type aid to China, Foreign Minister level talks between the two countries have been held, and Japan for the first time dispatched its officials to visit People's Liberation Army's North sea fleets last August. Meanwhile, China has been trying to establish itself as the driving force of the world economy after joining the WTO, and to raise its position in international relations by hosting a successful 2008 Beijing Olympics. As matters stand, it is an absolute diplomatic objective for China to have stable conditions on the Korean peninsula, including a peaceful resolution of nuclear crisis.

Meanwhile, North Korea's test-firing on July 5 came as a shock to China's foreign policies. The Western Press has been releasing reports that North Korea is capable of developing intercontinental ballistic missiles that range from 4000-6,000km up to 12,000km. However, a Chinese military expert says, in response to such releases that the missile, test-fired on July 5, ranges only 3,000km and

North Korea has a number of technical difficulties at this stage. China points out that Western nations, including the US, are overestimating North Korea's missile capability and such over-estimations are based on a calculation by the US to pose a strategic threat to China as well as to accelerate missile defense programs with Japan (the US and Japan has signed an agreement on Ballistic Missile Defense on June 23. To strengthen its cooperation with the US, it plans to imports 9 sets of defense system against SM3 ballistic missiles and to upgrade exiting 4 interception fleets and to place ground- to-air PAC3 missile system in Okinawa from March next year).

Japan submitted the Resolution on North Korea within a day of North Korea's test-firing. The resolution imposes compulsory responsibilities on the UN member states and quotes Article 7 of the UN Charter which opens possibilities for military actions. Objecting to the Resolution would have isolated China with diplomatic criticisms, especially because the US was strongly supporting the Resolution. Considering the condition China was in, it was necessary for China to have measures to restrain the increasing military capability of the US and Japan, while sending out a clear warning to North Korea about the missile test-firing. Consequently, China submitted a Resolution that is non-binding to the UN member states and excludes the Article 7 of the UN Charter, but at the same time allows China not to oppose to the Resolution of the UN Security Council.

Cooperation or Friction? Sino-North Korea Relations/

North Korea's test-firing has definitely incurred China's animosity. The spokesman for the Minister of Foreign Affairs of China expressed its discomfort saying that "North Korea is not listening to China." A moment after the test-firing, Chinese president Hu Jintao made this clear at the Beijing meeting with Yang Hyeong Seop, vice chairman of the presidiums of the Supreme People's Assembly of North Korea. President Hu is known to have shown his disapproval of any activities that could destabilize the Korean peninsula, and this is seen as a criticism, delivered from the head of China to the head of North Korea, on the test-firing. A Chinese expert on the Korean peninsula analyzes that the uninformed test-firing was viewed as a protest against Washington on the surface, yet up close, it is to proclaim that North Korean diplomacy is unrelated to that of China.

Sino-North Korea relationship has sharply been weakened, since China established diplomatic relations with South Korea without North Korea's understanding in 1992. Around the time of Kim Il Song's death, ties and exchanges between two countries' top officials decreased, and the two nations' relations soon became nothing better than a mere friendly relations like any other country as China accelerated its open policies. In the late 1990, when some North Korean defectors who had entered China due to North Korea's food crisis broke into foreign embassies in China, it unusually did not send them back to North Korea, but instead sent them to South Korea via third party countries instead. In addition, China arrested the Chinese North Korean, Yang Pin for corruption charges, when he was appointed to the executive official of Sineuju province. North Korea, against China's behavior, secretly developed nuclear weapons. Since 2002, when North Korea announced that it had joined members of world nuclear nations, there has been no sign indicating that North Korea discussed the issue with China. Under those circumstances, China and North Korea seem to be going separate ways, far from allied relations.

If North Korea continues to test-fire missiles, how would China react? When asked about the possibility of economic sanctions against North Korea, Wo Jenmin, the vice chancellor of the Institute for Foreign Affairs said in the interview with a Korean press agency on August 11 that "we haven't thought about it yet." It is likely for China to participate in imposing diplomatic pressure on North Korea together with the international community, as can be seen in its submission of the UN Security Council's Resolution. However, how would China react if North Korea strongly resisted the international community's pressure, and took measures that worsened the situation?

However, the outlook for Sino-North Korean relations is not too pessimistic. The vice-chancellor Wo Jenmin admitted that North Korea's test-firing created some difficulties to the two countries' relations, yet also said that "the two countries relations are much profound, therefore there will be no fundamental changes in the relations." The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Korea, Ban Ki Moon also said in the interview with one Korean press agency on August 8, that "China is likely to maintain its friendly relations with North Korea to stabilize the political situations of the region which will favor to China's economic development."

South Korea and the western press have reported that Sino-North Korea relations have sharply cooled down, as China voted for the UN Security Council's resolution on North Korea's test-firing. The western press gave an example for supporting such claims by reporting that China has increased military personnel on its borders with North Korea and carried out several missile night training at Mt. Back Doo. However, China uncommonly refuted the reports warning that "Do not make bad blood between China and North Korea with the faulty reports." Youth Reference, a magazine published by the Communist Youth League of China, claimed on August 5 that the reports that China has placed 2000 military personnel around China's borders with North Korea are merely a rumor.

It is predicted that China will continue its economic aid to North Korea despite the test-firing. Vice-chancellor Wo Jenmin explained the reason that "China's economic aids are derived from humanitarian mind-set." He also opposed to the possibility of the US and Japan pursuing military sanctions against North Korea saying that "these problems-nuclear crisis and missile issues-should be resolved through peaceful measures. It is a principle that the US and Japan also agree to." China also objected to the plan that the US and South Korea suggested having five-party talk without North Korea.

Considering all the pressure and concerns from the international community after the test-firing, the maintenance of friendly Sino-North Korea relations is a must to North Korea. Such necessity is also found in North Korean Chairman Kim Jong Il's remarks. The North Korean Commissioner at the Council of People's Commissars Kim Young Nam had a meeting with Chinese ambassador in North Korea, Wu Donghe, when the ambassador came to see him before he left his post on August 11. At the meeting, Kim Young Nam said Chairman Kim Jong Il has 'a strong interest' in Sino-North Korea alliance. This, reported by Chinese government's official news agency shows North Korea's hope to recover its awkward relations with China, after the test-firing.

In sum, China and North Korea no more have the military alliance that both had during the Cold War, yet they will still maintain a 'strategic partnership' due to several common interests; the Eastern part of China is closely related and they both need to defend themselves against the threat from the US. Sino-North Korea relations may be neither strongly attached nor completely broken, standing between such geographical reasons and different political decisions of the two countries. More profound discussions are needed about what significances such two-faced Sino-North Korea relations would have on peace on Korean peninsula.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

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