

## Chinese-North Korean Relations at a Crossroads<sup>1</sup>

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### **I. The Emerging Double Paradox**

At the locus of the "last glacier of the Cold War," there is a double paradox at work on the Korean peninsula, structured and symbolized by two competing alliances forged during the heyday of the Cold War: North Korea with China (1961) and South Korea with the United States (1954). The peninsula is currently experiencing an unprecedented crisis of alliance maintenance, even survival. For better or worse, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), or North Korea, is the only country with which the People's Republic of China (PRC) "maintains"—whether in name or in practice—its 1961 Cold-War pact. Yet amidst Chinese worries that the U.S.-DPRK nuclear confrontation may spiral out of control, in March 2003 Beijing established a leading Group on the North Korean Crisis (LGNKC), headed by President Hu Jintao. The LGNKC's mission is to improve assessment of the intelligence "black hole" over Pyongyang's nuclear capabilities and intentions and to formulate a cost-effective conflict management strategy.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, the half-century-old alliance between the U.S. and the Republic of Korea (ROK) has recently been mired in unprecedented disarray, especially since the inauguration of the hard-line Bush administration in 2001. However, Sino-ROK relations in political, economic, cultural, and perceptual terms have grown by leaps and bounds over the past decade. According to a major public opinion survey conducted by the ROK Ministry of Information in 1996, 47.1 percent of South Koreans chose China as Korea's "closest partner for the year 2006," in striking contrast to the 24.8 percent selecting the United States.<sup>2</sup> In a multinational citizens' opinion survey jointly sponsored by Dong-a Ilbo (Seoul) and Asahi Shinbun (Tokyo) and conducted in the fall of 2000, 52.6 percent of South Korean respondents predicted China to be the most influential Asian power in ten years, compared to only 23.3 percent for Japan and 8.1 percent for the United States.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, according to the Beijing Area Study's "feeling thermometer" (0-100 degrees), the mean degree of positive feeling toward South Korea

was 58 degrees, in contrast to 47 degrees for the United States and 35 degrees for Japan.<sup>4</sup>

Against the backdrop of rising anti-Americanism—more accurately anti-Bushism—in recent years there has also been a "China vogue" (Hanfeng) underway in South Korea, just as there is an "ROK wave" (Hanliu) in China. In the context of the unfolding second nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula, Beijing is moving closer to Seoul than to Pyongyang or Washington, just as Seoul is moving closer to Beijing than to its superpower ally in Washington or to Pyongyang. To some Chinese pundits, Seoul's proactive engagement stand is rational and sensible, constituting one of the biggest safeguards preventing the U.S.-DPRK nuclear confrontation from escalating into war.

## **II. Managing Asymmetric Security Interdependence**

A brief retrospect of the creation of the complex and evolving Beijing-Pyongyang-Seoul triangle clearly shows that the shift from a one-Korea to a two-Koreas policy is one of the most momentous changes in China's post-Cold War policy. In contrast with China's 1950 decision to intervene in the Korean War, however, the Joint Communique of 1992 that normalized China-South Korea relations lacked all the hallmarks of a foreign-policy crisis. By fits and starts, Beijing's Korea policy in the long Deng decade evolved through several phases—from the familiar one-Korea (pro-Pyongyang) policy to a one-Korea *de jure*/two-Koreas *de facto* policy and finally to a policy of two-Koreas *de facto* and *de jure*. The normalization decision was the culmination of a process of balancing and adjusting post-Mao foreign policy to the logic of changing domestic, regional, and global situations.<sup>5</sup>

The single greatest challenge to smooth management of the new Beijing-Pyongyang-Seoul relationship has remained Pyongyang's "security" behavior, which has varied from nuclear brinkmanship to missile-coercive diplomacy. The North Korean security predicament, along with the question of how to manage it in a cost-effective way, has remained one of the most daunting geopolitical challenges confronting China's foreign relations in the post-Cold War world. An unstable North Korea with inordinate potential to destabilize Northeast Asia with the threat of its conventional and non-conventional military capabilities has extraordinary refractory ramifications for China's foreign policy in

general and its two-Koreas policy in particular. Whether Beijing likes it or not, Pyongyang's nuclear brinkmanship has already become an important security issue in regional and global politics, especially in America's East Asian policy and in Sino-American relations.

Although Beijing's relations with North Korea began to be renormalized in recent years (1999-2001), due in no small part to shared threat perceptions emanating from the America-led Kosovo war, there remains just beneath the surface a highly asymmetrical interdependence in all political, military, and economic issue areas. This is still a fragile relationship of strategic convenience fraught with the underlying tensions and asymmetries of mutual expectations and interests. Thanks to growing enmeshment in the global community, China's concept and practice of security have experienced considerable modification and refinement in the post-Mao era of reform and opening, while North Korea remains an insecure but resolute garrison state, a country with seemingly fatal contradictions on the verge of explosion or implosion.

What then explains the paradox of North Korea's survival as it continues to muddle through with China as its only formal ally, even as Beijing finds Pyongyang increasingly difficult to deal with, if it is not openly hostile to it? This is partly because of geography—North Korea's occupying China's strategic cordon sanitaire—and partly because of the threat of potential armed conflict between the U.S. and the DPRK. Indeed, the single greatest challenge confronting Beijing is the danger of Pyongyang's nuclear brinkmanship combining with Washington's rogue-state strangulation strategy in an escalation into war—a war that would bring massive direct and collateral damage to Chinese geopolitical and geoeconomic interests.

### **III. Stability versus Survival**

Faced with the realities of asymmetrical interdependence on the ground, Beijing seeks to achieve multiple, mutually competing goals on several fronts. These goals include maintaining peace and stability on the Korean peninsula, promoting economic exchange and cooperation with South Korea, helping North Korea's regime survive, halting the flow of North Korean refugees into Jilin Province, stopping the rise of ethnonationalism among ethnic Chinese-Koreans, and enhancing China's influence in Korean

affairs. In other words, China's foreign-policy wish list with respect to its northeast neighbor includes at least five "no's": no instability, no collapse, no nukes, no refugees or defectors, and no conflict escalation.

Nonetheless, China's Korea policy must also be understood in a larger context of grand strategic goals and practical means of international conduct that Chinese leaders have adopted and pursued. China's foreign policy forms a double triangulation: domestic, regional, and global levels interact in the pursuit of three overarching demands and goals. The first is economic development, with an eye to enhancing domestic stability and legitimacy. The second is promotion of a peaceful and secure external environment free from threats to China's sovereignty and territorial integrity in Asia. And the third overarching goal is the cultivation of its status as a responsible great power in global politics.

For the DPRK, however, the most critical challenge is how to survive in a post-Cold War, post-communist, globalizing world by seeking more aid as an external life-support system, without triggering a cataclysmic system collapse. During the long Cold War years, geopolitics and ideology combined to make it possible for Pyongyang to extract maximum economic, military, and security benefits from China and the Soviet Union and to claim that the North Korean system was a socialist success. But the so-called *juche*-based self-reliant economy, which lived in essence on disguised aid from the Soviet Union and China,<sup>7</sup> has been exposed as a mirage in the post-Cold War era of globalization, and "our style socialism" is a poor substitute ideology to cope with the deepening crisis.

One of the most telling paradoxes of North Korean foreign policy is the extent to which Pyongyang has successfully managed to have its *juche* cake and eat it too. As an appealing legitimating principle, *juche* has often been turned on its head to conceal a high degree of dependence on Soviet and Chinese aid. Thus, the DPRK contorted *juche* to obscure the aid sent by the USSR and the PRC. Between 1948 and 1984, Moscow and Beijing were Pyongyang's first and second most important patrons, supplying \$2.2 billion and \$900 million in aid, respectively.<sup>8</sup> Thanks to the East-West and Sino-Soviet rivalries during the Cold War, Pyongyang was allowed to practice such concealed mendicant diplomacy. The end of the Cold War, the demise of the Soviet Union, and the end of Sino-

Soviet rivalry transformed both the context and the condition for maintaining such aid-dependent relations with Moscow and the traditional "lips-to-teeth" strategic ties with Beijing.

Still, North Korea has earned a reputation for employing "the power of the weak," creating and using crises to extract concessions to compensate for growing domestic failings. Indeed, North Korean nuclear and missile brinkmanship serves as a fungible instrument of security and survival strategy, as was made manifest in the 1994 U.S.-DPRK Agreed Framework (now on its death bed) and a recent "package of solutions" deal advanced by North Korea in the six-party talks in Beijing (August 27–29, 2003). With continuing asymmetries of need and expectation, Beijing's foreign-policy interests and objectives coalesce, clash, or compete with those of Pyongyang in situation-specific ways.

#### **IV. Managing Asymmetric Socioeconomic Interdependence**

From the perspective of post-Mao reform, the South Korean economy has represented opportunities to be more fully exploited by China, whereas North Korea's economic troubles have posed a burden the PRC wants to lessen without damaging geopolitical ties or causing system collapse. In the wake of the 1990 Soviet-ROK normalization, China's status as North Korea's biggest trading partner and principal economic patron has become a mixed blessing. In the process of the geopolitical and geoeconomic transformations of the early post-Cold War years, a highly asymmetric Beijing-Pyongyang-Seoul triangular economic relationship has emerged.

China's economic relations with the DPRK over the years are notable in several respects. First, Sino-DPRK trade seems closely keyed to and determined by turbulent political trajectories. Second, North Korea's trade deficits with China have been chronic and substantial, amounting to a cumulative total of \$4.45 billion between 1990 and 2002—the DPRK imported \$6.1 billion worth of goods from China and only exported \$1.7 billion worth of goods to China. While China remained North Korea's largest trade partner in the 1990s in terms of total value, Beijing has allowed Pyongyang to run average annual deficits of approximately \$358 million since 1995. China's role in the DPRK's trade is even larger if barter transactions and aid are factored into these figures. In contrast, South Korea's trade with China in 2002 amounted to more than \$41

billion—56 times greater than that of North Korea—with a huge trade surplus for the ROK of about \$10.3 billion.<sup>9</sup> In 2002, for the first time since the collapse of Sinocentric order in East Asia in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, China reasserted its historic role as the largest trading partner of the Korean peninsula as a whole.

The third notable characteristic of PRC-DPRK economic relations is that Beijing's aid in the form of food and energy supplies is an integral part of Pyongyang's external life-support system. North Korea's dependency on China for aid has grown unabated and has even intensified in the face of Washington's rogue-state sanctions strategy. Although the exact amount of China's aid remains unknown, support for North Korea is generally estimated at one-quarter to one-third of China's overall foreign aid. Recent estimates of China's aid are in the range of 1 million tons of wheat and rice and 500,000 tons of heavy-fuel oil per annum, accounting for 70 to 90 percent of North Korea's fuel imports and about one-third of its total food imports. With the cessation of America's heavy-fuel oil delivery in December 2002, China's oil aid and exports may now be approaching nearly 100 percent of North Korea's energy imports.<sup>10</sup> As a way of enticing Pyongyang to the six-party talks in late August 2003, President Hu Jintao promised Kim Jong II greater economic aid than in previous years (see below). In short, Beijing has become more deeply involved, playing a crucial role year to year in the politics of regime survival by providing more aid in a wider variety of forms: direct government-to-government aid, subsidized cross-border trade, and private barter transactions.

Paradoxically, Pyongyang's growing dependence on Beijing for economic and political survival has led to mutual distrust and resentment. Just as Mao demanded and resented Soviet aid for China's nuclear development, first Kim II Sung and now Kim Jong II have demanded but also resented Chinese aid. Indeed, Pyongyang's seeming inability to reconstruct its national identity in the face of a changing geopolitical context has engendered intense behind-the-scenes bargaining amidst an atmosphere of mutual suspicion. In every high-level meeting between the two governments, North Korean requests for economic aid dominate the agenda.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, Beijing continues to provide minimal necessary survival aid in order to lessen the flow of refugees into China, to delay a potential North Korean collapse, and to enhance

China's own leverage in both Pyongyang and Seoul. However, since the North Korean regime realizes that China's aid is given for Beijing's own self-interest, it has not greatly increased China's leverage with Pyongyang, much to Beijing's growing chagrin and frustration.

The rapid growth of Sino-Korean interactions at all levels involving political, economic, educational, religious, and humanitarian actors has also created a mixture of emerging challenges for identity politics in the complex web of asymmetrical interdependence. There has already emerged a Pyongyang-Beijing-Seoul triangle of human movements, involving flows of some 200,000 to 300,000 refugees from North Korea to northeast China, more than 400,000 Chinese middle-class tourists to South Korea, about 135,000 Chinese-Korean (chosonjok) illegal migrant workers from China to South Korea, and almost a million South Korean tourists to China in 2000, reaching 1.72 million visitors in 2002. In 2001, South Korea saw for the first time more Chinese visitors (some 444,000) than American tourists. Against this backdrop, the North Korean refugee question, hitherto a much ignored potential time bomb for both Koreas, has brought into sharp relief Beijing's abiding concerns about the possibility of a North Korean collapse leading to Korean reunification by Southern absorption.

#### **V. Avoiding a Nuclear Apocalypse**

Beijing's uncharacteristically proactive conflict-management role in the latest (second) U.S.-DPRK nuclear standoff suggests a changing strategic calculus on China's part and a reprioritization of competing interests and goals. At least until the end of 2002, China maintained a "who me?" posture, trying hard to keep out of harm's way with a strategy of calculated ambiguity and equidistance. As a way of maximizing its influence over Korean affairs, China often sought to be all things to all parties, which raises questions about the regime's true intentions. In short, Beijing followed Deng's foreign-policy axiom of "hiding its light under a bushel" by not placing itself on the front lines of the Korean conflict, especially in the 1993-1994 U.S.-DPRK nuclear standoff, playing neither a mediator nor peacemaker role for fear it might get burned if something went wrong.

All of this has changed in the heat of the second nuclear crisis on the Korean peninsula, in several dramatic and unprecedented

ways. In the first quarter of 2003, Beijing was busy at long-distance telephone diplomacy, reportedly having passed over fifty messages back and forth between Pyongyang and Washington. Further, Beijing successfully initiated and hosted, for the first time, a round of trilateral talks involving the United States, the DPRK, and China in Beijing (April 23-25, 2003). Despite or perhaps because of the inconclusive ending of the three-party Beijing talks, China's sudden burst of conflict-management activity in the form of jet-setting preventive diplomacy then accelerated. In July 2003, Beijing dispatched its top troubleshooter—Deputy Foreign Minister Dai Bingqiao—to Moscow, Pyongyang, and Washington to seek ways of "finding common ground while preserving differences" (qitong cunyi).

Despite the recurring and somewhat nebulous reassurance that China seeks a denuclearized Korean peninsula and that the crisis must be solved peacefully, it is becoming increasingly obvious that China's status-quo-seeking diplomacy is no longer tenable because the status quo on the ground is rapidly changing in dangerous directions. One small but still inconclusive example of China's changing geostrategic calculus on the Korean peninsula is that in the spring of 2003 some Chinese analysts were openly beginning to question, with American interlocutors, the strategic value of the Sino-DPRK alliance while others were espousing the need for a new thinking, a new strategy, and a new preventive diplomacy.<sup>12</sup>

Nonetheless, the major catalyst for Beijing's hands-on preventive diplomacy is growing security concerns about possible U.S. recklessness in trying to resolve the North Korean nuclear crisis through military means. Some Chinese analysts argue that the Bush administration is more interested in resolving the North Korean nuclear crisis with smart weapons than with dialogue and negotiations.<sup>13</sup> The conventional wisdom that the second U.S.-DPRK nuclear crisis began in October 2002, when Pyongyang admitted the existence of a secret highly-enriched-uranium (HEU) program, is only partly right. In fact, this crisis was long in the making. In June 2000, the Clinton administration announced its decision to expunge the term "rogue state" from the U.S. foreign policy lexicon, explaining that the category had already outlived its usefulness. Yet candidate Bush continued to use the term "rogue state" to refer to North Korea, Iran, and Iraq. Then, in his January

2002 State of the Union Address, President Bush used the phrase "axis of evil," upgrading the rogue-state strategy to the evil-state strategy. It became increasingly evident that this was more than rhetorical posturing, as shown by a series of radical shifts in America's military doctrine (e.g., the Quadrennial Defense Review that called for a paradigm shift from threat-based to capability-based models, the Nuclear Posture Review lowering the threshold of use or tactical nukes, and the Bush doctrine of preemption).

From Beijing's perspective, the perverse and self-defeating consequences of the evil-state strategy are seen as aiding and abetting hard-liners in Pyongyang and fueling the compensatory brinkmanship/breakdown/breakthrough (BBB) behavior of the first U.S.-DPRK nuclear standoff in 1994. Perceiving a clear and present danger, and facing the U.S. decision to stop sending monthly heavy fuel supplies as per the 1994 U.S.-DPRK Agreed Framework, Pyongyang did what most countries under similar circumstances would do; it reactivated the nuclear bargaining chip. What particularly unnerved Chinese leaders was the news in April 2003 that Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld had circulated a memorandum proposing that the United States ally itself with China to isolate and bring about a collapse of the North Korean regime.<sup>14</sup> China's "cooperative behavior"—to go along with America's regime-change strategy—became the litmus test for enhanced Sino-American cooperation. Beijing's proactive preventive diplomacy seems designed to preempt America's evil-state coercive strategy. After all, "evil" is something to be destroyed, not something to negotiate with.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the Bush administration policy has tended to box itself—and North Korea—into a corner, and China has had to look for ways around this.

The Chinese leadership, faced with these harsh realities, is giving the crisis the highest priority. As Pyongyang continues to command what former Commander of United States Forces in Korea Gen. John H. Tilelli, Jr., called "tyranny of proximity,"<sup>16</sup> in early 2003 President Bush shifted gears toward non sequitur diplomacy—he is willing to talk but never negotiate. Meanwhile, Pentagon hawks have been working overtime concocting all kinds of strangulation strategies, such as Rumsfeld's Operations Plan 5030 and the eleven-nation Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) to establish an air and naval blockade/sanctions regime.<sup>17</sup> China's challenge, therefore, is to navigate between the Scylla of allied

abandonment, with the potential for instability and/or collapse in North Korea, and the Charybdis of allied entrapment, with the continuing danger of being caught in escalating conflict not of its own making.

#### **VI. China's Conflict Management Role**

The U.S.-DPRK nuclear standoff has triggered an agonizing reappraisal of the strategic value of the Sino-DPRK allied relationship. Some Chinese scholars have now begun to discuss whether Pyongyang is an asset or liability in China's grand strategic calculus, in comparison to the costs and benefits of enhanced cooperation with Washington. While, according to Shi Yinhong of Renmin (People's) University, both Pyongyang and Washington, are to blame for the current terrible and dangerous situation on the Korean peninsula, the former holds more direct responsibility as the originator of the second nuclear crisis. In early 2003, Shi prognosticated three worst-case scenarios looming over the North Korean issue: (1) North Korean nuclear blackmail directed at China; (2) Japan going nuclear; and, (3) a U.S.-DPRK war. The conclusion was that China must, therefore, move away from tactical maneuvering toward grand strategic restructuring and reprioritization, breaking free from moral constraints to seek and supplement diplomatic mediation efforts with economic sanctions.<sup>18</sup>

The question for Chinese leaders and policy analysts is still whether the costs of dramatic change—refugees, possible war on the peninsula, and the loss of a strategic buffer, among others—sufficiently outweighs the benefits of regime change in the North. To date, China's official position remains the same: it is opposed to any coercive sanctions measures, since they only lead to more provocative and potentially destabilizing countermeasures. China certainly is more committed to the immediate challenge of maintaining stability than it is to pursuing its long-term objective of nuclear disarmament on the Korean peninsula.

Regardless of China's desire to maximize its leverage as a balancer, it faces great danger from two alternative possibilities: conflict and collapse. China's junior socialist ally in the strategic buffer zone could feel so cornered that it fights back, triggering a full-blown armed conflagration. Alternatively, economic sanctions could work so well as to produce another collapsing socialist regime on China's borders, with huge political, economic, and social consequences for Chinese domestic politics. Beijing's *realpolitik*

logic here seems clear enough. To abandon or rebuke Pyongyang publicly, especially during a crisis situation, would be to follow the Soviet fallacy of premature allied abandonment, losing whatever leverage it may still have in the politics of a divided Korea.

Moreover, Beijing believes, as do many North Korea experts, that Pyongyang's HEU program may have started as a hedge or a strategic "ace in the hole" but was accelerated in response to the perceived ratcheting-up of hostile attitudes by the Bush administration. The logic of Beijing's proactive preventive diplomacy is to avert the crystallization of conditions under which Pyongyang could calculate lashing out—to preempt America's preventive strike, as it were—to be a rational course of action, even if victory were impossible.

It has recently come to light that the six-party talks in Beijing (August 27-29, 2003) were the hard-earned outcome of President Hu Jintao's behind-the-scenes diplomatic efforts. Hu is said to have selected and sent Dai to Pyongyang to carry Hu's letter to Kim Jong II in the official capacity of special envoy, because Dai has had the most meetings with Kim Jong II and is the closest to Kim Jong II among all Chinese officials. In his letter, Hu is said to have made three key promises: (1) China is willing to help resolve the crisis by mediating and facilitating negotiations with the greatest sincerity; (2) China is willing to offer the DPRK greater economic aid than in previous years, although the latter did not mention specific numbers or amounts; and, (3) China is willing to persuade the United States to make a promise of non-aggression against the DPRK in exchange for the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. In the course of a six-hour-long conversation, Kim Jong II told Dai that he was willing to accept China's viewpoint and proposal to reopen talks with the United States in a multilateral setting while at the same time insisting that one-on-one negotiation would be his bottom line. In the end, however, thanks to Beijing's jawboning diplomacy, Kim Jong II's bottom line was not unchangeable.<sup>19</sup>

China's preferred solution is now advanced in the form of a comprehensive package deal stressing three key elements: (1) restarting diplomatic dialogue and negotiations in an bi-multilateral framework (i.e., a multilateral framework providing a venue for bilateral talks on the sidelines); (2) avoiding any hostile or provocative rhetoric and actions; and, (3) specifying security assurances and economic aid in exchange for dismantling the

nuclear program, thus reviving and revising the 1994 Agreed Framework. Yet such a comprehensive but flexible proposal is easier proposed than accepted, let alone implemented.

Certainly Beijing is better situated than any other regional power to help both Pyongyang and Washington think outside the box of their mutual making. Thanks to President Hu's jawboning diplomacy, Pyongyang was persuaded to give up, or at least put in abeyance, its often-stated position of holding bilateral talks only with United States, restrained from walking out halfway through the six-party talks, and convinced to advance a "package of solutions" proposal to be discussed within a timeframe. This was all despite the fact that Washington maintained a hardline stand of demanding that North Korea unconditionally end its nuclear weapons program before any benefits—such as a U.S. security guarantee or economic aid—would even be considered. On September 3, 2003, five days after the inconclusive ending of the six-party talks in Beijing, China expressed dissatisfaction with the inflexible position Washington had taken on North Korea's nuclear weapons program during the six-party talks and openly criticized the United States as the "main obstacle" to the peaceful settlement of the nuclear issue.<sup>20</sup>

Even China's foremost hardliner, Shi Yinhong, who is often singled out by Western journalists in China as the leading advocate of regime change in North Korea, had to admit that "the DPRK, no matter what its motives were, at least raised detailed proposals to be discussed . . . , and these proposals were rational. In other words, the DPRK got the upper hand in this round of DPRK-U.S. diplomatic rivalry."<sup>21</sup> On September 9, 2003, Jack Pritchard, the Bush administration's former top negotiator with North Korea, offered a blunt assessment and sharp critique of the administration's hard-nosed policy toward North Korea, asserting that Pyongyang will not relinquish its nuclear weapons programs without more active U.S. engagement: "The idea that in a short period of time you can resolve this problem" in talks where diplomats from six countries sit down with twenty-four interpreters and try to make a deal without private consultations is "ludicrous."<sup>22</sup>

Despite the considerable success in bringing Pyongyang back to the six-party talks, there are at least three major constraints on China's leverage in the resolution of the U.S.-DPRK nuclear confrontation. First, China does not have as much influence over North Korea's security behavior as Washington believes. China's

primary leverage is food and oil aid, but, because of the fear of refugees, this is a double-edge sword, so Beijing is cautious to a fault for fear of provoking and/or causing collapse in the North, with all the social, economic, and political destabilizing consequences. Paradoxically, China's leverage is also its vulnerability. Pyongyang, strategically located at the vortex of Northeast Asian security—indeed, the most important strategic nexus of the Asia-Pacific region—could potentially entrap China and/or all other regional powers in a spiral of conflict escalation.

Second, China's leverage in reshaping the Bush administration's rogue-state strategy ranges from very modest to virtually nil. With China's generating a trade surplus with the United States of over \$103 billion in 2002 (by U.S. calculations), the United States is the one country that can help or hinder China's march to great power status. However, the Bush administration's relentless pressure on China to exercise its leverage, mainly through economic sanctions, may well exceed the price that Beijing is willing or able to pay in pushing Pyongyang in potentially-dangerous directions.

Third is the often-overlooked question of nuclear fairness and justice. If nuclear weapons are necessary for China's security, or if Israel, India, and Pakistan can get away with building a weapons program by dint of not signing the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, why is the same not true for North Korea? Pyongyang asserts as much in its repeated statements that if missile development is permissible for the United States, China, Russia, and Japan, then it is surely permissible for the DPRK. In short, as the world's third largest nuclear power, Beijing cannot capture the high moral ground in pushing too vigorously for unilateral nuclear disarmament of an insecure hermit kingdom in its strategic buffer zone.

## **VII. Conclusion**

The interplay of a rising China and a declining North Korea in the post-Cold War world is complex and often confusing, with paradoxical expectations and consequences. On the one hand, contrary to conventional realist wisdom, China usually behaves as a largely conservative status quo power, more satisfied with its born-again national status and security than at any time since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949. On the other hand,

North Korea at first glance seems like a textbook case of how most Chinese dynasties collapsed under the twin blows of *neiluan* (internal disorder) and *waihuan* (external calamity). Yet the DPRK has defied all collapsist scenarios and predictions, as well as the classical realist axiom that "the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept."<sup>23</sup> For its own geopolitical interests and domestic and regional stability, Beijing has played a generally positive role in Korean affairs, not only providing the necessary economic support to the DPRK but also making it clear to Washington and Tokyo, if not to Seoul and Moscow, that it is now in the common interest of all to promote the peaceful coexistence of the two Korean states on the peninsula rather than having to cope with the turmoil, chaos, and probable mass exodus of refugees that would follow in the wake of a system collapse in the North.

In the early 1950s, it was common to hear the rallying cry that China needed to start a tidal wave of learning from lessons of the Soviet Union so as to make today's Soviet Union tomorrow's China. Half a century later, perhaps the greatest challenge to China's leadership in the uncertain years ahead is how to prevent tomorrow's China from becoming yesterday's Soviet Union. Many Chinese leaders and scholars have come to recognize the ineluctable Toynbeeian truth that the degeneration of a large country or empire—such as the former Soviet Union and many Chinese dynasties—starts from the internal roots of ethnonational separatism, economic stagnation, or political and social chaos, and they see the need to respond to the challenge of establishing a stable, orderly, and healthy society as the top priority. There is every indication that Chinese leaders are determined not to repeat the Soviet strategic blunder of placing an unbearable defense burden on its economy by spending too much on its military forces.

On the other hand, North Korea has learned different diagnostic lessons from factors that are said to have contributed to the collapse of socialist systems in the Soviet Union and East European countries: (1) attacks on the cult of personality and Stalinism that undermined the political foundation of the strongman autocratic systems; (2) ideologically disarming concessions that were made in the area of human rights at the Helsinki Conference (the European Conference on Security and Cooperation); and, (3) Gorbachev's strategically mindless concessions in the reduction of

nuclear weapons, by which he gave up the one and only trump card Moscow had in the superpower rivalry.<sup>24</sup> We are told that it is with the combination of military power and the on-again, off-again threat that Pyongyang has not only gained the upper hand over the imperialist offensives that seek to crush the DPRK but has also gained economic assistance from wealthy capitalist countries due to

their abiding fear of war.<sup>25</sup>

Herein lies Kim Jong IP's systemic Catch-22. To save the *juche* system requires reforming and deconstructing important parts of it, but any system-reforming departure from the ideological continuity of the system that Kim Il Sung created is viewed not as a necessity for survival but as an ultimate betrayal of DPRK's *raison d'etat* and, indeed, the seeds of the regime's destruction.

China is arguably a more influential player in reshaping the future of the Korean peninsula than at any time since the Korean War, and more than any other peripheral power. And yet, its capacity to initiate or implement consistent policies toward the two Koreas is increasingly constrained by the norms and practices of important domestic groups and Northeast Asian regional and global regimes, as well as the United States. When all is said and done, the future of North Korea is not for China to make. China can help or hinder North Korea in taking one system-rescuing approach instead of another, but in the end no external power can determine North Korea's future.

## Notes

1. *Meeting the North Korean Nuclear Challenge: Report of an Independent Task Force Sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2003), 28.
2. Jae Ho Chung, "South Korea Between Eagle and Dragon: Perceptual Ambivalence and Strategic Dilemma," *Asian Survey* 41, no. 5 (September/October 2001): 784.
3. *Tong-a Ilbo* (Seoul), December 4, 2000.
4. Alastair Iain Johnston, "China's International Relations: The Political and Security Dimensions," in Samuel S. Kim, ed., *The International Relations of Northeast Asia* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), p. 96.
5. For a detailed analysis, see Samuel S. Kim, "The Making of China's Korea Policy in the Era of Reform," in David M. Lampton, ed., *The Making of Chinese Foreign and Security Policy in the Era of Reform* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 371-408.

6. For analysis along this line, see Wang Yizhou, "Mianxiang ershi shiji de Zhongguo waijiao: sanzong xuqiu de xunqiu jiqi pingheng," (China's Diplomacy for the Twenty-First Century: Seeking and Balancing Three Demands) *Zhanlueyu guanli* [Strategy and Management] No. 6 (1999): 18-27.
7. According to Soviet economist N. Bahanova, Soviet aid was responsible for the construction of more than 70 facilities producing over one-fourth of the North Korean gross industrial output. See *Pravda*, August 6, 1990, in FBIS/Soviet Union, August 10, 1990, p. 10.
8. Eui-gak Hwang, *The Korean Economies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), Table 5.4.
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