

Who Knows Whether China Supports The 'Kim Regime' To The End?

By **ARAKI Kazuhiro**

In general, China-North Korea (DPRK) relations is thought to be close and amicable because there is no other countries these have supported North Korea like China. Both regimes, however, hate each other. Kim Il-sung spent his childhood at Chinese school and spoke fluent Chinese, and had been engaged in guerrilla activities in China. He knew the first generation of Chinese leadership, and it seems that he kept the diplomatic relation but not close. Meanwhile, his son, Kim Jong-il was born after Kim Il-sung had escaped to Russia, which he did have neither familiarity nor China. This is same as for Kim Il-sung's grandson, Kim Jong-un. This is one of the motives why Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un have been trying to talk to the United States in an attempt to improve its international relations.

The good example of not-so friendly China-DPRK relations was seen in the first ever inter-Korea Summit Conference between Kim Dae-jung of South Korea (ROK) and Kim Jong-il of DPRK held in June 2000. Kim Jong-il's intention was to improve DPRK-U.S. relations by leveraging ROK's relations with the U.S. since ROK was already under DPRK influence. Three months later, Kim Jong-il sent his trusted subordinate, Jo Myong-rok, Director of the General Political Bureau of the Korean People's Army (KPA), as an envoy to the U.S. He received extraordinary treatments from the U.S. of meeting President Clinton and State Secretary Madeleine Albright, which eventually led to Ms. Albright's official visit to DPRK in the following month. While Ms. Albright's three-day stay, Kim Jong-il extended his special hospitality by escorting her every day. Chinese Minister of National Defense, Chi Haotian was actually in Pyongyang earlier than Secretary Albright, though Kim Jong-il only met him on the day she left. Although Kim Jong-il's confidence deepened through the event, further progress was not achieved, since Bush won the presidential election in November of the same year.

This apparently made China lose its face. It was beyond China's understanding that DPRK welcomed U.S. Secretary of State, the common enemy whom they fought together a half century ago, while having such alliance delegation waited. The end of Democratic administration in the U.S. which Kim miscalculated as he thought it was

worth a try, even if it would upset China, to develop its relations with the U.S. and be more independence from China. As a result, North Korea has been more isolated from international community. Then, the U.S. Republican administration's policy towards DPRK has got much stricter particularly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In this context, the deadlock of Kim Jong-il's foreign policy became obviously President Bush's word of "axis of evils".

Since Pyongyang felt the pressure of being bombarded any time by the U.S. military, Kim Jong-il shifted to appease Japan including the major compromise on the abduction issue. There were many other complex factors which Kim Jong-il's fear of the U.S. would make him to take further to admit the abduction issue. The lesson for Japan was, as Dr. Kim Dong-Cheol notes in "The Message for the Japanese Government," that requires "sensitivity to deal with North Korea." That is to say, a strong message is more effective rather than to keep calmness and talks which will not be affected to North Korea.

Meanwhile, China has deepened its distrust against DPRK's foreign policy since Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un have been trying to proactively approaching the U.S. and kept distance with China. Although KPA is said to have close ties with China, People's Liberation Army's (PLA) influence has been seen in the recent midnight military parade of DPRK which may imply something to consider the background. If there is a perception gap between the Kim family, there may be strong orientation toward the U.S., and the KPA, which has a strong affinity for the PLA, there is a big question whether China can be said to support the "Kim Jong-un regime" to the end or not. China-DPRK relations has long been considered static, but in the current international situation, that may be needed more flexible interpretation to be interpreted more flexibly.

(This is the English translation of an article written by ARAKI Kazuhiro, Professor, the Institute of World Studies, Takushoku University, which originally appeared on the e-forum "Hyakka-Seiho (Hundred Flowers in Full Bloom)" of JFIR on November 25, 2020.)