

The Obama-Hu Summit, North Korea, and China's Strategic Thinking

By Gilbert Rozman

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One issue was of paramount urgency at the January 18-19 state visit of Chinese President Hu Jintao to Washington: North Korea. Despite the usual scrutiny of language regarding human rights and even more attention than is customary to the economic promises at the summit, the backstage drama centered on North Korea. U.S. preoccupation with this issue had been building since Obama took office in the shadow of the breakdown in U.S.-North Korean bilateral talks under the rubric of the Six-Party Talks. Obama's hesitancy to press China on other issues in 2009 could be largely attributed to this priority, and in 2010 the U.S.'s increasingly tough posture toward China was, above all, a reflection of North Korea's worsening belligerence and China's refusal to take it seriously. While Chinese ambivalence over cooperation in dealing with Iran's nuclear program raised eyebrows and its hyperbolic rhetoric over sovereignty in the South China Sea and a fishing boat confrontation with Japan was met with stern rebukes, North Korea was the sole matter that the United States and its allies treated as a serious threat.

The atmosphere for the January U.S.-China summit looked grim in late 2010. In December, Dai Bingguo, an authoritative voice for China's foreign policy, reasserted China's commitment to Deng Xiaoping's cautious approach and to common interests with the United States.¹ After a year of frustration in dealing with China, however, the Obama administration was not content with this late shift in tone and set the mood in the week before the summit with speeches by cabinet officers who balanced concern about the consequences of continued failure to resolve problems in U.S.-China relations with reaffirmation of Washington's strong desire for deeper engagement. The summit made measurable progress on a few issues and set a positive tone going forward, but the litmus test for the summit's success was whether China would take responsibility for pressuring North Korea to stop its provocative behavior and agree to five-country coordination, as the United States had sought since 2003, in creating conditions for progress in the Six-Party Talks.²

Security issues were highlighted in speeches by Defense Secretary Robert Gates in Japan following his visit to China, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Mike Mullen in South Korea, and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in Washington. They credited China with some new, positive actions, including toward North Korea, yet they left no doubt that Washington saw the threat from North Korea persisting (including a threat to the United States within five years), and more needed to be done. One story suggested that China had halted oil supplies to the North as a means to pressure

¹ Dai Bingguo, "Adhere to the Path of Peaceful Development," *Waijiaobu wangzhan*, Dec. 6, 2010.

² Gilbert Rozman, *Strategic Thinking about the Korean Nuclear Crisis: Four Parties Caught between North Korea and the United States* (New York: Palgrave, 2010, rev. ed.)

Pyongyang not to retaliate against South Korean naval exercises in December, as it had threatened, and to improve the atmosphere in U.S.-China relations prior to the Hu-Obama summit.³ In the run-up to the summit, however, China continued to press for resumption of the Six-Party Talks on terms considered favorable to North Korea, while the United States was adamant that the North first had to resume talks with South Korea, which insisted that North Korea apologize for the two attacks against the South in 2010 and promise not to repeat them. The gap between Washington and Beijing on North Korea issues was not appreciably closing in the run-up to the summit.

The full-court press on China to change course on North Korea reached its climax when the United States warned that it was prepared to reposition its forces and to conduct military exercises to provide protection against a North Korean attack on U.S. territory. In December, Obama delivered a clear statement about this in a phone conversation with Hu Jintao, and the point must have been reiterated in pre-summit bilateral meetings as well as at the private White House dinner on January 18 at the beginning of Hu's state visit.⁴ This appeared to make a difference. As the United States wanted, China agreed that talks between North and South Korea should be held prior to reconvening the Six-Party Talks. This represented a shift from Beijing's earlier appeals for unconditional resumption of the talks, but it was not clear that China agreed with requiring North Korea to apologize for its acts of aggression in 2010 and to promise not to repeat them. In Washington, Hu finally publicly stated China's concern about the uranium enrichment plant that North Korea had unveiled in the fall. These moves in connection with the summit seemed to bring a pause in the tug-of-war between Washington and Beijing, with Seoul and Tokyo backing the U.S. and Moscow mostly on the sidelines (until it grew critical of Pyongyang after the attack on South Korea in November) over how to break the impasse over North Korea. Still, there was no reason to think that Hu's state visit would be a true turning point.

From the ongoing struggle over North Korea we can draw several lessons. First, those who belittled Obama's interest in the issue as "strategic patience" that only gave the North time to build up its threat capacity were wrong. U.S. policy toward China and South Korea has consistently prioritized the issue of North Korea, building pressure on China to change course as well as maintaining close coordination with U.S. allies in the region. Precisely because of the seriousness of the North Korean nuclear threat, Obama had started with conciliatory moves toward China.

Second, dealing with China proved difficult for the Obama administration as China's foreign policy grew increasingly assertive. The clinching argument that moved China proved to be Obama's warning that the U.S. would redeploy its military forces in the region if China failed to help address the North Korean threat. This move came on the heels of strengthened U.S. diplomatic and military ties with countries around China's periphery. Instead of China's rise leading to more strategic influence and the sustained retreat of the United States from East Asia, as many in China anticipated, it was producing just the opposite effect. Failure to reach some agreement on North Korea at the summit would have left China exposed to what it regarded as U.S.-led "containment" without any prospect of reversing the trend.

Third, if the danger of regional instability and deterioration in U.S.-China relations had been slow to register with Beijing, the echoes of the Cold War and the negative consequences for China were now

³ "China Cut Off Oil to Stop N. Korea from Retaliating against South," *The Korea Times*, Jan. 19, 2011.

⁴ *The New York Times*, January 21, 2011, p. A8.

blatantly clear. Mesmerized by its own faulty strategic thinking,⁵ China had imagined a scenario of a weakened United States accepting its marginalization in East Asia; exclusive China-centered regionalism based on cooperation with Japan, South Korea, and ASEAN; and growing Chinese economic and military strength bolstered by increased soft power that would make China an appealing alternative to supposedly discredited Western values and hegemony. Yet, the developments in 2010 revealed the poverty of this logic. A course adjustment has been necessary for Beijing, but how far it goes remains uncertain.

Given the importance Beijing attached to a successful summit and the last-minute timing of its concessions, we should assume that so far it has made only a tactical retreat, not a strategic reevaluation of its position on North Korea. Beijing may still expect deep divisions between Washington and Seoul about proceeding with new talks with the North, although Seoul did quickly agree to bilateral military talks with Pyongyang in the wake of the Hu-Obama understanding. Beijing may also anticipate turmoil in the United States or elsewhere in the world, as has begun in the Arab states, that will distract Obama or weaken his hand. Beijing is also caught in a narrative that has taken hold inside China. That narrative places the Korean peninsula in the context of a multi-century struggle between Western and Eastern civilization that puts Chinese national identity on the line.⁶ We should anticipate further showdowns between Washington and Beijing with North Korea at the crossroads of two increasingly clashing worldviews.

⁵ Gilbert Rozman, *Chinese Strategic Thinking toward Asia* (New York: Palgrave, 2010).

⁶ Gilbert Rozman, Ch. 3, "Chinese National Identity: A Six-Dimensional Approach," in Gilbert Rozman, ed., *East Asian National Identities: Commonalities and Differences* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, forthcoming).