

China between the Two Koreas

Session: Session 4
Date/Time: April 27, 2015 / 13:30-15:00
Moderator: Jane Perlez, The New York Times
Speakers: Cheng Xiaohe, Renmin University of China
Bonnie Glaser, Center for Strategic and int'l Studies
Shin Jung-seung, Dongseo University
Wang Dong, Peking University

Session Sketch

After President Park Geun Hye attended the 2015 Victory Day military parade in Beijing, many viewed it as a shift of Beijing's policy towards the two Koreas. While the relations between China and South Korea have improved due to increasing economic and cultural ties, relations between China and North Korea have been strained with the new regime led by the young leader. In addition, China has been cooperating with the international community in imposing the UN sanctions 2270. Does this constitute a fundamental change in China's policy towards the two Koreas or is it merely a strategic move to expand its influence in the region?

Professor Cheng Xiaohe from Renmin University of China begins by stating that throughout history, China's foreign policy towards the two Koreas has been a challenge. Although maintaining good relations with both Koreas is highly desirable, China has been swinging between the two amid confrontations. Sino-North Korean relations has been strained in recent years due to North Korea's continuous pursuit of nuclear weapons. Sino-South Korean relations have relatively improved as leaders between the two countries build good personal relationships. However, the relationship still remains uncertain and would depend on several factors including the deployment of THAAD and how the North Korean nuclear program evolves.

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Asan Plenum 2016 Session Sketch

Ms. Bonnie Glaser, chair in China Studies at the Center for Strategic and Int'l studies, mentions that there have been changes in foreign policy towards the two Koreas. However, China will remain cooperative with the international community to the extent that the UN sanctions or other measures do not cause instability. She adds that although China is between two Koreas it has made a clear choice. China has increasingly been viewing North Korea as a liability rather than an asset. Imposing new sanctions illustrate a great deal of frustration of China with North Korea. China would like to see North Korea make fundamental changes in its national strategy but its policy of stability as a precondition has not and will not change.

Professor Shin Jung-seung of Donseo University explains that South Korea and China have shown some kind of trust. However, the relations between the two countries should not be exaggerated. The improvement in ties seems to be based primarily on interests rather than affinity. If the two have observed any changes in policy, it is a technical one confined to the nuclear issue. China continues to maintain its policy towards North Korea and he is not yet confident that China will fully implement the sanctions of resolution 2270.

Responding to the criticism of China's enforcement of sanctions, Professor Wang Dong from Peking University says that China has two intertwined goals: denuclearization and stability. These goals have featured consistently in China's policy and China has been strictly enforcing sanctions. However, disagreements exist because China views the collapse of North Korea differently from its U.S. and South Korean counterparts. In his view, South Korea and the U.S. seem to underestimate the negative consequences of collapse whereas China takes a more cautious approach to collapse.

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