



A CHANGING CALCULUS TOWARDS NORTH KOREA IN BEIJING?

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North Korea's advances in nuclear weapons and missile technology, in combination with its recent escalation of bellicose rhetoric against the US and its allies, have triggered a reassessment in various quarters of the threat posed by North Korea. Even in China, which has a tradition of friendly relations with North Korea, there are signs of changing attitudes. China's overall strategic assessment of North Korea may be changing, as North Korea goes from being an intermittently problematic but generally stable entity during the Kim Jong Il years to a source of regional instability under Kim Jong Un.

General Fang Fenghui, the PLA Chief of the General Staff had some tough words for North Korea during the press conference following his meeting with General Dempsey, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, on Tuesday:

"China is resolutely opposed to North Korea's nuclear tests. As far as we can tell, they have carried out their third nuclear test and may be preparing for a fourth. Faced with this situation, we wish to work well in common with all sides on all sides to make the North Koreans suspend nuclear testing and nuclear weapons production. A denuclearized Korean Peninsula is in the common interests of all sides."

Fang's statement is the latest signal from Beijing that North Korea's recent actions are unacceptable. It comes after a string of similar comments from the Chinese leadership. At the opening ceremony of the Boao Forum, President Xi Jinping said, "no one should be allowed to throw a region and even the whole world into chaos for selfish gains,"²² a statement widely interpreted as an oblique censure of North Korea. Meanwhile, Premier Li Keqiang was quoted as saying to US Secretary of State John Kerry that "Provocations on the Korean Peninsula will harm the interests of all sides and it is the same as picking up a rock to drop it on one's feet."²³ Foreign Minister Wang Yi told Ban Ki-moon in a phone conversation that "Beijing opposes any provocative words and actions from any party in the region and does not allow troublemaking at the doorsteps of China."²⁴

A rough patch in bilateral relations

Relations between China and North Korea have been frosty since December of last year, when Politburo member Li Jianguo visited Pyongyang in what is believed to have been an unsuccessful mission to dissuade the North Koreans from proceeding with their plans for a satellite launch. There are reports

that Kim Jong Un has been looking for an invitation for a state visit to Beijing since last year (his uncle, Jang Song Taek, is said to have made the request on his visit to China in September),⁵ but the response from Beijing continues to be "*bu fangbian*" ("it is not convenient"). It seems that Beijing is holding out for better behavior from the North Koreans before honoring Kim Jong Un with a state visit.

To recapitulate recent history, over the last five months the North Koreans have: successfully conducted a satellite launch in defiance of UN Security Council Resolutions (December 11); conducted an underground nuclear test (February 12); threatened the US with a pre-emptive nuclear strike (March 7); declared the Korean Armistice Agreement invalid and cut the emergency hotline at Panmunjom (March 8); closed the Kaesong Industrial Complex (April 8) and moved missile launchers into position on its east coast in the run-up to the celebrations of Kim Il Sung's birthday on April 15 for a missile test that may yet take place.

In the sense that it has not resulted in any casualties, this most recent crisis on the Korean Peninsula is less serious than that of 2010. In March of that year, the South Korean corvette *Cheonan* was sunk by a North Korean torpedo, resulting in the deaths of 46 South Korean seamen. In November, Yeonpyeong Island was shelled by North Korea, resulting in four South Korean fatalities. But this year, the combination of advances in North Korean nuclear and missile capabilities and escalation of bellicose rhetoric has given rise to a reassessment on various sides of the threat posed by North Korea. This is clearly the case in the US, where Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel has described North Korea as a "real and clear danger". The costly US deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system to Guam two years ahead of schedule is a direct response to the increased threat from North



Korea.⁶ But it is also increasingly clear that there is a shift in Beijing in attitudes towards its traditional ally.

China's Changing Calculus

The clearest sign of a shift is that open and critical discussion of the North Korean question is now largely permitted, particularly in online social media. This would have been unthinkable only a few years ago, when the topic of North Korea was considered politically sensitive and was more-or-less off-limits for open debate. Although many people in China still view North Korea through the lens of the traditional friendship between the two countries, public opinion towards North Korea has taken a negative turn in recent years. This is in part a reaction to the transition of power to North Korea's young and untested leader, Kim Jong Un, and in part due to incidents such as the capture of Chinese fishermen by North Korea in May 2012, and the mistreatment of the Chinese mining and steel company Haicheng Xiyang, which claims to have been cheated out of a large portion of its US\$ 45 million investment in North Korea. It is not unusual these days to hear critical opinions of North Korea from Chinese academics, among whom the 'revisionist school,' which sees China's relationship with Pyongyang as a liability, appears to be in the ascendancy over the 'traditionalists.' On the other hand, the controversy over Deng Yuwen's piece in the *Financial Times*, 'China should abandon North Korea,' illustrated that there are still limits to the acceptable range of public discussion of this topic in China (Deng was suspended from his position as Deputy Editor of the *Study Times*, the prestigious theoretical journal of the Central Party School in Beijing, as a result of publishing this article).⁷

Yet whether this shift in attitudes and reconsideration of the relationship with North Korea will produce any actual change in Chinese policy remains to be seen. In China, preserving a stable regional environment, particularly in neighboring countries (China's *zhenbian*, or periphery), is recognized as essential to ensuring China's continuing economic development. Part of the calculus with regard to North Korea during the Kim Jong Il years was that even if the regime was problematic in various respects and periodically provoked crises, internally it was remarkably stable and the situation on the Korean Peninsula was generally one of an uneasy but stable equilibrium. It was evident that the implications of any change to the status quo would be destabilizing and thus inimical to Chinese interests, which is why China has continued to provide North Korea with a minimal level of economic assistance. However, North Korea is now becoming a source of instability in the region and triggering a cascade of effects that run

counter to Chinese interests, as seen in the debates taking place in both South Korea and Japan on the idea of developing their own nuclear deterrent against North Korea.⁸ At some point it is possible that the balance will tip such that it is more in China's interests to join efforts to change North Korea than to preserve the status quo.

Possibilities for China-US co-operation

On his recent visit to Beijing, John Kerry appears to have raised the issue of strengthening economic pressure against North Korea. In comments after his return to the US, he said:

*"I think it is very important that the Chinese focus on the fact that ... if they're not prepared to put the pressure on the North—and they have the greatest ability to have an impact on the North—then this can become more destabilizing. And that instability is not in China's interest, certainly. It's not in anybody's interest in the region. So if we're going to operate according to what's in people's interest, China's and everybody else's, I believe China needs to become more engaged in this effort. It is obvious that China is the lifeline to North Korea. Everybody knows that China provides the vast majority of the fuel to North Korea. China is their biggest trading party, their biggest food donor and so forth."*⁹

In spite of changing attitudes in China towards North Korea, Kerry's suggestion that China join in applying economic pressure on North Korea is likely to be one that is resisted in Beijing, as to do so would be seen as becoming a tool of the US in attempting to bring about a regime collapse. An opinion piece in the *People's Daily* comments:

*"Even if UN Security Council resolutions on Korean Peninsula are a kind of silver bullet for the US—and it is reasonable to be concerned regarding nuclear non-proliferation and other security issues—overstepping UN resolutions with unilateral sanctions against North Korea and moves to apply pressure is still likely to be counterproductive."*¹⁰

It is, however, very clear that China is ready to work seriously with the US on diplomatic efforts to rein in the North Korean nuclear weapons program. If a breakthrough on this issue can be achieved through co-operation, this would be a major success for China's 'new great power relationship' (*xinxing daguo guanxi*) with the US. Wu Dawei, China's special representative for North Korea policy, has been in Washington this week for several days of consultations with his counterpart, Glyn Davies.¹¹ Very little information has emerged from these talks so far, but reports indicate that the talks have been fruitful and have gone on for longer than originally planned.¹² It is possible that we may see China conduct some shuttle diplomacy in the weeks ahead, if reports that preparations for Wu to visit Pyongyang are underway turn out to be accurate.¹³



Meanwhile, General Dempsey commented on the final day of his visit to China, “I will leave here with the belief that the Chinese leadership is as concerned as we are with North Korea’s march toward nuclearization and ballistic missile technology, and they have given us an assurance that they are working on it, as we are.”¹⁴

It is important to remember that for China the priorities on the Korean Peninsula are peace, stability and denuclearization, *in that order*, and that China and North Korea still consider each other allies, in spite of recent difficulties. Although North Korea’s pursuit of nuclear weapons technology is deeply and genuinely troubling to Beijing, any efforts to address the issue must not be at odds with the higher priorities of preserving peace and stability. Now that North Korea has succeeded in developing nuclear weapons and is demanding recognition as a nuclear weapons state, many in China are skeptical about the usefulness of the six-party talks as a means of resolving the North Korean nuclear issue (Shi Yinong, an influential professor of international relations, recently declared that ‘the six-party talks have already run their course’),¹⁵ but this is still Beijing’s preferred venue for discussion and it is likely that the focus of China’s efforts on this issue in the weeks ahead will be to encourage a return to the six-party talks.

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Endnotes

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