

# The North Korea-China Summit and the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula

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The attention to the North Korea-China summit was largely due to its potential impact on the discussions of denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula, as watchers were trying to guess whether the leaders of the two countries would suggest new initiatives to reanimate the six-party talks.

The last six-party meeting took place in Beijing in December, 2008. The talks stalled shortly thereafter, and later the DPRKa withdrew from the process altogether, protesting against the sanctions the UN Security Council imposed on it for test-firing missiles (April, 2009) and performing an underground nuclear test (May, 2009). Pyongyang's step dealt a blow to the political prestige of Beijing which presided over the negotiations.

The US and its allies constantly criticized China for not using the leverage at its disposal to make North Korea act rationally and revert to the six-party process. Indeed, China's logic in dealing with its defiant ally represents a dissonance with the expectations of the US, Japan, and South Korea, but it should also be taken into account that, contrary to widespread belief, Pyongyang is not a puppet of Beijing and the efficiency of China's leverage over it is largely overstated.

While the West's traditional priority is non-proliferation and the future of the regime in North Korea occupies a line much lower down its agenda (the sooner the totalitarian system falls apart, the better), for China the number one objective is to maintain status quo on the Korean Peninsula. From China's perspective, nothing can be more undesirable than a political and economic collapse in North Korea, chaos in the country, military and political destabilization on and around the Korean Peninsula, and the subsequent imminent establishment of the US and South Korean control over the situation followed by the deployment of US military bases along the Chinese-Korean border.

There is an impression that China's concern over the possible demise of the current regime in North Korea grew to such proportions that Beijing went so far as to take part in consultations with the US and South Korea on the theme. So far the consultations have not been arranged on the level of administrations and have been limited to exchanges between academic institutions with close ties to government circles. According to Japanese and South Korean media reports, the consultations took place in the late 2009 - early 2010, but the parties involved agreed they would be arranged on a regular basis in the future. Though during the talks the counterparts only meant to probe into each other's positions and to sound out each other's intentions, North Korea reacted negatively once the information about the meetings was leaked to the media. Along with the criticisms routinely leveled by Pyongyang at the US and South Korea, this time the DPRK chose to direct thinly veiled

criticism at China. On March 26, 2009 a spokesman from the General Staff of the Korean People army condemned “the neighboring country’s” involvement in the debates and added that those who seek to overthrow the DPRK’s existing political system, regardless of whether the role they play in the process is leading or passive, would fall victim to unprecedented nuclear strikes.

In other words, the relations between China and North Korea are not as spotless as it might seem. The DPRK leadership lays at least a part of the blame for the UN strictures on Beijing, assuming that as an ally China could do more to avert them. Though this is not said publicly, the leadership in Pyongyang is increasingly feeling that their country is being used as a pawn in a sophisticated political battle over strategic issues played out between China and the US.

The notion must be credited with an extent of realism, but the pressing problems on the international arena and the possibility of confronting powerful enemies alone make the North Korean leadership tolerate China’s conduct. It is also taken into account that in general Beijing is not interested in regime change in North Korea and its responses to the country’s nuclear and missile endeavors are quite moderate compared to what is heard from others at the six-party talks. Moreover, China has always helped the DPRK by taking the role of a bridge between Pyongyang and Washington whenever direct dialog between them became impossible.

Commentators are well-aware that it very China–North Korea summits that typically induced positives shifts in Pyongyang’s position and helped break stalemates. This was the case, for example, when Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao came to Pyongyang in October, 2009 and managed to secure Kim Jong-il’s consent to return to the six-party process, albeit “under certain conditions”. As a reward the Korean side requested the lifting or at least the softening of the UN Security Council’s sanctions and the immediate opening of the negotiations on replacing the ceasefire agreement that ended the 1950-1953 war with a peace treaty which it deemed necessary to create the climate of trust needed for advancing denuclearization. It was China that, according to media reports, proposed in the early 2010 a scheme of phased reanimation of the six-party talks which, despite a portion of criticism, was welcomed practically by all parties. The process was to begin with a top-level US–DPRK meeting, but preparations for the event were frozen as the result of the “mystical” incident with the South Korean warship. By the way, Beijing’s envoys, much to the displeasure of the US Administration, started probing in Washington into the possibility of having the sanctions lifted or soften.

Clearly, there was expectation in a number of countries that Kim Jong-il would announce his country’s unconditional return to the six-party talks on the eve of his visit to China. Nothing of the kind could actually happen, at least because in the DPRK the leader never makes statements on foreign politics issues, no matter how important they may be. Nevertheless, the current state of the nuclear theme discussions, which is described in detail by both North Korean and Chinese sources, shows that the atmosphere on both sides is fairly positive. According to media reports, the agreement has been reached to make efforts jointly with other North East Asian countries to work towards the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in accord with the September 19, 2005 joint statement.

At the same time, Kim Jong-il said the DPRK is ready to work with other parties creating favorable conditions for the resumption of the six-party talks and confirmed that the country

is committed to resolving the nuclear problem based on dialog. Leaders of both countries also said measures are needed to prevent escalation on and around the Korean Peninsula. The statement is a disguised warning to South Korea that - to avoid more serious consequences - it should stop the hysteria over the sinking of its warship.

Washington and Seoul were highly critical of the nuclear problem and regional security discussions in Beijing and expressed the view that Pyongyang should back diffuse formulations with actual denuclearization steps. The steps, however, cannot be unilateral. According to the joint statement, not only Pyongyang, but everybody at the six-party talks is under certain obligations, and, in fact, many of Japan's and South Korea's obligations have never been met. Moreover, it is unclear whether South Korea, the US, and Japan are truly ready to reopen the six-party talks in the nearest future or will adopt the tactic of leveling new allegations at the DPRK and exerting ever greater international pressure on it under the pretext of its alleged involvement in the Cheonan tragedy.

The results of Kim Jong-il's Chinese tour will yet require further analysis, but Russia can already learn a lesson of its own. All the "implicit" aspects of the relations between China and the DPRK notwithstanding, Beijing is implementing a consequent and independent policy with respect to North Korea, widening its role in the Korean affairs and increasingly making the county its dependent partner. In doing so, it pursues its own interests and shows no signs of fearing the West that criticizes China for supporting "the totalitarian regime". The policy meets with full understanding in Pyongyang which realizes how Beijing combines its international commitments with the cultivation of the ties with its traditional partner.

Russia is not going to compete with China over North Korea, as the approach proved unwarranted in the Soviet era. At present Moscow has no far-reaching plans involving the DPRK like those of China, but it is no reason for passivity. The DPRK is Russia's close neighbor in whose development Moscow invested heavily in the past, but currently the legacy is in neglect and is evaporating.

No doubt, a lot of things can be explained away. One should keep in mind, however, that Russia is attractive from the standpoints of both Koreas exactly because it is not a source of peril and has no plans for expansion in the Korean Peninsula. This is a serious political advantage, which, if used properly, can put Russia ahead of other countries.

Russia's considerable presence on the Korean Peninsula, which is a strategic geopolitical region, could help it strengthen its positions in the Far East and in North East Asia, which serve as the avenue to the Asia Pacific region.

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