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# China and the U.S.-ROK Alliance: Promoting a Trilateral Dialogue

Heung-kyu Kim  
November 2017

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*This Discussion Paper, produced by CFR's Program on U.S.-Korea Policy, was made possible through the generous support of the Smith Richardson Foundation.*

## Introduction

As the Republic of Korea (ROK) faces an increasing threat from North Korea, evolving U.S.-China relations are becoming important to Seoul's strategy for dealing with Pyongyang. The United States and China are competitors, but they also seek cooperation on a range of global issues. And although South Korea seeks to have good relations with both great powers, it is increasingly being pushed to take sides in the ongoing U.S.-China competition. The decision by the U.S.-ROK alliance to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system on the Korean Peninsula and the resulting deterioration in China-South Korea relations illustrate this point. As the U.S.-China relationship becomes more complex, South Korea needs to carefully evaluate its policy toward China in order to find the best ways to ensure Chinese cooperation on the North Korean issue, particularly taking into account China's evolving view of North Korea.

Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, China is profoundly changing its foreign policy, including its relations with the United States and the two Koreas. China has long been a staunch ally of North Korea and has supported the status quo on the Korean Peninsula. This perception, however, deserves a cautious reexamination. Xi firmly opposes North Korea's nuclear ambition and strongly dislikes the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un. Xi has emphasized the "normal state-to-state relationship" with North Korea, downgrading relations from the traditional "blood alliance" and providing a window of opportunity for South Korea to improve relations with China.<sup>1</sup>

With more confidence in its own diplomatic, military, and economic capacity to protect its national interests, China under Xi's leadership has begun to regard the entire Korean Peninsula as part of its sphere of influence. Xi even revealed his view on Korean unification in favor of South Korea when he met then South Korean President Park Geun-hye in Beijing in September 2015.<sup>2</sup> Xi's ambition to realize the "China Dream" to become a powerful and prosperous nation by 2049 has altered policy toward the Korean Peninsula.<sup>3</sup>

The United States and South Korea should carefully evaluate this shift and its implication. Xi's new policy orientation on the Korean Peninsula could open a window for greater cooperation on North Korea through a trilateral dialogue and, eventually, regional stability if the United States and South Korea can find a way to coordinate their policies and embrace the newly forming interests of China as a rising great power.

## China's Changing Identity and Foreign Policy Approach

Two major schools of foreign policy thought, the developing country school and the traditional geopolitics school, competed in China during Hu Jintao's presidency, from 2003 to 2013. The third school of thought, the rising great power school, was less prominent. The mainstream developing country school regarded China as a developing country that prioritized economic development. Although most Chinese scholars focusing on the Korean Peninsula belong to the traditional geopolitics school, China's official Korea policy at that time was guided by the developing country school. This school prioritized stability and status quo, including by avoiding confrontation with the United States on the Korean Peninsula. China's Korea policy was passive and hands-off. This policy was well illustrated by China's responses to North Korea's sinking of the South Korean warship *Cheonan* and the North's bombardment of the South's Yeonpyeong Island in 2010. Instead of accusing the Kim Jong-il regime of perpetrating the incidents, Beijing called for stability.

Xi's call to establish a "new type of great-power relationship" between the United States and China is evidence of China's changing perception of itself as a rising great power.<sup>4</sup> China's North Korea policy has shifted in line with this change (see table 1).

Table 1. Views of China's Foreign Policy Schools

	Traditional Geopolitics School	Developing Country School	Rising Great Power School
International Status	(Old) great power	Developing country	Rising great power
Status in Northeast Asia	Competition with the United States for dominance	Cooperation with the United States but competition with Japan for regional hegemony	Competition with the United States for an equal status in the region/world
Relationship With the United States	Competitive	Cooperative	Hedging and soft-balancing
Buzzwords	Geopolitics/buffer zone	Hide capacity and bide time ( <i>Tao guang yang hui</i> )	Take necessary measures arduously ( <i>Fen fa you wei</i> )
Policy on the Korean Peninsula	Recovery of influence	Status quo	Status quo with a potential of change
Perception of North Korea	Buffer zone	Troublemaker	Troublemaker/strategic card
North Korea Policy	Political support and economic aid	Economic aid and diplomatic persuasion	Complex means, including coercion
Policy in a North Korean Instability Scenario	Intervention	Coordination with the United States	Opportunistic intervention and utilization of the United Nations

Source: Revised version of table 1 in Heung-kyu Kim, "From a Buffer Zone to a Strategic Burden: Evolving Sino-North Korea Relations During the Hu Jintao Era," *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2010).

China's Korea policy changed after North Korea's third nuclear test in 2013. Outraged by the test, Xi reportedly harshly criticized China's inability to deal with North Korea in front of the army intelligence office. He then ordered related institutions and North Korea experts to reformulate China's North Korea policy based on national interests, practicality, and increased intelligence on North Korea, instead of prejudice, ideology, and possibly outdated ideas.

Xi now describes China-North Korea relations as normal state-to-state relations instead of as a traditional, cooperative relationship. Despite resistance from the traditional geopolitics school, Xi has oriented his policy in favor of South Korea. Under Xi, Chinese support for a Korean unification favorable to the South has also increased. Some Chinese scholars even floated the idea of forging a China-ROK alliance.<sup>5</sup> However, after North Korea's fourth nuclear test in January 2016, Beijing continued to prioritize stability on the Korean Peninsula even as Seoul sought to place greater pressure on Pyongyang, leading to a deterioration in China-ROK relations.

China now distinguishes its red line from its bottom line on the Korean Peninsula. The red line refers to prevention of war and chaos, while the bottom line involves protecting China's strategic interests.<sup>6</sup> The bottom line includes preventing the collapse of the Kim Jong-un regime, not allowing the THAAD system on South Korean soil, resolving the North Korean nuclear issue through talks and compromise, and preventing the U.S.-ROK alliance's military encroachment of North Korea.

## EMERGING CHINESE VIEWS ON NORTH KOREA

Opinions on North Korea among Chinese experts have greatly diversified since Kim Jong-un came to power. An analysis of the three evolving policy orientations toward North Korea and more than ninety articles and major reports written between 2013 and 2016 has resulted in several interesting findings.<sup>7</sup> During Xi's era, seven views on North Korea policy have emerged from the three schools of foreign policy thought of Hu's time (see table 2).

**Table 2. Seven Different Views on North Korea Under Xi Jinping**

Category	Frequencies	Major Supporters
Unconditional Support for North Korea	2	Li Dunqiu
Abandonment of North Korea	7	Zhao Chu, Deng Yuwen, Wang Hongguang
Status Quo	34	Ruan Zongze, Peng Guangqian, Liu Jiayong, Tao Wenzhao
Limited Sanctions	30	Shi Yinhong, Zhu Peng, Shen Dingli, Xue Litai
Strict Sanctions	15	Zhang Liangui, Jia Qingguo, Li Kaisheng, Wang Haifan
Political Realism	3	Yan Xuetong, Wang Yiwei
Passive Management or Indifference <sup>1</sup>	Uncertain	Possibly some individuals in the liberal circle

1. This category is different from the six discussed previously and includes individuals who support the One Belt, One Road initiative.

Source: The table above is based on an analysis of ninety-one articles and major reports published between 2013 and 2016 that were sourced from the Chinese search engine CNKI and other library-search engines, such as that of Fudan University. The numbers are not necessarily representative.

In general, the mainstream policy on North Korea during Hu's period was preservation of the status quo, derived from the developing country school. China's policy after North Korea's third nuclear test, in 2013, was still in between status quo and limited sanctions, reflecting Hu's legacy. However, after the nuclear test in January 2016, supporters of limited sanctions and of strict sanctions have increased. Those supporting abandonment of North Korea have also increased in number; under Hu, almost no one supported this view publicly. Such changes in policy outlook seem to reflect the majority opinion in the Chinese government.

Notably, in China, the discourse among experts under Xi's leadership illustrates an increasingly favorable attitude toward South Korea and even unification. As illustrated by the strategic report on the Korean Peninsula by Wang Shang, a lieutenant colonel in the Chinese air force, the Chinese military prefers a unification in favor of the South.<sup>8</sup> Some supporters of strict sanctions, such as Jia Qingguo, Zhang Liangui, and Li Kaisheng, argue that China should support the United States and South Korea if North Korea starts another war. Such a shift in the view could be related to Xi's efforts to find a breakthrough on the Taiwan unification issue by 2021, which marks the centennial of the Communist Party of China. Xi needs a favorable international disposition toward China to achieve such a goal.

If the United States and South Korea assured China that unification would not be disadvantageous to its interests, China could fundamentally alter its stance on Korean unification to support South Korea.

Moreover, Chinese liberals do not show a preference for North Korea. Although they are not Korea experts, they are the driving force behind the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and want to focus more on the west and south of China instead of the east. In their first scheme of the initiative, publicized in 2015 with the endorsement of the National Development and Reform Commission and the ministries of commerce and foreign affairs, there was “no belt and road” in Northeast Asia.<sup>9</sup>

## Adopting a Two-Track Approach on North Korea

Under the leadership of Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-un, China and North Korea have so far failed to find a point of concurrence. Xi has sought to command respect from Kim and to put an end to North Korea endangering China's interests with its development of nuclear weapons and provocations against the United States and South Korea. Meanwhile, Kim wants, at the least, an equal partnership in his country's relations with China. Kim's impertinent attitude toward China, apparent in his disregard for Chinese calls to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula, differs from those of his predecessors, Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, who deferred to China, at least superficially.

With the fourth North Korean nuclear test on January 6, 2016, Kim indicated yet again that under his leadership nuclear development was no longer a negotiable issue and that North Korea would determine its agenda according to its own timetable and reasoning. He had already decided to pursue deliverable nuclear weapons to threaten the United States and to possess an arsenal that could survive a U.S. first strike. As recently as July 2017, Kim tested intercontinental ballistic missiles that some analysts say could reach major U.S. cities.<sup>10</sup>

As a result, China faces a serious dilemma in its North Korea policy. Through vehement debates in 2014, China's Korea experts persuaded Xi to move to a more balanced Korea policy to reduce the potential costs of evolving security environments, including South Korea's favorable approach to the U.S.-Japan-South Korea trilateral cooperation against China.<sup>11</sup> Since then, China has intensified the so-called two-track approach to North Korea: on the one hand, maintaining sanctions, and on the other hand, working with North Korea while maintaining that China's denuclearization policy is irreversible. China's new approach appeared almost successful until North Korea conducted the nuclear test in January 2016.

China's bottom line on North Korea continues to be no collapse of the Kim regime. To meet this bottom line, China has requested exemption on items related to exclusively humanitarian purposes or people's livelihood in the UN Security Council Resolution 2270, which had broadened previous sanctions on North Korea.<sup>12</sup> China has also generally refrained from properly enforcing existing sanctions measures on North Korea, while continuing its strong stance on strategically important national interests, such as the THAAD issue.

China opposes South Korea's decision to introduce THAAD. At the same time, China is unwilling to embrace North Korea's nuclear development. THAAD in the Korean Peninsula provides better protection for U.S. personnel and facilities as well as enhances South Korea's defense against North Korea's increasing nuclear and missile threat. China perceives the THAAD issue in the framework of its strategic rivalry with the United States.<sup>13</sup> China considers its maintenance of influence over the Korean Peninsula as a policy imperative, particularly with regard to preventing South Korea from joining a U.S.-Japan alliance against China. Xi even identified THAAD as an issue pertaining to China's core national interests when he met his South Korean counterpart, Moon Jae-in, in Germany in July 2017.<sup>14</sup>

To protect its own interests and bottom line, China has adopted an increasingly active stance on the Korean Peninsula. For example, on February 17, 2016, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi suggested

pursuing parallel negotiations for denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula and a peace treaty. However, both Koreas instantly rejected the suggestion, while the United States was willing to consider the idea if denuclearization was on the table. In March 2017, Wang suggested a parallel freeze of North Korea's nuclear and missile programs and of U.S.-South Korea joint military drills.<sup>15</sup> In its own way, China agrees with the United States that the North Korean nuclear issue should be an area of coordination and cooperation instead of competition. For China, the Korean Peninsula issue can be a good example of the new major-power relationship between the United States and China, as suggested by Xi in 2013.

Because China does not want a crisis on the Korean Peninsula to spiral out of control, it has recently changed its stance on the Six Party talks and become more open to embracing various mini- and multilateral talks to deal with North Korea-related issues. China is worried about the potential for military clashes between the two Koreas and of U.S. strikes on North Korea's nuclear and missile facilities. In particular, the presidency of Donald J. Trump has increased this fear.

China takes the possibility of North Korean instability seriously and wants to prepare for it, even if that involves working with South Korea. Due to the maneuvering room required in diplomacy—and because of its sensitivity—China has hesitated to pursue a track-one dialogue with the United States and South Korea and is looking for a dialogue at track 1.5 or track-two levels. In particular, the People's Liberation Army—rather than an institution of foreign and security affairs—would likely pursue such dialogue given its area of responsibility. China could be willing to join a trilateral dialogue with the United States and South Korea at track 1.7 level. While a track 1.5 dialogue would involve government officials on one side and nongovernmental experts on the other, a track 1.7 dialogue would include government officials on the U.S. and South Korean sides and nongovernmental experts authorized to discuss sensitive matters by the government on the Chinese side.

Such a format could be possible if North Korea continued its nuclear weapons development, launched provocations, and worsened the security situation on the Korean Peninsula. Beijing is concerned that Pyongyang's increased belligerence is bringing Seoul and Tokyo closer while providing strong justifications for Washington to increase its military build-up in Asia as part of a strategy to contain Beijing's rise. South Korea's military-related institutions, such as the Korea Institute for Defense Analyses and the Korea Research Institute for National Security, which are largely staffed by civilian experts and retired military officers, could be tasked to work on such a dialogue with their Chinese counterparts. With enough trust-building, these dialogues could eventually make way for serious government-to-government talks.

The most challenging obstacle to cooperation on North Korea is the THAAD issue, which the U.S.-ROK alliance and China should work together to resolve. If the controversy continues, China's traditionalists and supporters of the status quo will quickly gain strength. Another issue is whether the U.S.-ROK alliance can share its vision about the end state of North Korea with China and whether the alliance is willing to work with China to formulate a common vision. The other question is whether the alliance will take over North Korea in a contingency while facing the prospect of a Chinese intervention.

## Recommendations

Preemptive diplomacy is important in dealing with North Korea–related issues such as nuclear weapons development, military provocations, and instability in Pyongyang. The United States and South Korea should seek to influence the Chinese decision-making process by reducing the distrust caused by the deployment of THAAD and by pursuing more flexible formats of strategic dialogues, such as a track 1.7 dialogue, with Chinese experts. Coordination between the United States and South Korea is crucial during strategic dialogues; otherwise, they could create distrust between the United States and South Korea, and render unrealistic all the consensus and scenarios previously prepared for North Korea.

South Korea should intensify diplomacy with China and reach a consensus on stability and the end state on the Korean Peninsula. South Korea should avoid creating the perception that it is becoming part of any effort to isolate or contain China. The Chinese perceive that the THAAD deployment symbolizes U.S. intent to use South Korea to contain China. Therefore, the United States and South Korea should pledge to use the system only against North Korea in return for China’s commitment to cooperate on the North Korean nuclear issue. The United States and South Korea should also explain technicalities of THAAD to relieve China’s fears that the system would be used against it.

China is becoming more independent of and less vulnerable to outside pressure. Nevertheless, Chinese mainstream thinkers—those in the rising great power group—are also aware of the U.S. capability to deter China and will not aggressively seek to overturn the regional order in Northeast Asia. The Chinese still hope to maintain the Korean Peninsula as an area of compromise and cooperation. Prevention of distrust through proactive diplomacy is the optimal outcome. Otherwise, North Korean issues will be out of any one country’s control; it will cause more tension, chaos, and uncertainties, probably resulting in military clashes in the region. China’s willingness and ability to help resolve the North Korean nuclear issue will help establish its status as a regional great power.

Trump and Moon should assure Xi that the U.S.-Korea alliance is not pursuing North Korea’s collapse. They should also seriously consider Chinese proposals on the North Korean issue. The United States and South Korea need to assure China that the future status of the Korean Peninsula, particularly with regard to the alliance arrangement on the peninsula, would not hurt Chinese interests in the region. Anything short of such an assurance could result in China’s traditionalists dominating policy circles, resulting in opposition to participation in North Korea’s denuclearization and Korean unification in favor of South Korea. The outcome of instability on the Korean Peninsula—such as another Korean war or an assertive North Korea with nuclear weapons—is likely in a losing game for all concerned parties. Against the backdrop of the worst-case scenario, crisis management mechanisms, such as hotlines between and among the United States, China, and South Korea, should be established.

There is greater potential for the United States, China, and South Korea to cooperate on North Korea. To achieve trilateral cooperation, the United States and South Korea should address China’s strategic concerns. The U.S.-ROK alliance is not entirely incompatible with China’s interests. The United States, China, and South Korea need to agree on the priorities in their policies, the first of

which should be resolving the North Korean nuclear issue instead of THAAD. With increased understanding and mutual trust, the three countries could help denuclearize North Korea, establish crisis management mechanisms, and reach an end state on the Korean Peninsula.

## About the Author

**Heung-kyu Kim** is a professor of political science and director of the China Policy Institute at Ajou University in South Korea. Other current assignments include work as a policy advisor for the national security council of the Blue House, presidential unification advisory council, national assembly, ministry of foreign affairs, ministry of unification, U.S.-ROK combined command, and others. Previously, he served as a professor at the Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security of the ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) for five years. Kim was a regular participant at ROK-China strategic dialogues and at the Korea-China professional commission supported by the foreign ministry. Kim has written extensively on Chinese politics and foreign policy and security issues in Northeast Asia. He received his BA and MA in international relations from Seoul National University and a PhD in political science from the University of Michigan.

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