

2012

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JOINT U.S.-KOREA ACADEMIC STUDIES

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

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Vol. 23

 **KEI** KOREA
ECONOMIC
INSTITUTE
한미경제연구소



Joint U.S.-Korea Academic Studies

2012

Volume 23

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Political Change in 2010-2012 and
Regional Cooperation Centered
on the Korean Peninsula

Chinese Politics and the Korean Peninsula

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Leadership has great bearing on the way the states active in Northeast Asia address sensitive questions related to the Korean peninsula. How should the shared goal of denuclearization of North Korea be prioritized relative to such goals as stability and the regional balance of power? What weight should be given to human rights in the context of urgent security concerns? To what extent should the multilateral nature of diplomacy override the expression of national policy priorities? How closely is coordination with South Korea advisable, recognizing its legitimacy to represent the Korean people, given divergence in threat perceptions and strategic thinking about the future of the peninsula? These questions asked about the other states in the Six-Party process apply also to Chinese politics. Despite the fact that Chinese decision-making remains opaque with censorship tightening of late, some clues are available to offer insight into how the transition to fifth generation leadership bears on strategic thinking regarding the Korean peninsula, toward both North Korea celebrating in 2012 its success as a “strong and prosperous power” and South Korea voting in 2012 for a conservative or a progressive.

The death of Kim Jong-il has raised the stakes in China’s handling of North Korea. By approving the transfer of power to his son, Kim Jong-un, and praising the “socialist” leadership of the state, China is making the case for regime continuity. Whereas earlier it gave the impression that despite objecting to “regime change” it strongly supported reform and relaxation of tensions, its tone was shifting in 2009-10 and has now moved much further in the direction of a special relationship between the two allies in the building of socialism, the Korean War, and the Cold War struggle against anti-communism.

China’s approach to the Korean peninsula has changed in a deliberate manner over the forty years since the 1972 breakthrough in Sino-U.S. relations, and new Chinese leadership can be expected to give priority to further adjustments. After the Pueblo incident of 1969 and other acts of aggression by North Korea, leaders in the United States and South Korea hoped that the improvement in U.S. ties with China would lead China to lean on the North to exercise restraint. While Sino-Soviet competition for influence in Pyongyang did not serve this purpose, North Korea at times in the 1970s behaved less belligerently without putting a strain on the fragile Sino-U.S. reconciliation. In the 1980s reform and opening under Deng Xiaoping produced an environment for gradual expansion of trade with South Korea, while widening the ideological gap with North Korea. Yet, the North’s brazen 1983 terrorist bombing of the South’s leadership tested China’s patience, as the South’s patient engagement of China began to be rewarded with expanded interactions. In this atmosphere China advised the North to turn to reforms and to broaden economic and diplomatic ties, but it was reluctant to pressure the North or to assist in steps that might lead to “regime change.”¹ It resisted all appeals from the United States.

China’s normalization with South Korea was a third blow to North Korea, setting back relations through the 1990s without prompting China to take an active role alongside the United States in the first nuclear crisis or to agree to political cooperation with the South that would suggest a preference. Only in the context of

the second nuclear crisis and the Six-Party Talks did China play a more active role in steering diplomacy at the same time as it revived ties with North Korea, reassuring the North of cooperation in resisting U.S. efforts at “regime change.” Even shifts in great power relations have serious implications for Sino-North Korean ties, but the Sino-North Korean-South Korean triangle is the most important framework for assessing China’s leaders’ shifting calculus toward the peninsula.

The third generation leadership under Jiang Zemin emerged under the towering legacy of Deng Xiaoping. While the economic direction for China’s future had been set by Deng, particularly in his last assertive move in 1992, the political and cultural directions were uncertain after the rollback in 1989. In 1995-97 as “Jiang Thought” began to be articulated, treatment of “Western culture” and traditional Chinese culture was confusing, as further clarity about socialism remained in jeopardy.² On the whole, Jiang did not alter Deng’s legacy of “avoid the limelight, never take the lead,”³ but he shifted the terms of debate toward emphasis on national identity, raising the stakes for leaders to draw on this rhetoric.

The transition to the fourth generation of leadership drew considerable scrutiny from outside analysts. In 2002-03 China was in transition following its accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO), uncertainties in dealing with the United States from its position as the second global power, and a growing leadership role in the region through a combination of ASEAN+3 and ASEAN+1 as well as through the new Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and intensifying negotiations over North Korea that became institutionalized as the Six-Party Talks. This generation of leaders led by Hu Jintao faced prospects of regionalism and multilateralism different from its predecessors. Given U.S. alarm about North Korea from October 2002, this issue overshadowed others as a test of intentions. In this transition observers studied the rising group of leaders and their patron-client ties and bases of power, but also the changing role of various institutions that drive policy and of think tanks and academic experts that shape the policy debate.⁴ Already there was informed commentary regarding the rise of the fifth generation of leaders, who attended college from the mid-seventies to eighties and joined the party in the midst of market reforms and growing awareness of divisions between factions linked to senior leaders. From the 1990s appeals to national identity in foreign policy intensified, and these rising leaders faced the challenge of accommodating them in addressing significant foreign partners.⁵

China’s policymaking toward North Korea has been a kind of black box for analysis of what determines policy decisions or shifts in rhetoric. U.S. officials intent on increasing coordination with China keep seeking greater clarity without adequate responses. Over the years of the Six-Party Talks such consultations intensified, but continued tight censorship on what could be published about the North left observers grasping for clues about how much confidence should be placed in the narrowly reassuring responses in support of denuclearization.⁶ It is easier to discern when critical decisions were taken by the Chinese leadership, than whose views they express or what reasons were foremost. Yet, there is enough published information to fill in some gaps and to indicate the importance of particular leadership changes for decision making on the peninsula.

The period of 2009-11 revealed the main elements of Chinese reasoning about the peninsula. Observers know few details about the internal leadership discussions that led to a softer line after the North Korean nuclear test in April 2009, decisions not to blame or pressure North Korea following its two attacks on South Korea in 2010, and the apparent Chinese effort to restrain North Korea at the end of 2010 in response to U.S. warnings about the dangerous environment that was emerging and Hu's preference to proceed with a January 2011 state visit to Washington in a positive atmosphere. It appears that a left-right split in the leadership was intensifying in advance of the 18th Party Congress in 2012. While leaders jockeying for the top posts may have found it beneficial to cater to hard-line elements in the party and military, there were longstanding concerns that favored more open defiance of the preferences of the United States and South Korea and tolerance, if not real approval, of the North's conduct, in line with the place of the Korean peninsula in strategic thinking.

In the midst of leadership changes in most or all of the countries engaged in the Six-Party Talks, China's leadership transition in 2012-13 deserves special attention. It is assessed against the background of Chinese strategic thinking, and is proceeding in a context of shifting national identity. This chapter looks at China's leadership prospects through the perspective of generational change and through interest groups. While direct evidence on the preferences of candidates for top posts regarding Korea is unavailable, the themes covered prepare us to appreciate the various dimensions of the leadership transition that pertain to policy determination regarding the peninsula.

CHINESE STRATEGIC INTERESTS, NATIONAL IDENTITY AND THE KOREAN PENINSULA

North Korea and, by extension, South Korea are special cases in Chinese foreign policy. This is a reflection of the peninsula's strategic location, the significance of the Korean War in PRC history, the legacy of three decades of Sino-Soviet competition over the North with no definitive resolution, and the peninsula's special relevance to both geopolitical calculations and Sinocentric assumptions linked to East Asian reorganization, including economic, cultural, and political regionalism. Decisions about Korean affairs draw a distinct set of actors—old-guard Chinese Communist Party (CCP) adherents, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), and regional leaders in Northeast China—all known for traditional, socialist outlooks. At critical moments since Deng Xiaoping launched China's "reform and open door" policy, decisions had to be made about Korean affairs in the midst of deliberations over Chinese politics.

The powerful coalition of forces insistent on prioritizing North Korea over South Korea kept its dominance until 1992, relinquishing some ground prior to normalization of relations with Seoul even as it repositioned itself to exert renewed influence once the Sunshine Policy took effect and China's power grew in the new millennium. North Korea had rising strategic significance as China refocused on regional realignment, symbolized by the Six-Party Talks, the Shanghai

Cooperation Organization, and ASEAN+3. Its salience rose as China took aim at the U.S. military presence near China's borders and more directly challenged U.S. alliances, including the ones with Japan and South Korea. Strategic thinking had not made an abrupt turn, but it was evolving in accord with a changing balance of power to put North Korean ties in a more favorable light. In 2003 China's willingness to play a positive role in bringing North Korea to multilateral talks reflected hopes that this would result in U.S. realization that unilateral military pressure was unrealistic while others would agree on pressuring it to shift to a regional strategy amenable to the North's revival and China's rise. In late 2006 Sino-U.S. coordination increased in response to the North's nuclear test, but many missed the point that Chinese confidence also grew and the United States would have to negotiate from increased vulnerability. After the 2009 nuclear test, China took a tougher posture against U.S. interests and in support of those of the North.

In 2010 not only was China more forthright about the balance of its strategic interests, it also expressed national identity in a more blatant manner. There was much discussion of "core interests" in which sovereignty was at stake. Differences were framed as conflicts between civilizations, making regionalism a matter of denying cultural imperialism from the West while insuring the advance of Eastern civilization led by China. As Bo Xilai led aspiring leaders in Mao-era nostalgia, the pull of national identity concerns intensified. Li Changchun, who heads the Ideology and Propaganda Leading Small Group and directs the Central Guidance Committee on Ethical and Cultural Construction, and Zhou Yonggang, the director of the Public Security Commission and secretary of the Politics and Law Commission of the Central Committee, have led in orchestrating recent assertive identity claims. Their legacy is being transmitted to the fifth generation leaders groomed to replace them.

GENERATIONAL CHANGE AND ATTITUDES TOWARD THE KOREAN PENINSULA

Americans, Japanese, and South Koreans placed high hopes on generational change as the force that would transform Chinese attitudes toward North Korea. Memories of the sacrifices Chinese made in the Korean War would steadily subside. The need to distort the truth about the nature of the war and of the regime in North Korea would diminish. Adhering to its slogan of "peace and stability" and benefiting ever more from economic integration with South Korea as well as with the United States and Japan, China would pressure North Korean leaders to choose reform and regional cooperation or at least get out of the way as others pressured it when it reverted to aggressive behavior. This outlook prevailed through 2008 even as generational change did not appear to follow the predicted script.

The first generation of Chinese leaders under Mao Zedong authorized the Korean War and had revolutionary bonds to Kim Il-sung and other North Korean leaders. When Mao agreed to cooperation with the United States against the Soviet Union, he did not sacrifice the North. After all, U.S. hesitation to sacrifice Taiwan meant that consideration of how to deal with these thorny allegiances would

have to be postponed to another time. Brief signs of North-South reconciliation at the time held out hope that spillover was possible, but new tensions followed with no sign that China would act to defuse them.

The second leadership generation under Deng Xiaoping decided to praise the first decade of Mao's achievements even as it acknowledged mistakes during the following two decades as leader of the Chinese Communist Party and PRC. They had been part of China's leadership at the time of the war and would have been tarnished by association with criticisms of it as well as by the impact on the legitimacy of communism. In the background was the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act that angered them and made the case for concessions on the other Asian state divided between socialists and capitalists unappealing. If Deng gradually allowed economic ties with South Korea, this appeared to be the most that could be accomplished as the Soviet Union was strengthening its ties to North Korea and China was both competing with it and seeking to normalize ties as the means to equidistance in the strategic triangle. Participation of Chinese athletes in the Seoul Olympics still fed optimism of change ahead.

In 1982 the 12th Party Congress solidified a new direction in foreign as well as economic policy, raising questions about relations with the two Koreas. On the one hand, Deng's reforms had prompted interest in the South Korean development model. On the other, China's dropping of "revisionist" as the label for the Soviet Union, growing desire for equidistance between the two superpowers, and worry about North Korean anger over its policies opening to the West and abandoning Mao's domestic system put a premium on reassuring the North. While Chun Doo-hwan singled to Beijing his eagerness for ties and Ronald Reagan and Yasuhiro Nakasone were strengthening ties to him and eager for Beijing to make some positive moves, the Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang team did not have the political clout to take anything more than some small steps, mostly economic in nature. Berated for going too far with Japan as he fell from power at the start of 1987, Hu was no doubt aware that his options were limited on Korea. Pressing his economics mandate, Zhao made some headway in 1984-87, the period Jae Ho Chung calls the "expansion phase" in Seoul-Beijing relations.⁷ Yet, hardliners limited such efforts.

Preparations for the 13th Party Congress in 1987 came amidst rising interest in South Korea due to the Seoul Olympics, democratization, and international fascination with its economic miracle. The political significance of the peninsula was growing as the contexts for viewing it drew political attention. One context was comparative socialism, which in 1956 had been the starting point of the Sino-Soviet split and remained after the 1981 70:30 verdict on Mao, a battleground in China. With the early 1987 purge of theorists, such as Su Shaozhi and Li Honglin, who were striving to establish this field of research and the growing alarm about Mikhail Gorbachev for both *glasnost* and new thinking, the prospect of criticizing North Korea was considered dangerous to both bilateral relations and the legitimacy of the CCP. A repeat of Mao vs. Khrushchev through Kim Il-sung vs. Gorbachev loomed in the background, as the humanistic theme, which

had been harshly repudiated in a 1984 campaign, was deemed to have fearsome consequences.⁸ The second context was democratization in Taiwan as well as South Korea, which could further put the PRC on the defensive. Rather than discarding the intransigent North as an albatross, the political imperative was to shield it from Chinese criticism. A third context was East Asian regionalism in which China was left at a disadvantage. Japan was rising, South Korea was becoming a more appealing model, Confucianism was invoked in reference to the “four little tigers” not China, and the U.S.-Soviet rapprochement coupled with new thinking favored an openness far from the liking of China’s leaders, which could lead to spillover as in South Koreans with their greater wealth and modern imagery gaining influence in the Korean Chinese area of Yanbian. In 1988, China’s political wariness of the South remained strong, refusing to allow it to open trade offices.

The usual image of 1988 to 1992 is of ever-improved Sino-South Korean relations, leading to normalization. Beijing responded, as did Moscow, to Roh Tae-woo’s *nordpolitik*. Northeast China had fallen behind the opening of Southeast provinces and was eager to expand ties with South Korea. After sanctions were imposed on China in the summer of 1989, South Korea became one of its saviors, even as North Korea lost favor and was pressured to accept joint admission into the United Nations. Yet, in Chung’s assessment of the politics of normalization, one learns of divisions within the leadership, even as the Small Group on South Korea served as a supra-agency to expedite ties.⁹ Rejecting the scenario after Moscow normalized ties with Seoul, China’s leaders continued economic assistance, albeit not at an increased level, and kept the door open to reinvigorated ties. In the background of the 14th Party Congress there was a duality to Chinese policies: follow Deng’s leadership in opening China’s market economy wide; and sustain the vigilance since June 4, 1989 in reinforcing communist legitimacy. The collapse of the Soviet Union and Russia’s tilt to the West led to vigorous efforts to change this course as well as to prevent spillover, such as in the Russian Far East where South Korea was feared to be seizing the crisis atmosphere to weaken North Korea’s presence and to flex its own economic muscle.

In the aftermath of the Tiananmen trauma, China’s third leadership generation under Jiang Zemin emerged from the shadows under Deng Xiaoping’s watchful eyes. Relations with neighboring states countered international sanctions, and South Korea’s *nordpolitik* was the most tantalizing offer. Given Gorbachev’s enthusiasm for a similar offer and the eagerness of Shandong and the Northeast provinces to capitalize on growing economic ties with the South, normalization beckoned. Yet, the collapse of international communism and then the Soviet Union raised the importance of keeping ties with North Korea, even if its leaders were angry at China’s relations with the South. As seen in the first nuclear crisis of 1993-94, China neither would pressure the North nor give it strong backing. In the eyes of the world, it was seen as cautious but inclined to let the North collapse if it did not choose to reform, as China advised. Jiang and his colleagues appeared passive without a strategy, as they paid most attention to rapidly advancing economic ties with South Korea and asserting leverage over it.

The Chinese political context in 1992-93 warrants further attention in light of what proved to be erroneous assumptions by many less careful than Chung about acknowledging many unknowns regarding domestic politics. It can be assumed from later actions that the leadership was resolved to forestall a hard landing for North Korea, which would be further proof of the failure of communism. As U.S. criticism of China intensified again in the 1992 elections and the early period of Bill Clinton's presidency, China was loath to encourage a sanctions mentality critical of human rights abuses. Not agreeing to more than a bystander role in the nuclear crisis of 1993-94, it welcomed new signs of U.S. reliance on it as the crisis unfolded and after the Agreed Framework was signed. Alert to gaps opening between Seoul and Washington, Seoul and Tokyo, and Tokyo and Washington, Beijing found room to maneuver. Yet, it found itself waiting, as Pyongyang remained cool to it and caught in the succession of Kim Jong-il as well as a severe famine. Joining in Four-Party Talks, Beijing proved itself sympathetic to Pyongyang even as it saw reforms along the lines followed in China as the eventual way forward.

The 15th Party Congress came on the heels of the Asian financial crisis weakening South Korea, Jiang Zemin's renormalization visit to the United States, and the formation of a close strategic partnership between Beijing and Moscow. Followed soon by Kim Dae-jung's election, it saw no clear shift in regional policy, even as optimism was growing about China's role in peninsular matters. By 1999 anger at the United States had intensified, coupled with more assertiveness in cooperating with Russia and capitalizing on Kim's Sunshine Policy to boost ties with North Korea. The Perry Process gave China an opening of renewed diplomacy. As Seoul eagerly pursued Pyongyang, with Moscow not far behind, and Tokyo strove for more leadership in the region with early improvements with Seoul and potential for Pyongyang ties, Beijing launched its own overtures to Kim Jong-il. Even before the Six-Party Talks, Beijing was the object of everyone's attention in dealing with Pyongyang. If some of the parties were under the illusion that they could gain leverage independent of Beijing and found encouragement for this view in Pyongyang, Chinese leaders knew better. They found the North Korean nuclear issue convenient to manage U.S. ties, to take advantage of Putin's new strategic aims in Asia, and, above all, to invigorate ties with the North. In this way, 1999 put Korea back as a central interest in Chinese politics. As in the years to 1992, China was certain of South Korea's need for it.

As the Crawford summit with George W. Bush proceeded in the shadow of the 16th Party Congress, Jiang Zemin saw flux on the Korean peninsula as an opportunity as well as a danger. More cooperation with Bush had seemed advisable after 9/11 and again as the Iraq War became a reality, but this could be accompanied by bilateralism and multilateralism in Asia at the expense of its rival distracted elsewhere. The pieces of China's strategic rise were soon in place as Hu Jintao took over the reins of power. Roh Moo-hyun's election meant tense times ahead for U.S.-South Korean relations. The self-defeating Asian strategy of Koizumi Ichiro enabled China to shift from its trial balloon of "new thinking" to actively using the "history card." Putin's growing anger with the United States and failed mediation in North Korea strengthened the strategic partnership. Even as tensions continued over the way North Korea dealt with reform and failed to coordinate,

the Six-Party Talks proved to be a venue where Bush had to yield, however slowly and grudgingly, to China's approach. In the fall of 2003 Wu Bangguo's visit to Pyongyang, followed by talks with Washington that proved unsuccessful, left Beijing convinced it was in the driver's seat and able to place the blame for no progress on Washington. This reinforced security thinking about the importance of Sino-North Korean relations. When a critical article on the North in *Strategy and Management* defied this thinking while arousing the North, the journal was closed. Given this sense of empowerment, China could more boldly challenge the South on the obscure placement of the ancient Koguryo dynasty, revealing a future-oriented Sinocentrism. Roh Moo-hyun's shift toward China's viewpoint was seen as far from sufficient, just as in 2009 Hatoyama's parallel shift away from the United States toward a regional community failed to impress the Chinese.

If special circumstances explain hesitancy in the previous generations to abandon North Korea, the fourth generation under Hu Yaobang was under no such constraints. Coming to power amidst the rise of East Asian regionalism and the eruption of the second nuclear crisis with North Korea, events appeared favorable for a tougher stance toward an unruly partner bent on destabilizing the region, as China was, doubtless, benefiting the most from stability. The period 2002-08 tested the Hu regime. On the one hand, diplomacy with the Bush administration gave some reassurance that it prioritized the denuclearization of North Korea and would calibrate its responses to provocative acts constructively. On the other, China kept giving North Korea the benefit of the doubt, insisting on an optimistic outlook on the North's inclination to reach agreement to denuclearize, while in the bulk of its publications airing criticisms of the United States for not making a deal within reach. Apart from momentary critiques of North Korea's nuclear test in 2006, Chinese sources conveyed a one-sided narrative that should have drawn suspicion for its lack of candor and obviously deceptive coverage of China's motives. Indeed, the exchange of visits between Hu and Kim Jong-il in October 2005 and January 2006, when U.S. ties with North Korea had deteriorated, may have produced some discord over economics but it saw more agreement on how to manage the crisis and indicated China's growing interest in playing a key role.

If the fourth generation seemed unsettled in its thinking about the region to 2006, diplomacy in 2007 was more reassuring. After attributing troubles in Sino-Japanese relations to Yasukuni Shrine visits by Koizumi Ichiro, the thaw begun in Abe Shinzo's visit to Beijing in late 2006 led to warming relations. The Bush administration reported increasing satisfaction about the course of bilateral talks. After a brief outburst in South Korea over China's claims to the Koguryo state, Chinese leaders strove to quiet concerns, as ties with Roh Moo-hyun continued to progress favorably. Above all, the Joint Agreement in February 2007 was attributed to an understanding that Beijing applies pressure when Pyongyang gets out of line and Washington accepts stage-by-stage progress when it cooperates. The most prominent academic voices were reassuring about China's interest in improving relations with each of the great powers, multilateralism, soft power, and peaceful development amidst its neighbors. There was talk that China was proving to be a "responsible stakeholder" with North Korea above all.

One of the important changes in the transition of the fourth to the fifth generation is the rising power of the People's Liberation Army. Three examples have drawn particular attention. First, earlier restraint has been dropped, as high-ranking military officers have, since 2008, independently pressed for a more assertive foreign policy. For example, in May 2011 General Liu Yuan, political commissar of the PLA General Logistic Department, charged that top leaders in the "past and recently" have been "selling out to foreign interests and ideology."¹⁰ Second, since 2008 the PLA has taken charge of added functions: psychological warfare, media operations, and legal warfare, leaving unclear how this may be diminishing the power of the Propaganda Department and various agencies within the media. One further change at the end of 2011 was the establishment of the Strategic Planning Department inside the PLA, which in the absence of a National Security Council may weigh military input more heavily in China's security deliberations. Given the special relationship of the PLA to North Korea, its voice likely counts for even more in the segmented leadership decision making affecting the Korean peninsula.

At times over the decade of the 2000s, Chinese academic experts wrote or spoke critically of North Korea in meetings with Western counterparts. There was even talk of Chinese "new thinking" about the North. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs conducted a promising dialogue with the State Department and other diplomatic bodies, repeatedly explaining China's support for denuclearization of the North. These views were transmitted widely as if they accurately reflected Chinese strategic thinking. Yet, Scott Snyder and some others who transmitted them also noted contradictory views, such as the idea that North Korea represents a strategic resource useful to China in countering the United States.¹¹ In 2009 it became clear that the reasoning of the moderates did not prevail in the leadership. A political watershed after the North Korean nuclear test in May revealed the leadership's reasoning not only in regard to North Korean provocative behavior, which would intensify, but also concerning the U.S. role in the region and South Korea as a U.S. ally. There has been no looking back three years later.

The fifth generation leadership was already emerging in 2010 under the shadow of factional struggles over who would be included. Without real evidence about the horse-trading under way, one cannot find direct links between policy making toward the Korean peninsula and leaders' preferences. Only circumstantial evidence suggests that the clout of the PLA and security apparatus was rising, the CCP ideologues and old guard found it easier to make their case, and Northeast China's officials intent on improving ties with North Korea had more room to maneuver. Somehow, in the linkages between the fourth generation leaders eager to perpetuate their power, or designate heirs from their faction, and the prospective fifth generation leaders agreement was reached on foreign policy, including how to deal with North Korea. Comparing different outlooks on issues related to the Korean peninsula sheds light on the national identity choices of China's leaders even if their personal preferences remain murky. The identity implications of support for North Korea proved decisive.

Analysis of the competition for slots on the Standing Committee centers on a small number of individuals born in 1945 or later and grouped largely into an elitist and a populist faction. Their main policy differences are over domestic matters with scant indication of divergent priorities in dealing with the United States, East Asian regional issues, and the Korean peninsula.¹² Already with the tough new measures on cultural policy in late 2011 and early 2012, it became clear that ideological pressure was mounting on those with reform ideas. Xi Jinping took the lead in ordering universities to step up ideological control over students and young lecturers.¹³ If South Korea is a target of criticism for its cultural effrontery, North Korea is treated as if it poses no cultural challenge to China whatsoever.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS DEBATES AND THE BALANCE OF NORTH AND SOUTH KOREA

While some in South Korea and Japan blame their own leaders for mismanaging China policy and causing China to take a harder line, the evidence from Chinese sources is that the hard line was taken with little provocation and new overtures to China are unlikely to revive the cooperative mood of 2007-08. The forces driving China closer to North Korea—shifting national identity, a changing balance of power, and internal dynamics of Communist Party leadership—are not reverting to the conditions that preceded the fundamental shift in 2009, which was fully confirmed by actions in 2010.

The Korean peninsula lies at the intersection of ongoing debates over Chinese foreign policy and national identity. They focus on great power relations, the international community, regionalism, and civilizations. In 2007 these debates appeared to be leaning in one direction, but by 2010 they had decisively veered in the opposite direction. Concerns related to Korea were at the center of this shift. The leadership groups leaning to North Korea and critical of South Korea under conservative control have strengthened, and there is no sign that they will be eclipsed in the coming transition at the top.

Seemingly, the strongest group in setting China's international relations has been the major powers school. In the period to 2009 it was associated with a priority on improving relations with the United States apart from brief interludes as in 1999 and 2001, Russia, and Japan. The best known academics are mostly in this school with no sign of dissent on Russia after mid-1992, some division on the United States at times of tension, and most discord over Japan, as was apparent in the backlash to "new thinking" in 2003. Dissension cast doubt on the logic for favoring cooperation over competition, such as that China is too weak or too dependent on the United States and its allies, it requires peace and stability for its continued modernization, and this approach provides the best cover for its rise in Asia by capitalizing on differences between the United States and other countries. This school revived to a degree in 2011, but its overall marginalization within the leadership seems to be little in doubt.

Championing North Korea and challenging South Korea threatened the major powers ideal. In 1993-94, 1998-99, and 2002-11, U.S. leaders kept stressing that China's stance toward North Korea is a litmus test for relations. Loss of U.S. urgency was not the cause of a sharp shift in 2009-10. Instead, it appears to have been a reassessment of China's relative strength and dependency, confidence in the economy to the point peace and stability no longer took priority, and an assessment that both hard power and economic power were sufficient to allow China to press harder for leadership in Asia. The transition in thinking was under way early in 2009 when Chinese anger at Lee Myung-bak—after a year of disappointment combined with a decision to take a tough line against Barack Obama's Asian policy—encountered the immediate challenge of North Korea's April missile test and May nuclear test. Japan counted for little as a great power and relations with Russia were considered separate; so it only took a decision to put the main blame on the United States for the nuclear crisis to mark a turning point. At first China's leaders were uncertain about using the flagrant provocations by the North as the event to shift direction. In April China voted for sanctions at the United Nations Security Council, and articles appeared very critical of the North. Yet, in May-June the tide turned against the United States and the school of officials and experts that prioritized cooperation. That appeared to change in 2011 and in early 2012 as Xi Jinping's visit raised some hopes, but the gap in national identities kept widening.

Which interest groups pressed for this hardened approach? With breakthroughs in military modernization, the PLA was apparently ready to question U.S. supremacy on the seas adjacent to China and be more vocal about the negative effects of U.S. alliances. The fact that the U.S.-South Korean alliance was tightening in response to Lee Myung-bak's strategic thinking and North Korea's more belligerent posture seems to have aroused the PLA, after a period when Chinese sources had seen a consistent widening of the gap between the two allies. The CCP old guard also was emboldened, as seen in a more assertive tone to claims about socialism and ideology. They may have decided that as a socialist state North Korea must be defended. Provincial interests in Northeast China had been given reason to expect that the long anticipated corridor to Rason would be developed, giving more than seventy million Chinese easier access to the sea. Frustrated, they pressed Beijing for stronger support in order to convince North Korea. Rising expectations had fueled impatience over Taiwan and domestic issues, which could be channeled toward support for more assertiveness regarding the Korean peninsula.

Another important group was the school in support of Asian regionalism, with multilateralism with China at the center. It had gained strength from the late 1990s and existed in uneasy coexistence with the major powers school. South Korea, as Japan had, became a partner in ASEAN+3 and by 2008 was in a new trilateral organization. While it had been an enthusiastic supporter of an East Asian community when the idea was broached by Kim Dae-jung at the start of the decade and under Roh Moo-hyun, it did not press for an expanded East Asian Summit to the degree Japan did and the prospect of cooperation faded under Lee Myung-bak. Even as Obama was blamed for interfering with the natural course

of region building by “returning to Asia,” Lee was deemed culpable as well and Hatoyama’s early interest in a community was not taken seriously since Japan focused on the East Asian Summit as its foundation.

While the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and internationally conversant academics draw attention from the global community, the power balance in China is tilted toward a combination of party-guided security and ideological forces less visible to the world and Chinese. Power transitions in these circles will be harder to follow. On North Korean policy, the People’s Liberation Army carries not only links to its principal partner since the final stages of China’s revolution and the Korean War, but claims that the greatest glory achieved since 1949 was in this war. Its voice is heard directly through the highest circle of party leadership. The International Liaison Department is directly under the party and keeps close ties to North Korea as well. Even the intelligence community, both the analysts associated with CICIR and the operatives separately organized, has its own channels to the leadership. While Dai Bingguo, who had headed the Liaison Department, may have seemed for a time, as Hu Jintao’s special councilor, to have brought his old unit together with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, his role was eclipsed before December 2011 when his call for moderation was again heard. Whoever succeeds Dai, especially if it is an internationally respected figure from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs such as Wang Yi, would seem to have less likelihood of representing the full range of voices on foreign policy.

Another factor is cultural. With widespread popular resentment of what was perceived as the affrontery of South Koreans in challenging assumptions about Chinese cultural centrality, leaders had broad support to teach the South a lesson. One assumption that grew with Sino-South Korean ties after normalization was that South Korea would be deferential, shift away from its pro-U.S. outlook, and welcome regionalism led by China. Yet, the Koguryo dispute, which erupted in 2004, and other signs of what was seen as cultural arrogance became popular Internet grievances, which writings on South Korea exacerbated in 2009-10. It is unclear how these cultural attitudes operated in discussions within the leadership. The Propaganda Department is one likely conduit for them. Less cosmopolitan and more nativist voices could have shared the urge to take a tougher line toward the South. A shift to the North Korean side represented, in part, rejection of the South Korean side and demonization of it.

Liu Yunshan, secretary of the Propaganda Department and member of the Politburo, who, as a member of the fifth generation, is favored to secure the Political Standing Committee slot held by Li Changchun. While he has been criticized by intellectuals as a conservative commissar, he has won support in leadership circles for reasserting an orthodox approach to national identity. The fact that the Party devoted an entire Central Committee plenary session in October 2011 to culture and ideology reflects Liu’s ability to draw attention to the urgency of safeguarding China’s “cultural security.”¹⁴ Along with Liu’s success in what is seen as rejuvenation of Chinese propaganda, Minister of Public Security Meng Jianzhu appears to be another rising leader, capable of replacing

Zhou Yonggang on the Standing Committee, with a proven record of managing public opinion through innovations such as public-security microblogging.¹⁵ The 6th Plenum was followed by release of “CCP Central Committee on Deepening Reform of the Cultural System: Resolution to Address a Number of Challenges to Promote the Development and Prosperity of Socialist Culture.” As reported, “proper public opinion guidance is a blessing for the [CCP] and the people; mistaken public opinion guidance is a disaster for the [CCP] and the people.”¹⁶ Assertive leadership on cultural matters favors the North over the South, given the image of a deepening cultural divide in Sino-South Korean relations.¹⁷

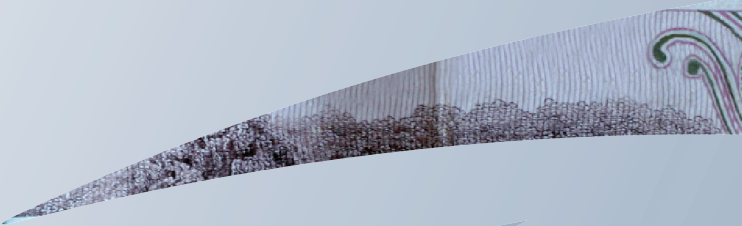
China has justified its claims to intervene in North Korea through historical arguments that the Koguryo state was part of China and that the Korean War, which is not over, was glorious cooperation that drew China into helping to save the beleaguered North. It explains China’s unique position today as a reflection of diplomatic success in establishing relations with both North and South Korea, giving it unique leverage on both sides. While supporting the North more than any other state does, China makes clear that it sets the terms for assistance. In support of Kim Jong-un, assistance is already rising further, but on terms that China’s leaders calibrate to steer diplomacy in the most favorable direction.

Precautionary measures have been taken by China’s leaders to prevent conciliatory voices from gaining real leverage over foreign policy. Returning students from abroad in international relations and related fields rarely become heads of academic organizations or party secretaries. Talented experts may be lured back to China, but in sensitive fields their mobility is narrowed. The example of the Soviet “*mezhdunarodniki*” influencing change under Gorbachev is well recalled. There is tolerance for a more informed discussion of international relations, but caution to inculcate a clear message at odds with what many experts argue and to prevent infiltration of advocates into top posts.

Hardliners have intermittently gained dominance over policy making, as in 1989-92, but there is debate over whether the long-run trend is in their favor or not. A moderating trend in 2011 reflects calculations that the balance of power remains less positive for China than many had believed. Yet, this relative caution does not suggest serious reconsideration of the reasoning that has driven China’s Asia policy, especially its Korean peninsula policy, since assertiveness grew bolder. For reasons of both long-term patterns in strategic thinking and multi-dimensional coherence in national identity, China’s leadership has clarified its outlook on the peninsula in a manner that is unlikely to change markedly after the fifth generation takes power. Xi Jinping’s fall 2011 statement on the Korean War is a telling indicator, as is a worsening human rights record and tighter controls over culture.

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

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