

Seven Fingers: China's New Leadership and North Korea Policy by Adam Cathcart, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Roger Cavazos

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When Mao Zedong's legacy was finally decided upon after long debate by the CCP in 1982, the Party settled upon the notion that Mao was seven parts good, three parts bad, just as Mao had declared that if his own 10 fingers represented Stalin, seven were good. Now, the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) has shrunk to seven, what does it mean for North Korea? Where will those "fingers" point?

As China encourages economic reform in North Korea, the substance and style of CCP policies and entreaties will be greatly influenced by the Chinese leaders with North Korea experience. In understanding future North Korea policy, the makeup of the Politburo Standing Committee is the easiest bellwether, since the PSC is the ultimate decision-making body on all crucial foreign policy decisions. There are few foreign policy decisions more sensitive than those dealing with North Korea. When Hu Jintao was at the helm (2002-2012), the PSC lacked members with direct personal experience in the DPRK. The PSC despite being the supreme organ of national power, was not, generally speaking, an effective instrument for prodding the North Koreans to move toward economic reforms or greater economic bonds to China.

Rising officials who hail from the Northeast provinces of Liaoning, Jilin, and Heilongjiang understand the importance of perseverance to advance China's agenda of North Korean economic reform. These officials, represented by Zhang Dejiang and Li Keqiang now on the PSC and Sun Zhengcai in the Politburo, spent formative years in close proximity to North Korea, and benefited from their time in local governments with long-term cross-border interactions with North Korean counterparts. They appreciate that patience and constant pressure are key to promoting reform in Pyongyang. This new generation of leaders is ostensibly better informed on North Korea issues and may lead to some policy nuance – if not policy changes – from China.

The ascension of Zhang Dejiang, as one of five new PSC members with increased influence due to the PSC's downsizing, indicates that his formidable experience with the North may play a leading role in North Korea policy. Zhang is a tried and true North Korea hand. Beyond the obvious connections to the North by graduating from Kim Il-sung

University, where he was secretary of the Party Branch, and spending his early career in Jilin province, his specific roles at each juncture of his career speak volumes about hands-on experience that portend unrivaled expertise on North Korean issues.

Palm-reading: China's Korea Hands

Although the new leadership has made vague statements on North Korea (even after the satellite launch), insider Chinese academics are a useful gauge of the temperature in Beijing policy circles. These academics include Zhang Liangui of the Central Party School, Zhu Feng of Peking University, and Lv Chao of the Shenyang Academy of Social Sciences, among others. These Chinese experts who are allowed and encouraged to comment about North Korea in the Chinese news media have not been entirely favorable. Zhang Liangui publicly raised questions about reconsidering PRC policy toward the DPRK just before the DPRK's missile launch in April 2012. Even more telling, Zhang, another Kim Il-Sung university alum, conducted this public debate in English.

Much has been made of the "demotion" of the security position within the Politburo and the relative downturn in public appearances of Zhou Yongkang. However, Zhou's successor, Meng Jianzhu, is hardly likely to be less hardline, and not having a seat on the Standing Committee will not deprive him of his immense budget for internal security. Zhou, on the PSC, dealt with North Korea from a PSC-level, but both he and Meng learned on the job and toward the very end of their careers.

Existing KPA-PLA interactions regarding intelligence are unlikely to atrophy. In fact, making common cause against reformers appears to have strengthened some of these relationships. The Dalian-Tokyo-Syria shipment appears to indicate that the DPRK's relationships with Burmese hardline generals, which are very profitable, continue even as broader geopolitical trends change.

Xi Jinping's mien and his public comments suggested that the military-military elements of the alliance will remain strong, within limits. China will reluctantly tolerate space rockets even though these launches enrage regional rivals, and will likely tolerate small arms and weapons development within limits; it's in China's interest to keep the KPA on its feet.

Red Glare: Chinese Reaction to DPRK Satellite

As an example, prior to North Korea's recent missile launch, the Chinese strengthened their hitherto rather oblique criticism of North Korea by issuing this statement: "North Korea has the right to the peaceful use of outer space," closely followed by these new words "but this right is restricted by the relevant UN Security Council resolutions." In language containing some slight indication of resentment, China states

that it “hopes the relevant parties take actions conducive to peace and stability on the peninsula, act calmly and avoid escalating the situation.”

Zhu Feng, one of the scholars mentioned above, has also made post-launch comments in English and Chinese-language media indicating that North Korea is causing Chinese soul-searching over whether and how to keep the relationship on track after the DPRK publicly demonstrated its unwillingness to listen to Chinese patrons.

China’s willingness to publicly acknowledge UN sanctions on DPRK indicates an increased exasperation and willingness to nudge DPRK in a nuanced manner. China is reminding Pyongyang that China can enforce – or ignore – UN Security Council Resolutions to DPRK’s benefit or detriment.

Statements from scholarly DPRK hands allow the PRC to send surrogate messages and maintain some distance. Official statements from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which were also echoed in *People’s Daily*, are official voices and canon “truths” as they are vetted, pared down, and defined by the Chinese Communist Party.

Given China’s preference for stability, we can expect all seven fingers to urge North Korea to help maintain the stable environment China desperately needs to focus on reaching targets set at the 18th Party Congress. But it looks like some of those seven fingers are tired of being pricked by North Korea. As a result, they are letting the DPRK know directly and indirectly that the “kid glove only” treatment of the previous PSC may be coming to an end.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.

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