

Sino-American Cooperation and the North Korean Nuclear Crisis: A Reassessment



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Abstract:

There is near-consensus that China's fears about the potential ramifications of regime collapse in North Korea are behind its reluctance to apply measures that could halt their nuclear program. This paper argues that if uncertainty over the costs of North Korean collapse prevent cooperation between China and the US on North Korea's nuclear program, reducing that uncertainty is the most direct, and perhaps effective, way to enhance Sino-American cooperation on the issue. It proposes an understanding between the US and China on a post-Kim regime Korea as the means to reduce that uncertainty. The benefits and possible elements of such an agreement as well as its obstacles are analyzed.

Introduction

A renewed urgency has infused debates about how to respond to North Korea as the country moves closer to acquiring the capability to reach the US mainland with nuclear weapons. While North Korea poses many difficulties as a national security challenge, an additional complication is the uncertainty regarding the stability of its regime. This uncertainty has led to the policy community combining various projections about the fate of the regime with those regarding the trajectory of nuclear crisis to produce a wide range of different scenarios and policy recommendations. Much has been written, for example, about military contingency plans that different forms of regime collapse in North Korea will require. Rather than add to this growing body of work, this paper focuses on a factor that can moderate the trajectory of all forms of collapse the North Korean regime can take: an understanding, if not agreement, between the US and China regarding the future of the Korean peninsula. Such an understanding,

moreover, can also lead to enhanced cooperation regarding North Korea's nuclear program between Beijing and Washington.

An agreement between China and the US, whether tacit or documented, can reduce the costs of a regime breakdown in North Korea for all parties involved and across the full range of scenarios. A relatively benign scenario, for example, where a non-violent breakdown of the regime quickly leads to an orderly transition without threats to the nuclear stockpile, would still leave the challenge of managing the economic and humanitarian crisis that is likely to emerge. Even this optimistic scenario entails the task of managing the path to a unified Korea – perhaps along a course resembling the German model of integration. Responding to the scale of these challenges would be very difficult, if not impossible, without coordination between the Americans and Chinese, as well as the South Koreans.

A shared understanding between Beijing and Washington can also lessen the fallout from more dire outcomes. Prudent policymakers in

the region now must prepare for the possibility of a violent North Korean collapse that triggers a civil conflict. Such a civil conflict, in turn, could lead to foreign intervention along the lines of Syria's civil war – but with the possibility that command and control of nuclear weapons could be lost or that nuclear material is left unsecured. Without Sino-American coordination, military measures to secure nuclear material or bring the civil conflict to a conclusion would be fraught with the danger of an expansion or escalation of the conflict. Uncertainty regarding the preferences and the commitment of the two powers leaves open the possibility, and perhaps exacerbates, the tendency for a North Korean collapse to impose higher costs on stakeholder states. Mutual understanding between the Beijing and Washington, conversely, on key issues of mutual interest regarding a post-collapse North Korea can prevent such costly deterioration.

A crucial factor in China's reluctance to take measures that could curb Pyongyang's drive toward nuclear weapons capability is that such measures can also destabilize North Korea. Perhaps the most widely shared assumption regarding Chinese foreign policy toward North Korea's nuclear program is that uncertainty over what could happen after a regime breakdown in North Korea is behind Beijing's hesitance to implement such measures. US policy thus far has attempted to change Chinese behavior by making Chinese prioritization of North Korean stability over non-proliferation more costly – through a combination of secondary sanctions, the threat of broader trade conflicts, and raising

the prospects of military action on the Korean peninsula.

American policy thus far, however, has not fully explored changing the other side of Beijing's calculus regarding North Korea by reducing the uncertainty over North Korea's breakdown. If Beijing is hesitant to apply pressure to the regime in North Korea due to fears of the ramifications of regime collapse, lowering the projected costs of such a collapse is perhaps the most direct way of facilitating a change of policy. Therefore, a shared understanding between the US and China on the response to regime collapse in North Korea, in addition to the coercive measures already in place or being contemplated, is more likely to change Beijing's thinking on policy toward Pyongyang.

In short, a shared understanding between the US and China can lower the costs across the full range of post-collapse scenarios. The lack of it creates the conditions for adverse downturns to many of them. In turn, increased certainty regarding the future of the Korean peninsula after the collapse of the Kim regime can result in the Chinese leadership reexamining their policy toward North Korea. Enhanced Sino-American cooperation and avoiding conflict over North Korea's nuclear program could be the result.

Critical to the prospects of a mutual understanding regarding a post-Kim era on the Korean peninsula is whether there exist terms of a “grand bargain” that both China and the US can agree on and that other key parties, such as South Korea, can accept. Academics as well as policymakers have disagreed on this issue. The rest of this paper

identifies the structural factors and key points of contention that make a mutually acceptable deal between China and the US difficult. It also discusses possible ways in which such impediments could be overcome.

The First Impediment: A Changing Balance

Crucial to understanding the strategic issues involved regarding the Koreas is the changing regional balance of power. East Asia has already transitioned from a unipolar to a bipolar system of power. Unipolarity in East Asia with China as the sole hegemon may not be far away. Rapid and sustained Chinese growth has led to countries in the region becoming more dependent on China's economy: most now rely on China more than they do the US for trade, tourism, and investment. Economic growth has also allowed the Chinese military to modernize and expand its reach. As a result, a wariness that a growing China is also becoming more assertive, and even aggressive, pervades the region.

The increase in economic size and military capabilities coupled with uncertainty about Chinese intentions has created for many countries in the region a dilemma: while becoming more dependent on China for their economic prosperity they are growing increasingly concerned about its foreign policy. The demands and threats that Seoul has faced from the Chinese and the measures against Korean firms in China the Xi government has taken over the American deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system on its territory is the sign of how the changing

power balance is imposing difficult choices upon states in the region.

China's growing capabilities can have destabilizing consequences because it can lead to Chinese demands that other states in the region are not ready to accede to. It can also create incentives for a conflict between China and the declining regional power, the US. In a self-help international system, the longer the descending power is mired in a relative deterioration of its position in the region, the more unfavorable the terms of any future agreement with the rising power will be. This may render a conflict now to impose a settlement on Korea, when the balance of power is still relatively favorable to the descending power, more attractive than waiting despite the costly nature of conflict. If competition over East Asia is inevitable between the two powers, every year the US waits, the worse the outcome of future conflict is likely to be. A conflict in the near-term may be more attractive than waiting.

The ongoing power transition in East Asia also means that even if China and the US can reach some type of cooperative agreement over matters of core national interests, the agreement is not credible in the eyes of the US: there is reason to believe that the ascending power will not adhere to the terms of the deal when the balance of power favors it in the future. The lack of credibility extends to any agreement regarding the Korean peninsula. From the Chinese side, they may expect that the terms of a deal regarding the Korean peninsula can only improve with time, as its capabilities and bargaining leverage relative to the US improve. They may also recognize the incentives the US has

for initiating a conflict sooner rather than later. In either case, an agreement is unlikely.

The Second Impediment: Korea, Indivisible?

Another impediment to a grand bargain regarding the Korean peninsula is the issue of unification. Movement toward unification could be triggered as a result of the collapse of the North Korean regime. The main stakeholders, at least on paper, support unification. Both Koreas have enshrined in their constitution the goal of a unified Korea, and China and the US have nominally expressed support for this goal. However, the parties differ on the concrete substance of unification and even if a North Korean collapse brings on conditions for a peaceful unification of the Koreas, it is far from certain that either the US or China will support, or even passively accept, it.

The argument that a mutually acceptable deal between the US and China regarding a unified Korea is unlikely rests on the understanding that a unified Korea means a net loss for one or both sides. Compared to a divided Korea with the North allied to China and the US in an alliance with the South, an alignment of a unified Korea to either side will mean a loss of all the economic and strategic benefits the alliance with one of the Koreas provided. According to this logic, it follows that the status quo is preferred to a unified Korea by one of the parties.

Unification would be particularly unacceptable to the Chinese if the South absorbs the North, resulting in a unified Korea aligned with the US. This, in essence, would be a wholesale shift of North Korea

from the Chinese sphere of influence side to an American one. However improbable, a unified Korea under control of Pyongyang and aligned to Beijing would also be unacceptable to the US. But the loss would be particularly acute for the Chinese side. North Korea borders China while South Korea is an ocean away from the US. North Korea provides a buffer against the US troops stationed in South Korea, and to a lesser extent, those in Japan. Chinese forces are not stationed anywhere close to the borders of the US. Those in North Korea returned to China decades ago. Ethnic minorities in Northeast China are another source of instability in China that the unification process could trigger. Korean Americans pose no such threat.

There are currently almost 30,000 US troops in South Korea and the US holds wartime command over Korean forces. Key to the argument that China would be resistant to a unified Korea under Seoul is the assumption that China would not accept a US military presence on its border. Therefore, faced with the choice between intervening in Korea and accepting a unified Korea allied to the US, the logic goes, Beijing may be likely to choose the former.

The Third Impediment: Diminished US Forces?

The perceived incompatibility of a unified Korea aligned to the US with the strategic interests of the Chinese has led some to conjecture that an offer to adjust US forces in Korea in line with North Korea's collapse would make a comprehensive understanding on the Korean peninsula more acceptable to the Chinese. Henry Kissinger has been a

recent, and perhaps the most prominent, figure to make this argument. Such an offer, the logic goes, would considerably lessen the blow that China's interests and security position take in the case of reunification and therefore make it more acceptable. While Kissinger has remained reticent about the exact details of what type of deal would be feasible or desirable, conjectures about such proposals have at times entailed a withdrawal of US forces from the Korean peninsula, along with the de facto (if not declared) neutralization of the unified Korea.

This offer however, is the most extreme of a possible range of offers from the US side. Moreover, there are several reasons that the US may not want to offer a full or partial withdrawal, particularly a sudden one. This decision may be interpreted as a signal that the US is not fully committed to regional alliances. Such a signal would increase suspicion about American commitments in the region, accelerating the extension of Chinese influence in the region. It would also lend less credibility to any future commitments in the region and beyond, which in turn could embolden challenges against the status quo. More instability and uncertainty is likely to be the outcome.

Beyond All or Nothing

Unification, however, doesn't have to be a choice between the extremes of a unified Korea with US troops at the Chinese border and an abrogation of the US-ROK alliance, American troop withdrawal, and neutrality of the peninsula. An either-or proposition of such extremes make it more likely that the terms would be unacceptable to one side. Agreement becomes difficult.

There may be a range of possibilities between these extremes that both the Americans and the Chinese may find acceptable. The assumption that the Chinese will be uncompromisingly opposed to a unified Korea aligned with the US, for example, might not hold up when various potential proposals in this range are explored. The following discussion is meant to demonstrate the range of potential terms and the flexibility both sides theoretically have regarding the terms of an agreement. Priority is given to capturing the full scope and extent of this range and flexibility - no strong assumptions are made about political feasibility. Some of the potential elements of an agreement are outlined below.

a. Return of wartime operational control of South Korean armed forces to South Korea.

Currently, wartime operational command of the South Korean armed forces resides with the top US military officer stationed in Korea. This is due to revert back to Korean control before the current South Korean president's term ends in 2022. Though the return of operational control was scheduled independent of prospects of a North Korean collapse, it could ameliorate security concerns the Chinese have about American intentions in a unified Korea. Under the current plan, while US military forces would remain in Korea, control of South Korean forces during wartime (Koreans currently hold peacetime control) would transfer to South Korean generals answering to the South Korean political leadership. This institutes an

additional layer of (South Korean) political control to Korean military capabilities being mobilized or deployed and makes it less likely that the Chinese perceive the South Korea-US military presence in South Korea, and a unified Korea, as a threat.

b. A demarcation line within the unified peninsula for US troops.

A commitment by the US to respect a demarcation line in case of North Korean collapse could be extended. An agreement on boundaries that US military forces would not violate could partially alleviate concerns about the lack of a buffer after North Korea's fall. The location of the demarcation line provides scope for flexibility during negotiations. Using the 38th parallel that currently divides North and South Korea as the new demarcation line would, in essence, leave North Korean territory as a continued buffer zone, extending the demilitarized zone around the 38th parallel to all of North Korean territory (for US troops). Exceptions for personnel providing support for humanitarian and WMD removal specialists could be made. The military posture, training, and mission of South Korean/US forces could be adjusted to take the demarcation line into account.

c. Drawing down American military presence within Korean borders (but maintaining alliance between Korea and the US) after unification.

This measure is intended to assure the Chinese a unified Korea will not be

detrimental to its core security interests by decreasing American military capabilities on and around the peninsula. The timing and nature of the reduction are the sources of flexibility during the negotiation process. For example, the draw-down could be gradual with key capabilities concentrated toward the end of the process. Or it could take place relatively quickly and leave a relatively small military presence within a few years. The pace of the drawdown and key capabilities the Chinese deem to be a threat, such as the THAAD system, could provide leverage during the negotiation process and facilitate an agreement. At the extreme, this measure would entail a withdrawal of US troops from the Korean peninsula, but with a unified Korea remaining allied with the US.

d. A unified and neutral Korea.

Short of unilateral withdrawal by the US, declared neutrality for a unified Korea would be at the extreme of the range of potential agreements that could be struck regarding American and Chinese influence on a unified Korean peninsula. A unified Korea that abrogates its military treaties and declares neutrality would mean that, at least nominally, both the US and China would be ceding any formal influence that it held on the peninsula.

Some of the measures outlined above can be taken in combination to facilitate an agreement between the two powers. The tentatively scheduled return of wartime operational control to the Korean military, for example, could be combined with discussion

of a demarcation line that constrains northern movement of US troops in case of a North Korean collapse.¹ Similarly, planning for a phased withdrawal can take place in conjunction with the transfer of operational control or talks on a demarcation line. There are numerous concrete proposals for an agreement that can come from the flexibility that the combination of these elements affords.

The argument that discussions for such an agreement are a non-starter because it leads to an absolute loss for both sides compared to the status quo of a divided Korea is untenable. First, the point of reference for these proposals is not the present status quo, but what the potential outcomes are after the collapse of the North Korean regime. This ranges from a wholesale loss of Chinese influence in Korea resulting from a unified Korea aligned with the US, to a unified peninsula no longer allied with the US and more dependent on China than ever before. While the opinion that there is no need for a security commitment to Korea and that American forces should withdraw after unification exists in the US and some intellectuals in China have contended there is no reason for alarm at a unified Korea aligned with the US, these views remain a small minority in their respective countries and are not likely to be acceptable to either the US or China. The measures discussed above give the flexibility over the terms of a potential deal between the Chinese and the Americans that avoids having to decide between these two extremes. They, in theory, should make

it possible to avoid a situation where an agreement cannot be reached because the future of influence over the Korean peninsula is viewed in all-or-nothing terms.

Second, even a proposal involving losses to the influence of both parties is not an insurmountable obstacle to agreement. Regarding the neutrality proposal specifically, for example, even if it is a net loss for both the Chinese and Americans in terms of their influence in Korea and interests in the broader region, such an agreement leaves both sides at relative positions comparable to the pre-unification period, and therefore may prove to be acceptable to both sides. This logic is grounded in the realist theory that states are more interested in relative gains (or in this case, losses) rather than absolute ones. Negotiations based on this logic are exercises in attempting to reach a “balance of losses” both can accept for neither the US or China suffers vis-à-vis the other compared to the situation before the unification of Korea.

Alignment of Interests

However, why would the Chinese accept a neutral Korea if they can hold out for a better deal with time? Why would the US believe that the Chinese would honor an agreement struck today once American power and influence in the region have waned? The focus on relative gains does not take into account that while a deal may not leave China at a loss relative to the US now, Beijing may be at a loss –and perhaps a substantial loss - relative to what it will be

¹ Previous two conservative governments under Park and Lee have each delayed the transfer of operational control.

able to gain in the future as a result of the ongoing power transition.

There are, however, several additional countervailing factors that provide strong incentives for an agreement. Each of them increase the costs of no agreement on the Korean question. While these do not provide a guarantee that there are acceptable terms for the Chinese, they may jointly compel the Chinese to engage in serious discussions rather than wait.

First, the North Korean regime may collapse sooner rather than later, when Chinese relative power and bargaining leverage vis-à-vis the US is less favorable than further into the future. While Kim Jong-Un is now in his sixth year in power and seemingly has consolidated rule against the expectations of many analysts, he has had to resort to acts of unprecedented terror to even his close inner circle to do so. Despite such acts, there are not many that think that his authority reaches the levels of his father or grandfather. Beijing might not be able to afford to be patient.

Second, if there is a collapse, it is likely to be violent. Recent political science research has shown that when personalist regimes such as the Kim Jung-Un in North Korea collapse, they tend to do so violently through non-institutional means such as coups, mass uprisings, or insurgencies. Moreover, with no clear successor in place, if he is removed or dies, an orderly transfer of power becomes more unlikely. Violent breakdowns are more likely to lead to negative consequences for China, increasing instability at the border, refugee flows into China, and raising the likelihood of intervention into North Korea by South Koreans and US forces. This is the

scenario that the Chinese want to avoid by imposing painful sanctions on North Korea. It may happen nevertheless.

Expectations of an early and violent collapse of the regime in North Korea incentivizes China to accept an agreement with the US. The more Kim Jung-Un stabilizes his rule, the less the Chinese will feel the need to take into account a post-Kim Korea and the more assured they will be that time favors them in terms of the balance of power in the region. Signs of destabilization in North Korea therefore should be utilized as an opportunity to engage China on this issue.

Third, while the changing balance of power is a barrier to a mutually acceptable agreement, the power transition in East Asia also has a positive implication within the context of the North Korean nuclear issue and may facilitate an agreement between China and the US. China's rise means it has increasing stakes in the status quo. At the global level, as a member of the nuclear club, they have an interest in upholding the non-proliferation regime, which monitors the nuclear activities of countries and prevents the spread of nuclear materials and weapons technologies.

At the regional level, the continued testing and development of nuclear weapons by North Korea has been destabilizing. With growing influence in the region and a vested interest in the status quo, the Chinese do not want a crisis that can potentially alter these largely favorable conditions. For the Chinese leadership, the potential fall-out from a North Korean collapse has thus far outweighed the costs of increased tension from the DPRK's nuclear program. However, the escalating

prospects for conflict could bring about a change to this prioritization of regime stability. Movement toward agreement with the US regarding a post-collapse Korean peninsula, by removing uncertainty regarding the costs of a North Korean breakdown, can further encourage a change in Chinese policy toward Pyongyang.

At the bilateral level, China does not want the added autonomy that nuclear capabilities would bestow on the North Korean regime. The North Koreans forgo some of its foreign policy autonomy in exchange for the security that the Chinese provide through the alliance. Nuclear weapons provide the means for North Korea to defend itself which means they have less of a need for Chinese support, and therefore are less constrained by the Chinese.

While the power transition in East Asia may make an agreement between the US and China harder, the above considerations jointly have the countervailing effect of increasing the shared interest that the US and China have in an understanding regarding the Korean peninsula.

Seoul within the Grand Bargain

Could Seoul's response to a collapse of the North Korean regime be a factor in the eventual outcome on the peninsula? The country's fate is intertwined with that of North Korea, and it will likely shoulder the biggest burden in any type of collapse scenario. Its alliance with the US can also factor into Sino-American bargaining.

If the policy preferences of the South Korean government deviated far enough from the US, it is feasible that Seoul could veto the

terms of an agreement with the Chinese that the US found acceptable. South Korea has from time to time taken independent initiatives regarding policy toward North Korea. While conservatives in South Korea have traditionally prioritized good alliance relations, hewing close to American policy preferences in the region, recent progressive governments have favored a policy of engagement even at the cost of strains on relations with the United States. The Kim Dae-Jung government, for example, had differences with the George W. Bush administration regarding policy toward North Korea, as did Roh Moo-Hyun, who followed him into office and continued his predecessor's "sunshine policy" of engaging North Korea. Moon Jae-in, the current president has also pledged to continue engaging Pyongyang.

Despite the rhetoric of the Moon government however, repeated North Korean provocations and the development of its nuclear program has led to a convergence of foreign policy between the US and South Korea regarding North Korea. The Moon government has taken part in the coordinated efforts of the international community to impose sanctions on North Korea. He has backtracked from campaign pledges that he would revisit the decision to deploy THAAD in South Korea. Moon himself has stressed that there is no difference between his approach toward North Korea and Trump's policy of "maximum pressure and engagement." Public opinion in South Korea has also become more cautious and skeptical about the relations with North Korea over time. The anti-Americanism that accompanied the engagement policy under

the Roh government has also dissipated, and there is no domestic consensus for a substantial reduction or withdrawal of US troops. Whatever differences regarding policy toward North Korea exist between Washington and Seoul, they do not seem serious enough for the South Koreans to obstruct discussions between the Chinese and Americans.

Regarding the terms of an agreement, however, any partition of the country is likely to draw mass resistance from South Koreans. Nationalist sentiments are likely to come to the fore during a collapse of the regime in the North. Calls for the South Korean government to ensure that all of North Korea becomes part of a unified Korea will draw broad support across the political spectrum. Seoul is likely to oppose any deal that falls short of South Korean authority over all of the Korean peninsula. Enforcing such an agreement would have to go against the will of a key stakeholder.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to outline the key benefits, as well as obstacles, to a mutual understanding between the US and China regarding the Korean peninsula. An agreement would lower the chances of a miscalculation or misperception in the aftermath of a North Korean collapse between the key actors in the region. It is likely to prevent the most dire paths a collapse could take. Because it does so, such an understanding would also clarify for the Chinese their calculus regarding a post-

collapse North Korea. If the Chinese are hesitant to apply more pressure on North Korea due to concerns of adverse repercussions following a regime collapse, more certainty regarding a post collapse trajectory of the peninsula can take away part of this uncertainty. This would facilitate a change of Chinese policy toward North Korea, and perhaps avert a military confrontation involving the US as well. It is important to note however, that the commencement of military conflict with North Korea should not mean an end to the diplomatic efforts to find an agreement with the Chinese. Conversely, it could be the case that the initiation of conflict can provide the impetus for an agreement to be reached.

The Chinese have so far been reluctant to acknowledge any possibility of a North Korean collapse. Even discussions that hint at the possibility of a collapse are anathema to the Chinese leadership. The issue of possible Chinese responses to a North Korean collapse has been raised at various Track II meetings. Academics in China now openly talk about its prospects and ramifications. Will the Chinese and Americans at some point engage in serious discussions on this critical issue? Are there terms that the two sides can agree to? The conditions—and the need—for an agreement on the future of Korea seem to be in place but these are questions that can only be answered through diplomacy. This points to the need for sustained attempts at dialogue with the Chinese on these themes.

The Views expressed herein are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the positions of any of the institutions to which they are affiliated (e.g., the George Washington University, the Scowcroft Institute of International Affairs, the Bush School of Government and Public Services, or Texas A&M University).

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