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No Shangri-La for North Korea

By Catherine Samaniego

Synopsis

Developments arising from the recently concluded Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore have drawn North Korea's adversaries even closer to one another. Kim Jong-un should expect to see his regime's political leverage in Northeast Asia gradually reduced, while its biggest ally, China, remains preoccupied with its own domestic concerns.

Commentary

THE OUTCOME of the 11th IISS Asia Security Summit, otherwise known as the Shangri-La Dialogue 2012 (SLD), has not been blissful for North Korea. Apart from Myanmar's new initiative to forge closer ties with the US, and the bolstering of the US-Japan-South Korea trilateral alliance, Kim Jong-un's regime has been further rendered vulnerable by China's minimal participation in the Dialogue due its preoccupation with internal issues.

Demise of the Unholy Alliance?

Myanmar-North Korea relations have never been easy though both were perceived as pariah states. Barely a decade since the establishment of full diplomatic ties in 1974, this so-called "unholy alliance" was abruptly ruptured when North Korean agents carried out an assassination attempt against visiting South Korean President Chun Doo-hwan in Rangoon. Relations were not restored until 2007, which gradually involved nuclear research, and allegedly, the shipment of illicit arms.

At the moment, it appears that relations between them have reached another turning point upon Myanmar's announcement at the Dialogue of its plans to discontinue its nuclear project and downgrade the extent of its political and military ties with North Korea. It's top defense official, Lieutenant General Hla Min, cited Myanmar's efforts toward democratic reform as a stimulus for this initiative. That is to say, this decision comes in line with the civilian government's strategy for shaping a policy that is more consistent with the image it seeks to project to the international community.

The US-Japan-South Korea Security Triangle

As North Korea's long-time adversaries, the US, Japan and South Korea are constantly seeking ways to improve relations with North Korea in order to carefully manage instability on the Korean Peninsula. During the course of the Dialogue, American, Japanese, and South Korean leaders agreed to step up trilateral efforts to counteract prevailing North Korean nuclear threats and to discourage Kim Jong-un from resorting to aggressive military strategies, such as the shelling of Yeonpyeong in 2010. While the situation appears to be looking up for

the three allies, it is simply too early to draw conclusions given the unpredictable behaviour North Korea has exhibited in the past. As a matter of fact, there have been claims that Pyongyang may be conducting a nuclear test in the near future to compensate for the embarrassing result of its failed rocket launch last April.

In addition to engaging in transfer of nuclear technology and exchange of relevant information, Myanmar had also been procuring weapons from North Korea for 20 years. Myanmar's move to put an end to the arms purchase is likely to reduce trade with North Korea and leave the regime with fewer sources of income to sustain its vast military expenditures. Fewer allies would also mean weakened tolerance for Pyongyang's political deviance, especially after its satellite launch, which was supposedly for "peaceful means," fell short of success.

In line with deterring threats from its neighbour, South Korea has also declared that it will not object to Japan's plan of deploying Aegis destroyers in the Yellow Sea. However, this proposal has met with domestic opposition from both sides in view of the lingering tension over contrasting historical interpretations and maritime territorial dispute over Liancourt Rocks. Nevertheless, it is expected to bring numerous benefits to both countries, as this will make it easier to track the trajectory of North Korean missiles.

Further, this will complement Japan's joint efforts with the US and South Korea to secure the freedom of navigation on the high seas, particularly in the surrounding area. In other words, the presence of Japan's Aegis destroyers can be instrumental in blocking Chinese attempts at seizing control of those waters in the event of an escalation of conflict on the Korean Peninsula.

Pyongyang's Shrinking Political Leverage

Although China and North Korea have traditionally been allies, their interests, perceptions and expectations do not always align. Pyongyang remains keen on pursuing a foreign policy that is independent from Beijing and shows great determination in ensuring that its biggest ally does not interfere with its internal affairs. To China's dismay, this is only becoming increasingly apparent since Kim Jong-un succeeded his father, Kim Jong-il, as supreme leader. North Korea's continued refusal to heed China's warning on conducting nuclear tests, and the detention of 28 Chinese fishermen in May by North Korean gunmen who were believed to be affiliated with the military, are only a few of the instances that have threatened to drive a wedge between the two countries.

As the US-Japan-South Korea triangle closes in on North Korea, there is no certainty as to how far China is willing to put its international reputation on the line for its ally this time, for the following reasons: 1) growing diplomatic pressure from its immediate neighbours and the US, 2) heightened Chinese disillusionment with North Korean policies, 3) its involvement in the brewing conflict on South China Sea with ASEAN countries, and 4) the Chinese Communist Party's preoccupation with overcoming the crisis of legitimacy in preparation for the upcoming leadership transition. In this regard, China's minimal involvement in the Dialogue may well serve as an indication of its wavering patience with North Korea in the midst of growing concern over its own domestic politics.

Against the backdrop of the North Korean regime's diminishing political leverage in Northeast Asia, the more pragmatic approach is for Pyongyang to make more cautious calculations before taking any steps. Otherwise, it could find itself sinking further into international isolation.

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