The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Security Woes Drive China's Pivot to Pyongyang

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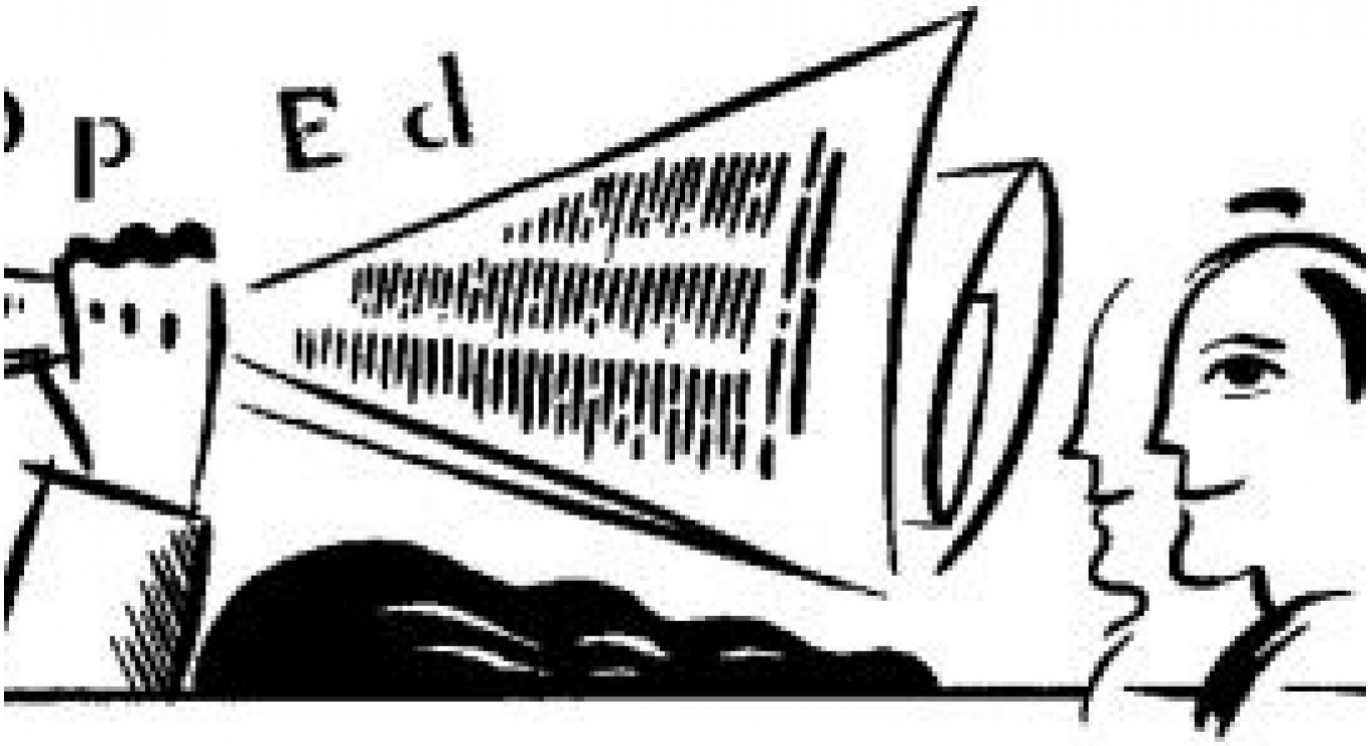
July 08, 2013



After a spring of heightened tension on the Korean Peninsula, a flurry of diplomatic activity in recent weeks has brought some hope of a meeting of the minds, at least between China, South Korea and the U.S. But the emergence of a viable consensus on how to minimize the security risks emanating from North Korea's mercurial leadership remains to be found.

After a reportedly tough meeting between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Vice Marshall Choe Ryong-hae, one of the four members of North Korea's ruling presidium, the U.S.-China summit in California took place with North Korea as one of the central points of discussion. This was quickly followed by a Beijing summit between Xi and South Korean President Park Geun-hye. The fact that Xi participated in all three meetings underscores two truths: China's policy toward North Korea is the key to a solution to the problems posed by North Korea, and China may be actively searching for a new approach to its wayward ally.

China's interest in a new North Korea policy is not entirely new. After all, China's policy toward the country has been gradually moving in a more constructive direction for the past

two decades, reflecting China's growing international prominence, as well as its leaders' cautious embrace of the global role that their country's new economic might has provided.

In the immediate post-Cold War period, China cooperated with other concerned parties in the process of resolving the first North Korea nuclear crisis of 1993-94. But it tended to regard the North's nuclear ambitions mainly as a bilateral issue between North Korea and the United States. U.S. President Bill Clinton seemed to agree and adopted a bilateral approach to the nuclear crisis, which resulted in the two countries' Agreed Framework of 1994.

But China upgraded its role in the 2000s. After North Korea's enriched uranium program triggered another crisis in late 2002, U.S. President George W. Bush wanted to mobilize China's influence in a more systematic way. But China's leaders balked, circumscribing their role severely. Though Chinese leaders became more active by hosting the six-party talks, they still regarded their role as that of a mediator between the U.S. and North Korea, rather than that of a party whose security interests were seriously affected by events on the Korean Peninsula.

Immediately after the North Korea's second nuclear test in 2009, Chinese officials undertook a review of their country's North Korea policy and decided to separate the nuclear issue from the overall bilateral relationship. Thus, former Prime Minister Wen Jiabao visited Pyongyang in October 2009 and promised generous economic aid. Chinese leaders may have believed that inducing North Korea to adopt the Chinese model of economic opening would create a better political environment for denuclearization.

One result was a deepening of North Korea's economic dependence on China. But the big problem was that North Korea's leadership apparently interpreted China's policy as a sign of unwillingness to pressure Pyongyang on nuclear matters. Indeed, North Korean behavior became much more provocative, including an attack in 2010 that sank the South Korean corvette Cheonan and another in which South Korea's Yeonpyeong Island was shelled.

Following this spring's round of North Korean provocations, Xi appears to have concluded that enough is enough. As a result, China's North Korea policy has entered a new stage.

Xi's criticism of North Korea's nuclear ambitions has become both unusually public and blunt. Chinese leaders may still view North Korea as a strategic buffer state, but China's status as a global power is pushing them to view North Korea in a new way. Former State Councilor Tang Jiaxuan was even reported to have said recently that denuclearization is now a higher priority for China than stabilization of the Korean Peninsula.

This approach should favor China's global strategy, which is premised upon Xi's desire to build a new type of "major power" relationship between China and the U.S. (The Chinese government prefers "major power" to "great power," probably to highlight its stated renunciation of hegemonic ambition.) Indeed, among the myriad unresolved issues dividing the U.S. and China, North Korea's nuclear program is the one most likely to impede mutual trust.

If the U.S. and China are to avoid being steered by North Korea onto a collision course, they probably have four or five years to pursue a joint strategy, a timetable established by the point at which North Korea could have the technology to load miniaturized nuclear warheads atop

long-range missiles.

As Pyongyang approaches this point, Washington will have to strengthen its missile defenses in the western Pacific — areas close to China — to deter the North Korean threat. The result, invariably, will be heightened U.S.-Chinese tension.

China has no interest in such an outcome. The long-term costs of a worsening security confrontation with the U.S. would exceed the short-term tactical benefits to be derived from continuing to support North Korea as a buffer state, especially given China's deepening relationship with South Korea. Though Park's visit to Beijing has not closed the gap between the Chinese and South Korean approaches to the North Korean nuclear issue, it does seem to have prepared the ground for closer coordination between the two governments.

Those improved ties matter because the time has come for China to rebalance its traditional geostrategic interests with its role as a global leader. That calls for a Chinese policy of disciplined engagement toward North Korea, without which an internationally coordinated solution to the nuclear problem — and, with it, the promise of more productive relations with the U.S. and South Korea — will be impossible.

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