The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus
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China's Intentions in the DPRK: South Korea Perspectives

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Recent reports of Kim Jong-il's death may have been, to quote Mark Twain, "greatly exaggerated," but they did reveal a great deal about South Korean thinking regarding the future of North Korea. Anonymous officials leaked informa¬tion that the government was looking at operationalizing ConPlan 5029, the contingency plan for joint US-South Korean intervention in the North that had been suspended under the previous administration. Given the lack of any signs of unrest in Pyongyang, the urgency of such planning was questioned by critics.1 But it reflects an ongoing concern that has been building in South Korea over the years: that if North Korea ever does collapse, the opportunity to determine the future of the pen¬insula may not fall to South Korea, but rather to China.

When South Korea and China first normalized relations in 1992, it was widely seen as a diplomatic coup for Seoul. Gaining official recognition from North Korea's most staunch supporter and Korean War ally signaled that, for all intents and purposes, Seoul had won the ongoing battle for legitimacy on the Korean Peninsula. Coming so soon after the fall of the Berlin Wall, few doubted that a reunified Korea under the Southern system was on the horizon, with at least tacit acceptance from Beijing.

Despite North Korea's stubborn refusal to prove the prognosticators right by collapsing, economic relations between South Korea and China have grown at a rapid pace. In the last decade, the PRC has emerged as the number one destination for South Korean investment, while also surpassing the United States as Seoul's leading trading partner. An increasing number of South Korean students are favoring the study of Chinese over English and staffing the language programs at top Chinese universities. South Korean pop stars and soap operas have gained wide popularity in China. President Kim Dae-jung spoke of reorienting South Korea away from the Pacific Ocean and toward mainland Asia, while his successor, Roh Tae-Woo, advocated moving the country away from its reliance on the US alliance and toward the role of a regional "balancer." So close have the two countries become that, until the election of the unabashedly pro-American Lee Myung-bak, many Washington observers were expressing fear of Seoul falling under the Chinese "orbit."

Recent events have shown South Koreans a less benign side of China's rise, how¬ever. Like the citizens of other countries, South Koreans have been disturbed by rev¬elations of the safety problems with Chinese-made products. Disputes over fishing rights in the Yellow Sea (known as the West Sea in Korea) have been on the rise, with over 2,000 Chinese fishing boats detained over the last four years.2 The situation turned violent in early October when a South Korean coast guard officer was killed trying to board a Chinese boat that had allegedly strayed into South Korean territorial waters. South Korean missionaries working with North Korean refugees in the Chinese border regions have been harassed, arrested, and sometimes deported by Chinese authorities, while the refugees themselves have been sent back to North Korea to face imprisonment, torture, and sometimes execution. Protestors demon¬strating against such actions during the Olympic torch relay in Seoul were set upon by flag-waving Chinese students whom unconfirmed reports suggested may have been bussed into the city by the PRC embassy.

These demonstrations of the darker side of Chinese nationalism have reinforced concerns over Chinese territorial ambitions that were stoked by competing histori¬cal interpretations between the two countries. At the heart of the disagreement is a dispute over the "ownership" of the history of Goguryeo, an ancient kingdom whose territory covered large parts of both Manchuria and northern Korea. While the ar¬guments on both sides are anachronistic, since Goguryeo predated the emergence of either China or Korea in their modern incarnations, it speaks to the competing visions of nationalism. China, concerned about ethnic separatism in its hinterland, points to Goguryeo as evidence of the existence of "minority" kingdoms within ancient China. South Korea, which clings to a myth of 5,000 years of ethnic homogeneity, sees Goguryeo as an integral part of the "Three Kingdoms," along with Silla and Paekche, that came together to form the Korean nation.

Many South Koreans were alarmed when China in 2002 launched its "Northeast Project" to promote research aimed at supporting its version of history. Both the government and private groups have responded by establishing their own centers for studying the history of Goguryeo. For its part, China sees its actions as defensive moves against claims by South Korean nationalists (not supported by the government) that the "Gando" region north of the Tumen River, which is heavily populated by ethnic Koreans, rightfully belongs to Korea. According to this interpretation, the Sino-Japanese border agreement of 1905 illegitimately "gave away" Korean territory to China, whereas Chinese maintain that the border was already well established by earlier Sino-Korean treaties. 3

In the two decades since it decided to ignore Pyongyang's call for a boycott of the Seoul Olympics, China has single handedly disproven the previously widely held no¬tion that relations with the two Koreas are a zero-sum game. In a way that no other country has managed, it has skillfully maneuvered between Seoul and Pyongyang, building strong economic ties with the former while retaining the latter as a buffer zone against the US alliance system in the region. This has led many in Seoul to begin questioning whether Beijing would ultimately be supportive of unification. If the current situation gives it the best of both worlds, why would China want to see a change?

China has disproven the notion that relations between the two Koreas is a zero-sum game

In many respects, China has played a positive role in the attempts to promote dialogue and reconciliation between the two Koreas. China has willingly served as the host of the six-party talks on reversing North Korea's nuclear development, as they did with the earlier four-party talks on re¬placing the Korean War Armistice with a peace agreement. It has even been willing to twist the screws a bit, as it did by briefly shutting off oil shipments to signal its displeasure with Pyongyang's nuclear test. China has also sought to gently nudge its ally down the road of economic opening and reform, but with little success to show for its efforts. Both China and South Korea would prefer to see gradual change and development in North Korea over a sudden, East German-style collapse, which would put a major strain on both countries' economies.

But when it comes to the question of unification, their interests begin to diverge. While support for unification, and particularly rapid unification, has waned some¬what in recent years, most South Koreans still see it as the logical and inevitable endgame on the Peninsula. In China, however, reunification poses a potential challenge. Will a reunified Korea be pro-Chinese, or at least neutral in its outlook? Or will it join with the United States and Japan in forming the northeastern curve of a strategic encirclement of China?

Both South Korean and American scholars who have studied Chinese strategic thinking on the Korean Peninsula have found that in fact China is not opposed to Korean reunification, but are rather worried about the possibility of joint US-South Korean intervention in North Korea. For this and other reasons, China would be willing to intervene in North Korea to protect its own vital interests, including preventing a refugee crisis, securing loose nuclear weapons, or restoring order out of chaos. 4

The Possibility of a Chinese-supported coup looms large in the South Korean imagination

While the Chinese may view such actions as benign, many South Koreans see them as a threat to Seoul's vital interests. In an interview I conducted for an International Crisis Group report, Yun Hwy-tack, a researcher at Seoul's Goguryeo Research Institute, warned that if the United States and South Korea were to intervene in case of a North Korean collapse, China might use a historical claim to the northern part of the Korean Peninsula to justify an intervention of its own.5 With the continued uncertainty over who will succeed the aging and apparently ailing Kim Jong-il, the possibility of a Chinese-supported coup looms large in the

South Korean imagination. Speculation has focused on Kim's eldest son, Kim Jong-nam, who has been living in virtual exile in China since being arrested by Japanese immigration authorities trying to sneak into the country on a fake passport to visit Tokyo Disneyland. Many observers fear that China would react to Kim Jong-il's death to prop up either Jong-nam or a China-friendly military junta to serve as a virtual puppet ruler in support of Chinese regional interests.6 Chinese experts deny that China would have any intention of helping to install a pro-Chinese leader in Pyongyang, which would go against China's longstanding opposition to one country intervening in another's national sovereignty.

Regardless of the likelihood of such a scenario, however, it weighs heavily on the minds of South Korean policymakers. In Seoul, scholars and government officials have begun to more openly admit that fear of Chinese intentions is a major motivating factor for South Korea's continued engagement efforts. China's response to North Korea's nuclear weapons development has lent credence to this view, as it has become clear that, regardless of North Korea's bad behavior, China will never entirely cut off its supply of vital food and energy. Recognizing that, Seoul feels compelled to push its own economic cooperation with the North to maintain some degree of leverage and avoid letting its estranged brother become entirely dependent on Chi¬nese support. As one researcher at a government-funded think tank put it, "If we isolate North Korea, they'll have to rely more heavily on China, which increases the possibility that North Korea will become a pawn in a regional game."7 This explains why the current South Korean administration of Lee Myung-bak, despite its oft-repeated skepticism of its predecessors "sunshine policy", remains reluctant to allow a full break in inter-Korean relations.

It is quite likely that South Korean concerns in this regard are largely overblown, the result of a historical perception of victimhood, of being a "shrimp among whales." In actuality, aside from the sticky question of Seoul's alliance with the United States, its interests and that of Beijing's are closely aligned when it comes to North Korea. The Lee administration's stated policy of promoting the DPRK's denuclearization and opening in exchange for large-scale development aid fits in neatly with China's own interest in a nuclear-free North Korea pursuing economic reform. Both sides would prefer to see gradual change and avoid chaos in the North. Opening up a trade route through North Korea by rebuilding the rail link with the South would also help increase Sino-South Korean trade.

All this strongly suggests the need for better communication between the two countries on North Korea's future. Chinese analysts have already indicated a desire to open such discussions with the United States.8 But any Beijing-Washington dialogue that excludes Seoul would only further exacerbate South Korean concerns of strategic isolation, which are growing, as inter-Korean relations remain stalemated while US-North Korean dialogue moves forward. Furthermore, it is not feasible to carry on an open dialogue on the possibility of regime collapse in North Korea while retaining Pyongyang as a dialogue partner, so that any discussions would have to be sub rosa.

But if the question of North Korea's future is too delicate to breach, it may still be possible to address some of the sources of mutual distrust. In particular, a new peace regime to replace the 1953 Armistice Agreement is on the agenda for a future stage of the six-party talks process. When negotiations reach that stage, China and South Korea can directly address the question of restructuring the US-South Korean alliance in a way that will address South Korean security concerns while at the same time alleviating Chinese fears of encirclement. North Korea in the past has hinted at a willingness to accept a continued US troop presence if doing so would help con¬strain South Korea or Japan from moving in a more aggressive direction, suggesting that they too may be amenable to a new arrangement.

In the meantime, the two sides need to constantly work to reduce bilateral tensions. China needs to realize that economic relations are not a substitute for diplomacy; it must directly address the historical and territorial disputes that divide the countries. For its part, South Korea should attempt to restrain the more virulent nationalistic sentiments of its citizens and constantly reassure China that it has no designs on any parts of current Chinese territory.

None of this will solve the vexing questions of North Korea's future direction, which in any case will be ultimately determined not in Beijing or in Seoul but in Pyongyang. China and South Korea cannot meet in a smoke-filled room and decide the fate of North Korea. But the more they can overcome their own mutual distrust, the less likely it becomes that whatever does happen in North Korea will lead to a broader regional crisis.

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Recommended Citation: Timothy Savage, "China's Intentions in the DPRK: South Korea Perspectives" The Asia-Pacific Journal, Vol. 52-3-08, December 21, 2008.

Notes

1 "Chung Se-hyun: Stop Mentioning Contingency and Gain DPRK People's Support!" Pressian, Sept. 16, 2008 (in Korean).
2 Shirong Chen, "China Acts in Water Dispute Row," BBC News, Oct. 17, 2008.
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4 Bonnie Glaser, Scott Snyder, and John S. Park, "Keeping an Eye on an Unruly Neighbor: Chinese Views of Economic Reform and Stability in North Korea," United States Institute of Peace Working Paper, Jan. 3, 2008.
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6 Yoon Won-sup, "Lee Fears Pro-China Regime in NK," Korea Times, Nov. 12, 2004.
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8 Glaser et al., op. cit., p. 20.

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