

China's Strategic Interests and Future Role

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Abstract

China has two longstanding security interests in North Korea which are supported by a separately ruled North Korea on China's northeastern border: strategic interests related to the regime's value in helping Beijing manage important bilateral relationships and the assurance of China's "core interests". With a new Chinese leader, and ever more provocative actions by North Korea, China's calculations about its support for the Democratic People's Republic of Korea are under reassessment. This article finds that Chinese support for the DPRK and stability on China's northeastern periphery is the best available choice for achieving Chinese security goals, and high costs would be entailed with any adjustment to this support. However, if sudden change were to occur in North Korea, China would have to adjust. China's People's Liberation Army has been charged with preparing for various contingency scenarios, but available evidence suggests that the PLA would be unlikely to act to prop up the DPRK in a crisis. More likely, the PLA would act unilaterally to secure China's own interests, and this might entail movement into North Korea to set up a buffer zone. Fundamentally, however, China does not appear threatened by the potential for reunification as much as concerned about the costs to China's own interests in such a process.

Keywords: China, North Korea, security, "core interests" contingency scenarios

Introduction

This article provides a consideration of China's perspectives on the prospect of Korean unification in light of Chinese security objectives, an

assessment of the international security environment, and shifting views in Beijing and in the region.

Although Beijing has not identified North Korea as a core interest of China's, the expenditure of Chinese "blood and treasure" in North Korea over six decades nonetheless represents a sizeable Chinese commitment. No doubt much of that commitment is due to shared history and to some shared values. In "normal" times Chinese support for North Korea ebbs and flows depending on the degree of external pressure and prospects for internal reform. All things being equal, Beijing would prefer a reforming North Korea that would extend the period of a separately ruled and non-hostile geographic space adjacent to China, as a strategic buffer. Beijing has supported North Korea with trade as well as fuel and food transfers and has resisted diplomatic and military pressure against North Korea to prolong the duration of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) regime to this end, because doing so is seen as the most direct means to achieve the accomplishment of Chinese core interests. This support has also created some leverage for Beijing, as China's influence with the DPRK regime in North Korea has provided some strategic value as China shapes its relationships with South Korea, Japan, and the United States.

The rationale for Chinese support – geographical buffer and strategic leverage – is today under stress and is being reassessed, as China assumes more influential leadership in the region and globally, and as the DPRK appears to become more resistant to Chinese leadership. In the event of – and along the way to – reunification, both the existence of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea regime and its value as a strategic asset likely will become diminished, in Beijing's view. Ultimately, what will matter to China is that its core interests are protected, and these are tied to the geography of the Korean peninsula.

The article begins with China's assessment of the strategic environment it faces; proceeds to China's view of its own security interests; examines the historic role played by North Korea in China's national security calculations; evaluates how China's assessment may be changing under current Chinese president and Communist Party General Secretary, Xi Jinping; includes a judgment about how North Korea's place in that structure might be evolving in light of North Korean behavior and increasing Chinese power; and ends with some perspectives on how this changing security landscape might affect Chinese thinking about a variety of North Korea end state possibilities and contingency

planning.

China's Evaluation of the Strategic Environment

China assesses that the international environment is largely free from regime-threatening risks to the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) rule of the mainland. Furthermore, the absence of fundamental external security challenges creates a window of opportunity for the regime to rapidly pursue national development goals. The two most important developmental goals espoused by Chinese leadership are 1) that China will have become a "moderately well-off society" by 2020 in time for the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2021¹, and 2) that China will build a "a modern socialist country that is strong, prosperous, democratic, culturally-advanced, and harmonious" by the centenary anniversary of the PRC in 2049.²

These optimistic judgments about the nature of China's strategic environment appear in numerous sources. Most recently, China's Party General Secretary, state President, and Chairman of the Central Military Commission, Xi Jinping, asserted at the May 2014 Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) Summit in Shanghai, that

"Asia today, though facing more risks and challenges, is still the most dynamic and promising region in the world. *Peace, development and win-win cooperation* are the main trends in the region, and countries in the region generally prefer policies that address differences and disputes through consultation and negotiation. Asia enjoys a rising status in the international strategic landscape and plays an increasingly important role in promoting a multi-polar world and democracy in international relations. Such a sound situation in the region has not come easily and ought to be doubly cherished. (emphasis added)³

For its part, China's military shares the views of a largely peaceful and stable strategic environment. China's most recent National Defense White Paper, issued in April 2013 asserts that:

"Since the beginning of the new century, profound and complex changes have taken place in the world, but *peace and development* remain the underlying trends of our times. The global trends toward economic globalization and multi-polarity

are intensifying, cultural diversity is increasing, and an information society is fast emerging. The balance of international forces is shifting in favor of maintaining world peace, and *on the whole the international situation remains peaceful and stable.*⁴ (emphasis added)

However, there are regional situations that create concern for Beijing. Chinese State Councilor and former Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi noted in an important speech at the International World Peace Forum at Tsinghua University in late June 2014 that the “international situation is undergoing extremely profound and complex changes”, such as recovery from the recession in global economies, largely led by developing economies. But he also stated “the world is still far from tranquil. Regional turbulences keep flaring up, and traditional and non-traditional security issues are intertwined and affect each other. There is still a big gap between the North and the South, and global challenges crop up one after another. We still face an uphill battle to uphold peace and promote common development in the world.”⁵

The 2013 Defense White Paper elaborates on these regional challenges, which include that “(s)ome country has strengthened its Asia-Pacific military alliances, expanded its military presence in the region, and frequently makes the situation there tenser”, “some neighboring countries are taking actions that complicate or exacerbate the situation” in maritime disputes, “Japan is making trouble over the issue of the Diaoyu Islands,” “the ‘three forces,’ namely, terrorism, separatism and extremism, are on the rise”; “Taiwan independence separatist forces”, natural disasters and epidemics, as well as “new and more sophisticated military technologies” for competition in space and cyber domains.⁶

In sum, then, the PRC’s own assessment of the international security situation is that, on balance, it favors the accomplishment of Chinese goals. Where challenges are present, and these are largely regional, the clear sense is that the leadership sees them as manageable. Of note, however, no mention is made of stability on the Korean peninsula in the section on “International Security” in the 2013 PRC Defense White Paper, in contrast to previous White Papers⁷. While we perhaps ought not make too much of the absence of a statement, that other enduring challenges for China were mentioned – Taiwan, Diaoyu Islands, cyber security – suggests that either a reduction in immediacy of the challenge presented by the Korean situation or that it occupies a different place in

the register of security challenges.

That Chinese leaders have consistently affirmed this confident assessment about the international security situation is testimony both to a willingness to live with some risk – China is bordered by four nuclear weapons states as well as two American “nuclear umbrella” allies nearby – as well as several important developments in the last quarter century. First, the disappearance of the existential Soviet threat more than two decades ago liberated Beijing to reorient its strategic military posture away from a traditional northwestern threat and to China’s eastern seaboard⁸, and to pursue national development at an accelerated pace. Second, China has resolved 12 of the 14 land border disputes it had with neighbors – thus reducing one traditional source of tension related to national sovereignty. Third, marked increases in Chinese comprehensive national power⁹ over the last decade give the PRC raw power advantages over regional neighbors and this has doubtless led to a perceived increase in security. And finally, notwithstanding Beijing’s concerns with Washington’s purported “containment” of China by means of the military deployments and strengthened alliance relationships that comprise America’s “rebalance to Asia”, CCP leaders also know that generally constructive relations are important to both the U.S. and China; Washington has no intent to seek the end of CCP rule anytime soon.

However, assessing that the current environment is characterized by peace and stability, and that the peace and stability provided in the current environment is essential to achieving long-term goals, can result in the pursuit of peace and stability itself becoming a near-term goal, sometimes at the expense of other more meaningful or useful goals. This reality has important implications for a discussion of North Korea, as this article will examine later on.

The next section describes and analyzes core security challenges.

China’s Core Security Interests

The People’s Republic of China (PRC, or China) has traditionally seen its national security interests through the prism of strategically defensive outlook, oriented around the security of Chinese territory and endurance of the Chinese Communist Party. This view of Chinese traditional security priorities has remained largely consistent, since at least the beginning of the “reform and opening up” (改革开放) in the late 1970s. However, these national security goals were largely unarticulated. Writing in 2000, Michael Swaine and Ashley Tellis

argued that while there existed no clear articulation of China's national security priorities, these priorities could be deduced as including: domestic order, defense against "heartland threats, control on the periphery, and restoring China's place atop a regional hierarchy."¹⁰

However, in recent years Beijing has clearly articulated its goals. Beginning a trend begun in the early 2000's and accelerated in response to provocative moves by the government on Taiwan, China began to speak about "core interests." The definition was applied flexibly to a range of issues for several years until American interlocutors pressed for more clarity.¹¹ At the July 2009 U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED), State Councilor Dai Bingguo, the senior Chinese official responsible for PRC foreign policy, outlined China's "core interests". He asserted that 1) preserving China's basic state system and national security (维护基本制度和国家安全); 2) defending China's national sovereignty and territorial integrity (国家主权和领土完整); and 3) contributing to the continued stable development of China's economy and society (经济社会的持续稳定发展) were China's "core national interests".¹² To these central core interests Minister Dai also added a few additional priorities, namely Taiwan, resistance to separatist movements in Xinjiang and Tibet, and a new one, response to international terrorism.

In many respects, these foreign policy goals of the PRC mirror the priorities previously outlined for China's People's Liberation Army (PLA). In an unpublished speech in December 2004, the contents of which have been incorporated into official documents and statements since, then Chinese president Hu Jintao said that the PLA's priority missions were:

- to consolidate the ruling status of the Communist Party
- to help ensure China's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and domestic security in order to continue national development
- to safeguard China's expanding national interests
- to help maintain world peace¹³

But preserving the CCP, defending the sovereignty of Chinese territory (as well as pursuing the ability to avoid resolution of disputed territories – Taiwan, Diaoyu Islands, South China Seas islands, etc – on terms unfavorable to Beijing), and enabling Chinese domestic

development could be seen as strategic level guidance, they do not address all Chinese interests.

For instance, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) or North Korea is not directly mentioned as a "core interest" in Dai Bingguo's formulation, nor in other authoritative renderings of Chinese national security interests. The reasons for the absence of mention for North Korea are likely many. At least one might be that China's interest is self-evident, as witnessed by its provision of resources to North Korea, its participation in trade with the regime, and its tolerance of North Korean behavior (even if that might be changing to some degree). Even if it is not a "core" interest, China still clearly cares about developments on the Korean peninsula.

A second reason might relate to the formulation itself, namely that China uses "core interest" mostly (or only) regarding contested issues. In this way, by asserting that something is a "core interest" serves to mark the issue as important to China, and in the process establish its own preferences and prerogatives regarding how the issue might be resolved.¹⁴ In this regard, an armistice may represent an incomplete ending to the Korean War for some of the combatants, but from a Chinese perspective, the existence of North Korea as a separately ruled entity is settled and thus declaring its preference regarding an outcome is unnecessary.

There may be yet a third reason for why the Korean peninsula is not listed. As this article will explore, it is quite possible that the DPRK regime itself is not critically important to China, but rather the buffer that a separately ruled entity occupies is of fundamental importance to China. Beijing can hardly argue that an unchanging geographic space is a core interest unless who rules that geography is itself fundamental to Chinese interests.¹⁵ In the case of the Korean peninsula, whether or not the DPRK remains in power in North Korea may not be the most important factor for China regarding the Korean peninsula. The DPRK is simply the most expedient means for helping to achieve Chinese core interests of CCP stability, defense of national sovereignty and secure development.

How and why North Korea as an entity remains an important factor in China's national security calculus is the topic to which this article next turns.

North Korea's Standing with China

As just noted, North Korea is not regarded as a “core” national security interest of China. But Beijing and Pyongyang have maintained close ties historically. The two countries’ militaries fought side by side in the Korean War, earning the “as close as lips and teeth” appellation. And the PRC and DPRK did establish the Sino-North Korean Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty in 1961, renewing it for twenty years’ duration in both 1981 and 2001.

In a contemporary sense, Beijing still retains an important commitment to the DPRK. China provides vast quantities of food and fuel resources to North Korea, serves as North Korea’s major (only?) legitimate trade partner and provider of agriculture and technology, and acts as a security partner.

- Trade. China accounts for 70% of North Korean trade and over the period 2007-2013 the volume of trade nearly tripled to more than \$6.5 billion.¹⁶ North Korean exports of anthracite coal to China, the DPRK’s only recipient, rose more than fifteen percent in 2013.¹⁷ China supplies nearly ninety percent of North Korean energy.¹⁸
- Provision of goods: China provides more than 500,000 tons of fuel oil annually¹⁹ and nearly half of North Korean foodstuffs.²⁰ And unreimbursed trade constitutes a de facto subsidy, estimated to be more than \$1 billion in 2008 alone.²¹
- Security. China regularly supports North Korea in its dealings with regional actors, especially the U.S. and Japan. For instance, after the March 2010 sinking of the *Cheonan* vessel, the PRC refused to condemn the DPRK and offered only tepid calls for stability to be supported. In November 2010, China called for “peace and stability” after Yeonpyeong Island shelling killed 4 and wounded 19, and argued for a return to Six Party Talks.²²

China’s fundamental commitment to North Korea is rarely questioned, even as Beijing sometimes uses this commitment as leverage to get North Korea’s attention or to register displeasure. For instance, China periodically withholds shipments of goods and materiel. Of the 500,000-plus tons of oil China supplies to North Korea on an annual

basis, none was shipped during a total embargo from January to May 2014. Moreover, Beijing has registered its opposition to North Korean nuclear developments, even voting for UN Security Council Resolutions after North Korea's nuclear tests and satellite launch (UNSCR 1718, 874, 2087 and 2094). While China has historically sold weapons and materiel to North Korea, since 2006 it has been largely complying with the UNSCR embargo on arms exports to the DPRK. Moreover, China's People's Liberation Army has limited contacts with the DPRK's Korean People's Army and does not conduct bilateral military exercises with the Korean People's Army.

What can we make of China's qualified support for North Korea, and sometime outright opposition? What is China seeking? The consensus view is that Beijing seeks stability on its northeastern periphery and so subordinates its actions and policy decisions to the pursuit of that stability. Michael Swaine argues that China's carefully orchestrated strategy seeks modest changes in DPRK state behavior without pushing for such dramatic reform that instability might ensue.²³ Christopher Johnson says that China and North Korea are locked in a "mutual hostage" relationship.²⁴

While stability in the northeast is certainly important, this view can overlook a second major objective served by Chinese support for the regime in North Korea. Such support also enables strategic leverage vis-à-vis both South Korea and the United States. China's relationship with the DPRK provides context to China's ROK relationship, and potentially sets up a role for China in a reunification scenario. In China's bilateral relationship with the U.S., support for the North Korean regime usefully complicates American decision making in a Taiwan contingency while also allowing Beijing to reassign PLA forces to other regions that would otherwise be engaged in securing China's northeastern frontier.²⁵

The arguments for stability and leverage both have great salience under normal conditions. But is China really "locked in"? Or is it possible that support for the DPRK is simply the most expedient means to achieve Chinese goals? To be sure, a change in Chinese policy could potentially result in instability that would put at risk Chinese security priorities. But what if change occurs that is not principally due to Chinese action? In a reunification scenario in which China's "carrots and sticks" approach has ceased to work because the regime in North Korea has changed, what would China's approach be?

This is the principal challenge in equating the DPRK with the geography of North Korea. The traditional justifications for Chinese support become less useful if the regime changes in North Korea. However, the geography of North Korea still remains instrumental to the achievement of core Chinese national security interests of Party stability, national sovereignty, and secure development, irrespective of who rules in Pyongyang. In this respect, one might say that issues related to North Korea are *derivative national security interests*, in that they are related to China's core interests in supporting ways while not being central, or "core" interests themselves.

As we will see later, this has some potentially interesting implications regarding reunification.

But meanwhile, new leader XJP has launched a new way of thinking about China's role in the region and world.

Changes Underway in Beijing?

Since Xi Jinping assumed his positions as General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, Chairman of the Party's Central Military Commission (CMC), and President of the PRC in 2012-13 he has consolidated his leadership roles in effective ways.

On the one hand, he has cast a vision for a resurgent China, what has been called Xi Jinping's "China Dream", a nationalistic paean to the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese people."²⁶

On the other, he has rapidly seized the reins of power. Unlike his predecessor Hu Jintao, Xi Jinping assumed the chairmanship of the CMC at the outset of his leadership tenure of the CCP. While Xi was seen to be more "ready" for the CMC position by virtue of his own short military service in the 1970's and frequent interactions with PLA leadership in his various Party and provincial leadership roles since, the reality is probably more complicated. The result, however, is unambiguous and the problem of an incomplete power transition was avoided.

Xi Jinping has also pressed an ambitious reform agenda in all sectors of the Chinese governmental space, an agenda that was given momentum with the outcomes of the 18th Party Congress' Third Plenum in November 2013. He is pursuing that agenda through a highly personal involvement in the structures that make decisions. For instance, he is chair of at least 9 new leading groups, including a new national security committee²⁷, whose roles are still being defined, but which is poised to become a central coordinating body on matters of domestic and

international security.

Xi Jinping has also staked the Party's future on effectively dealing with public corruption. Led by the supposedly incorruptible Standing Committee member Wang Qishan, now head of the Party's Central Commission on Discipline Inspection, the new leader is staging a frontal assault on the corruption problem; more than thirty officials at the rank of vice minister and above are being investigated.²⁸ That former Politburo Standing Committee Member Zhou Yongkang as well as Politburo and CMC Vice Chair General Xu Caihou are under investigation suggests that Xi has already consolidated a great deal of power rather than as evidence that Xi is still in the process of doing so.

Xi has also made tentative steps to articulate the beginnings of a new regional security architecture. In his June 2014 speech at the CICA forum in Shanghai, Xi argued for an Asian-run Asian security structure, characterized by inclusiveness of each nation's goals, the pursuit of common security outcomes, the inclusion of both traditional and nontraditional issues in a comprehensive framework; and finally, that cooperation would be the watchword of the new structure.

In buttressing his argument for the new structure, Xi then went on to say:

In the final analysis, it is for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia and uphold the security of Asia. The people of Asia have the capability and wisdom to achieve peace and stability in the region through enhanced cooperation.²⁹

Alarm bells went off at the "Asia for Asians" call, not least because it suggested that the post-war de facto security structure of Asia, in which American alliances provided for the common security of the region, and enabled the emergence of prosperity throughout the region – including in China – had served its purpose and could be replaced.

The CICA Summit's Declaration did not adopt Xi's language but instead said, "We maintain that no State will strengthen its security at the expense of security of other States. Bearing in mind the UN Security Council's primary responsibility under the UN Charter for maintenance of international peace and security, we emphasize that no State, group of States or organisation can have pre-eminent responsibility for maintaining peace and stability."³⁰ But China was not completely

rebuffed as Beijing did assume the chairmanship of CICA for the ensuing two year period.

Whether Xi was indeed arguing for the eventual displacement of U.S. forces in the region or not, the major speech of State Councilor Yang Jiechi at the World Peace Forum in Beijing one month later notably excluded mention of an “Asia for Asians” theme. Yang did re-emphasize Xi Jinping’s call for common, cooperative, comprehensive, and sustainable security. But Yang also downplayed any sense that China was seeking an early departure of the U.S. from the Asian security landscape, even stating at one point,

“The formulation and implementation of the Asian security concept shows to the world that Asian countries have the wisdom and capability to promote peace and prosperity in the region through enhanced cooperation, such as encouraging the various sides to expand cooperation scope, adopt new approaches of cooperation and improve cooperation mechanisms with a view to making their pie of common interests still bigger. The concept has also highlighted the need for Asian countries, while enhancing cooperation among themselves, to firmly *commit to working with countries from other regions and with other regional and international organizations. All parties are welcome to play a positive and constructive role in promoting Asian security and cooperation.* At the same time, countries outside the region should take into full account the real conditions of the region, respect the reasonable concerns of the regional countries, and join us in working to enhance rather than compromise regional security and development.”³¹ (emphasis added)

Whether or not Yang’s speech reflected a judgment by the PRC’s collective leadership that the “Asian security for Asians” theme was not ready for prime time, it may be that China recognizes that pushing for Chinese leadership at this time³² may not serve China’s longer-term interests. However, the impulse to solve regional security challenges using regional assets and capabilities doubtless will reappear and could factor into Chinese calculations regarding reunification scenarios on the Korean peninsula.

What is clear, even as Xi faces numerous hurdles to achieving his ambitious agenda, is that he is a confident and assertive leader eager to

put his mark on all of China's policies. And it appears that he is beginning to put his imprint on North Korean policy as well.

Beijing's Views Toward the DPRK Changing as Well?

Beginning with the aftermath of the second DPRK nuclear test in May 2009, a marked change in the tone of China's North Korea watchers was observable as scholars argued that China ought to reconsider its long-standing, "no questions asked" support for the DPRK. More assertive and punitive recommendations for dealing with Pyongyang began to emerge. The arguments often assessed the impact on China's reputation by North Korean activity, or urged China's leaders to consider China's international obligations above historical commitments to the DPRK. That China felt fundamentally threatened by North Korea's nukes is unlikely. After all, Beijing lives in "nuclear neighborhood" and has long had a view of the utility of nuclear weapons that differs from the West. What is more likely is that Beijing judged that DPRK behavior was putting at risk Chinese interests by introducing instability that might result in the end of the regime and change China's security calculus on its border.

Beijing University's Zhu Feng was among the first to question China's support for the DPRK when he argued that the second nuclear test was "not just a slap in the face of China, but a sobering wake-up call for the Chinese leadership to face up to the malignant nature of their North Korean counterparts."³³ Zhang Liangui, a noted North Korea expert at China's Party School, even argued for China to undertake tough measures against North Korea, including putting a halt on food provision and oil shipments, as a means to deter North Korea's move to develop nuclear weapons.³⁴ A third Chinese scholar, Chu Shulong, formerly of the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations and now of Tsinghua University asserted that China and DPRK were certainly not allies at all and China would not come to North Koreans' help militarily in any case.³⁵ These views have held over time as very recently Chu has argued, "North Korea brings much more trouble than benefit".³⁶ And finally, in May 2009, Cai Jian of Fudan University asserted that since reunification was unavoidable and that it was likely terms of reunification would favor South Korea "(F)rom a long-term perspective, if China wants to be a world power and a responsible member of the international community, it has to put its responsibilities and duties to the

international community above its responsibilities and duties to North Korea.”³⁷

The cumulative effect of these arguments was to suggest that within China’s top leadership new views about how to deal with North Korea were emerging and so alternative ideas were welcome. After rising to the top of the collective leadership structure, Xi Jinping’s position on North Korea was layered onto this existing rhetorical platform. He is considered to have harder line views on North Korea than his predecessors and appears to regard that China’s interests are broader than just dealing well with North Korea. But even considering Xi’s evident displeasure with the third nuclear test in 2013 and Beijing’s elevation of North Korea’s denuclearization to a higher level in China’s priority list (yet still not above maintenance of stability), the dilemma remains for China how to effectively “punish” Pyongyang and press North Korea not to conduct a fourth test without pushing the regime to act in ways that inflict more serious damage and further destabilize peninsula.³⁸

In interviews conducted in Beijing in late July 2014, noted North Korea expert Andrei Lankov corroborates that Beijing remains quite displeased with the DPRK. Xi Jinping is said to be less willing to countenance behavior by the DPRK that puts at risk Chinese interests. Beijing was also concerned with the threatening language expressed toward China by North Korea in the aftermath of Jang Song-thaek execution, and regards the DPRK’s diplomatic outreach to Russia and Japan as transparent efforts to diversify North Korea’s external relations.³⁹

For its part, North Korea hardly seems to regard China as a partner. For starters, Kim Jong-un has not yet traveled to China in the two-plus years at the helm in Pyongyang. Meanwhile, internal NK propaganda is reportedly describing China as a “sworn enemy,” and all trade officials in China have supposedly been recalled for the second time since Jang Song-thaek’s execution in December 2013. And now, most recently, North Korea’s National Defense Commission has said that “(S)ome spineless countries are blindly following the stinking bottom of the U.S., also struggling to embrace (South Korean President) Park Geun-hye....”⁴⁰

Christopher Johnson characterizes the change in Chinese policy toward North Korea as the end of the “special state to state relationship” and movement toward one in which China’s vast power differential ought to mean that North Korea becomes much more deferential to

Chinese interests. Of course, North Korea may not have “gotten the memo” and failure on the part of Pyongyang to be more attentive to Beijing’s interests may result in increased tensions.⁴¹ China may be learning the difficulties of dealing in an alliance relationship where power is so unevenly distributed, which can result in “entrapment” of the stronger by the weaker; Beijing may well want that dynamic to change.

Most recently, in his visit to Seoul in early July 2014, Xi Jinping and President Park Gyeun-hye agreed on four points related to the importance and effectiveness of the Six Party Talks to dealing security on the Korean Peninsula. Then, Xi Jinping made additional comments that highlighted China’s own position:

China adheres to an *impartial and objective* stance on the Peninsula issue, and is firmly committed to achieving the goal of denuclearization on the Peninsula, safeguarding peace and stability on the Peninsula, and settling the issue through dialog and consultation. We believe that it is necessary to *address the concerns of all parties in a balanced way*, and adopt concurrent and reciprocal measures to incorporate the DPRK nuclear issue into a sustainable, irreversible, and practical process of settlement. ...China positively evaluates President Park Geun-hye’s initiative for the process of trust on the Peninsula and supports the south and the north to improve relations, realize reconciliation and cooperation, and *eventually realize independent and peaceful reunification*. (emphasis added)⁴²

Whether Xi Jinping tailored his message for his audience, or this statement reflects a variation on the “Asia for Asians” theme, the ideas are certain to be salient to whatever form of resolution takes place on the Korean Peninsula.

Perspectives on how this changing security landscape might affect Chinese thinking about a variety of North Korea end state possibilities, including reunification.

Not surprisingly, given the derivative national security priority China has placed in a stable northeastern border for accomplishment of China’s core interests, China’s preference would be to forestall reunification. Despite its flaws, the DPRK regime in North Korea is judged to be the best means, at the moment, to achieve Chinese goals. Indeed, as Yun Sun has argued, China is avoiding trilateral discussions with the U.S. and

ROK on North Korean contingencies precisely because Beijing is concerned with "one factor: the endgame in North Korea." China does want the DPRK to denuclearize, but believes that the US (and ROK) would push for "stabilization" after denuclearization that would likely result in reunification on terms favorable to the South. In a crisis, China would not only want to deal with refugees and the nuclear facilities, but also ensure a regime that was favorable to Beijing. This would be difficult to accomplish given U.S. influence in South Korea which would likely result in an arrangement in which the South was strengthened and U.S. goals were supported, which could go beyond denuclearization and safeguarding WMD to regime change under ROK leadership.⁴³

To forestall reunification, China's first priority would be that the DPRK undertake some reform, and thus be in a position to postpone or resist reunification, or failing that to press for DPRK prerogatives in a more equal manner. Indeed, a principal finding of the "Bold Switchover" initiative of 2006 was that a moderately reforming DPRK would more stable and less dangerous to its regional partners and would likely reap huge "peace dividend" benefits for itself and the region. Moreover, the economies of the region, and especially China's, would see a major bump in growth as a result.⁴⁴ Chinese efforts to this end through the years have included multiple measures including hosting DPRK economic delegations (including Kim Jong-il), joint venture efforts, and participation in North Korean special economic zones. To date, it appears to this observer that whatever reforms undertaken by the DPRK have had less to do with Chinese encouragement than with domestic North Korean priorities.

Failing to resist reunification on terms challenging for the DPRK, China's second priority would likely be to press for a process that takes place through a slow and managed process. Xi Jinping's statement to Park Gyeun-hye about a peaceful and independent reunification process resonates of this approach. To be sure, this priority can look a lot like China's first priority, especially if modest reform in North Korea had begun, and Chinese incentives to participate in a managed process might diminish. The difference may be that Beijing judges that some irreversible course has been taken that makes reunification more likely.

Easily the least desired outcome from Beijing's perspective would be a sudden change scenario, because so many variables are outside of China's control. The means by which sudden change could occur include an internal coup, regime collapse under sanctions, or even externally

assisted regime change. There has even been speculation in the South Korean media that China might be preparing its own contingency plans to take over North Korea, but this notion has problems at multiple levels, not least Beijing's own aversion to become involved in the sort of nation-building and reconstruction that it has observed to seriously bog down the U.S. in Iraq and Afghanistan. Chinese scholars also argue that this is unlikely.⁴⁵

Some specialists argue that the manner and type of external intervention would shape the degree to which China might consider the use force against other foreign powers. For instance, Lankow reports that China has no doubt considered options in the event of a North Korean meltdown, but is loath to initiate change, because the status quo is still Beijing's best option. In the event of forced change, China could consider multilateral responses as acceptable. But U.S.-South Korean intervention would be regarded as very serious, and would likely trigger a response.⁴⁶ The degree of UN approval appears to matter to a great extent as well.

It also appears unlikely that China would intervene in the event of a crisis to prop up the DPRK regime. A major intervention would bring the same "over-involvement" risks that a take-over would bring. A lesser intervention to support the existing regime would require the sort of combined effort that begs for preparation and training to be done well in advance, both to deter other actors and to result in well-coordinated action in the event. However, the complete absence of bilateral military training activities between China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the DPRK's Korean People's Army (KPA) makes this option very unlikely. Not only has the PLA *not* conducted any bilateral training exercises with the KPA recently, but according to a review of the foreign exercises listed in the last 5 PRC Defense White Papers, there is no evidence of ANY bilateral exercises involving the PLA and North Korean Korean People's Army (KPA) for at least the last decade. Meanwhile, these same Defense White Papers list dozens of exercises with a variety of partner nations (Russian, SCO states) as well as potential adversary nations (U.S., U.K.).⁴⁷

The total absence of combined training almost completely rules out the possibility of coordinated intervention in the event of a crisis, and is quite puzzling. Possible explanations for the lack of combined training include that either or both of the two militaries might not been interested. But this explanation is hardly satisfactory, at least from Beijing's

perspective, because of the apparent relative eagerness of the PLA to train with foreign militaries, and to highlight those events in its biennial defense white papers. Additionally, China's military interactions with North Korea have taken place largely within the policy or political commissar spheres, such as the 2010 visit by CMC Vice Chairman General Guo Boxiong or the November 2011 visit of General Political Department Director General Li Jinai to Pyongyang. These political connections in the military sphere mirror the International Liaison Department's role in the Party-Party dimension.

However, not supporting or participating in regime change does not mean that China has not made proactive preparations to engage in North Korea. Implementing China's military policy to the DPRK is a Central Military Commission (CMC) leadership that has much expertise on North Korea as any CMC in recent memory. CMC Vice Chairman Xu Qiliang commanded the Shenyang Military Region Air Force at an earlier point in his career. Fellow Vice Chairman Fan Changlong spent more than 30 years in the Shenyang Military Region, eventually rising to become Chief of Staff before moving over to assume command of the Jinan Military Region. And General Armaments Department Director Zhang Youxia, son of a revolutionary era general who had close ties to Xi Jinping's father, commanded the Shenyang MR before assuming his own position on the CMC.⁴⁸ Collectively, their knowledge and experience suggest the potential for sophisticated contingency planning on North Korea.

The PLA does have an active program of military exercises in the northeastern Shenyang Military Region bordering North Korea. Beyond the military necessity of carrying out China's annual training calendar to inculcate new conscripts, Beijing likely also sees the utility of its exercise program as part of a comprehensive national plan to help deter North Korean aberrant behavior. In this regard, it bears noting that in January 2014, the PLA deployed to the field on short notice more than 100,000 troops.⁴⁹ Though unlikely to have been fully coordinated training – at that phase in the annual cycle soldiers were likely involved in individual and crew training – the number of troops in the field seemed intended to convey a message to North Korea. A Chinese military scholar told the author that the exercise was useful to communicate Chinese displeasure with DPRK actions.⁵⁰ And North Korea may have gotten the message, as it was reported that KPA border units built fortified machine gun emplacements to defend against

possible Chinese incursion in response.⁵¹

PLA exercises in the Shenyang MR may also be preparations for a range of North Korean contingencies, including acting in unilateral military fashion in the event of a DPRK collapse. Traditional views of Chinese military goals in an unplanned regime change in North Korea include preventing refugees, securing strategic sites, preventing U.S. close proximity to Chinese territory.⁵² These goals are fully consistent with a China that sees North Korean territory as more important than the DPRK as a governing entity. However, an assessment of China's international security environment, evaluation of China's core interests, and evolving judgments about China's regional security roles certainly allows for the possibility that PLA contingency planning might be more expansive, including that Chinese forces could move rapidly to establish a physical buffer zone in North Korea.

A typical rebuttal of the possibility that PLA units might move into North Korea is that China would never station troops in a foreign country. However, China has long since gotten over its self-imposed aversion to foreign deployments, especially if those deployments serve peacekeeping or humanitarian purposes. Indeed, it is not difficult to imagine the movement of PLA forces into North Korean territory under the guise of "humanitarian assistance and disaster relief." An earlier study even found that these humanitarian missions could well include: 1) assisting after a natural disaster; 2) peacekeeping or "order keeping" missions such as serving as civil police; and 3) "environmental control" measures to clean up potential nuclear contamination and to secure nuclear facilities.⁵³

Where and to what depth PLA forces might move within North Korea would be a function of several factors, including that the 1,400-km length of the border, whether to move a uniform distance into North Korea or make terrain-dependent decisions about the depth of an incursion, and whether to establish holding areas for refugees within the DPRK. The PLA also has limitations in mobility, especially helicopters, and this would require careful analysis about the depth of an incursion.⁵⁴ Whether the PLA might have more expansive goals than a limited ground-based cross-border move would remain to be seen. Re-establishing direct access to the Sea of Japan by occupying the salient of northeast North Korea to the southeast of Yanbian City on the southern banks of the Tumen River, and including Rajin and Sombong, would be an example of a more ambitious incursion. Indeed, some speculative reports out of South Korea suggest PLA forces may also have traveled

there to secure Chinese interests.⁵⁵

Conclusions and Implications

This article finds that North Korea's situation is not presently of central importance to Chinese assessments about the international security situation, nor that pursuit of specific outcomes in North Korea constitutes a "core interest" of China. Rather, North Korea is what this article calls a derivative security interest, important for what it allows Beijing to accomplish regarding its "core interests". Chief among these are defense of Chinese territorial sovereignty, preservation of the Chinese Communist Party, and secure economic development. Chinese support for the DPRK is maintained because it is the least costly approach, Beijing judges, to protect its core interests.

This viewpoint has obvious implications for reunification, which China would want to forestall in any event, in order to manage the outcome in ways that support Chinese goals. Beijing has doubtless made contingency preparations for a range of North Korean scenarios. The article finds that an examination of current PLA training exercises, as well as the absence of any bilateral PLA-KPA training, almost rule out any sort of coordinated military action with the DPRK's Korean People's Army. Indeed, the likelihood of unilateral PLA actions, especially in the event of a sudden collapse, is greater. China could move rapidly to establish a buffer even within North Korean territory, but would be limited by mobility factors in moving too deeply within North Korea.

The evidence does not suggest that Beijing believes its regime to be fundamentally threatened by a potential dissolution of the DPRK and reunification of the Korean Peninsula under Republic of Korea rule, even perhaps with American or South Korean troops stationed well north of the 38th Parallel. If that were the case, Beijing would have telegraphed that message already: stability on the Korean Peninsula would be an integral part of Chinese assessments of the international security situation, Korean peninsula outcomes would be added to a list of "core interests", and Chinese policy and planning would go beyond the diplomatic efforts to date and would include military planning and exercises with the DPRK. These have not happened.

What is clear is that China would find these developments to be enormously complicating factors in Chinese national security planning. Would Beijing still assess that "peace and development" were the main geopolitical trends if U.S. forces were near to China's border and

"containment" seemed a much more real development? The costs of a reassessment would be significant. Assuming direct management of China's northeastern periphery would almost certainly result in a reallocation of military forces there, and could quite possibly result in a new military strategic direction, with implications for strategy, force development, and weapons systems modernization. Thus, Beijing's blustering opposition to this potential development seeks to preemptively forestall its coming to pass because it sees the downsides and implications for its own freedom of action.

The Xi Jinping regime's changing views about the regional situation and China's roles therein are further complicating factors. Would Xi push for a much greater say in a reunification scenario while seeking to exclude U.S. action in an "Asian security managed by Asians" approach? If so, what responses would the U.S. and South Korea make? These questions remain to be answered.

Notes:

¹ "Full text of Hu Jintao's report at 18th Party Congress," Xinhua, November 17, 2012. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/special/18cpcnc/2012-11/17/c_131981259_4.htm.

² "Xinhua Insight: New Leadership's First Year, a Good Beginning of Chinese Dream," Xinhua, January 9, 2014. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/indepth/2014-01/09/c_133032687.htm.

³ Keynote speech of HE Xi Jinping, Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) Summit, Shanghai, China, May 21, 2014. http://www.s-cica.org/page.php?page_id=711&lang=1.

⁴ The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces, Information Office of the State Council, People's Republic of China, April 2013. http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Video/2013-04/19/content_4443469.htm. Hereafter, 2013 PRC Defense White Paper. Hereafter, 2013 PRC Defense White Paper.

⁵ Yang Jiechi, State Councilor, "Join Hands in Working for Peace and Security in Asia and the World" Speech at the The Third World Peace Forum, Tsinghua University, 21 June 2014.

⁶ 2013 PRC Defense White Paper.

⁷ This may be due to a format change in the 2013 PRC Defense White Paper, the main purpose of which was to explain how China intended to use its armed forces on military operations other than war (MOOTW) and, as a result, the

International Security section was shorter than in previous years. In the 2010 Defense White Paper's section on International Security, it was noted that there are "intermittent tensions on the Korean Peninsula."

⁸ David M. Finkelstein, "China's National Military Strategy: An Overview of the 'Military Strategic Guidelines,'" in *Right Sizing the People's Liberation Army: Exploring the Contours of China's Military*, ed. Roy Kamphausen and Andrew Scobell (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, 2007), pp. 69–140.

⁹ Comprehensive national power (CNP) is a calculation regarding the interaction of several critical factors related to national strength. See Hu Angang and Men Honghua, 'The Rising of Modern China: Comprehensive National Power and Grand Strategy,' *Strategy & Management* 3 (2002), p. 1.

¹⁰ Michael Swaine and Ashley Tellis, *Interpreting China's Grand Strategy*, Rand: Washington, DC, 2000, p. 112.

¹¹ Michael Swaine, "Chinese Assertiveness, Part One: On "Core Interests", *China Leadership Monitor* 34, February 22, 2011. <http://www.hoover.org/research/chinas-assertive-behavior-part-one-core-interests>.

¹² State Councilor Dai Bingguo, Closing Remarks for U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue, Washington, DC, July 28, 2009. <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/july/126599.htm>. Dai's elucidation in part was a response to American pressure for China to actually enumerate its priorities.

¹³ Daniel Hartnett, "Towards a Globally Focused Chinese Military: The *Historic Missions* of the Chinese Armed Forces" *Center for Naval Analyses*, June 2008. <http://www.cna.org/sites/default/files/9.pdf>.

¹⁴ Swaine, "On Core Interests", p. 6.

¹⁵ Taiwan is a core interest because China does not rule there, and Beijing cannot countenance any final outcome that rules out Chinese authority in Taiwan.

¹⁶ Korea International Trade Association, March 18, 2014. <http://global.kita.net/>.

¹⁷ "N. Korea's coal exports to China up 15.1 pct in 2013," *Yonhap News*, January 24, 2014. <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/northkorea/2014/01/24/19/0401000000AEN20140124006300315F.html>.

¹⁸ <http://www.cfr.org/china/china-north-korea-relationship/p11097>.

¹⁹ http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2014/05/26/2014052601515.html

²⁰ <http://www.cfr.org/china/china-north-korea-relationship/p11097>.

²¹ <http://www.cfr.org/china/china-north-korea-relationship/p11097>.

²² Author discussion with senior Chinese Foreign Ministry official on November 24, 2010. The official asserted to the author and a visiting American retired senior military officer “now that NK has gotten this out of his system, isn’t it time to return to 6PT?”

²³ Michael Swaine, “China’s North Korea Dilemma” *China Leadership Monitor* 30, November 19, 2009. <http://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/CLM30MS.pdf>.

²⁴ Christopher Johnson, "Decoding China’s Emerging “Great Power” Strategy in Asia", Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 2014, p. 35. http://csis.org/files/publication/140603_Johnson_DecodingChinasEmerging_WEB.pdf.

²⁵ Shen Dingli, "North Korea’s Strategic Significance to China" *China Security*, Autumn 2006, pp. 19 - 34.

²⁶ Zhao Yanan, “‘Chinese dream’ is Xi’s vision,” *China Daily*, March 18, 2013. http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2013npc/2013-03/18/content_16315025.htm.

²⁷ Christopher Johnson, "Decoding China’s Emerging “Great Power” Strategy in Asia", Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 2014, p. 44. http://csis.org/files/publication/140603_Johnson_DecodingChinasEmerging_WEB.pdf.

²⁸ Cheng Li, “Debunking Misconceptions about Xi Jinping’s Anti-corruption Campaign” *Brookings Brief*, July 17, 2014 <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2014/07/17-xi-jinping-anticorruption-misconceptions-li-mcelveen>.

²⁹ Statement by H.E. Mr. Xi Jinping, President People’s Republic of China, CICA Summit, Shanghai, China, May 21, 2014.

³⁰ Declaration of the 4th CICA Summit, May 21, 2014. http://www.s-cica.org/page.php?page_id=7&lang=1.

³¹ Yang Jiechi, PRC State Councilor, “Join Hands in Working for Peace and Security in Asia and the World” Opening of the Third World Peace Forum Tsinghua University, Beijing, Chian, 21 June 2014.

³² China’s seemingly unbridled military modernization program is hardly confidence-building for smaller regional states, and when added to China’s apparent assertiveness on maritime claims, after years in which others were much more aggressive in laying their claims, do not provide a backdrop for

recommending fundamental changes in regional security architecture, especially one led by China.

³³ Zhu Feng, "North Korea Nuclear Test and Cornered China," *PacNet*, no. 41, Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), June 1, 2009.

³⁴ See Wang Yen-che, "Without a Strong Power of Persuasion, the Mainland Is Concerned About North Korea's Nuclear Threat," *Ming Pao* online, May 26, 2009.

³⁵ Chu Shulong, "The ROK-DPRK-PRC Three-Party Relations," Manuscript Presented at the 2nd NEAR-Tsinghua Workshop on *Korea- China Security and Strategic Dialogue* (October 17, 2011).

³⁶ "North Korea brings much more trouble than benefit: scholar".
<http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/northkorea/2014/06/24/76/040100000AEN20140624005200315F.html>

³⁷ Cai Jian, "How Should China Respond to the Resurgence of the North Korean Nuclear Issue," *Shijie Zhishi*, May 1, 2009, pp. 27–29, in OSC CPP20090514671009.

³⁸ Yun Sun, "The North Korea Contingency: Why China Will Not Cooperate" July 25, 2014. <http://38north.org/2014/07/ysun072514>

³⁹ Andrei Lankov, "How China's view of North Korea is changing: *Beijing opposes unilateral action by Seoul, Washington in event of N. Korean collapse*" NK News, July 24, 2014.

⁴⁰ "North Korea Slams 'Spineless' China' *Choson Ilbo*, July 24, 2014.
http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2014/07/22/2014072201653.html.

⁴¹ Chris Johnson, CSIS Report, p. 23.

⁴² Chen Zhi, Qian To'ng, and Meng Na, "Xi Jinping Holds Talks With ROK President in Seoul" *Xinhua* July 3, 2014.

⁴³ Yun Sun, "The North Korea Contingency: Why China Will Not Cooperate" July 25, 2014. <http://38north.org/2014/07/ysun072514>.

⁴⁴ Nicholas Eberstadt, et. al, "Regional Economic Implications of DPRK Security Behavior: The "Bold Switchover Concept" Final Conference Report, *The National Bureau of Asian Research* (March 2006). http://www.nbr.org/downloads/pdfs/PSA/BS_Conf06_report.pdf.

⁴⁵ Bonnie Glaser, Scot Snyder, and John S. Park, "Keeping an Eye on an Unruly Neighbor" *USIP Working Paper*, January 3, 2008. <http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/resources/Jan2008.pdf>.

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- ⁴⁶ Andrei Lankov, “How China’s view of North Korea is changing: *Beijing opposes unilateral action by Seoul, Washington in event of N. Korean collapse*” NK News, July 24, 2014.
- ⁴⁷ No China-DPRK exercises in 2011-12. http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Database/WhitePapers/2013-04/19/content_4443471.htm; 2009-2010: http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Database/WhitePapers/2011-04/06/content_4442735_2.htm. ; 2007-2008: http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Database/WhitePapers/2009-07/31/content_4017039.htm; 2005-06: http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Database/WhitePapers/2007-01/15/content_4004332.htm;
- ⁴⁸ Greg Chafin, “China’s New Military Leadership and the Challenges It Faces: An Interview with Roy Kamphausen” January 18, 2013. <http://nbr.org/research/activity.aspx?id=303>.
- ⁴⁹ “PLA mobilizes 100,000 troops for N Korean border exercise,” *Want China Times*, January 15, 2014, WantChinaTimes.com.
- ⁵⁰ Interview with PLA military scholar, March 2014.
- ⁵¹ January 20, 2014 Choson Ilbo. http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2014/01/20/2014012001538.html
- ⁵² Sue Mi Terry, “A Korea Whole and Free: Why Unifying the Peninsula Won’t Be So Bad After All” *Foreign Affairs*, July-August 2014, pp. 153-162.
- ⁵³ Bonnie Glaser, Scot Snyder, and John S. Park, “Keeping an Eye on an Unruly Neighbor” USIP Working Paper, January 3, 2008. <http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/resources/Jan2008.pdf>.
- ⁵⁴ Roy D. Kamphausen, “China’s Land Forces: New Priorities and Capabilities” in *Strategic Asia 2012-13: China’s Military Challenge*, Seattle, WA: 2012, p. 18.
- ⁵⁵ Rowan Callick, “Beijing ‘Sends Troop Contingent’ into North Korea,” *Australian*, January 18, 2011. <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/beijing-sends-troop-contingent-into-north-korea/story-e6frg6so-1225989815007>.