Critical Issues Confronting China

North Korea’s Social-Economic Development and China’s North Korea Policy
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North Korea, with a population of about 25 million people, only catches the public attention when it carries out a nuclear test or fires a missile and then scores of analysts on this “rogue state”—from its capabilities to its intentions—dominate American media headlines. To most Americans, North Korea is a mysterious country characterized by repeated nuclear tests, autocratic rule, executions, and mass starvation.

Yet Zheng Jiyong, Professor and Director of the Center for Korean Studies at Fudan University in Shanghai, refuted this stereotype of North Korea and depicted instead a much more humane picture of this largely isolated country. He attributed the distorted mental image of North Korea to the tacit competition between the regime of North Korea, a relic of the former Soviet socialist block, and that of South Korea, an American ally as well as to westerm media’s instinctive reportage of only negative information as “news.”

Having traveled to North Korea numerous times over the past two decades, Zheng maintained that if you think of this enigmatic country as a social and religious sect rather than as a modern state, then much of North Korea’s behavior would make sense. North Korea has built a master narrative around the continuity of the blood lines of the ruling family—the Kim family—going back hundreds of years. In the eyes of North Koreans, the Kims represent deified royalty, and their reign reinforces the people’s faith in this royal family, much like a religion combined with local shamanism. Kim Il Sung ruled from 1945 to 1994 as the founding father of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), with his legitimacy fortified by fighting in the anti-Japanese war. Kim Jong Il ruled from 1994 to 2011 and implemented a military-first strategy.

Taking over the baton in 2011 at the age of 27, the young Kim, Kim Jong-un, having been educated in Switzerland, is very different from his father and grandfather. He is keenly aware of the Chinese precept, “[w]ealth (in this case the governing power) does not last more than three generations.” He began to normalize North Korea and tried to deliver more economic development to his people. He emphasized the importance of ruling the society by law and strengthened the institutionalization of the Korean Workers’ Party (KWP). He cast himself as a “son of the people” and a “great ordinary man” rather than a God. He continued the
dual-economic system, which was originated in the 1990s and allowed a market system to operate in parallel with the state-owned sector. Together with the farmland responsibility system, the market-oriented sector employs about half of the North Korean labor force. By the end of the current five-year plan (2016-2020), North Korea will become essentially self-sufficient with food supplies and electricity production.

Zheng showed colorful pictures of ample supplies of produce and other goods for daily use, as well as grandiose military parades, imposing sport stadiums, and splendid street scenes, including a major boulevard called “Future Scientist Avenue.” As the North Korean people’s living standards improve through the thriving market sector, the state ration system is no longer binding. The KWP has to confront the challenge of declining party loyalty as people don’t rely on the state sector as much as before.

More important than economic development, the young Kim is as concerned with his regime’s survival as his predecessors were and fears of rebellion and criticism. In North Korea, anyone who can’t answer these questions—Who are you? Where are you from? And where are you going?—in accordance with North Korean convention is deemed a foreigner or an outsider and hence is treated differently from insiders. Over the past few years, Kim has consolidated his power by taming the army and installing high-level officials loyal to him.

Finally, Zheng explained how China plays the North Korea card. Since 2013, after President Xi Jinping took office at the end of 2012, China has taken a proactive stand on the North Korea issue, consciously using it as a platform to exercise a leadership role in constructing solutions and affecting international affairs. China is more confident in its ability to prevent chaos or war at its doorway while standing ready to handle any possible situation.

Actively seeking creative ideas, innovative proposals and roadmaps, China wants to ensure peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula first and foremost and to achieve denuclearization in North Korea. A nuclear North Korea is a security threat to both China and the U.S. To achieve these two goals, China, on the one hand, seeks cooperation with the U.S.; on the other hand, it encourages North Korea to open to the outside world through trade since it needs to further improve its people’s livelihood. With insufficient natural resources, the more open North Korea becomes, the faster it will grow.

Albeit China’s overlapping interest with the U.S. to denuclearize North Korea, its approach to North Korea is very different from that of the U.S. It prefers reserving pressure and sanctions only to punish North Korea’s misbehavior, since it cannot jettison its past relationship with North Korea. Its North Korea policy is, therefore, to “find a new path for North Korea that is guided by historical realities.” With this rationale, China supports direct contact between North Korea and the U.S. while engaging North Korea diplomatically, economically, politically, and militarily through information and intelligence sharing, economic assistance, educational exchanges, tourism, high-ranking official exchanges, and military cooperation and exchanges, all with a friendly ambience.