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Fading Sunshine: China, South Korea losing patience with North Korea?

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ON July 15, 2006, for the first time in 13 years, the United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted a resolution -- Resolution 1695 -- on North Korea in response to Pyongyang's recent missile tests. While the resolution may not have any immediate impact on North Korea, the adoption of the resolution may indicate a seachange in China and South Korea's policy toward North Korea.

Since the end of the Cold War, both China and South Korea have been operating on a similar policy toward Pyongyang due to a common recognition that a sudden collapse of North Korea could lead to a disastrous fallout on its neighbours which neither country is in a position to cope with.-As a result, South Korea adopts the "Sunshine policy" toward North Korea and China the policy of 'giving them time, letting them reform'. The basic assumption is that the best way to resolve the North Korean problem is to provide some breathing space for it so that Pyongyang can reform and regain its economic footing. Thereafter, South Korea and China hope, North Korea can be in a better position to strike a grand bargain with South Korea and work towards an eventual peaceful reunification of the divided Peninsula.

The Kiss of Death

For a while, such a policy seems to hold promise, partly because North Korea has shrewdly played the goodwill of South Korea and China against the hardball of the United States and Japan. From time to time, North Korea would back off when facing possible tough actions from the US and Japan and happily take the "candies" (usually without any precondition) from South Korea and China, while still claiming that it did so for the sake of regional peace and stability. As a result, China and South Korea did have reason to believe that their message is finally getting across to Kim Jong-il. The recent missile testing by North Korea, however, may well be the kiss of death on this 'go-easy' policy.

Despite both South Korea and China working hard to prevent a UN resolution by offering North Korea several face-saving routes, Pyongyang would have none of it. First, it did not bother to respond to a Chinese proposal for direct bilateral talks with the US in Shenyang, China under the cover of an unofficial round of six-party talks. Second, eager to prevent UN sanctions against North Korea after the test, China sent two delegations to Pyongyang and sought clarification and assurance from Kim Jong-il, but both delegations came back empty-handed. Finally, North Korean delegations stormed out of the ministerial meeting with South Korea in mid-July-without offering any justification.

All these moves indicate that Pyongyang has now decided that it no longer needs any

goodwill from Beijing and Seoul. Indeed, by calling the UN resolution 'gangster -style', it is essentially treating South Korea and China as no different from the US and Japan. None of these gestures from the North bode well for Beijing and Seoul: the old 'go-easy' policy toward North Korea is getting increasingly untenable either for Beijing or Seoul.

In China, a growing sense of impatience and annoyance has been building up among China's foreign policy analysts and perhaps also its leadership for the past two years. For the Chinese, the North Korean problem has simply consumed too much of Beijing's foreign policy capital and too much of its attention; Beijing already has too many other issues to take care of and it simply does not want to spend so much time and energy, let alone hard cash, on the problem. More importantly, Beijing has been asking: What does it get in return for supporting Pyongyang, other than diplomatic headaches?

Likewise, in South Korea, without genuine and sustained reciprocity from the North, the Sunshine policy has been under constant attack from the political opposition. While reconciliation and benevolence may still be the right policy in the long run, many in Seoul are coming round to the unhappy view that Kim Jong-il may not be the right man to do business with.

Seen in this light, China and South Korea's support of the UN resolution might indicate that both countries have now come to an unpleasant but perhaps inevitable conclusion: The problem is not with the strategy to help North Korea reform. Nor is it with the possibility that Kim Jong-il failed to get the message that economic reform and cooperation with South Korea is its only way out. Rather, the problem may be that Kim Jong-il cannot and will not reform, even if he has now fully grasped its necessity.

Why Kim Jong-il Cannot Reform

Past explanations why Kim Jong-il had not initiated reforms and behaved moderately had usually given him the benefit of the doubt: Maybe North Korea lacks the experience and the human capital to implement the reforms; maybe it fears the United States; or maybe Kim Jong-il is held hostage by his powerful military. Few have recognized the possibility that reform may be a mission impossible for Kim Jong-il.

The fundamental problem is that Kim Jong-il simply cannot launch a reform as Deng Xiaoping did earlier in China because there is a critical difference between the situation Deng and Kim Jong-il faced respectively. Whereas Deng could shift much of the blame to his predecessor, Mao Zedong, and then head towards a new course, Kim Jong-il cannot: His predecessor was his late father Kim Il Sung; for Kim Jong-il to repudiate the legacy of his father for the sake of open reform is equivalent to committing instant political suicide. If this interpretation holds true, then no matter how much sunshine and how much time and help that South Korea and China can shower on North Korea, and no matter how smart Kim Jong-il is, North Korea is stuck.

The change of tactics by China and South Korea toward North Korea thus may signal that Beijing and Seoul are finally prepared to face a haunting prospect -- that as long as Kim Jong-il is in power, there are not going to be any major changes. China and South Korea therefore will have to live with it without achieving any tangible progress on the North Korean problem: North Korea under Kim Jong-il simply cannot be saved.

Thus, while North Korea may or may not collapse, Beijing and Seoul are now seriously preparing for a scenario that they have been unwilling to contemplate in the past. While this does not mean that China and South Korea no longer believe that reconciliation and reform are the best strategy toward an eventual resolution, one thing is for sure: The days that North Korea enjoys the unreserved support China and South Korea are now over.

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