

## North Korea's Third Nuclear Test and the Possibility of Change in China's Policy towards North Korea

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Despite strong condemnation by the international community, North Korea has conducted its third nuclear test. Many states, including the member states of the six-party talks, are individually pursuing sanctions against North Korea. As a response to such measures, North Korea has publicly avowed an additional nuclear test, as well as a missile launch, further increasing tensions on the Korean Peninsula. North Korea's military provocation has been strategically timed, so that it can influence the state of affairs in Northeast Asia towards its own benefit, while the major countries of the region are undergoing changes in leadership. It is increasingly said that a stronger response centered on South Korea, U.S., and Japan, is needed to avoid being caught in North Korea's strategy. In such context, the policy choice of China has been the focus of attention. Some say that, with North Korea's third nuclear test, China's policy towards the North will hopefully change. Others say that due to its structural constraints, China's policy is unlikely to change and that China's response to North Korea's third nuclear test will not be much different from that of the past. In this regard, this paper attempts to answer the following question - will China's policy towards North Korea change as a result of North Korea third nuclear test?

### Signs of Change

There are some signs of change in China's policy towards North Korea. In January 2013, China agreed to United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 2087, which involves applying sanctions against North

Korea for its long-range rocket launch. Until now, China defended North Korea's position on its rocket launches - that North Korea has a right "to use outer space for peaceful purposes." Furthermore, in April 2012, shortly after North Korea's failed rocket launch, China proposed a UN presidential statement as an alternative to imposing sanctions. Considering China's past behaviors, China's approval of Resolution 2087 came as a surprise. China's approval of the Resolution 2087 made North Korea's response more hostile. After the adoption of Resolution 2087, North Korea's foreign ministry ruled out the possibility of denuclearization and the six-party talks, as well as hinting a third nuclear test. Furthermore, North Korea's National Defense Commission bluntly condemned China by asserting that "Even big countries, which should be focused on constructing a fair world order, have lost their minds." North Korea's hostile reaction tarnished China's reputation as the chair of six-party talks, and explicitly showed that the target of North Korea's military provocation is no longer limited to the U.S.

China showed a strong counter response to North Korea's reaction. The Chinese government persistently demanded that the North take a cautious action, emphasizing compliance of the 9.19 Joint Statement and the principle of denuclearizing Korean Peninsula. The foreign ministry of China summoned North Korea's ambassador to China, Ji Jae Ryong several times to put pressure on North Korea regarding its nuclear test. The Chinese foreign ministry also actively pursued policy coordination with South Korea and U.S. It could be said that there is no major change in Chinese reaction to North Korea when compared to China's reaction in the past two nuclear tests. This time, however, China showed its determination to deter North Korea's provocations: The newly appointed Communist Party General Secretary, Xi Jinping expressed China's disapproval of North Korea's abandoning of its commitment to give up nuclear weapons by asserting that 'denuclearization is a prerequisite for the stability of the Korean Peninsula,' The statement was considered especially meaningful in that it was released when South Korea's President-elect, Park Geun-hye dispatched a team of special envoys to China. The Chinese public has shown a more intense change of opinion regarding North Korea. Strong warnings that go against the traditional Sino-North Korean relationship such as 'abandonment of the traditionally amicable relations with North Korea,' 'suspension of aid to North Korea,' and the like, have been released. Furthermore, some Chinese people are demanding that the government change its policy towards North Korea. Even the People's Liberation Army participated in pressuring North Korea by publically announcing its unprecedented launching of mid-range missiles.

On February 2013, immediately after North Korea conducted its nuclear test, China released a statement opposing the test. Specifics of the statement include: 1) resolute opposition of the nuclear test; 2) denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, and maintaining peace and stability in Northeast Asia; 3) call for concerned states to remain calm with an emphasis on the six-party talks. The statement appears no different from previous statements it has made on the issue. However, some subtle changes can be found. The statement released by the Chinese foreign ministry after the second nuclear test contains the phrase, '...the problem should be solved peacefully through dialogue and negotiations,' which was changed to, 'the problem of denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula should be solved through dialogue and negotiations under the six-party talk framework.' The inclusion and emphasis on the six-party talks and denuclearization is a response to North Korea's ruling out of the six-party talks and denuclearization.

The exclusion of the term ‘peaceful’ seems to indicate that it is possible to consider means other than the six-party talks to solve the problem. Also, China’s public announcement of summoning North Korea’s ambassador to China, Ji Jae Ryong, increased expectations for changes in China’s policy towards North Korea.

## Reasons for Change

Then, why did above mentioned changes occur? First, it is because China felt the need to warn North Korea. After North Korea’s second nuclear test in 2009, China put the survival of instable North Korean regime as its foremost priority. Despite condemnation by the international community and direct friction with South Korea and the U.S., China overlooked North Korea’s irrational behavior and protected the regime. China may have reasoned that being the sole supporting state of North Korea would be an effective strategy to tame the new Kim Jong-un regime. However, China’s expectations on expanding its influence over North Korea and inducing change within North Korea have crumbled – Kim Jong-un regime repeated anachronistic military provocations, causing regional instability. Arrangements for Kim Jong-un’s visit to China were never materialized. Further, Chinese senior leaders requests upon their visits to North Korea, that the North refrain from its rocket launches, were ignored. Moreover, with North Korea only considering President Obama’s schedule and not China’s situation (i.e., conducting the nuclear test during China’s biggest national holiday, the Lunar New Year holiday), China cannot help but run out of patience with the North’s behaviors.

Second, it is because China needs room for strategic cooperation with the U.S. in Northeast Asia. After North Korea sank the Cheonan Vessel in 2010, China experienced military conflict with the U.S. around the Korean Peninsula, and with the U.S. declaration of its ‘pivot’ to Asia policy, it has maintained tension and frictional relationship in all aspects. It is most certain that the U.S. strategy towards Asia will be strengthened, and if the U.S. alliance solidarity is expanded to contain China, such a situation will not be to China’s advantage. Moreover, with the Sino-Japanese conflict still far from reaching a resolution, China needs to check the strengthening of the U.S.-Japan alliance through means such as revising the U.S.-Japan security treaty. Such things considered, China needs to minimize U.S. containment of China through strategic changes and is highly likely to pursue a long-term balance of power strategy rather than rise as a great power. The Xi Jinping leadership’s sending a message to adjust Sino-U.S. relations by announcing a new type of great power relationship can also be understood in this regard. China will enlarge its room of cooperation with the U.S. through the process and could yield to the U.S. on the Korean Peninsula problem.

Third, it is because China is reconsidering the strategic value of South Korea. With U.S. containment of China expanding and Sino-Japanese conflict protracting, China cannot help but worry about South Korea participation in U.S. containment of China - the prime example being South Korea’s participation in the U.S. missile defense (MD) system. With the U.S. continually pursuing South Korea’s participation in the MD system, China has become concerned that North Korea’s military provocations could speed up U.S.’ plans to construct the MD system. In other words, China has more reasons to appeal

to South Korea within the security aspect. In addition, with the U.S. making it clear that it will expand not only Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) but also the Transatlantic Free Trade Area (TAFTA), the U.S. is likely to step up its efforts to contain China in the economic realm. For China to respond to such containment, trajectory of its main economic partners in Northeast Asia region such as Korea and Japan will become more important. With the Sino-Japanese conflict worsening, South Korea's strategic importance to China is increasing. Therefore, as China has experienced deterioration worsening of Sino-South Korea relations due to the North Korea, China may realize the importance of considering South Korea's position when implementing its policy towards North Korea. China's change of attitude (i.e., informing South Korea about North Korea's notification of its nuclear test to China) could be understood in this context.

Lastly, it is because of the change of Chinese public opinion. The Chinese society is going through diversification, and the influence of public opinion is growing. Since the start of the Xi Jinping leadership, debates on democratization have ignited with protests that directly pressure the central government's policies increasing. Especially because the new Chinese leadership put public welfare and anti-corruption as its foremost priority, the Xi Jinping government is in a position where it simply cannot but ignore public opinion. An example that shows this change within Chinese society, with regards to the North Korean nuclear issue, is the sensitive response of the Chinese citizens on outflow of nuclear radiation. The Chinese press dealt with the environment problem after the nuclear test, and the Chinese government tried to alleviate the citizens' concerns by dispatching a group of investigators to the Northeast region, announcing test results of radioactivity. Also, led by the press and intellectuals, the Chinese citizens are demanding that the government change its paradigm on its North Korea policy, while sparking debates on North Korea being a 'strategic burden,' and questions of how much longer China has to put up with the menaces of North Korea. Faced with mounting domestic issues, increasing popular discontent (with regards to North Korea) cannot be beneficial for the Chinese government.

### The Possibility of Change

Will the signs of change lead to China's imposing of tough sanctions against North Korea or a change in its North Korea policy altogether? China has already agreed to approve sanctions against North Korea in the past two nuclear tests. Considering the fact that China has even agreed to impose sanctions against North Korea for its recent long-range rocket test, it can be said that China will not be opposed to additional sanctions against the North by the UN. With the Resolution 2087 clearly stating that any additional rocket or nuclear tests by the North will be met with serious consequences, it is almost certain that the recent nuclear test will be met with tougher sanctions compared to the past two cases. As such, China will feel the need to make efforts to cooperate with the international community. However, China's active participation in sanctions led by South Korea and U.S., or imposing a unilateral sanction that pressures North Korea, seems unlikely. China remains North Korea's largest donor of food and crude oil, to the extent that it can decide the fate of the North Korean regime. In the past incidents of North Korea's nuclear crisis, China has put pressure on North Korea by restricting access to oil pipelines to North Korea. However, through the past experiences, China has learned that the more China pressures

North Korea, the more North Korea will resist. With North Korea having announced additional provocations, denuclearization will not be put before peace and stability of the Korean Peninsula on China's priority list regarding its diplomatic policy. In the past, China has showed strong condemnation and opposed North Korea's nuclear test. However, China eventually mended its relationship with the North and resumed economic aid to North Korea.

Most importantly, North Korea is still an important strategic asset for China as well as being a buffer zone. The Northeast Asian security environment that China is facing (or is faced with) has deteriorated compared to the past, and it is certainly not favorable to China. As China's desire to rise as a great power is becoming realized, the efforts by the U.S. and other neighboring states to contain its rise is also increasing. In this regard, the traditionally held strategic value of North Korea is still valid to China. Given this, North Korea is continuing its destabilizing provocations with the firm belief that China will never give up North Korea. The mainstream perspective in China is that the growing tension on the Korean Peninsula due to the military provocations of North Korea, will ultimately lead to the construction of the U.S. MD system in the Northeast Asia region. In other words, the Chinese are concerned about the strengthening of U.S.' containment of China. The Chinese perceive that if China participates in the international community's sanctioning against North Korea, North Korea will become more instable, which would lead to a repetition of additional military provocations, which could then result in the expansion of U.S.' involvement in the region, ultimately harming China's national interest. China's persistent emphasis on the "prevention of repeated worsening of state of affairs" and calls for "calm and restraint for concerned states" despite its condemnations of North Korea's nuclear test, could be understood in this context. Recent news on China also makes one to predict that China will not actively participate in imposing the South Korea and U.S.-led sanctions against North Korea. Centered around the official news agencies of China, demands that call for China to readjustment its speed of policy change such as 'China needs to be prudent in imposing sanctions against North Korea,' 'North Korea should not be considered as an enemy,' 'the U.S. is responsible for North Korea's provocations,' are being promoted.

However, it cannot be concluded that there is no possibility of change in China's policy towards North Korea. China's amicable approach towards North Korea after the second nuclear test was based on its judgment that a crisis, such as the health problems of Kim Jong-il, could directly affect the survival of the North Korean regime. At that time, the survival of the North Korean regime was China's foremost concern in its decision-making process. However, the current state of affairs is different from that after the second nuclear test. If China believes that the problem of North Korean regime instability has been solved to a certain extent, then the stability of the Korean Peninsula could be considered before the survival of the North Korean regime. With the growing possibility of North Korea conducting an additional nuclear test, China is increasingly becoming tired of North Korea's military provocations, as it also has to deal with its disgruntled citizens. Due to aforementioned reasons, China is seriously considering new solutions to solve the North Korea problem. Chinese scholars assert that China should move beyond its passive diplomacy policy, by strategically pursuing a new way of diplomatic thinking, including an active construction of new rules. If China's circumspection on a new way of thinking and

a new strategy continues, then it is possible that China will craft a policy that can manage North Korea without threatening the survival of the North Korean regime. Although China opted for soft-line policy until now, it may choose to put unofficial pressure on North Korea from now on, using a mix of soft-line and hard-line policies. Obtaining room for strategic cooperation with the U.S. regarding the North Korea problem is also important for China. China needs to adjust its speed of cooperation with the international community and to seek ways to cooperate with the U.S., while working to contain the perception of a ‘China threat’ among its neighboring states. Although China’s main framework for its policy towards North Korea is unlikely to change, there is still a possibility that it may change in accordance with changes in the state of affairs - especially the attitude of North Korea. © KINU 2013

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