The current state of China-North Korea relations

Discussions on “How soon will China surrender North Korea” are the topic of the day of South Korean or American political analysts, expecting that sooner or later Beijing will get bored of the Pyongyang’s provocative behaviour (“pragmatism will take over ideology”) and China will give “the green light” to the a regime change in Pyongyang, with the South subsequently taking over the North.

In this context, every critical statement against North Korea, voiced by a Chinese scientist on any international conference or in the media, spreads online as a proof of this thesis. Besides, it is also mentioned that Kim Jong-un did not go to Beijing, in contrast with the South Korean president, who got a very warm welcome. There are rumours that personal relations between the leaders of North Korea and China are so bad, that Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-un can’t even stomach each other. It is believed that from Beijing’s point of view, Park Geun-hye is viewed as a partner with whom it is possible to cooperate, and the leader of North Korea is more likely considered to be a problem. And even if Xi Jinping does not openly state this, he definitely thinks that unification through takeover will take place sooner or later, this is exactly the wording that I have heard in a statement from one of the South Korean analysts.

However, it can be noted that events of September-October 2015 strike a significant blow to this concept.

On October 9th the General Secretary of the Communist Party of China Xi Jinping sent to Kim Jong-un a telegram with congratulations on the 70th anniversary of the WPK. In it Xi Jinping stressed that friendship between China and North Korea is based on a proud tradition. China is going to work together with North Korea in order to maintain, strengthen and develop their bilateral friendship for the benefit of both countries and peoples, and play an active and constructive role in ensuring peace and stability in the region.

Then, Liu Yunshan, a current member of the Politburo Standing Committee, came to the celebrations of the anniversary. In the informal hierarchy he occupies the sixth or seventh place, so, this visit is a visit of a very high level official. And it is not a coincidence that the event was visited by the main ideologist of the country, whose statements may be entirely considered as an indication of the official position of Beijing, and it seems to be quite mainstream. There were a lot of key words said, including the very indicative expression of “friendship sealed with blood.” It was stressed that the North and the South are linked, as well as the role played by the Chinese “volunteers" during the Korean War.

The visit then continued at a lower level. On October 25, North Korea celebrated the 65th anniversary of the Chinese People's Volunteers sent to the Korean War. In this regard, near the monument "Korean-Chinese friendship" in Pyongyang and in other places of the DPRK, ceremonial events took place. They were attended by Yang Hyung-sop, the Vice Chairman of the Standing Committee of Supreme People’s Assembly of the DPRK, and by Li Liguo, the Chinese Minister of Civil Affairs, who arrived on a visit to the DPRK to participate in the ceremony due to completion of repair of cemeteries of the fallen Chinese volunteers.

A new free trade economic zone "Gomenvan" of 40 thousand sq. m on the territory of the urban district of Dandong was opened. Under the program of revival of the north-east of the country, the Chinese authorities have invested 1
billion Yuan (about 157 million. US Dollars) in its establishment. Dandong is separated by the Yalu River from the North Korean city of Sinuiju; it is a major centre of cooperation in trade and economy, investments and tourism between China and the DPRK. More than 600 companies are engaged in cross-border trade, 40% of the city's foreign trade turnover was accounted for by North Korea.

There are also continued talks of possible preparation for the visit of the North Korean leader to Beijing (supposed dates of the visit are the end of April and beginning of May 2016, as the Japanese newspaper "Mainichi" informed referring to its own sources), or the resumption of six-party talks on the nuclear issue (this topic emerged, inter alia, at the negotiations of Kim Jong-un and Liu Yunshan).

Yes, the difficulties which we described in the article about the absence of the leader of the DPRK at the September events still remain: in the context of overcoming the "century of shame", China began to hold a more active foreign policy in which "small countries should not oppose their policy to the needs of the Middle State." Here the traditional Juche reaction to the hegemony collides with the peculiarities of character of the young leader who really does not like it when someone tries to teach him how to live.

And a little about friendship between the leaders of China and South Korea. Indeed, Xi Jinping has got a trusting personal relationship with Park, because when in 2005 he visited South Korea as Secretary of the Central Committee, none of the politicians wanted to meet with him, and only Park Geun-hye did so. However, this may also mean that friendship between Xi and Park is not equal to the eternal strategic partnership of Seoul and Beijing. Any other President of South Korea will no longer benefit such a level of confidence of the Chinese leadership.

In the author's opinion, a person who wishes to analyse current relationship between Beijing and Pyongyang, should analyse the following.

Yes, the North Korean issue has become a subject of active discussion; and a variety of evaluations, interpretations and recommendations may be seen in the speeches of scientists and journalists. At the same time, different assessments are put forward by people with a high enough rank that mention of their positions could be seen as proof of the thesis that "the leaders at the top share their view." Besides, the Chinese really say different things in different places, and, in a certain situation (for example, at a forum in the United States) they may speak about the North with some disapproval. It is important not to confuse the personal opinion of an individual or a particular school with the official state policy.

Pragmatism may take over ideology, but even from the point of view of pragmatism, North Korea is still necessary for China. Another matter is that modern China's policy towards the countries of the Korean Peninsula may be easily compared with the "equally-directed" policy, which Russia has kept regarding the two countries since the Primakov days and early-Putin period.

In pursuit of the national interests, China as well as Russia does not provide determinant support for either North or South Korea. At the same time, China is naturally using the disagreements between the two Koreas and the balance of power, via supporting the North in some matters, while in the others doing the same for the South. Or putting pressure on Seoul by affording some support for Pyongyang.

Speaking against the nucleation of the peninsula, or turning it into a "crisis spot", China, however, understands the importance of North Korea as a kind of buffer zone, covering the north-east region of China.

Besides, unlike in Russia, there are enough of those in China, who would like to strengthen the influence on the peninsula, bringing the North Korean regime more in line with the political aims of Beijing. It meets with a certain resistance in the North, but it does not mean that Beijing would prefer to surrender the North to the South. Unified Korea with US troops on its territory in the circumstances of growing regional opposition (let's pay attention to the situation in the South China Sea), presents a serious strategic threat.

Accordingly, the fact that Beijing is making tough statements about certain actions of the North accelerated tensions in the region, but does not mean that similar actions of the South and the United States will be left unattended. Moreover, China would clearly never admit the existence of a unified Korea with US troops and a US missile defence system located on its territory.

The Chinese often say that they have no special relations with North Korea, but that "no special relations" depending on the situation may mean either "we have no favoured treatment", or "we have no levers of influence" and "our possibilities to put pressure on North Korea are limited." In some ways this is true because the ideological influence is indeed gradually reducing, however it should be noted, that even previously Pyongyang was only listening to
Beijing "to some degree", especially on the nuclear issue.

As for personal relations, they do not always play a decisive role.

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