



Kim Jong-il's Visit to China An Abiding Friendship?

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After days of silence about Kim Jong-il's recent secretive visit to China, the Chinese and North Korean news agencies Xinhua and KCNA released a statement saying that the traditional friendship of China and North Korea had been reaffirmed. Some questions remain about whether Kim's visit provided a breakthrough for improving North Korea's difficult political and economic situation and whether it will lead to moves that will decrease the security threat DPRK poses to the region.

Purposes of the Visit

The North Korean leader Kim Jong-il visited China from May 3 to 7. Before arriving in Beijing he stopped at the industrial cities of Dandong, Dalian and Tianjin. In Beijing, he met Chinese President Hu Jintao and other top leaders, including Prime Minister Wen Jiabao and First Vice-Premier Li Keqiang. Kim managed to keep to the tight schedule with a train trip that covered a total distance of more than 2,500 km, even though he seemed to be still suffering from a stroke he was reported to have two years ago. The timing of the visit was notable. It came only four days after South Korean President Lee Myongbak had visited China and discussed the possible role of North Korea in the sinking of a South Korean warship. Furthermore, a UN conference was held the same week as Kim's visit to review the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), which focused on a discussion about the nuclear programs of Iran and North Korea.

There are several reasons for Kim Jong-il's China visit. Firstly, North Korea faces a serious economic crisis, ushered forward by UN sanctions which are in place as a reaction to its nuclear test, and the failed currency reform last year. Pyongyang has promised its people that North Korea will be an economically strong nation by 2012, which is the 100th anniversary of the birth of Kim Il-sung. It is estimated that North Korea require an annual food production of at least six million tonne to meet demand. For this

year, food shortage is thought to be more than 1.5 million tonnes. With this in mind, the main purpose of the trip may have been to secure economic aid. Secondly, the visit was at a time of high tension between North and South Korea over the sinking of the warship in March. Although Pyongyang denies it, North Korea is suspected of having been involved in the sinking of this ship. If the multinational investigation team that is inspecting the wreck discovers that North Korea was behind the incident, it is likely that South Korea will ask the United States to jointly pursue retaliatory actions against North Korea. Therefore, Kim's visit to China may have aimed at securing Chinese support. Finally, Kim might also seek China's support for his transfer of power to his third youngest son, Kim Jong-un. Indeed, Kim Jong-il is rumored to be worried about the future of his regime, and is trying to arrange for the succession of his 28-year-old son.

Meeting between Hu and Kim

Kim's visit to China was not announced by China's state news agency Xinhua until it was over. Similarly, North Korea's state news agency KCNA only acknowledged the visit when Kim was returning home. According to Xinhua, President Hu Jintao strongly emphasized the Sino-DPRK friendship in his meeting with Kim: "Sino-DPRK relations have made continuous achievements in recent years, and last year in particular, the two countries celebrated the 60th



anniversary of Sino-DPRK diplomatic ties and successfully held the Year of Friendship, and the political contacts and cooperation in all areas have been fruitful.” KCNA added that Kim’s visit to China “infused great pleasure and encouragement into the two peoples desirous of consolidating the bonds of bilateral friendship and steadily and vigorously developing the bilateral ties in the new century.” More than usual, this time the two countries demonstrated their strong friendship during the meeting. Hu remarked that the traditional friendship between China and the DPRK is the common treasures of the two governments, parties and peoples, and it is the historical responsibility of the two sides to push forward their friendship with the progress of the times and from generation to generation. This rhetoric can be believed to be intended to assure Kim Jong-il that China will accept Kim’s plan for the transformation of power to his son.

Nevertheless, this meeting seemed to accomplish nothing beyond demonstrating friendship. According to Xinhua, Kim told Hu that he wanted to create favorable conditions for the reopening of the six-party nuclear negotiations, but he did not state when North Korea would return to the table. Kim has said the same thing in the past, but usually attaching more specific conditions. Before his visit to China, there were indeed high expectations that Pyongyang would announce a clear plan to go back to the negotiation table in return for economic aid from China. Such a plan might also help North Korea to overcome its difficulties, which caused by growing suspicions about a possible involvement in the sinking of the South Korean warship. However, it is reasonable to assume that Pyongyang was unwilling to promise to return to the talks in more explicit terms since South Korea, the United States and Japan are saying the talks should resume only after the investigation of the sinking of the ship is concluded. If North Korea turns out to be responsible for this incident, Seoul intends to boycott any negotiation process which will affect the resumption of the Six-Party Talks.

The unclear plan for the Six-Party Talks may also mean that the two leaders had different views. Kim’s talks with Hu were not described in any detail in the KCNA report on May 7. Instead, it was his visits to the cities of Dalian and Tianjin that were the main focus of the report. He had also

been expected to attend the premier of a North Korean version of the Chinese classic opera “Dream of the Red Mansion,” but he went home without attending this event. Kim may not have received the promises of economic aid he was expecting. Although he discussed economic support and cooperation with the Chinese leaders, talks probably focused on the Chinese model in North Korea. China seems to have changed its attitude towards North Korea and is not willing to often support the country for reasons of friendship alone.

The Chinese View

As Pyongyang’s sole strategic partner, China is believed to have the most leverage on Kim Jong-il’s regime. Nevertheless, North Korea’s nuclear ambitions cast a shadow on the relationship between the two countries. Apparently, China faces a dilemma in its policy toward North Korea. China’s internal debate on a change of policy towards North Korea has been ongoing since North Korea’s first nuclear test. Some people proposed punishment via the suspension of economic support and aid, but Beijing has too much at stake.

After its own reforms and opening up, China’s key strategic interest in the Korean Peninsula is to maintain stability and avoid war. Indeed, Beijing is afraid that Kim Jong-il’s regime will collapse, as it would probably lead to chaos in the country and result in a surge of refugees into China. On the other hand, China also fears that it will lose its influence and whatever political leverage it has over North Korea’s nuclear program. Therefore, China believes that it is in its best interest, under the current situation, to preserve Kim’s regime and the status quo on the Korean Peninsula.

Kim’s visit has given the Chinese government an opportunity to strengthen its influence amid the prevailing tensions over the sinking of the South Korean warship and the economic predicament of North Korea. Nevertheless, the proposals of Hu and the official statements issued after the visit indicate that China’s North Korea policy has been consistent with its past practices.

In the long term, China hopes that North Korea will copy the Chinese model of reform and opening up, but seems to lack influence on North Korea’s internal affairs.



Since Beijing's support for North Korea is driven by strategic considerations, it is in China's interest to be on friendly terms with North Korea. However, Chinese leaders are unhappy with North Korea's rejection of the Chinese style of economic reform and the Six-Party Talks hosted by China. Kim Jong-il worries that reform would topple his regime and turn North Korea into another Soviet Union. China feels it is trapped in a stalemate due to Kim's stubbornness and sees few options to change the situation. The deadlock hinders China from realizing its long term diplomatic objectives and strategic goals. It is time for China to act more like a global leader as it calls for Kim to return to the nuclear dialogue table, but also to open up his country to the outside world.

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