Breakdown in China-North Korea Relations: Caused Not by the Third Nuclear Test but by Failed Economic Cooperation

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Abstract

Many have argued that the Sino-North Korean relationship deteriorated due to the latter’s defiant act of not giving face to the former by conducting a series of nuclear tests and China’s continuous embrace of successive UN resolutions against the North, not to mention China adopting its own sanctions measures. However, this article argues that the rift already had begun when the negotiations on Rason, Hwanggumphyong, and Wihwa Islands broke down in August 2012. The reasons for the breakdown are still speculative at best, though presumably China’s depletion of patience against North Korea’s lackluster attitude at the negotiations was a factor. This article analyzes how it came to an end. It is significant and well worth study in the following meaningful ways. First, it explains the flexibility that gave China to not only adopt UN resolutions against North Korea but also its own individual sanctions in 2013. Second, it also allows us to see clearly how China’s distrust of North Korea began to take place. China’s distrust of the North was cemented by the incident and perhaps permeated into the perception of China’s fifth generation. Third, the end of the negotiations deprived China’s new leaders a chance to engage with its counterpart. The past records refute the absence of engagement at the summit, i.e., Kim’s seven summits with his Chinese counterparts from 2000 to 2011. However, China’s distrust of North Korea was enhanced by its sense of deception that Pyongyang was not interested in economic liberalization but only money. Against this background, the article will address how the high hopes that Beijing had for Pyongyang plummeted to distrust and disrespect, driving a wedge between the two to the point of no return.

Key Words: Rason special economic zone, Hwanggumphyong and Wihwa Islands, Joint Guidance Committee, Two Areas (Two Special Economic Zones), China-North Korea relations

I. Introduction

There is a growing consensus that the Sino-North Korean relationship is no longer as “special” as it used to be, the relationship that was guided and shielded by the armor of the all mighty ruling parties of the respective countries in the context of so-called “party-to-party” relations.1) Pundits have attributed the break-up to China’s depletion of tolerance with North Korea’s continuous reckless and defiant provocative behavior driven by its nuclear ambition.2) The deterioration in the bilateral relationship was apparent in 2012 when the spokesperson of the Chinese Foreign Ministry stated that the relationship was a “normal state to state” one.3) It was further manifested by China’s adoption of its own sanctions and public directives to related agents to uphold the punitive measures in 2013. Beijing’s frustration and sense of insult was further made explicit through successive editorials following the third nuclear test in February of 2013.4) Its diplomatic efforts against Pyongyang’s nuclear ambitions were only countered by the North’s fourth nuclear test in January 2016 and other nuclear-related tests including “satellite” and missile launches.5) Invitations for a summit were extended during all this development but to no fruition.6) All this was

5) Beijing’s last warning against Pyongyang’s launch of another rocket/satellite was delivered by a nuclear envoy headed by Wu Dawei on February 2, 2016. See “China Struggles for Balance in Response to North Korea’s Boldness,” The New York Times, Feb. 7, 2016. Allegedly there was another warning from Beijing to Pyongyang on the prospective fourth nuclear test during a China’s politburo standing committee by member Liu Yunshan on October 12, 2015. “Message from China’s Leader, Xi Jinping, to North Korea May Signal Thaw,” The New York Times, Oct. 10, 2015. While these two warnings remain speculative at best, the last confirmed message of such a sort was personally delivered by Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin during his visit to North Korea February 17-20, 2014. He was quoted in Seoul as having said that China will “never allow chaos or war on the Korean peninsula.” He further went on to persuade Pyongyang to forego its plan for a fourth nuclear test, if there was, with such remarks as that the joint military exercise of US-South Korea was defensive in nature, and China adheres to denuclearization of the peninsula and opposes additional nuclear tests and missile launches. “First Visit after Jang Sung-thaek’s Execution by a Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Warns against Provocative Actions,” Dailyan, Feb. 21, 2014.
6) Supposedly there were six occasions from October 2010 To February 2014 when invitations of visit to the respective head of state were extended but met by the cold shoulder of the invited