

North Korea

Can China emerge as inter-Korean mediator?



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President Moon Jae-in and Chinese President Xi Jinping / Korea Times file

By Kang Seung-woo

Amid a deadlock in denuclearization talks between North Korea and the United States that were much anticipated to bring peace and stability to the Korean Peninsula, China sees its presence as a facilitator in the stalled inter-Korean relations increasing.

The development comes as re-election-seeking U.S. President Donald Trump has been putting engagement with the North on the back burner, leading President Moon Jae-in and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un to reach out to Chinese President Xi Jinping.

However, it remains to be seen whether China can live up to such expectations as it is currently engaged in a struggle for hegemony with the U.S.

Last week, Moon had a phone conversation with Xi, during which the latter agreed to visit the South within this year.

The government has been pushing for Xi's visit Seoul, which could help expand bilateral trade. But apart from the economic considerations, it is also seeking support from the Chinese government for Moon's "Korean Peninsula peace process" given that China is regarded as the lone nation that can exert influence on the North as the country's chief diplomatic protector and economic benefactor.

According to Cheong Wa Dae, Moon and Xi discussed the situation on the peninsula during the phone talks, with Xi expressing unwavering support for the peace initiative.

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"While the North is closing its borders due to the coronavirus, China is highly likely to be its first country to exchange with. In that respect, China can play a significant role in inter-Korean relations and we need to secure its support," said Yang Moo-jin, a professor at the University of North Korean Studies.

Ahead of Moon, the North Korean leader reached out to his Chinese counterpart. One week after making a public appearance after a 20-day hiatus, May 1, Kim sent a message to Xi praising his COVID-19 fight success.

While congratulating Xi on winning the war against COVID-19, Kim expressed hope that their bilateral relations will be even closer and further develop on good terms.

Xi replied, May 9, saying, "I am ready to work with you ... to enhance strategic communication and deepen exchanges and cooperation."

In February, Kim also wrote to Xi to extend his sympathy on COVID-19, which the latter said was a vivid example of the strong foundation and vitality of the traditional friendship between the two countries.

Many believe that Kim is trying to revitalize the virus-dented bilateral economic ties. Also, amid growing tension between Beijing and Washington over the origins of the coronavirus, Pyongyang is siding with its traditional ally to confirm their "blood alliance" that would ensure various forms of cooperative engagement between them.

Given that the North Korean regime has turned a deaf ear to the Moon administration's suggestions for cooperation for inter-Korean quarantine, speculation is arising that the government here could take advantage of the Sino-North Korea ties, hoping Xi will broker the quarantine proposal.

In addition, China itself has repeatedly expressed hopes that it will play a key role in matters related to the peninsula.

However, critics question whether China will act on Moon's hopes.

When the Chinese government announced the phone conversation, it was focused on their COVID-19 response and cooperation without mentioning Xi's support for Moon's peace initiative.

China is also expected to have little room to work for inter-Korean matters due to its clash with the U.S. over responsibility for the outbreak of the coronavirus.

"Amid intensifying tensions with the U.S., China is likely to put the North under its influence rather than playing a mediating role," said Park Won-gon, a professor of international politics at OHandong Global University.

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South Korea wants RED CHINA to "broker" deals with North Korea? For once, I'm really speechless.

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I wish you were actually speechless, rather than brainwashed by US propaganda.

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Robert Cornett

Any type of 'negotiation' with North Korea is just a flash in the pan. NK will never agree to unify, negotiate a peace, or anything that jeopardizes the regime. SK has been pushing this peace agenda since Moon took office, but any outsider can see that it'll never work. Good luck to Moon, but I'll remain skeptical until proven wrong.

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Michael Aronson

Well, "peace" can take a wide range of forms. It can be more economic interdependence, like the Kaesong complex from a few years ago. Technically, the Kaesong complex could be reopened at any time.

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