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Despite North Korea's Nuclear Test, China Maintained Close Ties with It

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Adopted on June 12, 2009, the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1874 has imposed further sanctions on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (the DPRK or North Korea), for it conducted a second nuclear test. However, China has attempted to maintain close ties with North Korea even after then. This indicates that China's regional strategy depends on the current North Korean regime as an ally.

When the above resolution was adopted, a Chinese representative insisted that the sanctions should not impact "the country's development." However, contrary to China's assertion, the exceptions of the sanctions in the original text are development aid "directly addressing the needs of the civilian population, or the promotion of denuclearization." [1] The gist of this exception refers to continuing support for the people rather than "the country," which inevitably means the Kim Jong-il regime. China, following its approach, which places high priority to supporting "the country," agreed to strengthen cooperation with North Korea in the spheres of economy and trade, for example, the construction of a new highway bridge over the Yalu River. It was announced during the visit of Premier Wen Jiabao to the DPRK from October 4 to 6, 2009[2] With regard to such support, on October 10, Premier Wen explained that Chinese development aid for North Korea was consistent with the resolution 1874, because its aims were denuclearization and the resumption of the Six Party Talks.[3] Thus, it can be said that the phrase "the promotion of denuclearization" provided a legal basis for China to define "the country's development" as an exception to the sanctions.

In fact, the approach of promoting the North Korean denuclearization through economic assistance is significantly different from the sanctions. What led China to provide economic support to the DPRK, bearing the risk of facing criticism for not adhering to the resolution? At that time, it was clear that economic aid from China was not very critical for North Korea to return to the Six Party Talks; before the agreements, North Korea already had expressed the possibility to resume dialogues about the nuclear issue.[4] In addition, North Korea has insisted that Korean nuclear issue involves its relations with the US rather than the other countries.[5] Thus, China would not consider its support for North Korea as a necessary condition for resuming the Six Party Talks. Indeed, even in its position

expressed at the time of the agreements, North Korea claimed that it would return to the Talks, depending on the outcome of the US-North Korean dialogues.[6] On the other hand, the above assistance does not reflect China's concern over the influx of refugees from a collapsed North Korea because it is not realistic to predict that North Korea would disintegrate without the economic aid agreements at that time. This means that China could have agreed to provide support to North Korea at a more appropriate time later on.

Thus, the most persuasive explanation for China's support for "the country" would be that China intends to maintain close ties with the North Korean government. If so, China's Northeast Asian policy assumes an alignment with the existing North Korean regime rather than with a significantly reformed one or one involving a unified Korea. This is because the support was for the current leadership, which has never accepted any competitor in its domestic politics. If Chinese strategy includes an alignment with North Korea, questions on Korean security, which have been almost entirely focused on the issues directly concerning the two Koreas, would be trapped in the broader regional security politics led by the US and China. Indeed, with regard to the security issues beyond the Korean peninsula, China already hinted at its intention at the Six Party Talks. On May 27, 2008, a spokesperson for the Chinese Foreign Ministry stated that the US-South Korea alliance was "something leftover of the history," citing "the establishment of Northeast Asia Security Mechanism" as part of the agenda of the Talks.[7] For China, the progress of the Six Party Talks regarding the multi-lateral Security Mechanism could undermine the relevance of the Northeast Asian alliances, which sustain US military presence in the region, even though critical questions would remain, for example, the stable co-existence between the two sides in the Taiwan strait. This clearly exhibits that, unlike in the past decades after the Cold War, the Korean issues involve not only the North Korean nuclear issue or the North-South confrontation, but also greater power competitions in the region beyond the peninsula. In China's policy on Korea intending to manage US commitments to Northeast Asia, the DPRK needs to be a Chinese ally to hedge the possible regional role of the US-South Korea alliance.

As opposed to the gist of the resolution, China intended to provide support to North Korea for not only its people but also for its regime. Given that China considers questions of Korean security as issues to manage the Northeast Asian alliances, the development assistance indicates that the existing North Korean government is a critical Chinese ally against the US presence in the peninsula. If this is the case, China will have to maintain its close ties with the current North Korean regime, which has led to unnecessary tensions even for itself.

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[1] Article 19 of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1874 and the remarks of Chinese

representative in the following text. The United Nations Security Council, *Security Council, Acting Unanimously, Condemns in Strongest Terms Democratic People's Republic of Korea Nuclear Test, Toughens Sanctions*, SC/9679, June 12, 2009.

[2] Yi Gaochao, "Wen's DPRK visit rich in content, weighty in outcome: Chinese FM," *Xinhua News Agency*, October 10, 2009.

[3] Japan, Cabinet Secretariat, "Nicchuukan Kyoudoukishakaiken (Joint Press Conference by Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama of Japan, Premier Wen Jiabao of the People's Republic of China and President Lee Myung-bak of the Republic of Korea following the Second Japan-China-ROK Trilateral Summit Meeting), " October 10, 2009, http://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/hatoyama/statement/200910/10JCKkyoudou.html. The English translation of this document is at the following address. http://www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/hatoyama/statement/200910/10JCKkyoudou_e.html.

[4] "Yuen Jujae Chosunsangimdaepyo Anpori Uijangegae Pyongchi (DPRK Permanent Representative Sends Letter to President of the United Nations Security Council) ," *The Korean Central News Agency*, September 4, 2009.

[5] For example, "Haekmunjae Haekyore Pekaemuikhan 'Jean'—'Ilkwar Dakyoran' (KCNA Dismisses S. Korean Chief Executive's 'Proposal' as Rubbish)," *The Korean Central News Agency*, September 30, 2009.

[6] "Kim Jong Il Chongpiso Onkapo Chongriwa Chopkyon (Kim Jong Il Visits Wen Jiabao at State Guest House)," *The Korean Central News Agency*, October 5, 2009.

[7] China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Qin Gang's Regular Press Conference on May 27, 2008, " http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw/s2510/2511/t441519.htm.

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