



DECIPHERING PLA MEDIA COMMENTARIES ON NORTH KOREA: GOING ROGUE OR STAYING ON SCRIPT

By Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga

Abstract

As one of the most opaque actors at the center of China's policy toward North Korea, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) reveals few official public details on its views of North Korea and their nearly 60-year-old alliance. Yet as the Chinese government allows greater debate on North Korea policy in the mainstream Chinese media, some of the most prominent voices are those of PLA commentators. Compromised mostly of PLA academics who serve ultimately as propaganda artists, these "talking heads" or "hawks" serve to shape domestic public opinion and offer Beijing plausible deniability for signaling intentions and resolve to foreign governments during periods of tensions related to the Korean Peninsula. These commentators provide a window into PLA thinking on North Korea, but analysis is complicated by mixed messages and potentially misinterpreted signals. While isolated articles often lack authoritativeness without being placed in the proper context of the larger strategic environment and PLA actions, long-term trends in PLA commentators' writings, such as the emergence of Lt. General Wang Hongguang's critical narrative, can reflect shifts in official Chinese thinking about North Korea and may better capture changing dynamics behind the scenes. Since these PLA commentators have little impact on China's overall policy toward North Korea, U.S. and South Korean analysts should be wary of overemphasizing these writings and push to engage more authoritative PLA officials for future discussions of North Korea-related issues.

Key words: *China-North Korea relations, Chinese foreign policy, North Korea, People's Liberation Army (PLA), Chinese media*

Introduction

In December 2014, Lieutenant General Wang Hongguang, the former deputy commander of the Nanjing Military Region, wrote an article for the state-run *Global Times* saying "it is unnecessary for China to sacrifice its own interests for those of the DPRK... China has cleaned up the DPRK's mess too many times... but doesn't have to do that in the future."¹ He concluded that North Korea has "harmed China's fundamental interests." This article caught the attention of Western officials and analysts as a rare public criticism of North Korea by the People's Liberation Army (PLA), but in reality, Lt. General Wang had already been writing critically of North Korea in the mainstream Chinese media for over a year. Moreover, his voice is just one of many from PLA experts with a diverse array of opinions in the Chinese press, providing a wealth of source material to analyze PLA views of North Korea.

Lt. General Wang's broadsides against North Korea come as Chinese President Xi Jinping has overseen a noticeably chilled political relationship with Pyongyang following the North's third nuclear test in February 2013. The Chinese government has permitted an increasingly open public debate since the last nuclear test, and PLA commentators have been an active part of this discussion, along with Chinese academics and think tank experts.²

This paper addresses five core questions, with a focus on commentary following the 2013 nuclear test. First, what do PLA-affiliated commentators say in the mainstream Chinese press? Second, are these articles and statements authoritative for the PLA's views and thinking on North Korea issues? Third, how do public comments compare to private PLA discussions about North Korea? Fourth, what does this mean for China's North

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Korea policy? Lastly, how can this inform U.S. and South Korean policy decision-makers in their interactions with the Chinese government, and specifically the Chinese military, on North Korea issues?

While there is a wealth of PLA commentary on North Korea that is largely unexplored by Western analysts, its utility for policy makers in Washington, Seoul and beyond is evident only in the context of broader PLA policy trends. PLA commentators provide an important window into better understanding PLA views of North Korea, but with the important caveat that many of these commentators are, though not reading a script, able to maintain a high-profile persona because they are keenly aware of their boundaries. They do not function as “agenda-setters” but rather project the view of events that the PLA would like Chinese and foreign audiences to see. Thus, PLA commentary on North Korea serves to shape Chinese public opinion by educating the audience according to the PLA’s worldview, while also signaling PLA intentions on North Korea issues.

Narrowing the Lens: The PLA and North Korea

As North Korea’s treaty ally and most important supporter, China will play a crucial role in the future of the Korean Peninsula. Those involved in the region must understand Beijing’s policy and, therefore, the bureaucratic actors who shape it. Although foreign policy decision-making authority has become increasingly centralized under President Xi, several bureaucratic stakeholders still wield influence over the direction of China’s policy toward Pyongyang. The Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC), China’s top decision-making body, is the final arbiter on policy, with President Xi first among the other six increasingly unimportant equals. The PBSC is advised on policy by the Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group (FALSG), currently managed by State Councilor Yang Jiechi, with an undetermined role played by the recently created National Security Commission (NSC).³ Below this top tier, the International Liaison Department (ILD), the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) are the primary stakeholders in policy decision-making, in ranking order.⁴ While the ILD is the most important, there are rarely any public statements or discussions that provide insight into ILD views of North Korea. And although the MFA is by far the most transparent by virtue of its press briefings and affiliated think tank, the China Institute for International Studies (CIIS), it is also by far the weakest actor of the three.⁵

This leaves the PLA as a wild card in better understanding China’s policy toward North Korea. Its central role in North Korea affairs, especially security issues—not only for the nuclear and missile programs that alarm the international community, but also collapse scenarios that ossify Chinese thinking on North Korea—means the PLA’s views of the North are a critical factor for foreign analysts to consider. Despite the general fanfare given to the relationship between the PLA and North Korea’s Korean People’s Army (KPA), the reality has long been characterized by an indecisive outlook and hesitant cooperation from Beijing.⁶ Writing on the status of the military ties between Beijing and Pyongyang, Andrew Scobell and Mark Cozad concluded that despite the binding mutual defense treaty from 1961, “there does not appear to be any real defense coordination mechanism nor do the terms of the treaty ever seem to have been invoked,” as there are no known PLA-KPA multilateral exercises and a general “absence of robust mil-mil ties.”⁷ In his history of PLA views of North Korea, John J. Tkacik Jr. illustrates that even the founding moment of their bond, the new Chinese military leadership’s decision to enter the Korean War, was marked by heavy resistance.⁸ The “general consensus among the Chinese Politburo in September and October 1950 was against Chinese participation in the war [...] it is now clear that Mao was in a distinct minority if he truly considered Korea to be of dramatic strategic importance to China.”⁹ Discussing PLA-KPA cooperation during the Korean War, You Ji states the “general feelings of PLA commanders were that North’s forces were not reliable [sic].”^{10,11} As one European scholar noted, despite this tension between the two militaries, it is important to understand that the PLA is the most sympathetic Chinese actor to North Korea’s nuclear program, as its own nuclear program was also originally viewed as necessary for state survival.

Understanding the PLA in Chinese Media: What Do We Already Know?

There is little preexisting research on the PLA’s public commentary on North Korea. The most important study on PLA views of North Korea was published in 2006,¹² before the North’s first nuclear test, attacks on South Korea in 2010, and hereditary succession to Kim Jong-un in 2011—all events that undoubtedly gave Chinese leaders pause to reconsider the North’s strategic value to China. Nevertheless, Tkacik already found that “there is certainly much skepticism about the value of keeping company with the North Koreans among China’s nonintelligence military analysts.”¹³



Yet he noted, “just what exactly the PLA thinks about North Korea is a mystery to outside observers.”¹⁴ This study is one attempt to fill that gap and update this research.

The general role of the PLA in the Chinese media has received more attention by Western scholars and analysts, but there is no definitive answer on their implications for foreign policy decision-making. Reviewing the statements of PLA commentators, often known as “hawks,” Andrew Chubb has analyzed their place in the PLA’s outreach strategy and concluded “their role probably has more to do with the regime’s domestic and international propaganda work objectives than political debates,” and thus their “hawkish remarks... should be seen as propaganda rather than statements of intent or clues to foreign policy debates [and] belong to the realm of political warfare.”¹⁵ Chubb quotes the most famous hawk, Luo Yuan, as saying he plays a “rational hawk” whose role is “designed properly at the highest level,” and that he is an “external propaganda expert” under the direction of the government.¹⁶

In contrast, Liu Yawei and Justine Zheng Ren argue that “the military is [now] seen to air its unique views and try to become an agenda setter for China’s strategic interests.”¹⁷ They conclude that “unlike academics of international relations and bureaucrats in the foreign policy arena, the PLA’s strategic thoughts are underpinned by their organized interest, articulated with striking consistency, and advocated with enthusiasm,” making them a powerful special interest group in Chinese politics.¹⁸ Compounding this issue, “the civilian leadership today is simply not able to stop the military elite from openly discussing China’s strategic interest,” creating “an active and assertive group of PLA elite who came out to build a unique narrative of China’s strategic goals and make policy recommendations on all possible occasions.”¹⁹

Finding Truth in Rhetoric

There are two distinct worlds for public PLA analysis of North Korea: the mainstream Chinese media and PLA-run academic journals—and these two worlds rarely overlap. Well-known PLA commentators rarely publish on North Korea issues in these PLA-run academic journals because they are not experts on North Korea. However, another group of PLA academics do publish in these journals but rarely appear in the mainstream Chinese media.

One such internally focused expert is Wang Yisheng, who appears to publish nearly exclusively in PLA and MFA academic journals and only rarely speaks to the mainstream Chinese media. From 2002 to 2010, he published at least 25 articles in government journals but this author could find no articles in the *Global Times* or *People’s Daily*. The only article in the mainstream press was a 2008 article for *Guangming Daily*, which provided a detailed assessment of North Korea’s nascent cell phone network.²⁰ He is also the main author on two sensitive PLA books about North Korea, suggesting seniority within the PLA on North Korea issues. Moreover, he has co-authored at least one article with an officer from the Yanbian Military District, located along the border with North Korea, suggesting ongoing cooperation with local-level military officials and thus access to a local perspective on the issue.²¹ When he is quoted in the mainstream press, his comments are largely sympathetic to North Korea and place blame on the United States. During the tensions following the North’s 2013 nuclear test, Wang told a Chinese reporter “as long as the United States or South Korea do not fire the first shot, North Korea is unlikely to initiative a large-scale attack [on them].”²² In an article for a 2004 Tsinghua University report on arms control, he said the “earliest motivation for North Korea to starts its nuclear development was the United States’ nuclear threats.”²³ Notably, he does not mention China in the article, even when discussing the Six-Party Talks. His in-depth research and analysis stands in stark contrast to the relatively bland analysis of PLA commentators, and suggests a real expertise in the issue.

While mainstream PLA commentaries are published in a variety of venues, the vast majority are published in the *Global Times*, a state-run newspaper known for its nationalistic tabloid slant. The *Global Times* has been the premier domestic forum for the ongoing elite debate about North Korea policy, hosting a wide range of opinions written by Chinese academics and PLA officers.²⁴ Indeed, Wang’s famous article was actually a response to an article by Li Dunqiu, a professor at Zhejiang University, in November 2014.²⁵ This reveals that at least some PLA officers desire to engage in the public policy debate within China, more likely in an attempt to impact public opinion than to influence policy outcomes.

It should also be noted that PLA commentators are not omnipresent in the Chinese media. While there are certainly many who appear frequently, Phoenix TV’s “Strategy Room” show, hosted by Qiu Zhenhai, provides one example of their frequency in certain venues – In the show’s four years, it has



devoted its 35-minute runtime to North Korea issues eight times, and only once invited a PLA commentator—Luo Yuan—for a rather mundane conversation about North Korea.²⁶ Moreover, not all PLA commentators address North Korea issues regularly, suggesting a possible division of labor based on regional expertise.

PLA Views of the Alliance and Buffer

It is unlikely that all PLA writings in the mainstream press are authoritative, but there are certainly public debates that likely reflect internal PLA discussions of North Korea issues. One prominent case is PLA views of China's alliance with the North and the North's role as a buffer in the 21st century. Tracking a likely evolution of PLA views of North Korea, Scobell and Cozad's 2014 article differs with Tkacik's 2006 assessment of PLA views of the alliance. Tkacik wrote "the PLA appears completely committed to the precise terms and spirit of the treaty," while Scobell and Cozad assert that "the security relationship is perhaps best viewed as a 'virtual alliance' with considerable ambiguity as to if and when it might be invoked by Beijing."²⁷

In a 2011 article in the authoritative CIIS journal *World Affairs*, alongside an article by Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, Teng Jianqun, a former PLA naval officer who later worked at the PLA's Academy of Military Science (AMS), listed North Korea as the first "third party factor" in U.S.-China relations. More important, he wrote that the China-North Korea "assurance relationship [*youbang guanxi*] is not the same nature as the United States' alliance relationship [*tongmeng guanxi*] with Japan and South Korea: China does not wish to control North Korea; and China does not have troops stationed in North Korea."²⁸ While Teng's current affiliation with a MFA think tank may lessen his credibility as a representative of present military thinking, his military background certainly gives some credence to his comments.²⁹ The explicit decision to draw a clear distinction between China's relationship with Pyongyang and Washington's relationships with Tokyo and Seoul reflect consistent appraisals by Chinese and Western academics that the Chinese leadership has long determined its relationship with the North does not constitute an alliance and that Chinese leaders have been searching for a way out. Moreover, his use of "country-to-country relationship" instead of "traditional friendship" is in line with a growing push, originally driven by the MFA, to "normalize" China-North Korea relations.

In an interview with the author, one well-known PLA commentator asserted that North Korea no longer serves as a military buffer since the development of new military capabilities makes it irrelevant, but the North does have strategic value—China does not want a unified peninsula and seeks stability. This echoes comments by Lt. General Wang in his December 2014 article, "The information-based warfare in modern times requires larger space and shorter time, then how useful can the so-call 'strategic barrier' be?"³⁰ To reinforce this nonchalance, Wang adds that "China is not a savior, so it cannot save the DPRK if it is really going to collapse." Yet, ultimately, Wang's only policy advice is for China to "take a clear and firm stance on matters on its own discretion."

Yet there are other members of the PLA who still favor North Korea as a buffer. In August 2013, Lt. General Wang Haidong conceded that the North no longer serves the same military buffer utility as it did in the Korean War, writing that "North Korea's geostrategic place still has a special importance to China's national security and China should revive its use as a strategic buffer."³¹ On the 60th anniversary of China's entry into the Korean War, Xu Yan, a Major General and professor at the National Defense University, praised Mao's decision to send troops in order to "guarantee China decades of a peaceful environment and win China an important strategic buffer."³² Laying out an economic rationale in November 2010, Yin Zhuo, a PLA Navy Rear Admiral, said that North Korea is important to China because its "security and stability" impacts "the security of China's Northeast region," which is undergoing industrial revitalization and could even affect the provinces around the Bohai Sea, including Beijing, Tianjin, and Shandong.³³ The continued debate over the value of North Korea to China as a strategic buffer suggests that there is disagreement within the senior PLA leadership. Future articles in the mainstream Chinese press will be one window into how the debate develops until the PLA leadership reaches a consensus view of the North's strategic value.

A Lone Ranger or Smoke Screen?

Lt. General Wang Hongguang, who sparked immense debate with his December 2014 article in the *Global Times* lambasting North Korea, appears to be the only PLA commentator who consistently criticizes North Korea in high-profile venues.³⁴ Yet this raises the question of whether Wang's negative comments should be considered representative of the PLA, if he is a loose



cannon without authority or if he is simply just a PLA propaganda artist masquerading as a critic of Pyongyang to soothe Western government officials and analysts.

His April 2013 and December 2014 articles are a key indicator of Wang's motivation for his continued critique.³⁵ These *Global Times* articles urged his fellow PLA commentators not to speak out of turn and to follow the party line, tracking with comments from other PLA commentators documented by Chubb. Wang even scolds them for interfering with "high-level decisions and deployments."³⁶ This suggests that Wang is not a loose cannon unsanctioned by senior leadership, but does not answer whether he actually reflects internal PLA thinking.

There are several other factors that suggest Wang can be considered an authoritative voice for certain parts of the PLA. In contrast with the vast majority of PLA commentators who have little to no operational experience, Wang served at senior levels of the military, providing routine access to both junior soldiers and fellow senior officers. He is also a Princeling, enabling him to access elite networks in the Party that would assumedly provide him the necessary political space to air his views, which may otherwise be considered unacceptable.³⁷ Furthermore, as detailed later, in March 2014 Wang directly criticized the MFA for their handling of the near-miss of a North Korean missile passing a Chinese passenger plane, a rare feat for PLA commentators.

Wang has actually been active in the Chinese media on a wide range of issues since 2013, finally attracting attention for his comments on North Korea in December 2014. He has written a total of 13 articles on North Korea in the Chinese press but has made no appearances on TV.³⁸ His first article on North Korea, written in May 2013 in the Chinese-language *Global Times*, was actually a simple call for reevaluating the strength of the KPA and a critique of South Korea and the United States for overhyping the North Korea threat for their own purposes.³⁹ His first critical article was written for *National Humanity History*, a relatively obscure bimonthly publication under the *People's Daily*.⁴⁰ The article used a historical angle to recount the threat of instability on the Korean Peninsula posed to China's Sui and Tang dynasties, and also asserts the "tributary" relationship under the Ming and Qing dynasties in reality meant a lot of "gifts" from Beijing and little "tribute" from the Peninsula, with the Chinese government often having to mediate their wars and disputes. He blames the start of the Sino-Japanese War of 1895 and outbreak of the "Korean War" on the Koreans, the latter of which the central government was indecisive about joining and ultimately left the

newly formed People's Republic unable to unify Taiwan with the mainland. In Wang's telling, Koreans are to blame for nearly every bad event in the last 100 years of Chinese history. This historical analogy is a clear message that China is aware of the costs of supporting the North, as Wang notes, "the Korean War is already more than 60 years in the past, but it is still a drag on China, as it still impacts China's unification and development to this day."⁴¹ In the end, Wang criticizes North Korea's "Byungjin Line" policy and warns "nuclear contamination must not directly impact Chinese territory."⁴² One U.S. government analyst explained that Wang's articles have transitioned from simply being critical of North Korea in 2013, to containing more policy recommendations for the Chinese government in 2014.

Another PLA commentator provides a good example of what happens when people really step outside of the lines in the eyes of Party censors. In 2005, Major General Zhu Chenghu said that China would be prepared to launch nuclear strikes on hundreds of U.S. cities in the event of a Taiwan crisis, inciting a fervent response by the U.S. government.⁴³ According to a former senior Department of Defense official, Zhu was silenced for several years but later reappeared, and is still making notable public comments, including describing President Obama's foreign policy as experiencing "erectile dysfunction."⁴⁴ On North Korea, a provocative article in 2004 by Wang Zhongwen, an economist, led to the closure of the magazine it was published in, *Strategy and Management*, which ostensibly had PLA ties.⁴⁵ More recently, Deng Yuwen was suspended from his post at the Central Party School for publishing an article in the *Financial Times* after North Korea's 2013 nuclear test urging Beijing to "abandon" Pyongyang.⁴⁶

Wang's elite status as a Princeling, avowed interest in following the party line and continued presence as a commenter suggest his opinions are sanctioned by the PLA. However, it is difficult to discern if this is due to his Princeling ties or if his policy views truly reflect the thinking of at least some high-level PLA officials. Lt. General Wang's continued publishing on North Korea issues, as well as his inclusion in private expert meetings on North Korea, may be the more telling signs that his comments are condoned by Beijing.

The Journey to Showtime

In order to understand the intended role of these PLA commentators in the Chinese system, one critical question is who is the driving force behind their participation in the public media



debate? If they are utilized as mere pawns of the PLA senior brass in a state-run media environment, then their every move should be orchestrated by calculating PLA officials intending to send signals to specific targets. If they are rogue actors, they should be seeking out these media companies as outlets for their thoughts. Interviews with two senior PLA officials who speak frequently with the media and multiple senior Chinese officials and scholars with high-level connections revealed a different story: The Chinese media, increasingly run as commercial businesses separate from their Party ownership, drive the PLA's participation as a response to consumer demand, which in turn supports media companies' bottom line through advertising.⁴⁷

As explained by every Chinese interviewee, the media's reliance on advertising revenue means programming decisions are increasingly based on viewership numbers. Chinese viewers tune in to watch PLA commentators, likely because of their strident opinions and assumed ability to speak for the government, and the media is merely responding to this market demand. Thus, PLA commentators are not ordered on TV by the PLA to toe the party line, but rather go on the air when they are asked for comment by the Chinese media. As one Chinese interviewee explained, PLA commentators are far more interesting than boring diplomats who speak "diplomatically." Of note, PLA interviewees said they were not provided talking points by the PLA, although the PLA propaganda department only allows certain experts to appear on TV. They do need special approval for Phoenix TV, while foreign journalists also reported limited access to the PLA. This is not to say the Chinese government does not require certain appearances by PLA commentators, which is likely as this author knows civilian Chinese experts have been called and directed personally to appear on TV at a moment's notice, but the author does not have personal knowledge of any similar instances with PLA commentators.

PLA commentators have one unique feature that sets them apart from other Chinese analysts who regularly appear in the Chinese media—some are directly affiliated with the Chinese government. Chinese academics, however influential and well connected they may be, are obviously unable to speak for the Chinese government. While other Chinese government bureaucracies do have their own subordinate think tanks, these experts are not officially affiliated with the government bureaucracy. A good example is the MFA's CIIS think tank. Teng Jianqun, the former PLA officer, is simply referred to as a CIIS "researcher" on CCTV, and Yang Xiyu, a former senior MFA official on North Korea affairs who was extensively involved with the Six-Party Talks, is similarly

called a CIIS "researcher."⁴⁸ One PLA interviewee did note that PLA commentators are either retired or academic experts. However, this is not always clearly stated in their short biographies on TV or elsewhere. For Chinese audiences, without detailed background information about their earlier government careers, non-PLA commentators cannot be viewed as having the same authority to speak on government policy, especially military and security related issues, as PLA commentators.

Yet, the Chinese government can also exploit this ambiguity as plausible deniability by downplaying their official status if necessary. Indeed, after Lt. General Wang's December 2014 article made waves abroad, a senior PLA official told Western interlocutors that Wang was expressing "his personal views," and that his opinion should not be taken as representative of PLA thinking on the issue. Likewise, after Major General Zhu made a provocative comment in 2005, the MFA told U.S. officials that his statements were "personal."⁴⁹ One Chinese academic added that as the PLA loses influence over North Korea policy, it uses commentary in the Chinese media to stay relevant.

One known factor limiting their freedom of speech is an apparent distinction between speaking on policy issues versus technical matters. According to one Chinese academic, PLA commentators are free to speak on policy issues as they see fit (within the perceived boundaries), but they are unable to speak freely on technical issues. In this context, the *Global Times* took pains to point out that the April 2015 *Wall Street Journal* article revealing higher Chinese estimates for North Korea's nuclear weapons production, from a private meeting of U.S. and Chinese experts that included PLA representatives, was that of an "already retired and old physicist" who was making routine calculations.⁵⁰ This reinforces the commentators' role to focus on public opinion and signaling, instead of injecting authoritative analysis into the debate.

Peeking Behind Partially Closed Doors

PLA public commentary in the mainstream Chinese press raises the question of whether their comments reflect the internal thinking of the PLA. Generally, articles by PLA experts appear removed from high-level PLA thinking and known internal PLA discussions, and instead appear intended as news in the form of opinion.

Although the PLA's public discourse on North Korea seems animated yet shallow, a wide body of literature written by PLA



experts on North Korea intended for internal consumption reveals there is immense interest in learning more and generating more objective assessments about DPRK military capabilities. In the largest military bookstore in Beijing, this author found *A Secret Report on North Korea People's Army*, a book by South Korean scholars on the DPRK military translated by PLA's AMS and with a foreword by Wang Yisheng, a prominent AMS scholar on North Korea's military. Another book, written by Wang and two other PLA scholars in 2010, discussed crisis management on the Korean Peninsula. The book claimed the PLA could arrive in Pyongyang within two hours, and set the priority in a collapse scenario as countering nuclear proliferation.⁵¹

While there is limited reliable public information on internal PLA deliberations over North Korea, a 2014 Japanese media report revealed a leaked PLA document detailing contingency plans for the potential collapse of North Korea.⁵² U.S. government analysts interviewed for this paper believe this Japanese report represents authoritative thinking within the PLA.⁵³ Tkacik believes the multilateral Peace Mission 2005 military exercise, led by Beijing, was “a very serious effort to plan for the collapse of North Korea [and] a plausible indicator that the Chinese military is planning for a possible invasion and occupation of North Korea.”⁵⁴ This suggests the PLA has long been concerned with North Korea's stability, despite its refusal to engage with the U.S. government on the issue at the official Track 1 level.⁵⁵ However, this study found no public PLA statements or discussion by any PLA commentator that directly reflect these concerns or planning in such detail, suggesting that the PLA is hesitant to talk about these issues publicly. Indeed, one senior Asian diplomat relayed to the author that senior Chinese officials view North Korea “like a dying cancer patient—even if you know they are dying, you can't discuss funeral arrangements until they are dead.”⁵⁶

One topic where PLA commentators have overlapped with authoritative PLA thinking is on border security issues. Chang Wanquan, the current Minister of National Defense, wrote an article in 2009 detailing his three years along the North Korea border working on security issues.⁵⁷ Although the Chinese media rarely covered the frequent incursions across the border by Korean People's Army (KPA) soldiers before 2015, the PLA has long been concerned with these issues since at least a 2005 incident in which a KPA soldier killed a PLA soldier, and Tkacik documents massive PLA troop deployments to the region in response to the border security issue dating to 2003.⁵⁸

Following the MFA's belated acknowledgement of a KPA soldier killing four Chinese civilians in December 2014, Lt. General Wang wrote an article calling for the construction of an “electric fence” along the border.⁵⁹ However, Wang did not detail the quiet but rather proactive aforementioned steps the PLA has already undertaken, instead citing media reports that the government has initiated the “ten household joint defense system” and installed alarms to call the police.⁶⁰ Wang's decision not to delve into long-standing efforts by the PLA or reference other public works by PLA authors suggests he was either not interested in reassuring the public that the PLA has been working to address this issue, or that mainstream discussion of such PLA efforts is not allowed. This also reflects one limit to the insight that can be gleaned from PLA commentators: even when they are writing on a topic that has been publicly discussed by senior PLA leaders openly, they are often not writing true analytical articles for Chinese policy makers, but rather most often simply news articles for consumption by the Chinese general public—fulfilling their responsibility as propaganda artists to educate the general public and shape opinion.

Stretched Between the Boss and the Customer

Although PLA commentators speak on North Korea issues, the special bilateral relationship appears to complicate, and very likely limit, the traditional antagonist and provocateur role played by these PLA commentators. As documented by Chubb, several PLA commentators have reiterated numerous times that they follow the will of the Party and their rhetoric must ultimately conform to the Party and military's guidelines. Yet they also work to cater to public nationalism.⁶¹ This means PLA commentators must walk a fine line between adhering to Chinese government statements and policy direction regarding North Korea issues while also reflecting Chinese public opinion. As Chinese public opinion is increasingly critical of Pyongyang and Beijing's policies, comments by PLA figures sometimes lag behind this sentiment and leave them open to public criticism.⁶²

This balancing act has proven difficult at times for Luo Yuan and others. When North Korea hijacked a Chinese fishing boat and kidnapped 16 fishermen in May 2013—repeating a similar hijacking just a year earlier—users on Weibo, China's version of Twitter, were generally critical of the Chinese government's quiet and diplomatic handling of the issue with the North and specifically seared Luo Yuan and other prominent PLA commentators for not speaking out on the issue.⁶³ One netizen,



or online commentator, said in comments circulated widely around the Chinese web on May 19, “Luo Yuan, Commander Zhu [Chenghu] [some versions replace him with Dai Xu], and the hawks don’t say a word... North Korea abducted fishermen by force, you can not pretended not to notice.”⁶⁴

Yet less than 24 hours later, Luo Yuan did tweet that “I’ve been watching the issue of Chinese fishermen being detained by North Korea ...North Korea has gone too far, even if it is short on money it cannot cross the border to seize people, North Korea must release the boat and crew according to the demands of the Chinese government... or else there will be retribution.”⁶⁵ Indeed, it was Luo Yuan’s most popular Weibo post on any North Korea issue by far (750 reposts compared to an average of around ten for other related posts). However, Luo Yuan did not make these comments in any mainstream public media venue while the events played out in May 2013. This gap between social media posts and statements in the mainstream media reflect one level of likely censorship, whether self-imposed or dictated by the government, which is also evident in English-language translations.

Signals and Targets: Pyongyang or Washington?

While there is no evidence that North Korea pays attention to these PLA commentators (at least, KCNA has not seen fit to name them or respond to their comments), the Chinese government’s decision to allow expanded space for some PLA commentators, most notably Lt. General Wang, to pen articles critical of North Korea suggests the Chinese government increasingly sees the North as a necessary target of its overall foreign propaganda campaign. As Andrew Scobell has documented, PLA commentators can play an important role in signaling PLA intentions: in certain cases “PLA rhetoric reflects scripting; the utterances of Chinese soldiers are prepared and calculated to have impact.”⁶⁶ However, it is important to understand which country the signal is meant to target. Articles translated into English, and thus intended for Western audiences, represent an important distinction between messages that are meant for Pyongyang and domestic readers, which are left in the original Chinese.⁶⁷

Of 28 articles published in the *Global Times* by eight PLA authors, only one article each by Luo Yuan and Wang Hongguang were translated into English.⁶⁸ The only notable article translated into English by China Military Online was Lt. General Wang’s December 2014 article, which was not translated by the *Global Times*. Luo’s article was published in March 2013 and focused on

China’s response to the North’s 2013 nuclear test while Wang’s article came in response to the March 2014 North Korean missile launch, which barely missed hitting a Chinese passenger plane. Luo’s article appears to take a strident line against the North by discussing concerns about spillover from nuclear accidents and refugees following regime collapse, with lines such as “Did North Korea harm China’s interests? Sure,” and “North Korea should

“Articles translated into English, and thus intended for Western audiences, represent an important distinction between messages that are meant for Pyongyang and domestic readers, which are left in the original Chinese.”

also be concerned about China’s interests.” Yet the article also replays the generally optimistic tone of the PLA on North Korea: “China’s sanctions against North Korea are done through real concern rather than malice,” and “China has a totally different aim from certain countries, for it only expects that North Korea can abandon the pursuit of nuclear weapons, not its political system.” Wang’s article does not have an optimistic tone about the North, and simply concludes that, “Our northern neighbor manifested a rather unfriendly attitude toward China and we must take actions and mobilize related departments to deal with it.” Moreover, Wang actually directly challenges the MFA to take a harder line against the North, as he critiques the official MFA statement.⁶⁹

Luo and Wang’s articles were not solely intended for Western audiences (and perhaps Seoul), however, since they were first written and published in Chinese. Both articles appear intended for domestic consumption and Pyongyang, while Wang also appears to be engaging in a policy debate by criticizing the MFA. The choice of these two articles to be translated contrasts with the larger body of PLA articles that are more supportive of the North, which are not translated into English for Western readers. These articles together illustrate that when PLA commentators are naturally critical of the North, these articles can be translated



into English to present that desired image to Western audiences, even though it is only a small subset of the PLA's broader views. This demonstrates the limits of only viewing PLA commentary in English-language Chinese news, as these select translations are by definition a conscious choice by Chinese government and propaganda officials.

Beyond shaping domestic public opinion, PLA commentators can also be used to broadcast PLA signals during periods of tension. One former U.S. Department of Defense official interviewed by the author asserted that the January 2014 Chinese military exercises with over 100,000 troops, located in the Shenyang Military Region, were intended as a message to North Korea.⁷⁰ This came one month after the execution of Jang Song-taek, who was widely seen as China's most important interlocutor in the North.⁷¹ Indeed, Luo Yuan appeared on Phoenix TV that same month and said China must prepare for the worst case scenario, since Kim Jong-un has been engaging in brinkmanship and is often irrational.⁷² The exercises' intended political message to North Korea was conveyed by PLA interlocutors to the former U.S. official and suggests the PLA is actively involved in the Chinese government's signaling to North Korea. Andrew Scobell has also tracked the signaling role of PLA commentators in voicing their objections to the joint U.S.-ROK military exercises in the Yellow Sea in response to North Korea's March 2010 attack on the *Cheonan*.⁷³ This illustrates the need to place PLA comments in the Chinese media in the broader context of PLA actions, as Luo Yuan did not mention the ongoing military exercises.

Conclusion

Not all PLA writing on North Korea issues is authoritative, and there are substantial limitations to policy insights gained from solely reading English-language material. While it is important to treat these writings as worthwhile data points in the larger China-North Korea relationship, single articles are unlikely to mark true turning points in PLA views. Specific authors, publishing venues, and timing in the larger strategic context may be indicative of some level of authoritativeness. In context, PLA commentators can reflect likely disagreements within the senior PLA leadership, or add perspective to ongoing tensions in the bilateral relationship. PLA commentators' role as conduits for government policy means larger trends in their writings, such

as the emergence of Lt. General Wang's critical narrative or increasing use of "country-to-country relationship," can reflect shifts in official Chinese thinking about North Korea and may better capture changing dynamics behind the scenes.

Commentary is often intended first and foremost for domestic consumption as propaganda to shape public opinion. These PLA experts work to filter events and news through a PLA prism and produce writings that promote PLA interests within China. Occasionally, PLA commentators can be utilized by the Chinese government as a signal to foreign audiences—Washington, Pyongyang and Seoul—when deemed necessary. In these scenarios, comments frequently come in tandem with broader PLA actions, such as military exercises or official PLA statements, to emphasize their political message.

For U.S. and South Korean officials, discussions with civilian and military Chinese counterparts still form the basis for understanding Chinese government views of North Korea. PLA commentators largely focus on shaping public opinion and signaling foreign audiences, not injecting themselves into high-level decision-making. This leaves them little role in influencing China's North Korea policy. Liu and Ren caution that "the actual influence of these PLA officers can be a self-fulfilling prophecy, becoming more and more important as other states perceive the influence of the PLA to be growing in the process of foreign policy decision making."⁷⁴ Indeed, one former Department of Defense official said the U.S. government assigns too much importance to these PLA experts.

Thus, U.S. and South Korean officials should be conscious of the underlying motives for PLA commentary and thus wary about placing too much emphasis on these writings in their discussions with Chinese counterparts. One potential productive use of these writings would be to cite them as a prompt for discussions with PLA and other Chinese counterparts on whether the PLA is rethinking its views of North Korea. Officials should push to engage more senior or internally-focused experts in the PLA that can represent more authoritative viewpoints in dialogues. However, in times of tension—for instance, after a future North Korean provocation against the South—Western analysts should observe PLA commentators as possible supplementary explanatory signals to PLA military exercises. In the end, PLA commentaries provide as much insight as the analyst can provide context.



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