

Who shapes China's North Korea policy?

Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt, The Korea Times | 19 May 2011

Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi abruptly canceled his pre-arranged trip to South Korea, just one day before the visit was to take place in November last year. Yang was supposed to meet with his counterpart Kim Sung-hwan and President Lee Myung-bak.

South Korean media fumed over the sudden breach of diplomatic protocol amid already brooding anti-China sentiment over Beijing shielding North Korea in the aftermath of the latter's two brazen attacks on the South.

The cancellation also came three days after North Korea's shelling of the South's Yeonpyeong Island. Seoul's media outlets regarded it as China's expression of displeasure over the joint military exercises by Seoul and Washington in the West Sea, with the participation of the aircraft carrier George Washington, in particular.

China instead dispatched State Councilor Dai Bingguo. This bewildered some South Korean opinion makers, who were not familiar with Dai. Compared to Yang, Dai is not frequently mentioned in South Korean media. In fact, most of them don't know that he outranks the foreign minister.

South Koreans often claim they are the people on the planet who understand China best, based on their shared Confucian culture and geographic proximity. The episode showed their confidence was misplaced.

Koreans are familiar with ancient historical China, but not the People's Republic of China that was formed in 1949. During the Cold War era, the two neighbors were ideological adversaries and there were virtually no exchanges between them. Seoul had little direct idea about what was happening inside the "Bamboo Curtain" until 1992 when the two reconnected by establishing diplomatic relations.

With their complementary economies, Beijing soon became Seoul's largest trading partner. Koreans felt they had a "soft-landing" in getting reconnected with the China they knew before. They also thought the new China since 1949 under the Communist Party would be more or less the same. The Cheonan and Yeonpyeong incidents were a wakeup call.

South Koreans were in disbelief when Beijing didn't join the international community to condemn North Korea over the two attacks last year and became enraged when Beijing watered down Seoul's effort to mete out U.N. Security Council punitive measures.

At the same time, South Korea's leading intellectuals also raised the necessity of knowing more about China, especially its foreign policy toward North Korea, an issue that has proven to be the primary source of friction between Seoul and Beijing.

This week, Hahm Chaibong, director of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, hosted a two-day conference to explore the topic, by inviting a number of leading experts. Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt was one of them. She is North East Asia Project Director and also China Adviser with the International Crisis Group.

The Korea Times interviewed her in Beijing prior to her departure for Seoul. The following is an excerpt of the interview:

Q: We normally think a foreign ministry is responsible for foreign policy. But in China, the picture seems to be more complicated, especially in terms of its policy toward North Korea.

A: There are a multitude of actors in China that shape and influence its policy toward North Korea. In fact, this multiplicity of actors is becoming an increasing feature of Chinese foreign policy toward North Korea. In China, the International Liaison Department (ILD) of the Chinese Communist Party is the main facilitator of China's relations with North Korea. It also plays a central role in its North Korean policy-making. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is an implementer of China's policy toward North Korea. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) also exerts strong influence due to the two countries' shared military history and the national security implications of North Korean policy.

Q: North Korea is reported to be the most controversial foreign policy topic in China, unlike the common outside perception of the "blood ties" of Sino-North Korean relations.

A: Traditionalist actors, such as the ILD, PLA and conservative policymakers and analysts, are supported by nationalist public opinion. While externally China's North Korean policy remains unchanged, in private Chinese experts tell me that North Korea is a case of how it's getting harder to achieve consensus. There is more pluralism of views now on North Korea than there used to be. What's behind this are the array of actors in China's policy-making toward North Korea, each with their own, and sometimes conflicting motivations, interests, and influence.

Q: The ILD still sounds very foreign in South Korea.

A: The International Liaison Department (ILD) is the foreign affairs office of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). It has a policy advisory role at the highest levels of government and is also an implementer of foreign policy through "party work" — liaising, communicating, and building relationships with foreign political parties. The ILD's research and policy advisory role focuses on four areas: political relations, economic relations, governance theories, and public opinion. Since one key aspect of the ILD's role is maintaining and building relationships with communist parties, this gives them unique status in China's relationship with communist countries, and North Korea in particular. The CCP and the Korean Workers' Party have an extremely close relationship, with a regular and very high volume of high-level exchanges.

Q: And Dai Bingguo previously served as head of the ILD?

A: Dai assumed the leadership of the ILD in 1997 and held it for the following six years. The role and

power of the ILD and party diplomacy (zhengdang waijiao) have steadily expanded alongside traditional government diplomacy (zhengfu waijiao), carried out by the foreign ministry. Public commentary by ILD leaders in recent years reflects this, asserting the department's increased engagement in state-to-state relations and high priority foreign policy issues such as North Korea. For instance, Wang Jiarui described the ILD's role as "actively participating and taking initiatives in the key tasks, laid out in the overall diplomatic framework," specifically citing North Korea as an example of this.

Q: Can ILD "sidestep" the foreign ministry?

A: The ILD plays the main role in China's North Korean policy-making, and in practice, frequently sidesteps the foreign ministry to act as the real manager of the bilateral relationship. Dai Bingguo is one of the most powerful actors in China's policy-making toward North Korea. Wang Jiarui, the head of the ILD, visits North Korea more often than Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, and his meetings, speeches, and announced agreements with the North are generally regarded as the bellwether of bilateral relations. Several recent reshufflings of staff reflect the ILD's growing prominence in foreign policy-making and in North Korean policy in particular. In January 2010, Beijing announced the appointment of Liu Hongcai, a vice minister-level deputy head of the ILD, as the new Chinese ambassador to Pyongyang. Replacing Liu Xiaoming, who was not well-liked by North Korean leaders during his three years in the position, management of China-North Korean ties was put firmly again in the Communist Party hands with the foreign ministry taking even more of a back seat.

Q: How do the foreign ministry and the ILD share and compete in their policy initiative on North Korea?

A: While the ILD clearly steers China's North Korean policy, the department's leaders continue to emphasize the organ's "subordination" to China's "overall diplomacy" (guojia zongti waijiao), a reflection of the Party's ongoing efforts to minimize and mask disparate or competing diplomatic agendas. Personnel reshuffles between the ILD and the foreign ministry also show the Party's ongoing efforts to promote increased cohesion between the two organs. For instance, in 2009 then-ILD Deputy Director Zhang Zhijun switched roles with then-foreign ministry Vice Foreign Minister Liu Jieyi (Zhang became Vice Foreign Minister and Liu became a Deputy Director in ILD). The report announcing the shift stated that "job exchange" plays an "important role" in China's diplomatic strategy by enhancing "communication between organizations."

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