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ASIA AT A TIPPING POINT:
KOREA, THE RISE OF CHINA,
AND THE IMPACT OF
LEADERSHIP TRANSITIONS

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Security Challenges on the Korean Peninsula

The View from China

ANDREW SCOBELL

It has become conventional wisdom in recent years to characterize the PRC as an “assertive” power. Since 2008, many commentators and analysts insist that China has become forceful and activist on a wide range of foreign policy issues.¹ While Beijing appears to have become more proactive on many issues especially with regards to the United States, where Korea is concerned China has tended to be surprisingly quite passive and reactive. Although China has been modestly proactive toward the Korean peninsula at times during the past twenty years (i.e. early 1990s and early 2000s), this has not been evident of late. What explains the dramatic contrast between Chinese forthrightness toward the United States and recent reticence on Korea?

This paper contends that China’s Korea policy since 2008—if not earlier—can be explained by a buffer strategy whereby Beijing has established and is maintaining a protective cordon of territories and bodies of water all around its periphery. The goal is to create Chinese spheres of influence or at least to deny/restrict access to other great powers. In recent years building this buffer has been undertaken quite assertively and vocally for China’s maritime territories but in a more restrained and quiet manner in the case of Korea. China’s strategy on the Korea peninsula is best explained as part of a larger effort to counterbalance a significant perceived threat from the United States combined with moves to bandwagon with North Korea. This paper first briefly analyzes the drivers of Chinese foreign policy generally and then focuses on policy toward Korea since 2010, explaining why policy has concentrated on the DPRK, while exploring China’s relations with the ROK as well as the United States and other great powers of the region such as Japan and Russia.

CHINA’S FOREIGN POLICY DRIVERS

Why has China been meek as a mouse where Korea is concerned but loud as a lion on U.S. policy in recent years? The answer lies in Beijing’s deep domestic insecurity, its “buffer strategy,” and Korea’s prime location. First of all, Beijing is inward focused and fearful of instability within the country.² The ruling CCP is insecure. Anything that appears remotely to pose a challenge to its rule is deemed dangerous and provokes a brutal response, including to individual dissidents such as Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo and the artist Ai Weiwei. The twin pillars of regime legitimacy are economic prosperity and national pride, and CCP leaders believe they must deliver on them if they are to be seen as the rightful rulers of China and remain in power. This translates into Herculean efforts by Beijing to keep China’s economy growing by all available means and a CCP that seizes every opportunity to portray itself as the champion of a strong and respected great power.

To be secure and strong at home, the CCP believes China must be increasingly active and engaged abroad. Logic might suggest an insecure CCP would closely restrict or even shut off China from the outside world and turn its focus exclusively inward—adopting an autarkic policy along the lines pursued by Mao Zedong. But this has not happened; on the contrary, China has become more activist around the world to an extent that is unprecedented in history.³

While China is globally more active, its 21st century focus is upon its own neighborhood: the Asia-Pacific. The countries on its periphery are especially important because they are immediately adjacent and hence pose the greatest potential threat to stability within China. Surprisingly, Beijing did not have an explicit Asia policy until the end of the Cold War. As Steven Levine astutely observed back in 1984, the PRC was “a regional power without a regional policy.”⁴ This is not to say that China ignored its neighborhood or was not engaged with its neighbors, but rather, that China tended to perceive Asia within the larger context of superpower relations—under the rubric of the strategic triangle.

Over the past twenty years, since the collapse of the Soviet Union and confronting a different geostrategic landscape, China has adopted a buffer strategy or what it calls a “good neighbor” policy. China has sought to build good relations with all its neighbors by resolving territorial disputes, demilitarizing border regions, enhancing diplomatic ties, and expanding economic relations. Beijing’s goal has been to create a Chinese sphere of influence adjacent to its borders and deny or at least limit the actions and influence of outside powers.

Overall, China has been quite successful at implementing its buffer strategy with better results in some locations than others. Beijing was most successful in Central Asia and most challenged in Northeast Asia. Taiwan and Korea have been the two perennial flashpoints in the latter region. Of the two, Korea has provided the most persistent headache of the 21st century for China. Despite the fact that North Korea has been post-1949 China’s most enduring buffer, it has proved costly and high maintenance, and it has required repeated reinvestment.

The first wave of trouble came in the early 1950s and considerable Chinese blood and treasure was required to maintain the DPRK as a buffer state. The Korean War armistice of 1953 provided reassurance that the Yalu River was secure although units of the Chinese armed forces remained in North Korea until 1958. The second wave of trouble, raising questions as to the durability of the buffer zone, emerged in the 1990s with the demise of the Soviet Union. A worrisome double crisis emerged on the peninsula: a systemic economic one triggered by the end of Soviet aid and a security one whereby the United States reacted to the rise of a nuclear North Korea.

Chinese efforts to build a belt of territory (landlocked and maritime) around its periphery of stable, pro-China states has proved particularly time consuming where the DPRK is concerned. Not only have attempts to keep North Korea stable economically proved to be a constant struggle, but denying or limiting the intervention of outside powers has also been an ongoing challenge. The PRC continues to provide the DPRK with aid in the form of food and fuel. In addition, it has encouraged Chinese businesses to invest in and conduct trade with North Korea, notably in extractive industries but in other fields as well.⁵ What Beijing fears is turmoil inside the buffer.

COUNTERBALANCING WASHINGTON, BANDWAGONING WITH PYONGYANG

The result of Beijing's acute insecurity, its buffer strategy, and extra sensitivity over the Korean peninsula has two important impacts on China's Korea policy. First, it means that the PRC's DPRK policy is as much about Beijing's views of Washington as it is about Beijing's perceptions of Pyongyang. The involvement of the United States raises the stakes for and threat to China. The United States poses an even bigger threat to China than North Korea—militarily and otherwise—going far beyond the geographical bounds of the Korean peninsula or Northeast China. The stakes are also higher for Beijing—not just the danger of instability or war on China's doorstep but the specter of a wider conflict involving the United States and possibly other countries. Hence, a volatile situation in Korea is much more alarming to Beijing than a cursory analysis would suggest. While the United States is more problematic than North Korea in many ways, nevertheless, Beijing perceives Washington as more malleable than Pyongyang.⁶

Second, it means that severe inertia afflicts China's policy toward the DPRK. This is because Beijing deems the situation to be extremely delicate with policy alterations likely to be severely destabilizing. North Korea's geographic location on China's doorstep presents a serious proximate potential threat to China's political and economic heartland. Moreover, the United States is directly involved as the ally of the ROK with a military presence on the peninsula and a long-time staunch critic of Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs. China prefers to keep the buffer zone between the Yalu River and the Demilitarized Zone free of interference by outside powers, especially the United States.

Perhaps most alarming of all for Beijing is that Pyongyang has proved to be a 'hegemon magnet'—attracting the attention of Washington to a sensitive location on China's periphery. The magnet both repels and attracts. The former force has tended to predominate where the United States is concerned. Through provocations, including the development of a nuclear program, missile launches, nuclear tests, and other periodic provocations Pyongyang has predictably drawn the ire of Washington. What Beijing worries about is a tough U.S. response that will dangerously escalate tensions. In 1994, and then again in late 2002 and early 2003, China feared that the United States was preparing to launch a military strike against North Korea. Chinese leaders scrambled to avert this outcome.

Pyongyang's power of attraction is also of concern. While Beijing desires a North Korea on cordial terms with other states these relationships can become too cozy and challenge China's sphere of influence. Over the course of the past decade or so North Korea at various times has courted Russia, Japan, and, of course, the United States. Moscow continues to have some influence in Pyongyang, and the possibility remains of renewed talks with Tokyo. Much of this attention is undesirable from Beijing's perspective.

One significant outcome of the second Korean nuclear crisis for China was the establishment of a multilateral forum for discussion of the North Korean nuclear

program with Beijing in the driver's seat. The Six-Party Talks offered Beijing a kind of management mechanism whereby it could rope in, however loosely, Pyongyang, Washington, Tokyo, Moscow, and Seoul together around a six-sided table for on-again off-again talks.

Conventionally, international relations theorists conceive of bandwagoning as a maneuver performed by a weaker state to move closer to a stronger power. I turn the concept on its head by describing China as bandwagoning with North Korea. This conception underscores the disproportionate amount of influence the DPRK shrimp exerts on the PRC whale, and to suggest that in many ways it is not Beijing that alters Pyongyang's behavior but, rather, Pyongyang that constrains the behavior of Beijing. In terms of China's economic priorities and the outward orientation of its diplomacy, Beijing would seem to have more and more in common with Seoul. Moreover, South Korea's economic power, cultural vibrancy, and political dynamism contrasted starkly with North Korea's poverty, anachronistic socialist realism, and Stalinist atrophy. The logical conclusion for Beijing was that Pyongyang represented Korea's failed past while Seoul symbolized the exciting promise of the peninsula's future. In many ways, China was receptive in principle to the idea of Korean unification and assumed it would occur under South Korean auspices.⁷ But abandonment of North Korea proved unthinkable. Indeed, by the mid-2000s, China seemed to have decided that its truculent neighbor could not be permitted to fail. Since then, it has made concerted efforts to prop up the Pyongyang regime economically (with aid and investment), politically (tacitly supporting hereditary succession), and diplomatically (refusing to criticize the North publicly for its intransigence or transgressions).

GREAT DEBATES, LITTLE IMPACT, BIG WORRY

Since the mid-2000s, a lively debate has emerged in China over North Korea policy. Various schools of thought have been identified among foreign policy analysts.⁸ These opinion groups may be divided into three schools of thought. The first opinion grouping is the "Dump the DPRK" school. This viewpoint is not so much a distinct school of thought as it is a gut reaction to the frustrations of dealing with North Korea. Indeed, this feeling appears to be widespread within China but tends to be voiced in public only by academics because it is officially highly controversial and far too risky to be a viable policy option.⁹

This position springs from two perspectives. First, there is a sense—especially among those with liberal inclinations—of revulsion or distaste for a regime that is seen as morally reprehensible or at least untrustworthy and backward. Some analysts believe that by being so closely associated with a regime like this China is doing serious harm to its reputation as a responsible forward-looking great power.¹⁰ Second, there is a realist perspective that views a continued alliance or partnership with North Korea as being fundamentally at odds with China's national interests. While Pyongyang may have been an asset to Beijing in the past, North Korea has become detrimental to Chinese national security in the 21st century. The events of the past decade cause some analysts to question the value and utility of China's longstanding quasi-alliance relationship with North Korea.¹¹

The second grouping is the “Push Pyongyang” school. This opinion grouping is where many whose initial reaction is to “dump the DPRK” gravitate upon reflection. Pushing North Korea to adopt Chinese-style economic reforms and moderate its security policy is less extreme and more closely parallels what Beijing has been articulating as official PRC policy toward Pyongyang. After all, it reflects genuine Chinese desires for continued social order and economic prosperity within China and peace and stability beyond its borders. Beijing has tried for more than a decade to persuade North Korea’s leaders that they should emulate China’s example and adopt market-oriented reforms. But Chinese analysts recognize that this is unlikely to happen, especially if Pyongyang discerns no significant improvement in its security situation. China’s post-Mao reforms were made possible by Beijing’s assessment that its strategic environment had improved as a result of dramatic rapprochement with the superpower (the United States) heretofore considered its most dangerous adversary. This experience leads Chinese analysts to argue that a North Korean “reform and opening” initiative must be preceded by a significant breakthrough in its relations with Pyongyang’s most threatening adversary. These analysts tend to assume that the onus for this “opening” lies with the more powerful adversary—the United States.¹² Without significant reassurance from Washington that it harbors no aggressive intentions, Chinese analysts believe that Pyongyang will not embrace Chinese-style reforms. Whatever happens, many adherents of this school recognize that a sea change in North Korea is probably not imminent and will not happen suddenly; however, they remain hopeful that this change may occur incrementally, and persistent Chinese efforts may eventually pay off.¹³

The third grouping of Chinese analysts belongs to the “Bolster the Buffer” school. This opinion grouping believes that Pyongyang is located at the gateway to China’s heartland and, as such, has tremendous geostrategic worth. North Korea is a valuable buffer client state because it keeps South Korea and its superpower patron, the United States, at arm’s length. Although a serious headache, Pyongyang is nevertheless an ally of longstanding in a critical region. China has no other staunch friends in Northeast Asia. Indeed, of the four remaining actors, three have enduring alliances with the United States and the fourth, while loosely aligned with China, is deemed unreliable. Other than North Korea, China’s best relationship is with Russia. While bilateral ties are amicable and tensions are low, the relationship is aptly described as an “axis of convenience.”¹⁴ Of the three other actors, two seem firmly in the U.S. camp, and, as of 2012, appear deeply suspicious or skeptical of Beijing. Tokyo and Seoul both have formal bilateral defense treaties and U.S. forces stationed on their territory. A third, Taipei, while not considered the capital of a separate state by Beijing, has Washington as its superpower backer and arms supplier. Moreover, Taiwan remains unwilling to subordinate itself to China’s authority.

In essence, adherents of this school of thought remain mired in Cold War-era thinking and continue to harbor a deep-seated distrust of the United States. Repeated Chinese protestations that the United States should discard its “cold war mentality,” “zero sum” calculations and “hegemony” say as much if not more

about an entrenched way of thinking in Beijing as they do about the existence of such a mindset in Washington.¹⁵ Three Northeast Asian actors (Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan) are considered allies of a superpower that Chinese analysts tend to perceive in adversarial terms and a fourth (Russia), although sharing much of China's worldview, is a largely unreliable partner for Beijing. In this context, the DPRK takes on greater significance because it is simultaneously considered a traditional PRC ally and a sworn enemy of the United States.

These schools of thought produce a hybrid narrative along the following lines: "We Chinese can barely tolerate those loathsome North Koreans (and would gladly dump them); nevertheless, we go through the motions of pushing for reform in North Korea (but do not anticipate results, at least in the near future); in the meantime, fearful of destabilizing change, we have built a buffer state (even though we disdain alliances)."

However, in the final analysis these different schools may not really matter much. First of all, while the differences of opinion appear real, they are held by people one step removed from the decision makers themselves. Second, the decision makers are in fundamental agreement that the highest priority is maintaining the status quo with the result being policy inertia (as noted above). China is most fearful of the prospect of chaos on the Korean peninsula. Near term fears about upheaval in North Korea trump Beijing's concerns about a nuclear armed Pyongyang and the possibility of a unified Korea under Seoul's auspices. China has more influence on North Korea than any other country. But this influence is "potential" in the sense that Beijing is extremely unlikely to activate it. This is because China fears that applying pressure to North Korea will either result in Pyongyang distancing itself from Beijing (and hence China will have no influence) or, Chinese pressure tactics will backfire and only make matters worse.¹⁶

The bottom line is that although China's leaders are not necessarily unreceptive to new thinking on Korea, they remain largely preoccupied with maintaining stability (internal and external) and focused on promoting their country's great power status. North Korea threatens to besmirch China's prestige, and many in China want their country to be viewed as a responsible power and a force for good in the world. But, North Korea is not akin to Sudan in Beijing's eyes. After all, it is not a far off Third World state. Rather, it is a Darfur on the doorstep—a humanitarian disaster which is the subject of enormous international attention with a repressive, distasteful dictatorship made all the more complicated because North Korea is a hyper-militarized state armed with ballistic missiles and weapons of mass destruction. Instability immediately across the Yalu directly threatens domestic stability in China's heartland if only because of the specter of many hundreds of thousands of refugees flooding into Manchuria. So Beijing is ultra-sensitive to any hint of turmoil on the Korean peninsula.

Since the late 1980s, Beijing has been engaged in a delicate tightrope act, preserving good relations with Pyongyang while working to establish and maintain good ties with Seoul with considerable success at least up until the mid-2000s. China sent athletes to compete in the 1988 Seoul Olympics and

normalized relations with South Korea in 1992. Moreover, Beijing supported both Pyongyang and Seoul for membership in the United Nations with both Koreas admitted to the world body in 1991.¹⁷ On the one hand, it tried to coax Kim Jong-il to adopt Chinese-style economic reforms, while on the other, its trade with South Korea grew dramatically. The tightrope act survived the first Korean nuclear crisis in 1994 and the onset of the second crisis in 2002-2003. Although the DPRK weathered both crises intact, they took their toll on China. Tensions fluctuated between Pyongyang and Washington and relations between Beijing and Seoul cooled noticeably. Attempting to address these tensions, China stepped out of its comfort zone, leading Beijing to establish the Six-Party Talks in 2003 and engage in rare public criticisms of Pyongyang at the United Nations.

A series of North Korean provocations—nuclear tests and missile launches—culminated in the torpedoing of the Cheonan and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island. By 2010 it had become clear that the tightrope act was over and China was bandwagoning with North Korea. Beijing was ever more mired in Pyongyang's swamp as the PRC did everything it could possibly think of to stabilize the DPRK economically and security-wise.

CHINA'S 2010 KOREA CRISIS AND AFTERMATH

China's tightrope act ended in 2010 as North Korea unleashed yet another provocation with the sinking of the Cheonan. Beijing initially appeared to view the tragedy as a minor irritant as it launched an initiative to restart the dormant Six-Party Talks, welcoming in early May Kim Jong-il on yet another unofficial visit to China. Aside from being one more attempt to convince the North Korean leader about the merits of Chinese-style economic reform, the visit signaled that Beijing was making a serious effort to restart the multilateral talks. When, on May 20, 2010, an international team of investigators issued a report that concluded the explosion was caused by a North Korean torpedo, the episode went from mere irritant to major impediment. Pyongyang vehemently denied any involvement and the situation threatened to derail completely Beijing's initiative to restart the Six-Party Talks.

China's muted response to the apparent North Korean provocation angered South Korea. Seoul was irate at what it viewed as Beijing's coddling of Pyongyang. China refused to condemn or criticize North Korea publicly, successfully pushing to exclude any mention of Pyongyang in the United Nations Security Council's statement of July 9, 2010, which condemned the sinking of the South Korean naval vessel. Beijing was slow to respond with a message of condolence to Seoul, as one Chinese scholar observed.¹⁸ While Russia accepted South Korea's invitation to come and independently review the evidence (and sent a four-person team to Seoul which arrived on May 21), China demurred.¹⁹ Beijing tried to downplay the incident, and the policy focus was on how to manage the reactions of Washington and Seoul, concerned that they would retaliate militarily. If this happened, China feared it could easily provoke a harsh reaction from North Korea and hostilities could very quickly spiral out of control. Indeed, following the Yeonpyeong Island attack, Beijing feared that war might be imminent. Both the ROK and the DPRK

put their armed forces on high alert. China's most senior foreign policy official, Dai Bingguo, made a sudden visit to Seoul on November 27, 2010 on the heels of postponing a PRC-ROK foreign ministerial meeting in protest over U.S.-South Korean exercises in the Yellow Sea.²⁰

Beijing was well aware that Pyongyang was in the throes of preparations for leadership succession. In this delicate period an ailing Kim Jong-il made arrangements for his twenty-something son, Kim Jong-un, to assume formally the position of designated successor. Since the younger Kim was lacking in political experience and virtually unknown to most North Koreans, his emergence into the spotlight required careful stage management.

Beijing's response to the escalating crisis was to deflect the focus away from the DPRK and toward China. The decision was less a deliberate and carefully chosen course of action and more of a case of an unhappy coincidence: the fallout from the Cheonan tragedy overlapped with a rise in tensions with the United States over the South China Sea and other issues. In short, China emphasized counterbalancing against the United States while downplaying its bandwagoning with North Korea. After an initial honeymoon period with the Barack Obama administration, tensions rose in late 2009 and early 2010. During Obama's first year in office, Beijing perceived Washington as being deferential to China's "core interests," downgrading its commitment to East Asia, and preparing to concede significant areas to a Chinese sphere of influence. Indeed, during the 2000s, although by no means absent from Asia, the United States had a somewhat lower profile in parts of the region because Washington's attention was so focused on the war on terror with the main battlefields being in Afghanistan and Iraq. Thus, Beijing appeared surprised by the Obama administration's Asian activism in 2010 and perceived a need for vigorous counterbalancing.²¹

In a January 12, 2010 address at the East-West Center in Honolulu, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton underscored the strong and enduring U.S. links to Asia, stating: "So I don't think there is any doubt, if there were when this Administration began, that the United States is back in Asia. But I want to underscore that we are back to stay."²² Beijing appeared to view this as assertive and threatening. It was particularly irate at Clinton's remarks at the ASEAN Regional Forum in Hanoi on July 23, 2010, articulating an abiding U.S. interest in the South China Sea. Beijing interpreted this as part of a forceful U.S. "return to Asia." Whatever the perceptions, the United States had certainly adopted a lower profile in Southeast Asia while it was preoccupied with waging wars elsewhere. China was outraged at what were viewed as overbearing and provocative U.S. military and diplomatic actions.

After Seoul announced that the United States and South Korea would hold a naval exercise in the Yellow Sea in late July, Chinese protests were loud and shrill. Postponed in the aftermath of the Cheonan incident, the exercises (originally scheduled for early June) would include an aircraft carrier, the USS George Washington, and an assortment of other ships and aircraft. According to one Chinese analyst, the extent of Beijing's reaction to the impending drill was

unprecedented.²³ What explains China's vocal, vehement and repeated protests of the July U.S.-ROK naval exercises in the Yellow Sea (which were eventually moved to the Sea of Japan)? And why was this in stark contrast with China's understated and mild mannered response to the sinking of the Cheonan?

The different Chinese approaches to these two events can be explained by the reality that Beijing is far more fearful of agitating Pyongyang than it is of antagonizing Washington. While it is acceptable practice to criticize U.S. policies across the board, public criticisms of North Korea by the Chinese government remain largely off limits. From Beijing's perspective, Washington is more susceptible to modifications of policy than Pyongyang—witness the switching of the location of the July naval exercises from the Yellow Sea to the Sea of Japan announced by a South Korean defense official on July 15 (of course a separate U.S.-ROK exercise was held in the Yellow Sea in August much to China's dismay).

The outrage expressed over the Yellow Sea exercises is best understood as Chinese sensitivity to the world's most powerful armed forces—and ones that are perceived to be adversarial—muscle flexing on China's doorstep. The parameters for permissible targets of Chinese ire are limited and the United States tends to be considered fair game and a large convenient target for an array of Chinese civilian and military officials and commentators who find it hard to sound off on other more controversial topics. But this should not obscure the fact that China has become increasingly sensitive to and assertive about its maritime territorial claims. So in the summer of 2010 Beijing was not only vocal about the anticipated exercise in the Yellow Sea but also in responses to Secretary Clinton's comments about the South China Sea made at the July ASEAN Regional Forum meeting noted earlier.

NORTH KOREA'S DYNASTIC SUCCESSION

One of the major Korean peninsula news stories of 2011 was the December death of Kim Jong-il. But the succession process was underway since at least the latter part of the 2000s—the twilight years of Kim the father as he prepared to have his son take his place. Beijing recognized that a botched transition could trigger upheaval and perhaps even morph into the twilight of the Pyongyang regime (possibly ending in the complete collapse of the North Korean state). China is sensitive to this and, while not enthusiastic about dynastic succession, it was persuaded that this was the best hope for a turmoil-free transition. Chinese leaders were in no position to veto dynastic succession. Moreover, Hu Jintao and his colleagues have likely concluded that under the circumstances it is a satisfactory arrangement. The plan probably offered the best hope of a smooth power transition in Pyongyang as well as the best prospect for economic reform. Whatever the likelihood of real reform, Pyongyang is heavily dependent on Beijing economically. Hu Jintao reportedly promised more economic assistance to Pyongyang when he met with Kim Jong-il on August 27, 2010 in Jilin Province.²⁴

Whether the Dear Leader will be as successful as his father, the Great Leader, was in engineering dynastic succession remains to be seen, but so far the leadership transition appears to be working smoothly. While Kim Jong-il did not necessarily

need Beijing's blessing for a hereditary succession, the elder Kim was shrewd enough to keep North Korea's foremost patron informed as well as to suggest strongly to any wavering Pyongyang elites that China supports—or at least did not oppose—the arrangement. His two visits to China in four months were strong indications of urgency to cement succession arrangements—likely due to the fragile state of the Dear Leader's health. It was unprecedented for North Korea's top leader to make two trips to China in one year, and the prime reason for the August trip appears to have been to inform Chinese leaders of the succession arrangements being put in place.

CONCLUSION

Beijing is almost certain to stay the course on Korea barring a major crisis. Inevitably, there will be new provocations from North Korea, but China will refrain from harsh criticism or public condemnation. While North Korea threatens domestic and regional stability and China's international reputation, in the near term the current unstable status quo security situation on the peninsula is strongly preferred to the alternative: greater instability—the prospect of Chinese pressure that might push Pyongyang to even more extreme actions and rash provocations. For an extremely risk averse Beijing, the unstable status quo is preferable to the uncertainty of change.

Perhaps no foreign policy issue has posed a greater challenge for China in the 21st century than Korea. North Korea is viewed in the context of a larger challenge—counterbalancing against the United States. This means Beijing fears that instability on the peninsula will be exploited—or perhaps even precipitated—by Washington as a way to threaten China. China feels very vulnerable to U.S. collaboration with its allies Japan and South Korea. Instinctively China has turned to bolstering the buffer—essentially bandwagoning with North Korea as it did in 1950. However, unlike in the former instance Beijing hopes that military force will not be required and economic power and diplomatic influence will prove adequate.

The DPRK has been a near constant headache for the PRC since the early 1990s. The Pyongyang problem appears to be chronic. While Beijing walked a tightrope between Seoul and Pyongyang for some two decades, ultimately, it decided to bandwagon with North Korea to counterbalance against South Korea and its superpower patron. The decision was ultimately determined by Beijing's vital interests: domestic insecurity and a stable buffer state at the gateway to China's political and economic heartland. Future Pyongyang provocations are unlikely to change Beijing's buffer strategy. To bolster the North Korean buffer China seems prepared to use all of the instruments at its disposal—economic (aid, trade, and investment), political (tacitly supporting hereditary succession), diplomatic (refusing to criticize the North publicly for its intransigence or transgressions), and, if necessary, military (including limited or wholesale intervention to prop up the regime).

In sum, China does not appear likely to adopt a major change of policy where North Korea is concerned unless confronted by a serious crisis. The last time it adopted a major new initiative was in 2003 when it launched the Six-Party Talks under the impetus of grave concern that Washington was prepared to undertake

military action against North Korea. Both now and then, it was preoccupied with leadership transition at home, but today there is no detectable elevated level of alarm in China similar to what there was a decade earlier. A decade ago, the so-called fourth generation spearheaded by Hu Jintao succeeded the third generation led by Jiang Zemin. Today the fifth generation led by heir apparent Xi Jinping is preparing to take over from Hu. Moreover, Beijing is sensitive to a dynastic succession in Pyongyang. At this time, maintaining stability both inside China and on its periphery is the highest priority. The near-term challenge for China is how to get the Six-Party Talks—its primary multilateral management mechanism for the peninsula—restarted. South Korea and the United States seem to be in no mood to come back to the table. Whether or not the talks resume, China is unlikely to apply significant pressure on North Korea to make nuclear concessions or implement systemic economic reform, particularly at this sensitive period of transition. It is possible that Xi Jinping could bring new thinking to Korea policy. However, without significant external impetus new thinking on Korea seems improbable.

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