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Yeongpyeong: Tough Test for China's North Korea Policy

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Synopsis

Beijing is caught in the crossfire between the two Koreas. It is a victim of Pyongyang's recent provocations but has to swallow the bitter fruit. It is high time for Beijing to review its overall strategy towards North Korea.

Commentary

HARDLY HAD the dust of the Cheonan Incident subsided, North Korea's artillery shelled the South Korea-controlled Yeongpyeong Island on 23 November. This re-ignited the inter-Korean armed confrontation. The ongoing naval exercise in the Yellow Sea between the United States and the South has escalated Pyongyang's agitation. It saw the exercise as a provocation. The exercise also unnerved Beijing which saw the presence of a US aircraft carrier in China's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) for military purposes as a grave threat to its national security.

Now both Koreas have put their armed forces under the top-level alert. The US 7th Fleet has been mobilised. Japan ordered its cabinet ministers to stay in the capital in case of any emergency meetings. China's State Councillor Dai Binguo promptly visited Seoul on 27 November, just three days after Beijing postponed its foreign minister's trip to South Korea in apparent protest against the US carrier's presence in the Yellow Sea. This move revealed Beijing's new assessment of the explosive situation in the Peninsula: Beijing's Korea policy is facing its biggest test since the end of the Cold War.

Logic of China's "Neutrality"

Despite President Lee Myung-bak's personal plea for Beijing to take a fair stance on the Yeongpyeong incident, Beijing has been silent on the shelling, although it criticised Pyongyang for the civilian casualties. It simply called on both sides to stay calm and de-escalate the tension. This apparent stance of neutrality is not acceptable to Seoul.

In fact both the Cheonan and Yeongpyeong events substantially hurt China's strategic interests. Its relations with the South suffered a major blow. Also, the Washington-Tokyo-Seoul security architecture has tightened on Pyongyang with the indirect goal of hedging against China. The presence of a US carrier in the Yellow Sea for the first time since 1995 has a profound military and domestic impact on Chinese national interests. The combat zone of the exercise is only 170 kilometers away from Chinese territory. The carrier's striking distance puts Beijing well within range of a direct attack, and the US spy planes in the exercise not only monitor North Korea's troop movements but also China's.

The question then is why has Beijing taken a so-called “neutral stance” on the Korean clash, which amounts to rendering support to the North. China does not see the North’s artillery attacks the way they have been depicted in the West. To Beijing, the North’s part in the Cheonan incident was also not proven beyond reasonable doubt. Beijing saw the logic in Pyongyang’s stance: the Yeongpyeong attack was not an isolated act but one in a series of retaliations over disputed waters. The Yeongpyeong shelling was Pyongyang’s response to repeated war games at its door-steps. It was out of proportion but had its context.

However, this rationality is not the key to Beijing’s neutrality. The key is China’s genuine worry about the survival of the North Korean state. Beijing knows that its “neutrality” is a bad choice but under the circumstances other choices may be worse if these contribute to Pyongyang’s collapse. China, as do the other regional states, is not ready to cope with the fallout of a major crisis in the Peninsula. North Korea – officially known as the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) -- is at its most precarious: domestically the failed financial reform deepened its economic crisis. The political succession may trigger fragmentation of the political system, as Kim Jong Il’s divide-and-rule style will cause the inevitable elite power struggle.

Externally, Pyongyang is facing mounting security pressure, as Washington and Seoul start to contemplate the military option to solve the DPRK challenge. For instance, both Seoul and Washington have now concluded that denuclearising North Korea is possible only through regime change -- not negotiations. This has eroded the hitherto tacit consensus with Beijing on the issue. Preserving the DPRK serves Beijing’s overall security needs. Neutrality is a means to an end not the end in itself. Although the price thus paid is very high, it is still the lesser of the two evils.

Chinese Influence on the North

China is under new pressure to rein in Pyongyang. This raises an old question of how much influence Beijing has on the DPRK. Given that China meets a large proportion of the North’s energy and food needs, its influence is proportionally large. Yet using economic aid to change North Korea’s behaviour is a one-off and irreversible weapon, as it is linked to the DPRK’s survival. Thus punishing Pyongyang through cutting aid may mean China punishing itself.

Fundamentally what emboldens Kim Jong-II is his apparent belief that none of his neighbours has the stomach for war. Although Washington does weigh the military solution vis-à-vis Pyongyang, it is still highly reluctant to use force, which is opposed not only by China but also by its own ally, the South. Yet this confused signal -- of war avoidance on the one hand but heightened military pressure on the other -- becomes the stimulant for Pyongyang to act provocatively, short of a real war. What Beijing can do against this brinkmanship is limited. Moreover, it has no control over US actions against the North --, should these be through sanctions or war exercises, to which Pyongyang has to respond, often in ways not liked by Beijing.

Bleak Future

Beijing’s Korea policy is status-quo oriented. This status quo is defined by two key elements: the first is the North free of nuclear weapons and the second is the US refraining itself from launching any regime-change strike against Pyongyang. This is a sensible policy but it has been challenged on two fronts. The DPRK will cling to its nuclear power; and the US and its allies will be more inclined to unseat the Kim dynasty after the Cheonan and Yeongpyeong events. Beijing’s choices will become increasingly narrower and harder in the years to come. It is high time for Beijing to review its overall DPRK strategy.

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