

Sino-US Competition and Nuclear Non-Proliferation on the Korean Peninsula

By Brendan Taylor

Between 2002 and 2012, China and the US engaged in a form of strategic diplomacy regarding the Korean Peninsula that emphasized co-operation on a range of key issues, especially nuclear non-proliferation. But with the rise of tensions since 2012 over maritime disputes in the East and South China Seas, relations between China and the US appear headed toward greater competition, including on the Korean Peninsula, writes Brendan Taylor.

Published: Dec 27, 2016

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North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities are gathering pace at an alarming rate. While Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs still face technical challenges and limitations,¹ expert opinion increasingly suggests that North Korea is now only a few years away having the capacity to strike the United States mainland with an inter-continental ballistic missile (ICBM).²

North Korea has conducted two nuclear tests so far in 2016, which marked the fourth and fifth tests in the history of its nuclear program and the two closest in succession since its first such test in 2006. The most recent test, conducted in September, was also the Hermit Kingdom's most powerful yet, producing a blast that measured a magnitude of 5.3 and an explosive yield equivalent to at least 10 kilotons of TNT (and quite possibly more).³ North Korea has also launched more than 20 ballistic missiles so far in 2016. Perhaps the most worrying aspect of this acceleration in Pyongyang's missiles activities occurred in August 2016, when North Korea conducted what experts believe to be a successful test of a submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM). The missile flew approximately 500 kilometers and, significantly, landed in Japanese waters. Taken together, these developments point to a North Korea that seems bent upon pressing ahead with its nuclear and missile programs, while also reflecting the paucity of options available to an international community that for more than two decades has struggled to contain Pyongyang's growing nuclear capabilities.

While North Korea's burgeoning nuclear and missile programs are unquestionably tied to shoring up the legitimacy of the regime under its young dictator, Kim Jong Un, I suggest in this article that the acceleration in these programs is equally a product of changing strategic dynamics in relations between Asia's two dominant powers — China and the United States. I argue that during the decade from 2002, in a clear case of "strategic diplomacy" in practice, China and the US undertook strategic co-operation at key junctures in order to achieve two long-term shared objectives: preventing nuclear proliferation and maintaining stability more broadly on the Korean Peninsula, which was viewed largely as a self-contained strategic system. This period of promise for strategic diplomacy ended abruptly in 2012, however, as developments in both the East and South China Seas sharply diminished the appetite for Sino-US co-operation. During the period since, the connections between East Asia's traditional flashpoints have begun to intensify. Unless and until this condition abates, the inability and unwillingness of Beijing and Washington to treat the Korean Peninsula in isolation from broader East Asian strategic developments, as they had largely done during the decade from 2002, will render the pursuit of mutually beneficial strategic diplomacy here more challenging. Instead, Sino-American strategic interaction regarding the Korean Peninsula is likely to become increasingly competitive.

Sino-American co-operation around the North Korean nuclear problem commenced in 2002, following the collapse of the Agreed Framework in October of that year. The unraveling of this agreement occurred in the aftermath of US Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly's visit to Pyongyang, when he confronted North Korean officials, asserting that Washington had evidence that Pyongyang was continuing to secretly

develop nuclear weapons using uranium-enrichment technology, in violation of the spirit if not the letter of the Agreed Framework.⁴ US President George W. Bush and his Chinese counterpart Jiang Zemin met at Bush's Crawford Ranch in Texas during the same month, where they famously agreed "that peace and stability in Northeast Asia must be maintained" and that "both sides will continue to work towards a nuclear-weapons-free Korean Peninsula and a peaceful resolution of this issue." Bush subsequently referred to this agreement as the "Crawford consensus."⁵ Interestingly, the establishment of the Agreed Framework in 1994 had provided a much earlier example of the potential for such Sino-American strategic diplomacy. It has been argued, for instance, that behind-the-scenes discussions between Beijing and Pyongyang played an important role in averting a more serious strategic crisis and thus maintaining stability on the Korean Peninsula in 1994.⁶

By 2003, while Chinese and American motivations were by no means identical, they were certainly complementary. Beijing and Washington shared a common interest in preventing nuclear proliferation and in preserving strategic stability on the Korean Peninsula, as the Crawford consensus highlighted. The Bush administration at that time viewed the Korean problem through the lens of the emerging war on terror. During his inaugural State of the Union address in January 2002, for example, Bush famously labeled Pyongyang, along with Iran and Iraq, as part of an "axis of evil" that was pursuing weapons of mass destruction and assisting terrorist groups.⁷ While East Asia was by no means irrelevant to this campaign — Southeast Asia, for instance, was designated as a second front in the war on terror — with a primary focus upon the Middle East and Central Asia, the US had an interest in maintaining stability in other theaters so as not to become distracted, including on the Korean Peninsula.

China also had a strong interest in non-proliferation and strategic stability at this time, albeit for different reasons. For Beijing, concerns about nuclear proliferation related less to the possibility of weapons of mass destruction falling into the hands of non-state actors and more with the prospect of a Northeast Asian nuclear arms race in which South Korea, Japan and possibly even Taiwan might be tempted to revisit the nuclear option in light of North Korea's advances. Perhaps more importantly, the early 2000s was also a period that Beijing officially regarded as one of "strategic opportunity," in which it could focus its energies primarily on domestic priorities.⁸ Such an approach relied on a largely favorable international situation, particularly in terms of stability in areas immediately adjacent to China, such as the Korean Peninsula. It also required a modicum of stability in Beijing's relations with the US, which had got off to a rocky start with the Bush administration, due to early comments the US president had made regarding US arms sales to Taiwan and a period of crisis following the collision of a US EP-3 surveillance aircraft with a Chinese fighter jet over the waters of the South China Sea.⁹

FROM CALM TO TENSION

Based on interests and objectives that were contrasting and yet complementary, Sino-American co-operation in relation to the Korean Peninsula blossomed from 2002 onward. It was during this period, for instance, that collaboration between Beijing and Washington succeeded in bringing Pyongyang into trilateral talks that formed the basis for the ensuing Six-Party Talks. Again in 2006, as tensions on the Korean Peninsula heightened following North Korea's first nuclear test, US and Chinese officials worked together to bring Pyongyang back to the negotiating table. In 2010, following the March sinking of the South Korean naval vessel, the Cheonan, and the North's November bombardment of South Korea's Yeonpyeong Island, tensions intensified to the point where respected analysts such as Victor Cha pointed to the possibility of all-out conflict between the two Koreas.¹⁰ By December, however, Beijing and Washington were again reportedly working together to calm matters.¹¹ Sino-American co-operation was evident once more in late 2011, following the sudden death of North Korean leader Kim Jong-il. US and Chinese officials maintained close contact in the aftermath of that event, as reflected in Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell's statement at the time observing that "the US and

China share a strong determination to maintain peace and stability.”¹²

The US and China were able to view the Korean Peninsula largely as a self-contained strategic system throughout this period, partly because of the relative calm that existed around East Asia’s other traditional flashpoints. Following a phase of heightened tensions in the South China Sea during the mid-1990s, for instance, those troubled waters had calmed considerably by the early 2000s, particularly following the signing in November 2002 of a “Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea” between China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). From 2000 to 2008, during the administration of Taiwan’s President Chen Shui-bian, who favored Taiwanese independence, cross-Strait tensions threatened periodically to flare. Ultimately, this flashpoint failed to get anywhere near ignition point. Interestingly, from the perspective of this article, however, Chinese strategic diplomacy for a time in late 2004 reportedly included efforts to convince the Bush administration to restrain Chen’s inclinations toward independence in return for Beijing’s assistance in reining in Pyongyang’s provocative behavior.¹³

This relative calm ended rather abruptly in 2012, however, as many of the predictions of the early post-Cold War period suggesting that this region was “ripe for rivalry” seemed finally to be coming to fruition.¹⁴ In April of that year, for instance, tensions in the South China Sea re-emerged as the result of a standoff between Chinese and Filipino vessels in the disputed Scarborough Shoal. In September 2012, tensions also intensified in the East China Sea after the Japanese government’s nationalization of the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Further crises ensued over the following years, including in 2014, when China parked an oil rig in Vietnam’s exclusive economic zone (EEZ), sparking widespread anti-Chinese protests in Vietnam, and as a result of Beijing’s land reclamation efforts in the South China Sea. Tensions have also intensified on the Korean Peninsula centered around Pyongyang’s burgeoning nuclear and missile programs, alongside continuing animosity across the so-called demilitarized zone (DMZ), such as the inter-Korean crisis of August 2015, which was sparked when two South Korean soldiers on patrol were badly maimed after stepping on freshly laid landmines.¹⁵ Most recently, speculation is rife that the cross-strait situation will soon follow suit after the election of Tsai Ing-wen — who belongs to the same political party as Chen — as president of Taiwan in January 2016.¹⁶

COMPETITIVE MINDSET

It is debatable whether these developments reflect the return of geopolitical rivalry in East Asia or whether events themselves are driving that rivalry. Either way, unlike the early 2000s when Chinese and American interests in relation to the Korean Peninsula were contrasting yet complementary, today a more apt description of Beijing and Washington’s objectives would be one of growing coincidence and increasing competitiveness. Gone is the George W. Bush administration’s overriding preoccupation with the Middle East and Central Asia, replaced by a much more diffuse foreign and strategic policy posture during the Barack Obama administration that has included the so-called US “pivot,” or rebalance, to Asia as a central pillar. Likewise, the focus almost solely on domestic matters and the “bide-and-hide” approach that had guided Chinese foreign and strategic policy since the era of Deng Xiaoping has also largely vanished under President Xi Jinping, whose government has exhibited a clear intent to play a much larger role in the international system, particularly in the Western Pacific.¹⁷

Such fundamental shifts have reduced the inclinations of both Beijing and Washington to see the Korean Peninsula largely as a self-contained system and to view it instead as being nested in, and intimately connected with, the broader East Asian strategic system. This, in turn, has had the effect of inhibiting co-operation between Beijing and Washington as the peninsula has increasingly been subsumed in an emerging Sino-American rivalry. In April 2016, for instance, the Chinese and Russian foreign ministers publicly denounced US interference on the Korean

Peninsula and in the South China Sea.¹⁸ Consistent with this, in September 2016, the Russian and Chinese navies held a high-profile eight-day military exercise in the waters of the South China Sea. They held a similar exercise in 2015 in the Sea of Japan/East Sea — which borders on North Korea, South Korea, Japan and Russia — while in 2014 Sino-Russian naval exercises also took place in the East China Sea.¹⁹

Chinese assertiveness elsewhere in the region is also increasingly shaping the US approach to the Korean Peninsula. Some commentators, for instance, have suggested that Washington's decision to provide South Korea with a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile system is intimately linked to Beijing's assertiveness in the South China Sea. As an analyst from the Council on Foreign Relations has observed, "Beijing should be more aware of its own actions and how others view them before denying those countries the means to defend themselves."²⁰ Other commentators have suggested that the threat of deploying THAAD is intended to secure Chinese support for exerting greater pressure — including tougher sanctions — against North Korea, but that its actual implementation is more likely to further hobble Sino-American co-operation and to encourage Beijing to retaliate elsewhere, including in the South China Sea.²¹

Developments such as these indicate a growing degree of connection in the East Asian system of the type highlighted in the concept of strategic diplomacy. Yet, rather than encouraging and facilitating strategic diplomacy of the co-operative variety — as occurred with regard to the Korean Peninsula during the decade from 2002 to 2012 — the fact that Beijing and Washington increasingly see the Korean Peninsula as one component within a larger East Asia strategic system suggests that we are entering a new phase where strategic diplomacy related to the peninsula will generally be of a more competitive nature. Following the North Korean nuclear tests of 2016, for instance, Beijing has been slower than usual in responding to international efforts to implement new United Nations Security Council sanctions. According to respected commentator Minxin Pei, this reflects the fact that "China will not co-operate with the US in containing North Korea's nuclear ambitions if the US does not cancel its plans to deploy THAAD in South Korea."²² Similarly, unlike earlier instances of Sino-American collaboration in the wake of North Korean nuclear tests, Washington in September 2016 indicted a Chinese executive, Ma Xiaohong, whose Dandong Hongxiang Industrial Development Company reportedly accounts for approximately 20 percent of bilateral trade between China and North Korea. As Pei goes on to observe, "with this indictment the US government is signaling to Beijing that, if China sits idly by as North Korea ratchets up tensions, Washington and its allies will further tighten the screws on Pyongyang and take steps that will inevitably harm Chinese interests."²³

Barring a major strategic shock — such as the genuine threat of all-out war between the two Koreas or some other form of international catastrophe (accidental or deliberate) involving North Korea's burgeoning nuclear and missile programs — this trend seems likely to continue. Although ties between Beijing and Pyongyang have themselves become somewhat strained in recent years, the importance of North Korea to China as a strategic buffer between itself and a number of US allies and partners means that the Hermit Kingdom will likely remain more of a strategic asset than a liability to Beijing. In the final analysis, therefore, the very fact that the region's major powers are thinking more strategically in relation to East Asia means that their interactions are only likely to become more competitive. Precisely because the North Korean regime has traditionally thrived on the use of "divide-and-conquer" tactics,²⁴ the fissures that are already evident as a consequence of this shift from co-operation to competition in Sino-American strategic interaction do not auger particularly well for stability on the Korean Peninsula and across East Asia more broadly.

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Notes

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