
Recent Improvements in North Korea-China Relations and the Prospect of the North's Changes

In-hae Ahn*

Review of North Korea-China Relations during the 90's

China aims to increase its influences on the Korean Peninsula by pursuing the "same-distance diplomacy." China has consistently strengthened its relations with South Korea since the normalization in 1992, through various high-level exchanges with the South. In contrast, China has almost ceased its relations with North Korea after the death of Kim Il-sung in 1994. Since then, however, China has been trying to restore its relations with the North, so as to prevent the North's abrupt collapse and to check the U.S. influence on the North. For its sustained economic development, China needs a stable security environment. From this strategical thinking, China has shown its support for the Kim Jong-il regime, while emphasizing the traditionally favorable and cooperative relations between the two countries.

In general, however, one can say that North Korea-China relations have been weakened since the normalization of South Korea-China relations. The end of Cold War loosened the military alliance between the two countries, and China's reform and opening policies weakened the ideological bond between them. In addition, incidents such as Hwang Jang-yop's defection and Taiwan's

* Korea University

attempt to put nuclear wastes into North Korea created conflictual situations between the two countries. With the gradual lowering of its confidence on China, North Korea attempted to exclude China from the four-party talks held from August 1997, thus revealing to the world the uneasy feeling between the two countries. The fact that there had been no high level exchanges between them since Kim Il-sung's visit to China in 1991, except for Yang Shang-kun's and Hu Jin-tao's visits to North Korea in 1992 and 1993, respectively, clearly demonstrated how distant North Korea-China relations had become.

Despite this general trend, China and North Korea has tried to maintain the traditionally favorable relations primarily through exchanges of party and military personnel. China's Communist Party and North Korea's Workers Party have been sending representatives to each other four times a year, while China's People's Liberation Army and North Korea's People's Army have continued mutual visits and personnel exchanges. Of course, such party and military exchanges are not so much substantive as symbolic in nature, but it is important to note that with these symbolic exchanges China and North Korea have tried to hold their relations despite the general trend of weakening.

China has also continued to provide North Korea with food and oil, as it is concerned very much about the North's collapse. China seems to believe that such aids could contribute not only to easing the tension on the Korean Peninsula, but also to improving inter-Korean relations. Therefore, since the mid-nineties, China's trade with, as well as aid to, North Korea has been steadily increasing.

Recognizing the necessity to restore the bilateral relations, China and North Korea finally agreed to the visit of North Korean high level delegates to China. From June 3rd to 7th, North Korean delegates led by Kim Young-nam paid a visit to Peking for talks with Chinese leaders such as Jiang Zemin, Li Peng, and Ju Rongji, and then toured around major regions including Shanghai. The visit has attracted a great deal of interests with respect to its impacts on the restructuring of Northeast Asian order, North Korea's internal changes, and the improvement of inter-Korean relations.

In this vein, this paper deals primarily with three questions. First, what implications do China and North Korea's efforts to restore the bilateral relations have for the restructuring of Northeast Asian order? Second, considering North Korea's extreme economic difficulties, would the country take this opportunity and adopt the Chinese-style opening policy? Third, what implications do the expected improvements in North Korea-China relations have on the Korean peninsula?

Restructuring of Northeast Asian Order and North Korea-China Relations

China-U.S. relations are worsening rapidly, since the incident of U.S. bombing of Chinese embassy in Cosovo. The question that draws a lot of interests at this time is whether China will ask North Korea to take anti-U.S. policies, fully knowing that the North has been trying to improve its relations with the U.S. as a means for regime survival.

With the strengthening of Jiang Zemin's domestic political power base, China is now attempting to form an equal partnership with the U.S., thus replacing Russia as the other superpower checking the U.S. hegemony. Despite such intention, China-U.S. relations began to be worsened when the U.S. raised the possibility of China's spreading of nuclear technologies in the "Cox Report." China denied the charge steadfastly, and criticized the U.S. by pointing out that the U.S. possessed more than 6,000 tactical nuclear heads while China had only 24.

As to the Cosovo matter, China's position was to oppose NATO's attack on Yugoslavia. When the Chinese embassy was bombed by NATO forces, Chinese people raged and demonstrated, expressing their anti-U.S. feelings. The U.S. admitted the mistake, emphasizing that it had been merely an unintended incident. With the U.S. formally apologizing, this matter was resolved without further fusses.

From the viewpoint of North Korea, the country seeks to counter possible U.S. pressures by utilizing China's intent to check the U.S. hegemony. Recognizing that it could be the next Yugoslavia,

North Korea would like to have China's help in countering potent threats from the U.S. It was in this vein that North Korea criticized the "Cox Report," pointing out that the U.S. with the greatest number of nuclear weapons was also posing the gravest threat of a nuclear war.

Then, will China ask North Korea to join in opposing the U.S. hegemony? It is important to note here that China is now taking global issues and regional issues separately. On global issue, China is attempting to check the U.S. hegemony, but on regional issues such as the stability of Northeast Asia, China is likely to maintain its old position of supporting the idea of North Korea improving its relations with the U.S. and Japan.

The Restoration of North Korea-China Relations and North Korea's Domestic Policies

The visit of North Korean delegates led by Kim Young-nam to China was the first visit abroad since North Korea's amending of its constitution and restructuring of its power structure in September 1998. Kim Jong-il, the de facto leader of North Korea, is known to be not so enthusiastic about meeting foreign leaders. With Kim Young-nam, the President of the Supreme People's Congress, being selected as the leader of delegates, many other high level officials were included in the delegation.

According to the amended constitution of North Korea, Kim Young-nam, as the President of the Supreme People's Congress, was entitled to represent the country abroad. It is intriguing, however, that the North Korean delegation was invited and received by the National People's Congress of China, and that Kim Young-nam was not treated in China as the head of the State. While Kim Jong-il, as the de facto leader, will continue to exercise his control on both domestic and international matters, most official activities on international matters are likely to be led by Kim Young-nam, the constitutional head of the state.

North Korean leadership has been impressed by China's successful economic development through reform and opening. It also feels that North Korea has no alternatives other than external open-

ing in order to overcome the country's severe economic difficulties. The only caveat is that the North Korean leadership is much more worried than the Chinese leadership about the possibility that the residents's exposure to outside world might lead to a collapse of the regime. As it seeks to take only the fruits of reform and opening (i.e., economic development) while preventing the spread of capitalist spirits, North Korea cannot simply copy the Chinese-style reform and opening.

Therefore, North Korea has been negative on the Chinese-style reform and opening. During the visit, however, North Korea changed its position. In talks with Li Peng, Kim Young-nam and other delegates expressed a full support for China's reform and opening by stating that North Korea respected the choice made by Chinese party and people. Then, does it mean that the North Korean leadership is willing to take the Chinese-style opening policy from now on?

Such an optimistic prediction would be premature considering the followings; the North Korean delegation did not pay a visit to Pudong special economic zone while staying in Shanghai area, the number of economic specialists within the delegation was rather small, and there was no schedule during the visit for economic activities. While praising the remarkable economic success of China, North Korea is likely to maintain its own North Korean style economic policy, which focuses on gradual economic development and the maintenance of Kim Jong-il regime. Therefore, the two countries are showing support for each other's peculiar approaches to the construction of socialism. In particular, China has been praising North Korea's efforts in such economic sectors as coal, steel, and agriculture.

In dire need of economic resources from abroad, North Korea must have tapped, during the visit, the possibility of securing long-term economic cooperation and aids from China. Prior to the visit, working level officials from the two countries negotiated on how to deal with North Korea's debt to China, amounting to 3.8 billion dollars. As they agreed to a partial repayment, one could say that China was willing to lessen North Korea's economic burden.

When Kim Dae-jung visited China in November 1998, China

and South Korea agreed to establish a cooperative partnership for the 21st century between them. The high level North Korean delegation's visit to China in June 1999 signified that China sought to balance its "same-distance" diplomacy by restoring its weakening relations with North Korea. In return for China's favorable move, North Korea will show support for China's reform and opening, while not giving up its own strategies for the construction of socialism. One can expect, however, to see some positive effects from the restoration of North Korea-China relations. The continuance and expansion of economic exchanges and cooperation between the two countries may exert constructive impacts on North Korea's reform and opening.

North-South Korean Relations and Neighboring Countries' Roles

What are the implications of the improvement in North Korea-China relations for the Korean peninsula in relation to the restructuring of Northeast Asian order. Since the normalization of their relations in the seventies, China-U.S. relations have been swinging back and forth from "conflict" to "reconciliation." In recent years, China has been attempting to improve its relations with Russia and North Korea, as there arise necessities to respond jointly to the increase of the U.S. hegemonic influence. Russia also feels the need to improve the relations with China and North Korea, in order to check the U.S.'s increasing influence and to restore its past influence in the region.

Since the death of Kim Il-sung, North Korea has been isolated diplomatically. In order to escape from the isolation, North Korea is expected to utilize the recent high level visit to China as the momentum for increasing its diplomatic activities in general. Meetings with Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ivanov, and with Murayama Domiichi and other members of Japan's Social Democratic Party will be signals for North Korea's increased aggressiveness in its future foreign policy. In addition, the country seems to be putting greater efforts in strengthening its cooperative relations with China and Russia, as there arises a need for common

responses by former socialist countries to the possibility of U.S. hegemony in the region.

These changes in North Korea's foreign policy may be understood as a strategical move designed to facilitate negotiations with the U.S.. The country might be thinking that improvements in its relations with the U.S. would be critical to the maintenance of the current regime. Therefore, North Korea's strengthening of its relations with China might be reflecting the leadership's strong will to have a greater leeway in responding to the package deal that was prepared jointly by South Korea, the U.S. and Japan, and was presented to the North by Mr. Perry of the U.S. during his recent trip to the country.

It must be noted, however, that a conflictual situation between China and the U.S. does not serve the interests of the U.S., which seeks to be the sole superpower in the coming 21st century. In particular, the U.S. cannot resolve various security problems in Northeast Asian region, without China's implicit consent. Moreover, the close economic interactions between the two countries will not tolerate the continuance of a crack in China-U.S. relations.

Under such circumstances, North Korea will join China in making efforts to establish a new international political and economic order based on the principle of a multi-polar international system. In this vein, North Korea will support China's criticism of NATO's military action in Yugoslavia, and the bombing of the Chinese embassy. However, North Korea will not show overly sensitive responses to the worsening of China-U.S. relations. Taking improvements in its relations with the U.S. as a critical factor for the maintenance of the current regime, North Korea will show very careful responses.

North Korea once pursued a strategy of utilizing the Sino-Soviet conflict for the maximization of its national interests. If the conflict between China and the U.S. gets intensified, the country might be tempted to adopt the same strategy, thus utilizing its brinkmanship diplomacy in its dealings with the U.S. In this case, it will have negative effects on the inter-Korean relations. If China and the U.S. maintain their cooperation in the region, thus con-

tributing to the stability of the Korean peninsula, the inter-Korean relations are also likely to be improved with increasing exchanges and cooperation.

Concluding Remarks

It is hoped that the coming 21st century will bring the new era of peace to the Korean peninsula. For that hope to be realized, North Korea's changes through reform and opening are needed. In that respect, the improvements in North Korea-China relations following Kim Young-nam's visit to China will have significant implications for the restructuring of order in Northeast Asia, North Korea's internal changes, and the future of inter-Korean relations.

First, China is likely to continue to support North Korea's efforts to improve its relations with the U.S. and Japan. Despite some conflicts between China and the U.S. on global matters, China seems to need the U.S. cooperation for the stability of Northeast Asian region. Kim Young-nam's visit to China, therefore, will have the effect of restoring the confidence between North Korea and China without negatively affecting the relations between North Korea and the U.S.

Second, the North Korean leadership, although it acknowledges the need for economic development through reform and opening, is not likely to copy the Chinese-style reform and development. Rather, the leadership is more likely to maintain its own style of economic development, as its foremost concern is with how to secure the current regime led by Kim Jong-il. Therefore, China and North Korea are likely to support each other for going its own way in constructing a socialist society.

Third, the future developments of China-U.S. relations will have significant effects on North Korea's foreign policies, and thus on inter-Korean relations. If the conflicts between China and the U.S. get intensified, North Korea might be tempted to use the brinkmanship diplomacy for the maximization of national interests in its dealings with the U.S., thus freezing the relations between the two Koreas. On the other hand, if China and the U.S. could maintain cooperation for peace and stability on the Korean peninsula,

the North-South Korea relations will be improved. Fortunately, the chance for the second scenario seems to be higher than that for the first one.

All things considered, South Korea does not need to respond to the restoration of North Korea-China relations with too much sensitivity. It is tempting to conclude from the recent developments that China is getting closer to Russia and North Korea in order to match the tripartite alliance formed by the U.S., Japan, and South Korea. It is highly unlikely, however, that China wants to create a new purely conflictual situation in Northeast Asian region. The restoration of China's influence over North Korea is more likely to contribute to the disintegration, in the coming 21st century, of the Korean peninsula's cold-war structure by inducing North Korea's changes through reform and opening. ■■■