



## XI JINPING'S FIRST VISIT TO NORTH KOREA: CAUSES AND EFFECTS

On June 20-21, 2019, Chinese President Xi Jinping made his first official visit to North Korea. During his two-day visit, Xi met with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and other high-level officials. According to Chinese media reports, during the talks, the parties discussed bilateral relations between the two countries, the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and other important issues of mutual interest. During his meeting with Kim, Xi stated that the traditional good-neighborly and friendly relations between the two countries would remain unchanged and that China would certainly support the concrete steps taken by North Korea in achieving a political solution on the Korean peninsula in spite of the changes in the international situation. In his turn, Kim stressed that Xi's visit was of great importance for further development of the relations that are based on historical ties. Moreover, he expressed readiness to make joint efforts with China on this issue, appreciating Beijing's significant contribution to the preservation of stability and peace on the Korean Peninsula.

As the world's eyes turned to Xi's visit to North Korea, both countries also attached great importance to it, as evidenced by the concurrent publication of Xi's article in the official media of China and North Korea on June 19, 2019. On the following day, Kim and his wife Ri Sol-ju, as well as President of the Presidium of North Korea's Supreme People's Assembly Choe Ryong-hae, the country's Prime Minister Kim Jae-ryong and other senior officials greeted Xi at the Pyongyang Sunan International Airport.

It is noteworthy that this visit, which commemorates the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Sino-North Korean relations officially established in October 1949, is the first trip to North Korea by a Chinese president in 14 years. Looking at the background of the Sino-North Korean relations, which began in 1949 and continued in close alliance due to common historical and political-ideological ties until the early 2000s, it can be seen that no Chinese president has visited Pyongyang since 2005, as there were some disagreements between China and North Korea. The reason is that the China-North Korea relations, which had significantly developed over the years, cooled off after October 2006, when North Korea conducted its first nuclear weapons test. Beijing argued that North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons could seriously threaten the security of both China and South Asia, and called on North Korea to stop nuclear weapons development and ballistic missile tests. Moreover, Beijing's support for sanctions imposed by the United Nations Security Council in October 2006 against North Korea's nuclear weapons tests was China's first step from diplomacy towards punishment in the North Korean nuclear crisis. Since taking office in

December 2011, Kim has increased Pyongyang's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile tests, thereby escalating tensions on the Korean Peninsula. That was a matter of concern to Beijing because the U.S. efforts to deploy the THAAD missile system in the region by strengthening military cooperation with South Korea and Japan against the nuclear program of North Korea have made China extremely uncomfortable. However, after participating in the Winter Olympics in South Korea in February 2018, North Korea's efforts to improve its relations with China were welcomed positively by Beijing. Therefore, the Sino-North Korean relations started to gain momentum again after Kim made his first overseas visit to China in March 2018, and three more visits in May 2018, June 2018 and January 2019.

It is no coincidence that the Chinese president paid a visit to North Korea at a time when the U.S.-China trade war intensified and the G20 Leaders' Summit in Japan was approaching. One important point that needs to be mentioned is the fact that Xi's visit to Pyongyang was before the meeting of Xi and U.S. President Donald Trump, which was expected to take place during the G20 Leaders' Summit. Xi's visit to Pyongyang as an indication of historical relations between China and North Korea points out that China could mediate in the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Although there are disagreements between the two countries, China cooperates in the political and economic spheres with North Korea more closely than other countries and is willing to play a constructive and active role in reducing the tensions on the Korean Peninsula. Therefore, Beijing has always emphasized that the problem should be solved at the negotiating table by using diplomatic and economic relations with all the parties related to the situation on the Korean Peninsula. Such an attitude stems from China's national security, as well as geostrategic and geopolitical interests. The possibility of millions of North Korean refugees flocking to the Chinese border as a result of a possible conflict on the Korean Peninsula, or even the possibility of North Korea's use of nuclear weapons, is a major threat to China's territorial integrity and ecological security. Moreover, the possibility of an increase in the U.S. military presence in the region due to a growing confrontation on the Korean Peninsula is also detrimental to China's geostrategic and geopolitical interests.

From this point of view, attaching great importance to developing bilateral relations with Pyongyang based on the visit, Beijing will continue its efforts to play an important role as a mediator in the Pyongyang-Seoul and Pyongyang-Washington relations. Compared to the fruitless meeting between Trump and Kim in Hanoi, this visit shows once again that Xi has more influence over

North Korea than the United States. Given that Trump has repeatedly called on Beijing to play a more active role in resolving the North Korean issue, Washington will likely further need positive Beijing-Pyongyang relations to promote its own negotiations with Pyongyang. In its turn, Beijing advocates the preservation of stability and peace on the Korean Peninsula in terms of national security and geostrategic interests. On the one hand, Beijing will support Pyongyang's steps in mitigating the tensions on the Korean Peninsula through dialogue and negotiations, while, on the other hand, it may use the North Korean issue as a bargaining element in trade talks with Washington.

From the North Korean perspective, it can be said that Xi's visit fits very well with Pyongyang's current wishes and agenda because Pyongyang has taken important steps in the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula in the last year and seeks to gain Beijing's support in the related negotiations with Seoul and Washington. Given that each of Kim's four visits to Beijing in about a year took place before some significant event, such as the historic Inter-Korean summit and the first and second North Korea-United States summits, it is clear that Pyongyang expects support from Beijing. Kim's particular attention to relations with Beijing and Xi's visit arises from the goal to develop his country's commercial and economic relations with China. One of the main reasons why North Korea has taken further steps to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula has been the stagnant economic situation due to the sanctions imposed on this country in recent years. Especially in the last year, the economic development in North Korea has gained importance, and Kim has started to actively participate in economic activities in the country.

In summary, Xi's visit to North Korea, the first by a Chinese President in 14 years, is of great importance for both countries due to its geopolitical and geostrategic dimensions, as well as in terms of ensuring stability and peace on the Korean Peninsula. From China's perspective, the visit could create a more favorable environment for Beijing to act as an intermediary in the tensions on the Korean Peninsula, increasing the need of the parties for China. Xi's visit to Pyongyang during the trade negotiations between the United States and China, which have accelerated again after a trade war between the two countries intensified for a second time, shows that China has a say in the North Korean issue. While North Korea's expectations for both Chinese economic and diplomatic support are evident, Xi's visit is symbolic for Pyongyang. Any support from a historic and powerful ally, such as China, could be an essential element of balance in North Korea's next talks with the United States.

## Politics, Foreign Affairs, and Security

- The Committee of the Security Council Secretaries of the CSTO member states held its regular session in Bishkek. The parties discussed current challenges and threats to collective security and additional measures to counter international terrorism and extremism in the CSTO format, and signed a number of documents, including the collective action plan to implement the UN Global counter-terrorism strategy for 2019-2021.
- The Senate, the upper house of Kazakhstan's parliament, ratified the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, the first legally-binding international agreement to comprehensively prohibit nuclear weapons. 70 countries signed and 24 of them ratified the document, which must be signed and ratified by at least 50 countries to come into effect.
- The ministries of foreign affairs of Russia and Kazakhstan held political consultations in Moscow. The parties discussed the current state and development prospects of bilateral cooperation and the schedule of upcoming joint high-level events, including the preparation process for the 16<sup>th</sup> Russia-Kazakhstan Interregional Cooperation Forum to be held in Omsk in November 2019.
- Russia rejoined the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) after the assembly voted to lift a five-year ban imposed on the Russian delegation over the annexation of Crimea. While ratifying the delegation's credentials, the PACE called on Russia to fulfill its recent recommendations, including the release of Ukrainian sailors captured in 2018 in the Kerch Strait.
- For the first time in 13 years, the United States removed Uzbekistan from the list of countries with the worst religious tolerance. This was announced by U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo during the presentation of the annual U.S. report on international religious freedom. According to Pompeo, Uzbekistan freed more than 1,500 religious prisoners.
- The Co-Chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group issued a joint statement welcoming the simultaneous release of prisoners by Armenia and Azerbaijan and expressing appreciation for the mediation efforts of the International Committee of the Red Cross. The Co-Chairs also called on the sides to take as soon as possible additional concrete humanitarian measures to further consolidate an atmosphere conducive to peace.
- The Armenian court of appeals ordered the country's former president Robert Kocharyan to be re-arrested ahead of his trial on charges related to the violent breakup of protests in 2008, which are known as the "March 1 events" in Armenia. Kocharyan, who was president at the time, first faced the charges in July 2018, but has been released twice since then.

## Economy, Finance, and Energy

- Finance Minister of Russia Anton Siluanov and Chairman of the People's Bank of China Yi Gang signed an inter-governmental agreement to switch to national currencies in bilateral trade in an effort to move away from the U.S. dollar. It is expected that the share of cross-currency settlements can reach 50% in the coming years.
- Russia extended its economic sanctions and food embargo imposed against the United States, the European Union, Australia, Canada, Norway, Ukraine and other countries until December 31, 2020. Moscow put in place the restrictive measures in August 2014 in response to anti-Russian sanctions introduced by Western states over Russia's annexation of Crimea.
- The Asian Development Bank endorsed new Country Partnership Strategies for Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan for 2019–2023. In Azerbaijan, the bank will support the country's goal of achieving a more diversified, resilient, inclusive, and sustainable economy. In Uzbekistan, the bank's strategy is aimed at assisting the government's ongoing reforms to help the economy's transition towards a market-driven growth path.
- Armenia and Georgia re-launched the bilateral intergovernmental commission on trade and economic cooperation by holding its 10<sup>th</sup> session in Yerevan. The parties discussed prospects of further strengthening multifaceted cooperation between the two countries, including in the fields of energy, transport, high tech, tourism, agriculture, culture, education, healthcare and other spheres of mutual interest.
- In the U.S. State Department's 2018 Investment Climate statement, Kazakhstan was named the "best investment climate in Central Asia". Justifying this assessment, last year, Kazakhstan attracted \$24 billion of foreign direct investment, overtaking Kyrgyzstan (\$851 million), Tajikistan (\$645 million) and Uzbekistan (\$624 million). The Netherlands, the United States, Switzerland, Russia and China are the top countries investing in Kazakhstan's economy.
- The construction of Kazakhstan's largest wholesale distribution center nears completion in Karagandy. A modern logistics center that will link North-South flows for agricultural trade will have social importance as sales of farm products without intermediaries will allow reducing prices of fruits and vegetables not only in Karagandy, but also in other regions of Kazakhstan.
- The Iranian government approved visa-free policy for Chinese tourists visiting Iran. In addition, President Hassan Rouhani asked the Interior Ministry to waive visa-stamping or marking passports of foreign nationals visiting the country. The move aims to facilitate travels to Iran without a fear of possible U.S. penalties. According to the Iranian media, 7.8 million foreign nationals visited Iran in 2018, up 52.5% compared to 2017.

## Society and Culture

- A Soviet-era ammunition depot located in the town of Arys in southern Kazakhstan exploded, killing at least three persons – two soldiers and a civilian. The regional authorities declared a state of emergency and ordered the evacuation of the town's residents, while President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev instructed the government to take urgent steps for eliminating the explosion's consequences.
- Georgian farmers in the country's eastern Kakheti region will receive compensation for damage to crops caused by hail and severe weather conditions. After calculating total financial losses suffered by farmers this season, the government will compensate 50% of losses to vineyard owners, while all other agriculture businesses will get a 70% reimbursement.
- President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev signed a law ratifying the protocol to the Convention Concerning Forced or Compulsory Labor of the International Labor Organization. The protocol adopted in 2014 obligates the convention's states parties to provide protection and appropriate remedies, including compensation, to victims of forced labor and to sanction perpetrators.
- The second international conference themed "Seeking ways to eliminate tuberculosis in Asia" was held in Ulaanbaatar. According to the World Health Organization, the number of new tuberculosis cases reached 10 million globally, of which 60% were registered in Asia. Over 100 scientists and medical doctors discussed the policies implemented by their countries to prevent the disease and shared their research, achievements and new methods.
- The Fourth International Summer School for Junior Diplomats from Central Asia, Afghanistan and Mongolia was held at Issyk-Kul in Kyrgyzstan. The event, organized by the Diplomatic Academy under the Kyrgyz Foreign Ministry and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation with support from the OSCE, became a platform for young diplomats to share views and propose solutions of contemporary global and regional challenges.
- The Kazakh city of Atyrau hosted the first International Festival of Traditional Turkic Music, gathering renowned composers of Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The musical event, supported by the TURKSOY, is expected to give a new impetus to the development of cultural ties among the Turkic countries.
- The Second European Games, featuring 200 events in 15 sports and nearly 4,000 athletes from 50 countries, were held in Minsk. Some competitions offered qualification opportunities for the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo. Athletes from 43 countries won medals, with Russia, Belarus and Ukraine leading the medal table, while seven nations failed to win any medals.