**The Current Sino-DPRK Relations**

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From North Korea’s third nuclear test, China’s relations with the DPRK have experienced some tangible changes, which may fundamentally change the geopolitical landscape in Northeast Asia. Some observations are in order.

(1) Since Li Yuanchao’s visit to North Korea last July, high-level visit between the two nations comes to a halt;

(2) Mass media coverage of the Sino-DPRK relations drops in a tangible way;

(3) Economic interactions lost its momentum.

All the signs mentioned above indicate that the Sino-DPRK relationship is cooling off, but it is too early to announce that the relationship is undertaking substantive change in its very nature for a number of reasons:

(1) The two-way trade between the two nations still grows, ever though at much slow pace, North Korea is not in a position to break its economic ties with China;

(2) The two nations have not gone public with their disagreements;

(3) Leaders from both nations still publically call for strengthening bilateral friendship; in other words, both nations are not ready to abandon each other;

(4) The geopolitical landscape has not changed in a way that both nations feel comfortable.

**The Impact of Xi Jinping’s Visit to South Korea on Sino-DPRK relations**

Xi’s visit to Seoul carries some impacts on Sino-DPRK relations:

(1)placing South Korea ahead of North Korea in Xi’s visit reflects China’s effort to normalize its relations with North Korea;

(2) Even though China did not agree to finger point North Korea in a joint statement with Preside Park with regard to nuclear issue, the frequent and institutionalized visits between China and North Korea’s top leaders constitute pressure to North Korea, whose young top leader has not met Xi so far.

(3) Xi’s visit further strengthened China-South Korean relations, and in turn make North Korea in a more difficult position to rebuild its weakened ties with China.

(4) Xi’s visit helped China to generate added leverage over North Korea, which might be pushed to think about its top leader’s visit to China or to seek out a way out by cultivating relations with Japan, or South Korea and/or the US in the future.

**China Three Top Leaders’ Congratulatory Messages to their North Korea Counterparts for 66th National Day**

On Sept. 9, Xi Jinping, Zhang Dejiang and Yu Zhengsheng sent their congratulatory messages to their Korean counterparts for North Korea’s 66th National Day.

(1) The move was extraordinary for two reasons: (A) The Sino-DPRK is in a bad shape, the Chinese mass media stopped reporting Chinese leaders’congratulatory message to North Korea for its national day since 2008 when Hu Jintao, Wu Bangguoand Wen Jiabo sent their congratulatory message to their Korean counterparts on the occasion of the 60th National day of the DPRK; Business as usual, the Chinese media did not report the message issue, even though North Korea’s did so. The Chinese leaders seemingly tried to make a symbolic posture of goodwill to North Korea. (B) In comparison with the 2008 congratulatory, this year’s message changes in the following two aspects, which deserve special attention:

* For the first time, the message ostensibly left out top leaders’ individual names and attributed the accomplishments of the Socialist revolution and construction cause to the Korean People and WPK. The omission demonstrated that the Chinese leaders do not support the cult of personality that has been taking place in North Korea or are reluctant to put Kim Ii Sung, Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un together.
* The message dropped sixteen-character guideline (继承传统、面向未来、睦邻友好、加强合作) that has served the foundation of China’s policy toward North Korea during Hu Jintao era.This omission reveals that the Chinese leaders keenly know that the friend tradition has not inherited in a good fashion and cooperation between the two nations has not been really delivered, and the future of Sino-DPRK relations is uncertain.

(3) The changes constitute one step forward for China to normalize its relations with the DPRK. The Chinese leaders’ messages are clear,changes of the messages are significant. Kim Jong Un might not be very happy about it. The changed messages inevitably bring extra pressure to North Korea’s young top leaders.

**Future of the Sino-DPRK relations**

The ball now is in North Korea’s court. Kim Jong Un needs to think hard how to make a prudent calculation of benefits and costs in his relations with China. Kim has only few bargaining chips in his hand. Mishandling of North Korea’s relations with China may bring a catastrophe to its future rule in that country.