



China's Policy Toward North Korea: A New Twist?

by Zhu Feng

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The decision by WikiLeaks to release a batch of US diplomatic cables dating between 2004 and 2010 has created a political storm. A lot of attention has been given to what the cables reveal about Chinese policy toward North Korea. It has been suggested that comments made by Chinese diplomats in the cables indicate that China is ready to “abandon North Korea” in favor of a unified Korean Peninsula under Seoul.

This has generated some surprise because it seems to run against the stated Chinese policy. Over the past months China has been criticized for failing to openly condemn North Korea for its role in the sinking of the ROK Navy corvette *Cheonan* in March and for the artillery attack it recently launched on Yeongpyeong Island. China's call for “emergency talks” between relevant parties in the aftermath of the Yeongpyeong incident has also been dismissed by the US and South Korea as merely rewarding brinkmanship. Other North Korean provocations, particularly its nuclear tests, have also led to criticism of China.

Beijing's indecision about how to deal with Pyongyang and leverage its influence are seen as reflecting China's long-standing patronage of Kim Jong-il's regime. The apparent support offered by China to North Korea is widely interpreted as reflecting China's priority on its own narrow strategic interests. The conventional wisdom is that Beijing does not want to risk losing the “buffer zone” North Korea provides between the Chinese border and US troops stationed in South Korea. China therefore acts to shore up the Kim dynasty and opposes efforts aimed at Korean reunification, particularly if on Seoul's terms.

The WikiLeak cables hint at another side to China's thinking about North Korea. China's trade with South Korea is almost 70 times greater than that with the North. It has no desire for Pyongyang to stoke a new “Cold War” or arms race in East Asia through its provocations. China worries that North Korean actions will lead to deeper defense and security cooperation among South Korea, Japan and the US. Perceptions that China “protects” North Korea could lead to the emergence of a powerful Washington-Tokyo-Seoul axis directed, not only against North Korea, but also implicitly at China. According to this evaluation of interests, China would be better leaning toward Seoul rather than Pyongyang.

The question then is why Beijing continues to show excessive tolerance to North Korea despite the obvious costs of doing so. Surveys show that the majority of Chinese dislike Kim Jong-il's regime and its hereditary power structures. Over the past 30 years, China and North Korea have taken significantly divergent paths. Despite this, China apparently

remains unwilling to risk abandoning North Korea even as it continues to act in an unhelpful way.

Much of the answer lies in historical ties between the two states and the binding created by now otherwise obsolete ideologies. Despite apparent shifts toward a more “normal” relationship with North Korea, Chinese policy remains mired in the rhetoric of comradeship and morbid reminiscence. The latest evidence of this tendency occurred when Chinese Vice-President Xi Jinping recently repeated the old formulation that the Korean War was a “great and just war for safeguarding peace and resisting aggression.” There is sympathy toward the North because of its status as an isolated and weak state surrounded by more powerful countries. It appeals to the Chinese tradition of sympathizing with the weak while standing up to the strong.

So although there is no doubt that North Korea's repeated provocations have dismayed Chinese officials – even those more sympathetic to North Korea recognize that Pyongyang's choices have had negative consequences for China – this has not provoked serious thinking about policy options. The complexity of Chinese perceptions of North Korea and the constraints imposed by a growing foreign policy bureaucracy mean Beijing is reluctant – or possibly unable – to overhaul its policy toward North Korea. So even in the event of crises like the shelling of Yeongpyeong Island, a period of agitation ultimately gives way to traditional policies.

As a result, Chinese policy has come to be defined by inertia rather than an accurate evaluation of China's national interests. This is not to say that Beijing's policy toward North Korea will never change, but to point out that the Chinese leadership is struggling to find a way out of its psychological ambivalence. This will likely remain the case for the foreseeable future, despite speculation caused by the information contained in the US cables released by Wikileaks.

There are signs that Chinese thinking toward North Korea is becoming increasingly pluralistic. But the North Korean question remains the single most divisive foreign policy issue in China. There are powerful reasons why China shouldn't “abandon” North Korea; historical ties, geographical proximity, fears of a refugee influx, and uncertainty surrounding the security implications of sudden regime collapse all make China's calculations vis-à-vis North Korea very complex. Many of China's fears and concerns, however, could be addressed through international collaboration. The question is whether China is willing to confront that possibility.