

Korea-China Relations: Kim Jong-il In China. What Implications for the West?

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Kim Jong-il's "unofficial" tour across China's northern provinces early this May was loaded with symbolism. It was his fifth visit to the country which in fact acts as the DPRK's only remaining partner in international politics. As required by the North Korean protocol, the tour took place in the regime of tight secrecy: a few results produced by the talks and even the very fact that the North Korean leader had traveled to China became widely known only upon Kim Jong-il's return to Pyongyang.

The otherwise unremarkable event attracted a lot of attention globally and – more than elsewhere – in the neighboring countries. The intrigue of the visit was interwoven with broader turbulent processes on and around the Korean Peninsula, where the situation is marked with uncertainty of the future of the six-party talks aimed to resolve the North Korean nuclear problem, growing tensions between the two Koreas, and North Korea's pressing economic problems, which it has to face along with harsh international sanctions and the consequences of its own unsuccessful currency reform. Though Pyongyang promptly recognized the failure of the latter financial experiment and took urgent measures to neutralize its negative impact, the domestic situation in the country still appears unstable, largely due to Kim Jong-il's reported health problems. Western watchers are convinced that Kim Jong-il's younger son – 27-year old Kim Jong-un who has been nominated to key posts in the Communist Party and the National Defense Commission over the past several months– is already being orbited as his father's successor.

The fragile balance on the Korean Peninsula has been seriously affected by the sinking of South Korea's Cheonan corvette. Seoul expects to be through with the investigation of the tragic incident by May 20. Ignoring any other probable explanations, it strives to discover (or to forge?) evidence implicating N. Korea, the a priori version at the moment being that Cheonan had been destroyed by a torpedo. Efforts are clearly made to "internationalize" the incident, to entrain the US, Japan, China, and Russia, and thus to trigger another round of punitive actions against the DPRK such as the passing of the corresponding resolution by the UN Security Council. The East Asian "troika" comprising the PRC, ROK and Japan is to convene in South Korea at the level of foreign ministers in the coming several days, and the approach to the Cheonan incident based on the investigation materials to be presented by Seoul is going to top the agenda.

In the context of the developments linked to the Cheonan incident, Kim Jong-il must be credited with a fairly intelligent preemptive move. Though his Chinese tour did not come as something totally unexpected, it echoed with confusion – and later with quiet rage – in Seoul. Experts were forced to conclude that China did not regard the drama as serious

enough to affect Beijing's relations with the DPRK. Seoul registered its displeasure with Beijing via diplomatic channels by pointing to the unacceptable and untimely character of China's hospitality given North Korea's hypothetical responsibility for the incident, and suggested that under the circumstances China could take a more responsible role in the Korean Peninsula affairs. A number of Western countries directed similar criticism at Beijing, albeit in a gentler form, and expressed a hope that China would rather focus on representing the international community in its interactions with Pyongyang.

As for the objectives of Kim Jong-il's visit to China, the expert consensus converges on the idea that his priority was to demonstrate that, regardless of the complexities currently confronting North Korea, the country still has "a window to the world" and enjoys China's reliable backing, and that it can count on Beijing's diplomatic and economic support. It was not a coincidence that, despite the unofficial status of the visit, Kim Jong-il was accompanied by practically the entire the DPRK leadership, which represented such bodies as the National Defense Commission, the Party, and the defense and foreign ministries. Throughout the tour Kim Jong-il stressed in his addresses that the Chinese- North Korean friendship will survive all epochs regardless of new realities, the change of generations in both countries, and various hardships of external origin. Chinese leaders including Hu Jintao upheld the same view.

While the ceremonial part of the tour was pompous (the Korean leader and his team were received by the Chinese President, several members of the Standing Committee of the Chinese Communist Party's Political Bureau, and all the heads of the provinces visited by the Korean delegation), only a minimal amount of information concerning the agreements reached in the process was released. China People's Daily reported that Hu Jintao put forward several proposals aimed at broadening the bilateral cooperation, offered to intensify top-level contacts and to organize regular consultations, and suggested further deepening the economic relations between the two countries. There is silence on both sides as to whether any specific political support or additional economic assistance has been promised to Kim Jong-il.

It should be noted that there seems to be a certain discord between China and North Korea over the forms of their economic transactions. While Pyongyang expects China to go on being a donor of fuel, foodstuffs, and necessities, Beijing favors switching to a more commercialized approach and gently urges its North Korean partners to realize that a long-awaited reform must finally take place. This could be the motivation behind showcasing the industrialization in China's northern provinces. Paying lip service to China's accomplishments, Kim Jong-il hardly plans to transplant the Chinese approaches to his own country, evidently out of concern that similar experiments would breed a market sector of the Korean economy that would evade state control. In the settings of the conflict with "the hostile environment", the result, as seen through the prism of the logic of North Korea's leadership, would be the erosion of the positions of the current regime and its eminent demise.

Minor disagreements notwithstanding, at the moment China remains the DPRK key political and economic partner. The trade turnover between the two countries reached the impressive \$1.8 bn, which is 50-60% of N. Korea's foreign-trade total. The expansion of Chinese business into North Korea is clearly collecting momentum, especially in the border provinces where Chinese companies are gaining control over natural resources and the more valuable of the industrial assets, including those initially meant to be run jointly by the two Koreas. Though the DPRK leadership views the developments with explainable concern,

worrying to fall into dependency on China and to lose the commanding heights in the economy to the long-handed Chinese business, the current international isolation leaves Pyongyang no space for maneuver.

What seems truly surprising under the circumstances is the shortsightedness of Pyongyang's opponents whose attempts to strangle North Korea by imposing economic sanctions and exerting political pressure actually help China tighten its grip on the peninsula northern part and weaken their own positions. Logically, Seoul should have been the player most alarmed by the tendency.

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