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Rift in China's Relations with North Korea?

By Sukjoon YOON

Synopsis

China's reaction to North Korea's recent provocations directed against the US and South Korea has been interpreted as signaling a change in the state of relations between the two communist nations. What does this portend?

Commentary

THERE HAVE been no indications recently of any specific interactions between Pyongyang and Beijing: no mutual exchanges by communist parties, no military or government visits - relations have never been so estranged. By stirring up unnecessary tensions, without prior consultation with China, North Korea has impacted Chinese regional security strategy in several disagreeable ways.

Distaste for Kim's provocations

The Chinese have expressed their discomfort at Kim Jung-un's persistent brinksmanship, repeatedly testing China's willingness to maintain a friendly attitude. North Korea's attempt to establish itself as a nuclear power blatantly undermines China's policy for a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula. Beijing's new regime, led by Xi Jinping, is still in a transitional period where power is volatile. Policies are currently determined by the party elite, but as they are trying to decentralise policy formulation without lessening the power of the party, they are very sensitive to criticism. Both the Chinese media and the general population are wondering why Kim is spending millions of dollars on nuclear weapons while his people are starving, with many escaping to Northeastern China. The fifth generation leadership is paying close attention to what the Chinese people are thinking about North Korea, and is far less concerned with outdated notions of fraternal relations.

By contrast, South Korean President Park Geun-hye's "trust politics" harmonises with Chinese proposals for a "confidence-building process in the Korean peninsula". She wants to move on from the terrible times of the *Cheonan* sinking and the Yeonpyeong island bombardment in order to reallocate government spending from defense to social security. Beijing seems ready for a change in the relationship with Seoul, concentrating on a spirit of "strategic cooperative partnership", and Park is responsible for the "cooperative" aspect.

The US Pivot to Asia

China has spent more than two decades building up its forces to secure the "first island chain", and the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) is now concerned about the rebalancing of US deployments occurring over the past 18 months. Well-informed military sources suggest that the PLA has been unimpressed by the nuclear and

missile tests of the North Korean People's Army (KPA) during the recent crisis, all likely targets being, of course, already covered by various strategic missiles of the PLA's Second Artillery. China has adopted a policy of "rights protections" in the South China Sea (SCS) and East China Sea (ECS), but North Korea's provocative attitude has motivated the US to reinforce its "four pillars of the rebalancing": partnerships, presence, power projection, and principles of freedom of seas.

None of this is welcomed by the PLA, which has therefore been reviewing its Anti-Access and Area Denial (A2/AD) strategy. During the crisis the US has been using its sophisticated ships and aircraft to monitor for any indications of forward deployment by the KPA, and updating its readiness for all-out war on the Korean Peninsula. They have employed a chemical battalion, B-52s, B-2s, SSGN, and TBM-capable ships; and sea-based TBM Defense radars have also been moved from the East Pacific to the West Pacific. Thus, the US military presence is more widely dispersed than previously, but will be more easily scalable if called upon to intervene.

Concerns about nuclearisation

The North Korean regime seems determined to make trouble in its search for levers with which to build up its influence, threatening to conduct a fourth nuclear test or launch another of its indigenous long-range three-stage rockets/missiles. Meanwhile its neighbours, Japan and South Korea, perhaps even Taiwan, must be considering developing their own indigenous nuclear weapons and delivery systems. The recent ROK-US nuclear talks, held on April 22 2013, stalled over Washington's reluctance to allow Seoul full sovereignty over its nuclear energy policy, whereas Koreans regard renewing the bilateral nuclear accord as an inviolable US obligation.

North Korea's recent nuclear blackmail is a typical strategy to confront the new administrations in Seoul and Washington. On this occasion, however, China's reaction seems less obliging than usual, even rather truculent. This is not altogether surprising to close observers of the current situation, who understand what a difficult problem it poses for the Chinese leadership. In China, crises and high-intensity exigencies can be readily distinguished from all-out war; but on the Korean Peninsula, it is all or nothing. However, no international conflict is imminent, certainly not an all-out war, and the threat is mainly rhetorical, but it is possible that continuing local provocations could move Northeast Asia closer to open nuclearisation, which the Chinese leadership really does not desire.

How can Beijing manage the situation?

It is now surely time for diplomacy: President Xi Jinping should meet with Kim Jung-un, who, after China's recent rebukes, may be losing patience with their traditional relationship. Damage control is now necessary for a resolution to this dangerous situation. China is a powerful stakeholder in this situation, and if they wish to avoid being seen as part of the problem, with their tactical support for North Korea, then they should take responsible steps to more closely monitor, and hopefully restrain, North Korea's behaviour.

It is clear that China will not jeopardise its relations with other states in the region, and with the US, in order to protect its unpredictable neighbour, and it is certainly in China's best interests to avoid being perceived as an overt military threat. Indeed, the confrontation is facilitating the sale of sophisticated US fighter jets with stealth technology to the ROK Air Force, including F-22s, F-35s and F-15SEs; and the US has also deployed its stealth fighters to the region – surely neither of these developments is welcomed by China. If the Chinese take the steps necessary to rebuild their strategic relationship with North Korea, this would not be a moral victory for Pyongyang, but a win-win situation for both countries.

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