

Policy Forum 05-10A: China's Worsening North Korean Headache



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Kosuke Takahashi

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I. Introduction

Kosuke Takahashi, a former staff writer at the *Asahi Shimbun* and a freelance correspondent based in Tokyo, writes: "Chinese intellectuals suggest that North Korea is increasingly becoming a downright troublesome ally for China in its strategic and political relations. The more Pyongyang

delays nuclear talks, the more Beijing loses face in the eyes of the international community as host nation, especially when China strives to promote proactive diplomacy in Asia and elsewhere as a rising economic and political power."

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II. Essay by Kosuke Takahashi

- "China's Worsening North Korean Headache"
by Kosuke Takahashi

The problem of China's intractable neighbor North Korea developing nuclear weapons could grow even worse for Beijing if the United States seeks United Nations Security Council sanctions against Pyongyang. Then what will China do? How will it vote? Will its problem with its old Korean ally become a Sino-US problem - or even crisis?

A Chinese diplomat close to the talks, speaking on condition of anonymity, showed this correspondent four four-character Chinese idioms commonly used in North Asia and specifically used these days to describe North Korea's duplicity, especially with China. An example: Speaking pleasing words but ready to stab you in the back.

On Friday, Reuters quoted diplomatic sources as saying China has proposed working-level talks to prepare for a fourth round of six-party talks. Three rounds have been held since August 2003. A fourth round had been scheduled for last September, but North Korea refused to attend, saying it would wait and see how US policy developed.

With US President George W Bush extolling freedom and tough, military-backed diplomacy in his second inaugural speech in Washington, China is falling further into a Catch-22 situation over the North Korean nuclear standoff. Beijing, host of the six-party talks, is faced with the problem of how to keep the negotiations from collapsing; it is lobbying Pyongyang to return to the negotiating table soon, and to respond to pressures from and requests by other parties, especially the United States, to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula for regional stability.

Chinese intellectuals suggest that North Korea is increasingly becoming a downright troublesome ally for China in its strategic and political relations. The more Pyongyang delays nuclear talks, the more Beijing loses face in the eyes of the international community as host nation, especially when China strives to promote proactive diplomacy in Asia and elsewhere as a rising economic and political power. The six parties are North and South Korea, China, Japan, Russia and the United States.

The true test of China's status as a responsible great power in international politics would surely come, possibly in the second half of this year, if and when the North Korean nuclear issue were finally taken to the Security Council, after Pyongyang's stubborn refusal to dismantle its estimated six to eight nuclear weapons and its nuclear-development program. Should the Security Council vote to impose economic sanctions upon North Korea, what stance would Beijing take? Would China abandon its longtime ally by at least not voting against economic sanctions? Or would China veto sanction efforts in order to protect the Hermit Kingdom? Or would it just abstain at the last minute?

US seeks regime change

Now it is becoming clear that the evangelical Christian soldiers of the Bush administration are marching onward to a regime-change strategy against Pyongyang. Bush said in his inaugural address, "It is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world ... We will defend ourselves and our friends by force of arms when necessary." The US North Korean Human Rights Act of 2004 is another example of this regime-change strategy, as is the recent testimony by new Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

Rice said in her Senate confirmation hearings last week that the US "stands with the oppressed people on every continent" and identified six "outposts of tyranny": North Korea, Cuba, Myanmar, Iran, Belarus and Zimbabwe.

The appointment of Georgetown University Associate Professor Victor D Cha, a fast-rising star scholar on Korean Peninsula issues, to the post of director for Asian affairs at the National Security Council of the White House also reflects the Bush administration's strong commitment to a regime-change strategy. Cha, a second-generation Korean-American, is among experts who believe Pyongyang will not give up its nuclear deterrent because once it does, the regime will be weakened, or even come apart - it will be vulnerable without the big nuclear card.

The US delegation that recently visited Pyongyang, led by Representative Tom Lantos, a California Democrat, appeared to be just gesture politics. The Bush administration and US officials apparently never have been open to genuinely negotiating with North Korea. Pyongyang is simply unacceptable as a negotiating partner. Bush's comments that he "loathes" North Korean leader Kim Jong-il and calling him a "pygmy" do not bode well for statesmanlike negotiations, or any negotiations.

From the very beginning, some Asian experts say, Washington has not seriously wanted to make the six-party talks a success. Instead, Washington just seems to have been attempting to use the talks to consolidate political support from the other four parties for its own ends in the near future. In particular, by engaging and spurring China into the talks, the US appears to have been straining to isolate Beijing from its longtime ally North Korea for possible future economic sanctions against Pyongyang; major economic sanctions over time might lead to a regime change in the Hermit Kingdom, while causing enormous human suffering. Washington's moves appear to reflect the Bush administration's evil-state strangulation strategy based on the hardline Bush doctrine of neo-conservative fundamentalism.

Troublesome old ally

"For China, North Korea is becoming troublesome," a Chinese diplomat who has engaged in the past six-party talks told Asia Times Online recently, speaking on condition of anonymity.

To explain Beijing's current relations with Pyongyang, the diplomat showed this correspondent several *Yonjjukugo* or four-Chinese-character idioms that are commonly used in Northeast Asia, such as in China and Japan. These idioms revealed how much Beijing distrusts Pyongyang and views it as a troublemaker:

- *Mian cong fu bei* , literally meaning "One obeys someone on the surface, but not from one's heart." Pyongyang has just been listening superficially to Beijing's advice, namely that economic reforms must come first ahead of military-first politics and that the US has no intention of attacking North

Korea for the foreseeable future. Beijing emphasizes this - the US doesn't intend to attack - to soothe North Korea's security anxieties. But although Pyongyang does not seem to have taken the advice to heart, it has still received rewards from Beijing in food and energy supplies.

- *Kou mi fu jian* , meaning one says pleasant words to you, but actually is wicked and dishonest enough to knife you in the back. Pyongyang speaks the words Beijing wants to hear in order to get food and oil aid, but Beijing thinks Pyongyang is actually sly and not straightforward.
- *Liang mian san dao* , literally meaning one sword usually has two edges, but some swords have three edges. This suggests Beijing believes Pyongyang is tricky and dishonest enough to hide something - a third sword edge.
- *Chun wang chi han* literally means that without your lips, your teeth will become cold. This means if North Korea has troubles, China also suffers from them. The diplomat interviewed pointed out China's geographical and geopolitical closeness to North Korea, particularity referring to recent mass movements of refugees from North Korea - more than 460 last July. Many are so desperate to leave the worker's paradise that they even climb the walls of various embassies and schools in Beijing and elsewhere in China, to Beijing's great embarrassment.

Old iron-clad reliance melting rapidly

In the past, North Korea and China were often called "as close as lips to teeth", and North Korea was seen as China's little brother. This is because during the Cold War, North Korea had been seen as China's first line of defense and strategic buffer zone vis-a-vis the camp of capitalism, led by the US. In other words, China had held North Korea, like a sword, to the throat of the free world. About a million Chinese are said to have been killed, wounded or missing during the 1950-53 Korean War. During the war, Beijing even risked the danger that it could be the target of a US atomic attack on northern China. Mao Zedong himself even lost his eldest son in the war.

But the biggest change in the post-Korean War history of Sino-Korean relations came in 1992 when the Chinese government, after a decade of increasing contact with South Korea, decided to change its de facto policy of two Koreas to a de jure policy by normalizing relations with Seoul, as Columbia University Professor Samuel S Kim points out in his article in the book, *The Making of China's Korea Policy in the Era of Reform* . China is South Korea's largest trading partner, while South Korea is China's third-largest trading partner after Japan and the United States. Most recently, China's trade volume with South Korea shot up more than 50% in the first half of 2004 compared with the previous year, propelled by significant two-way trade in computer components and electrical machinery. For China, this all leads to the growing geopolitical importance of South Korea, reducing its strategic and geopolitical interests in North Korea. Besides its diplomats, Chinese academicians also express their fear that China could face a terrible predicament unless North Korea actually does give up its nuclear programs and weapons. Most recently, Zhang Liangui, a professor at the central Party School of the Chinese Communist Party and a well-known commentator on Korean Peninsula issues, forcefully argued in a recent World Affairs magazine that if the current North Korean nuclear stalemate is not settled by July, the issue could be brought to the UN Security Council by October. Then, Zhang said, within the following month the council could decide to impose economic sanctions against North Korea, including a naval blockade by UN-authorized coalition forces.

As one of the five permanent Security Council members with veto power (along with the United Kingdom, France, Russia and the United States), China would have to make three crucial decisions:

- Whether to vote for or against taking this issue to the UN Security Council.

- Whether to veto economic sanctions against North Korea, it still Beijing's security ally.
- How to respond to economic-sanction activities if those sanctions are imposed.

Moreover, Zhang said, if China opposed such sanctions, Beijing would be isolated from and criticized by the international community, and then the North Korea-US problem could turn into a Sino-US problem.

North Korea's continuing nuclear crisis, coupled with the 1993 firing of a Nodong missile and the 1998 firing of a Daepodong missile, as well as spy-ship incidents, has disturbed the regional waters, prompting changes in Japan's traditional pacifist military posture. The US and Japan are accelerating joint research on a theater missile defense (TMD) plan. Japan also decided to introduce a multi-tiered and layered ballistic missile defense (BMD) system in December 2003 - to Beijing's great annoyance. China cannot righteously accuse Japan of modifying its self-defense posture if Tokyo cites North Korea's very real threat as a major reason, although the new Japan-US systems could target China's missiles as well.

The six-party talks will likely remain stalled unless either the US or North Korea makes major concessions (this is highly unlikely), or unless North Korea takes provocative actions, such as secret sales of its nuclear weapons and materials, or carries out a nuclear test or tests missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads.

Will China become the victim of North Korea's nuclear blackmail, indirectly fueled by a tougher stance by the Bush administration? US-China-North Korea trilateral relations are giving off a lot of heat in the unsettled state of affairs of Northeast Asia these days.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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