

## Prospects for Sino-American Policy Coordination toward North Korea

Scott Snyder

Kim Jong-il's death on December 17, 2011 stimulated widespread expectations that sudden change might occur in North Korea as a result of political paralysis resulting from a premature father-to-son succession in North Korea. But the respective responses of both the United States and China following Kim Jong-il's death revealed both a shared interest in preventing the outbreak of instability on the Korean peninsula and evidence of strategic mistrust over the conditions that would constitute a desirable end state on the peninsula. These responses and recent past fluctuations in Chinese policy toward North Korea and Sino-U.S. cooperation, respectively, provide a data set that can be analyzed to understand in greater detail the relationship between instability on the Korean peninsula and prospects for policy cooperation between the United States and China. This article will analyze fluctuations in Sino-American cooperation over policy toward North Korea to draw preliminary conclusions regarding the influence of the quality of Sino-American policy coordination efforts toward North Korea on both peninsular stability and Korean unification.

**Key Words:** North Korean instability, Sino-North Korean relations, Sino-U.S. relations, post-Kim Jong-il, U.S.-DPRK relations

Kim Jong-il's death on December 17, 2011 stimulated widespread expectations that sudden change might occur in North Korea as a result of political paralysis resulting from a premature father-to-son succession in North Korea. But the respective responses of both the United States and China following Kim Jong-il's death revealed both a shared interest in preventing the outbreak of instability on the Korean peninsula and evidence of strategic mistrust over the conditions that would constitute a desirable end state on the peninsula. This mixture raises important questions regarding the context and prospects for

Korean unification because the extent to which the United States and China either cooperate or compete with each other for influence during a potential period of instability or uncertainty will be one among several major factors that will influence the prospects for and feasibility of Korean unification. This article will analyze fluctuations in Sino-American cooperation over policy toward North Korea to draw preliminary conclusions regarding the influence of the quality of Sino-American policy coordination efforts toward North Korea on both peninsular stability and Korean unification.

Recent years have seen considerable fluctuations in the level and type of China's cooperation with the United States on North Korea-related issues, so these variations may offer a useful window onto the influence of U.S.-China coordination on efforts to deal with North Korean instability and unification. Following North Korea's first nuclear test, Sino-U.S. cooperation played a critical initial role in bringing North Korea back to the Six-Party Talks, but ultimately broke down over perceptions that Sino-U.S. cooperation came at the expense of China's own capacity to influence North Korea. But following North Korea's second nuclear test and the passage of UN Security Council resolution 1874, the level of Sino-U.S. cooperation on North Korean issues appears to have dropped. Differing American and Chinese responses to North Korea's provocations in 2010 lessened American hopes for China's cooperation on North Korean issues even as China's ability or willingness to restrain North Korea appears to have diminished. This circumstance changed somewhat with the issuance of the Sino-U.S. Joint Statement of January 2011, outlining limited Sino-U.S. cooperation in an attempt to bring North Korea back to the Six-Party Talks, but as a tactical objective embedded in strategic interests that increasingly seemed to be in direct conflict. Finally, the responses to Kim Jong-il's death are revealing because they increasingly show a Chinese approach that is skeptical of U.S. intentions and one in which China has set out to unilaterally strengthen its direct influence on North Korea.

## **Responding to North Korea's First Nuclear Test: Sino-U.S. Cooperation at the Expense of Relations with North Korea**

The Bush administration's decision to support the establishment of the Six-Party Talks with China as the host recognized China's interests and provided China with an opportunity to play a constructive role as host of the talks, but it also provided China with an opportunity to inject its interests directly into the main diplomatic process for managing tensions on the Korean peninsula. As host, China had responsibility for coordinating participation by all the parties in the Six-Party Talks, and found itself engaging in shuttle diplomacy and playing a limited mediating role between the United States and North Korea in the early stages of the establishment of the talks. China exerted sustained effort to bring the United States and North Korea together and to convene the other parties for Six-Party meetings, but beyond the hosting role, China appeared hesitant to assert its own interests as part of the talks, ostensibly preferring to preserve its neutrality and to act as though China was an observer rather than an interested party in the settlement of North Korea-related disputes. China's role also provided an opening for it to attempt to restrain the United States from pursuing objectives that might have been perceived as harmful to China's own interests. After all, China's primary motive in undertaking a more active convening role in organizing the Six-Party Talks was to prevent U.S.-DPRK tensions from spiraling out of control by providing a diplomatic mechanism for addressing tensions on the peninsula. As long as the talks continued, however sporadically, China could be assured to some degree that escalation of tensions was capped by the existence of a mechanism for managing the Korean crisis. The talks also provided a framework through which the United States and China might work cooperatively to a certain degree toward a shared interest in constraining North Korea from further developing its nuclear capabilities.

Following North Korea's first nuclear test, PRC President Hu Jintao harshly criticized North Korea for conducting its first nuclear test on

October 10, 2006, using a description normally reserved for adversaries, “hanran,” or “brazen,” to describe North Korea’s action in proceeding with a nuclear test. The international ramifications of North Korea’s nuclear test put pressure on China to go along with UN Security Council Resolutions 1695 and 1718, which condemned North Korea for its actions and imposed sanctions on shipments of luxury goods to North Korea. It also motivated China to align its position more closely with that of the United States, but at a cost to the level and quality of China’s relationship with North Korea.

In combination with measures to impose greater pressure on North Korea, China also sought to utilize high-level dialogue with the North to get a handle on the situation, dispatching Councillor Tang Jiaxuan as a special envoy to Washington, Moscow, and Pyongyang for consultations immediately following the nuclear test in mid-October. This mission may have borne some fruit, judging from the fact that by the end of the month China was able to host Assistant Secretary Chris Hill and Vice Minister Kim Kye-gwan for an announcement of the resumption of Six-Party Talks. However, no progress was made at the December round of Six-Party Talks; instead, Kim Kye-gwan and Chris Hill agreed to bilateral meetings in Berlin the following month at which a framework was hatched for moving forward toward a February 2007 agreement adopted as part of the six-party process on an interlocked set of actions to implement the Six-Party Joint Statement.

China faced a clear dilemma as it approached diplomacy toward the North following North Korea’s nuclear test: greater support for U.S. denuclearization aims came at an apparent cost to its perceived influence and leverage over North Korea. Following North Korea’s missile and nuclear tests the level and quality of Sino-DPRK interaction appeared to decline as North Korea appears to have pulled back on the level and frequency of high-level exchanges with China. Moreover, China also perceived that loss of leverage on North Korea meant loss of relevance and loss of leverage with the United States, since America’s primary interest in China’s involvement related directly to perceptions of China’s ability to restrain North Korea’s behavior.

China’s marginalization from the process in favor of U.S.-DPRK

bilateral handling of substantive aspects of implementation engendered criticisms that China's policy had tilted too closely toward the United States and that as a result China had lost leverage (and relevance) with Pyongyang. Moreover, Sino-DPRK high-level consultations were reduced in frequency, as Pyongyang sought to distance itself from Beijing. As a result of the "normalization" of relations between Beijing and Pyongyang, the PRC was losing momentum in its relations with Pyongyang and losing influence over the pace and progress of U.S.-DPRK relations. In the meantime, Vice Minister Kim Kye-gwan began to openly call for Washington to engage Pyongyang independently of coordination with Beijing. This circumstance further heightened criticism among some Chinese strategists that by treating North Korea as "normal" and lowering the priority of good relations with North Korea, China was in the process losing influence to the United States over an issue that did have a direct impact on China's strategic interests.

In a prescient critical review of China's policy toward North Korea published in March of 2008, Shi Yinhong concludes that China's siding with the United States and American diplomatic reengagement of North Korea at the end of the Bush administration led to "China's losing its central position as the indispensable mediator, negotiation organizer, and leading settlement-promoter," implying that China needed to strengthen relations with North Korea not only in order to shore up North Korean stability, but also as a means by which to gain strategic leverage not only with North Korea, but also with the United States and South Korea.<sup>1</sup>

But with the apparent failure of the parties to resume Six-Party Talks until North Korea affirms its will to denuclearize, the potential for North Korea to serve as an example or opportunity for Sino-U.S. bilateral cooperation has been constrained. As a result, China and the United States have less to show for their cooperative efforts to

---

1. Shi Yinhong, "China and the North Korean Nuclear Issue: Competing Interests and Persistent Policy Dilemmas," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, Vol. 21, No. 1, March 2009, pp. 33-47.

restrain escalation of tensions on the Korean peninsula under President Obama than was the case during the Bush administration. Moreover, Chinese attitudes appear to have hardened on the desirability of economic engagement as a tool for promoting eventual reform in North Korea, while the Obama administration has insisted on trying to change the pattern of its past interaction with North Korea and that it would not reward North Korean provocations. These developments place Chinese and U.S. economic policies toward the North essentially at odds with each other. China chooses to interpret UN resolutions and prohibitions against North Korea narrowly while the United States has focused on sanctions as a means by which to send a message that there will be “no reward for provocations.”

### **North Korea’s Second Nuclear Test and Kim Jong-il’s Health Crisis: China’s Strategic Embrace of North Korea at the Expense of Cooperation with the United States**

Following North Korea’s May 2009 nuclear test and the passage of UN Security Council Resolution 1874, Chinese leaders reviewed their policy toward North Korea and came to the conclusion that the relationship has a strategic dimension that is critical to China’s security interests. This determination reversed China’s policy following the first North Korean nuclear test to treat Sino-DPRK relations as a “normal” (as opposed to “special”) relationship, and was accompanied by redoubled Chinese efforts to promote Sino-DPRK economic relations and high-level dialogue.<sup>2</sup> Premier Wen Jiabao led an impressive cabinet-level delegation to Pyongyang to commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of Sino-DPRK normalization in October of 2009, revealing China’s determination to hug North Korea closer both through intensified bilateral economic exchanges and through more frequent high-level strategic consultations. On the occasion of the visit, Premier Wen

---

2. Bonnie S. Glaser, “China’s Policy in the Wake of the Second DPRK Nuclear Test,” *China Security*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2009, pp. 1-11.

reportedly offered a comprehensive economic package that included \$20 million in aid.<sup>3</sup> The purposes of China's comprehensive engagement were to provide stability for North Korea's political succession and economic reform while restraining North Korea from continuing its provocations.

China's decision in late 2009 to reaffirm a strategic element in the Sino-DPRK relationship was in the words of Shi Yinong, "nothing less than a renewal of the alliance."<sup>4</sup> It reframed China's approach to North Korea in ways that limited prospects for Sino-U.S. cooperation to increase pressure on North Korea, particularly because an element of China's engagement was driven by Chinese strategic mistrust of American intentions toward the Korean peninsula. But this strategy also failed to deliver satisfactory outcomes for China precisely because China was unable to control North Korea's volatility, both in terms of bringing predictability to North Korea's internal succession process and in terms of imposing predictability by narrowing North Korea's preferred policy options and behavior. Moreover, China's support for North Korea limited its ability to cooperate with the United States on strategies designed to pressure the North. The divergence became particularly apparent in the aftermath of North Korea's 2010 provocations, during which the United States and South Korea sought to hold North Korea accountable for its actions through UN condemnation while China blocked these efforts. China's decision to promote comprehensive engagement with North Korea revived Chinese influence on the North, but at a certain cost to prospects for Sino-U.S. coordination.

China's primary policy objectives toward the Korean peninsula have remained unchanged since the direction of its policy was set in

---

3. "Chinese premier discusses "multilateral issues" with N. Korea," *Yonhap*, October 4, 2009.

4. Shi Yinong, "New Games in Tightly Fixed Structures: North Korea's Volatile Desperation and China's Cornered Strategy," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, Vol. 23, No. 3, September 2011, pp. 353-368.

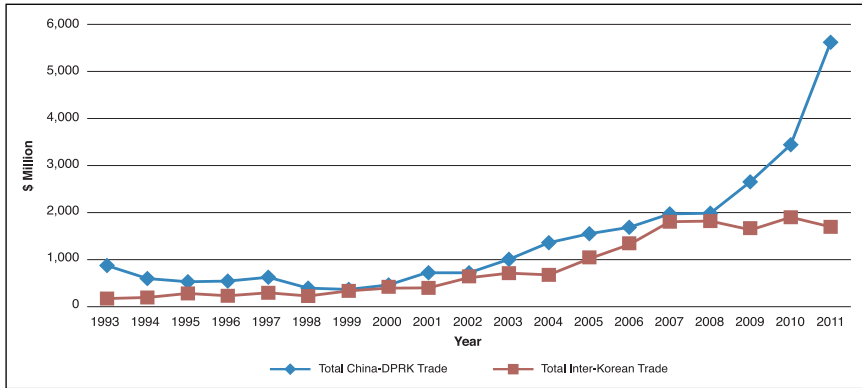
late 2009.<sup>5</sup> China prioritizes stability on the Korean peninsula, seeks to avoid escalation of tensions that could lead to war, and opposes a nuclear North Korea. However, China's top priority is stability and its primary near-term concern is to support a stable leadership transition in North Korea. China's concerns about potential instability in North Korea following Kim Jong-il's stroke in the fall of 2008 may have catalyzed China's decision to promote strategic relations with North Korea from 2009. Kim Jong-il's death in December of 2011 has only resulted in a redoubling of Chinese efforts to support North Korea's transition and political consolidation. As of mid-February of 2012, Chinese analysts appeared satisfied with the progress of North Korea's political consolidation and were relieved to observe no evidence of instability in the North.<sup>6</sup> During this time, China has actively cultivated senior-level contacts with North Korean counterparts, not only through more intensive meetings between Hu Jintao and Kim Jong-il, but also through the active utilization of high-level visits organized by the Chinese Embassy in Pyongyang as occasions for meeting with all the top leaders in North Korea's elite hierarchy.

Expectations regarding China's influence over the North Korean nuclear issue have grown with North Korea's increased economic reliance on China. The China-North Korea trade relationship has experienced double digit growth, reaching US\$5.63 billion in 2011, an increase of 62.5 percent from \$3.46 billion in 2010.<sup>7</sup> China's trade with North Korea has steadily grown since around 2003, at approximately the same time that China took a more active role in mediating nuclear

- 
5. Bonnie S. Glaser, Scott Snyder, See-Won Byun, and David J. Szerlip, "Responding to Change on the Korean Peninsula: Impediments to U.S.-South Korea-China Coordination," Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 2010, [http://csis.org/files/publication/100506\\_Glaser\\_RespondingtoChange\\_Web.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/100506_Glaser_RespondingtoChange_Web.pdf).
  6. Author conversations with Chinese Korea specialists, Beijing, China, February 2012.
  7. "N. Korea-China trade jumps 62 percent in 2011: Data," *Yonhap*, January 1, 2012.



Figure 1. China-DPRK Trade vs. Inter-Korean Trade (1993-2011)



Source: Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency, Korea International Trade Association, ROK Ministry of Unification.

talks between the United States and North Korea through the establishment of the Six-Party Talks.

Figure 1 shows that Sino-DPRK trade has increased steadily since 2002, with the exception of a slight drop in Sino-DPRK trade in 2009. However, the volume of Sino-DPRK trade increased dramatically from 2007 to 2008 and from 2009-2011. The expansion of China-DPRK trade ties was matched by growth in inter-Korean trade relations through 2008, at which point the inter-Korean trade relationship stopped growing, primarily as an effect of the South Korean government’s May 24, 2009, policy measures in response to the sinking of the Cheonan. One result of continued growth in Sino-North Korean trade in combination with the stagnation of Sino-South Korean trade is that North Korea’s trade dependency on China as a proportion of its overall trade is now almost seventy percent.

Modest Chinese investments have focused on North Korea’s mining and extractive industries, but it is not clear that these investments have provided China with significant political leverage in relations with North Korea. According to South Korean sources, Chinese investment in the North stood at \$41 million in 2008 compared to a

\$1.1 million in 2003.<sup>8</sup> Most of these investments have occurred in North Korea's natural resource sector.<sup>9</sup> The overall amount of Chinese investment in North Korea appears to be more a function of Chinese energy security needs than a strategic design to increase influence over or exposure to North Korea, given that Chinese investment there lags in comparison with China's investments in other neighboring countries such as Myanmar and Laos.<sup>10</sup> Chinese investment in North Korea provides an incentive for China to favor stability as a means to protect its economic and commercial interests. Overall, China's economic reach into North Korea has increased substantially in recent years, but it has not necessarily been accompanied by commensurate political influence. At least China has not yet found that its growing economic leverage is sufficient to prevent North Korea from taking actions destabilizing to regional security that involve direct costs to China's national interest.

China's efforts to establish a strategic relationship with the North have come against the backdrop of seemingly rising mistrust of U.S. intentions, including the purpose and aims of the U.S.-ROK alliance. As Lee Myung-bak came into office with the intention of strengthening the U.S.-ROK alliance, this development was met with mistrust in Beijing. The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson called the U.S.-ROK alliance a "cold war relic" in advance of South Korean president Lee Myung-bak's first visit to Beijing in 2008, asserting at the time that the United States-ROK alliance "would not be valid in viewing, measuring and handling the current global or regional security

---

8. "N. Korean economic reliance on China further growing: Report," *Yonhap*, October 1, 2010.

9. A list of significant Chinese investments in the North Korean natural resource sector is included as part of Dick K. Nanto and Mark E. Manyin, "China-North Korea Relations," Congressional Research Service, December 28, 2010.

10. Drew Thompson, "Silent Partners: Chinese Joint Ventures in North Korea," U.S.-Korea Institute, Johns Hopkins SAIS, February 2011, [http://uskorea.institute.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/USKI\\_Report\\_SilentPartners\\_DrewThompson\\_020311.pdf](http://uskorea.institute.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/USKI_Report_SilentPartners_DrewThompson_020311.pdf).

issues.”<sup>11</sup> Chinese analysts were surprised and frustrated by Lee Myung-bak’s efforts to strengthen the U.S.-ROK security alliance following the relative convergence of Chinese and South Korean interests under Roh Moo-hyun’s progressive leadership (which also seemed to be moving in the direction of lessening South Korea’s dependence on the United States), both because they perceived Lee’s move as leading to heightened inter-Korean tensions and because of China’s concerns that the U.S.-ROK security alliance stands as an obstacle to greater Chinese influence on the Korean peninsula.

Chinese skepticism toward U.S. intentions on the Korean peninsula has grown higher in recent years, with some Chinese analysts seeing U.S. policy toward the Korean peninsula as a means of countering China’s rise. American and South Korean skepticism toward China grew in turn as a result of China’s poor handling of the aftermath of the Cheonan sinking and Yeonpyeong Island shelling in March and November of 2010, as a result of which China chose to defend North Korea at a cost to its relations with South Korea and the United States. Through this period, there was a growing perception in China that the United States and South Korea were utilizing the provocations as a pretext for placing undue pressure on the North. This perception came through strongly in Chinese protests against U.S.-ROK combined anti-submarine exercises held in the summer of 2010 off South Korea’s east coast. Several Chinese military analysts strongly criticized the exercises, even though they were held in South Korea’s East Sea (Sea of Japan). At that time, Chinese analysts also warned that such exercises should not be held in areas adjacent to China such as the Yellow Sea. Immediately following the Yeonpyeong shelling in November of 2010, the USS George Washington participated in exercises in the Yellow Sea. Chinese analysts showed sensitivity to U.S.-ROK security cooperation for the first time.<sup>12</sup> U.S. rebalancing, with its strengthened emphasis on East

---

11. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Qin Gang’s regular press conference, May 27, 2008.

12. Christopher Bodeen, “USS George Washington Visit Poses a Dilemma for China,” *Huffington Post*, November 26, 2010.

Asia as a component of U.S. global strategy, and the prominent naming of China as part of U.S. Defense Guidelines released in early 2012, have further fueled some Chinese suspicions that the U.S. intends to block China's rising regional influence.<sup>13</sup>

### **Squaring the Circle: Limits of China Support for North Korea and Cooperation with the United States**

One partial exception came in the context of preparations for Hu Jintao's January 2011 state visit to the United States, at which time limited but visible efforts to strengthen Sino-U.S. cooperation served as a factor that imposed restraint and discouraged further escalation of tensions between the two Koreas as a result of heightened tensions resulting from the North Korean shelling of Yeonpyeong Island. As a result, prospects for Sino-U.S. cooperation on North Korea have also become more limited.

The January 2011 Sino-U.S. joint statement reveals both commonalities and limits in the two countries' approaches to the Korean peninsula. It affirms their shared interest in promoting stable inter-Korean relations by calling for "sincere and constructive inter-Korean dialogue." It also recognizes enriched uranium as an item that should be on the agenda of renewed Six-Party Talks, underscoring a common interest in the denuclearization of the peninsula. However, the joint statement exposes limits to Sino-U.S. agreement on how to approach North Korea, failing to explicitly mention UN Security Council Resolutions 1718 or 1874, or the need for stepped up counter-proliferation and export-control efforts focused on preventing the transfer of fissile material-related technologies or know-how. This is a significant omission because it dramatically exposes differing views on how to apply tools of economic statecraft as leverage to influence North Korean

---

13. Michael S. Chase and Benjamin S. Purser III, "China unbowed, vigilant and still rising," *Asia Times*, March 17, 2012.

behavior. The statement also failed to explicitly mention or attribute responsibility for “recent developments” that have heightened tension on the Korean peninsula.

There is no indication of agreement on a further UN role in addressing tension on the Korean peninsula. The statement does not explicitly define “necessary steps” that would enable a return to the Six-Party Talks, indirectly underscoring the absence of a viable process for achieving the shared objective of denuclearizing the Korean peninsula. Although China allowed direct mention of North Korea’s “enriched uranium” program in the joint statement it released with the United States in January, it opposed the issue being taken up at the UN Security Council and has rebuffed South Korean efforts to even acknowledge the topic in Sino-South Korean joint statements.

China’s defense of North Korea has become a growing source of irritation in Washington. From the perspective of U.S. policymakers, China has seemingly turned a blind eye to North Korea’s actions and allowed Kim Jong-il’s regime to pursue provocations with apparent impunity. Washington’s growing frustration with China’s insistence on “calm and restraint” when dealing with North Korea was clearly reflected in President Obama’s remarks at the G20 Summit in Toronto, when he noted, “There’s a difference between restraint and willful blindness to consistent problems.”<sup>14</sup> This feeling has only intensified since China’s response to the Yeonpyeong Island shelling, where there is no ambiguity about North Korea’s disproportionate and escalatory actions.

### **Sino-U.S. Responses to Kim Jong-il’s Death: Convergent Interests in Stability amidst Rising Mistrust**

China’s immediate response to Kim Jong-il’s death was to pull out the stops in support of North Korea’s succession. In its condolence

---

14. Remarks by President Obama at G20 Press Conference in Toronto, Canada, The White House, June 27, 2010. Accessed at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-obama-g-20-press-conference-toronto-canada>.

message to Pyongyang over the death of Kim Jong-il, China emphasized hopes that North Korea “will remain united as one with the leadership of the WPK and comrade Kim Jong-un.”<sup>15</sup> President Hu Jintao offered his condolences at the DPRK embassy in Beijing on December 20, accompanied by Vice President Xi Jinping, top legislator Wu Bangguo, propaganda chief Li Changchun, Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission Guo Boxiong, Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, head of the CPC International Department Wang Jiarui, General Office Director of the CPC Central Committee Ling Jihua, and Director of the President’s Office Chen Shiju. Senior officials Wen Jiabao, Jia Qinglin, Li Keqiang, He Guoqiang, and Zhou Yongkang visited the embassy of the DPRK on December 21. Hu Jintao affirmed Beijing’s “persistent policy” of consolidating and developing the traditional friendship with North Korea, calling for “joint efforts” to further the China-DPRK friendship.

China also mobilized regional efforts to promote stability on the peninsula, even to the extent of warning others not to engage in mischief-making with North Korea during such a sensitive period of transition.<sup>16</sup> Foreign Minister Yang held separate telephone conversations with Russian, Japanese, U.S., and South Korean counterparts on December 20, emphasizing peninsular peace and stability in the “common interests of all parties.”<sup>17</sup>

The United States also responded cautiously to Kim Jong-il’s death, with Secretary Clinton providing a statement of condolences to the North Korean people. The statement said that “it is our hope that the new leadership of the DPRK will choose to guide their nation onto the path of peace by honoring North Korea’s commitments, improving relations with its neighbors, and respecting the rights of

---

15. Deng Shasha, “China sends condolences over death of DPRK top leader,” [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2011-12/19/c\\_131315765.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2011-12/19/c_131315765.htm), December 19, 2011.

16. Victor D. Cha, *The Impossible State: North Korea, Past and Future*, Ecco, April 2012.

17. “China urges stability in wake of Kim Jong-il’s death,” <http://english.people.com.cn/102774/7684153.html>, December 21, 2011.

its people.”<sup>18</sup> In a public appearance with the Japanese foreign minister on the same day, Secretary Clinton stated that “We both share a common interest in a peaceful and stable transition in North Korea, as well as in ensuring regional peace and stability.”<sup>19</sup> Although these statements reserved judgment on the leadership succession process itself, they expressed an interest in continuity and made no attempt to treat North Korea’s leadership transition as an opportunity to press for regime change or to foment instability. Likewise, after a day of deliberations, South Korea’s Minister of Unification Yu Woo-ik issued a statement of condolences to the Korean people, carefully avoiding criticisms of the North Korean regime.<sup>20</sup> No doubt, there were some advocates in both Washington and Seoul who advocated North Korea’s leadership succession as a moment of opportunity to overturn the regime, but those sentiments clearly were not reflected in the official responses of South Korea or the United States. Given this circumstance, Chinese warnings to neighboring countries of the need to remain calm and not do anything to heighten tensions begs the question of why China would carry such high levels of suspicion regarding South Korean and American actions toward North Korea at a moment of apparent vulnerability.

Despite a convergence in U.S. and Chinese desires for stability, there remains a substantial difference in American and Chinese strategic objectives as it relates to the desired end state on the Korean peninsula. Chinese anxiety about changes in the political balance (i.e., anything that might lead toward Korean unification) inhibits

---

18. Secretary Clinton on Passing of Kim Jong-il, U.S. Department of State, December 19, 2011, <http://translations.state.gov/st/english/texttrans/2011/12/20111220100015su0.2711865.html#axzz1wyu3Fke4>.

19. Remarks by Secretary Clinton, Japanese FM Gemba, U.S. Department of State, December 19, 2011, <http://translations.state.gov/st/english/texttrans/2011/12/20111219170839su0.3180157.html#axzz1wyu3Fke4>.

20. Donald Kirk, “Sympathy? Condolences? South Korea weighs response to Kim Jong-il’s death,” *Christian Science Monitor*, December 20, 2011, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-Pacific/2011/1220/Sympathy-Condolences-South-Korea-weighs-response-to-Kim-Jong-il-s-death>.

prospects for future Sino-U.S. cooperation and even raises the prospect of Sino-U.S. conflict as developments on the peninsula unfold. Above all else, China's fear that internal instability might lead to a unified Korea has led it to attempt to shore up the status quo in the face of increasing North Korean weakness and instability. It has also prevented the Chinese government from cooperating with the United States and others despite common interests in preventing instability and promoting denuclearization of the Korean peninsula.

### **Strengthened Sino-DPRK Relations and Implications for Sino-U.S. Coordination toward North Korea**

U.S. perceptions of China's efforts to strengthen its relationship with North Korea are a background influence in the U.S. policy debate over how to deal with North Korea. The influence of strengthened Sino-DPRK relations on U.S. perceptions primarily revolves around the question of prospects for cooperation with China to pursue common objectives toward North Korea. To the extent that U.S. policymakers might have sought regional cohesion as a basis for pressuring North Korea, China's prioritization of North Korean stability and strengthened relations with the North seem to prove that China has no intention to actively cooperate with the United States in pursuing such a strategy. There are at least three background factors likely to influence the quality and importance of Sino-U.S. cooperation as it relates to policy toward the Korean peninsula.

First, China's capacity to influence the strategic situation on the Korean peninsula has grown in proportion to China's rising influence in regional and global affairs. China's influence on U.S. perceptions of the Korean issue was negligible in the 1990s, and the apparent necessity of cooperation with China as a means by which to restrain North Korea is now an important factor shaping North Korea's strategic environment. Although U.S. and South Korean policymakers acknowledged China's constructive efforts to influence North Korea in the first North Korean nuclear crisis in the 1990s, the Bush administration's



decision to pursue Six-Party Talks with China as host constituted a direct recognition that any successful effort to achieve North Korea's denuclearization and integration with the region required China's buy-in. Policymakers from the Clinton era who returned to positions of responsibility at the beginning of the Obama administration cited China's rising influence as the single biggest change in the policy environment surrounding the North Korean issue that had occurred since they had last dealt with North Korea policy in the 1990s.<sup>21</sup>

As time passes, China's ability to influence the situation on the Korean peninsula may continue to grow as a result of China's rising power. This circumstance may reinforce the perception in Beijing that time is on China's side, and that efforts to buy near-term stability on the Korean peninsula will ultimately work in favor of a solution on the Korean peninsula that is conducive to China's interests, while near-term instability in North Korea is clearly perceived as contrary to Chinese interests. A *Global Times* editorial argued in October 2010 that "China should firmly insist on the protection of peninsular stability and oppose any country that seeks to undermine such a standpoint. As China's national strength rises, such a bottom line will be insisted on with greater seriousness."<sup>22</sup> This suggests that increasingly, the United States will have to factor in cooperation with China as a necessary element of any successful strategy in dealing with North Korea, and that China's importance to any policy that attempts to address North Korea's denuclearization will continue to grow as time passes.

A second factor influencing the effectiveness of Sino-U.S. cooperation over North Korea is that the U.S.-China relationship is now overloaded with so many agenda items that North Korea can get lost in the shuffle. But the danger is that Chinese policymakers take the crowdedness of the agenda and the prioritization of other pressing issues in the relationship over North Korea as a signal of the relative priority that U.S. accords to solving the North Korean issue. As a

---

21. Author conversations with U.S. government officials, May 2009.

22. "Stable Sino-N. Korea Ties Benefit Region," *Global Times*, October 11, 2010.

result, some Chinese analysts may have drawn the observation that the Obama administration does not place a high priority on addressing the North Korea issue, especially compared with the other issues on the agenda that are prioritized above North Korea. Certainly, the fact that President Bush personally made North Korea an active issue of discussion at the leadership level means that it would be easy for Chinese analysts to draw the conclusion that by comparison, the Obama administration has prioritized North Korea behind Iran and other issues at the top of the list.

But even if North Korea were at the very top of the Sino-U.S. agenda for coordination, there would still be clear limits imposed on what the United States and China would be able to do together with each other, especially in an environment in which PRC Vice Minister Cui Tiankai has described the two countries as facing a “trust deficit.”<sup>23</sup> This is an understated way of pointing to strategic mistrust between the United States and China that would likely persist in the respective positions of the two countries even if North Korea were to become the number one priority issue on the Sino-U.S. agenda. Because the United States and China so far appear to embrace very different preferred end states on the Korean peninsula—with China’s priority being the perpetuation of stability and the United States having formally signed on to a Joint Vision Statement with South Korea that aspires to see a unified, democratic, market-oriented Korean state—it is easy to feel that prospects for Sino-U.S. cooperation on the peninsula will face clear limits. At the same time, North Korea’s provocations continue to be a drag on China’s security environment. The problem is that U.S. ownership of the North Korean issue too often appears to let China off the hook as China continues to adopt the view that China is an innocent by-stander and potential victim of continued hostility in the U.S.-DPRK relationship.

Third, the state of China’s own leadership transition and the conduct of foreign policy under Xi Jinping is additional factors likely

---

23. Chris Buckley, “China sees ‘trust deficit’ before Xi’s U.S. trip,” *Reuters*, February 7, 2012.

to require further Sino-U.S. interaction in the coming days and months, given ongoing concerns that North Korea's third generation leadership may actually fail. How China chooses to manage its relationship with North Korea will remain important, as will the issue of how much China is willing to share its first-hand experience and observations of the North Korean leadership with outsiders.

### **Chinese Concerns about North Korean Stability and their Influence on Sino-U.S. Coordination toward North Korea**

The foregoing review attempts to provide a picture of the influence of China's policies toward North Korea on prospects for Sino-U.S. coordination, based on a review of the dynamics in the Sino-DPRK relationship and the Sino-U.S. relationships, respectively. This review of China's approach to North Korea and its influence on prospects for Sino-U.S. cooperation points to two primary variables in China's approach to North Korea that have an impact on prospects for Sino-U.S. cooperation, both of which lead to a sober view of prospects for cooperation with China in the future. First, China's primary objective has been to ensure stability in North Korea, and China's cooperation with the United States and South Korea on other issues appears to have been limited to that objective. Cooperation in pursuit of other objectives has been limited and has been premised on the assumption that cooperation on other issues must not be allowed to supersede the objective of stability maintenance on the Korean peninsula. Second, Sino-U.S. cooperation has been most active when China has perceived instability on the Korean peninsula as coming from a source external to North Korea (i.e., a rise in U.S.-DPRK tensions or rising inter-Korean tensions), while perceived instability internal to North Korea has resulted in limited Sino-U.S. cooperation, as a result of China's prioritization of the maintenance of North Korean stability above all other priorities. The influence of China's concerns regarding North Korean instability and its judgment regarding whether such instability is driven by

**Table 1. Nature of North Korean Instability and Impact on Sino-U.S. Policy Coordination**

Sources of North Korean Instability	PRC Position, Reaction, Implications
External/Peninsular Instability (ROK/U.S.-DPRK Tension)	intent: influence ROK/U.S. action action: distrust-constrained cooperation with ROK/U.S. result: limited cooperation with U.S.; strained relations with DPRK
DPRK Domestic Uncertainty/Instability	intent: influence DPRK domestic conditions action: high-level outreach/support for DPRK result: diminished potential for cooperation with U.S.

external or internal factors is reflected in Table 1.

Following North Korea’s first nuclear test, China regarded the greatest potential for instability on the Korean peninsula as coming from external sources, namely the possibility of a U.S. reaction that would drive further tensions on the Korean peninsula, rather than from internal sources. Thus, China’s main energy and efforts were focused diplomatically on how to convince the United States and North Korea to return to diplomatic talks. This circumstance required careful Chinese coordination with the United States to promote diplomatic channels through the Six-Party Talks. But a result of the talks was that by aligning with the United States, China lost leverage and influence over the process, demonstrating the limited prospects for Sino-U.S. cooperation on the Korean peninsula.

Following North Korea’s second nuclear test, China’s concern with North Korea’s internal instability was the overriding factor motivating Chinese diplomacy, which was focused on revitalizing Sino-DPRK relations as a means by which to support North Korean political and economic stability. China’s strategic interest in North Korean stability overrode prospects for cooperation with the United States and South Korea, respectively, and even led China to incur

significant diplomatic costs as a result of its decision to support and protect North Korea from retaliation for its provocations in March and November of 2010.

With rising inter-Korean tensions following the Yeonpyeong shelling, China again focused on the possibility that sources of tension external to North Korea might lead to internal instability in North Korea and resumed active efforts to cooperate with the United States as a means by which to restrain inter-Korean tensions and maintain peninsular stability. But China's cooperation with the United States remained limited to the objective of maintaining stability on the peninsula, and did not provide the Obama administration with opportunities to strengthen regional cohesion as a basis for pressuring North Korea on denuclearization.

Finally, Kim Jong-il's death raised the twin prospects of internal North Korean instability and the risk that external actors might take advantage of North Korea's vulnerability during a period of leadership transition. China warned against external interference while concentrating most of its energy on maintaining stability in the North. China must be pleased that the U.S. government is not attempting to destabilize North Korea, but there have been no special efforts to enhance Sino-U.S. coordination in response to North Korea's leadership transition. This suggests that China's policy approach in the near-term will continue to prioritize stabilization of North Korea, but that prospects for Sino-U.S. coordination on North Korea-related issues will remain limited.

## **Conclusion**

China's focus on stability in North Korea narrows the scope and circumstances under which China is willing to cooperate with the United States, especially in light of Chinese concerns that the United States could take advantage of North Korean regime transition as an opportunity to pursue objectives that might involve transformation of the strategic situation on the Korean peninsula. The best period of

Chinese cooperation with the United States in recent years resulted in the apparent marginalization of Chinese influence toward North Korea, making China ill-positioned to respond in case of North Korean instability or to influence prospects for Korean unification. China's dilemma has been described by Shi Yinhong as "cornered in its relations with the ROK, and with the United States on the North Korean issue and with a volatile DPRK."<sup>24</sup>

This suggests that China's rising influence on North Korea is mitigated by the unpalatability of its strategic choices, hemmed in by a desire to avoid both unification and North Korean instability, but with no sure means by which to preserve the status quo. If this is the case, then there will be limited likelihood of success from directly trying to engage China in discussions regarding how to deal with instability because China's objective and investments are designed to prevent instability in the first place.

The main conclusion for American and South Korean policymakers to consider from this study is that prospects for Sino-U.S. cooperation on policy toward North Korea will remain limited: China will not officially discuss with the United States and South Korea on how to respond to possible instability in North Korea, while remaining worried that the United States and South Korea might seize the moment to press for Korean unification at an early stage by moving forces into North Korea—perhaps to reestablish social order in the event that a power vacuum or infighting might develop inside North Korea. To the extent that China's influence with North Korea is growing, it will be used to perpetuate the status quo; as a result, China will increasingly become an obstacle to South Korean and U.S. efforts to achieve goals that might remotely challenge the status quo. Nor will diplomatic efforts to persuade China to accept an altered strategic environment on the Korean peninsula be successful. The emergence of North Korean instability due to internal factors would be a particularly unstable and dangerous problem that would require careful Sino-U.S. management, especially to avoid the possibility that various factions

---

24. Shi Yinhong, *op. cit.*, p. 363.

inside North Korea might draw the United States and China into support for different sides in the incipient stages of an internal competition for control inside North Korea, but until it become clear that the current status quo is unsustainable, it is unlikely that Sino-U.S. cooperation will be possible in any circumstance that goes beyond China's primary strategic objective of maintaining stability in North Korea and perpetuating the status quo on the Korean peninsula.

■ Article Received: 5/7 ■ Reviewed: 5/22 ■ Revised: 6/7 ■ Accepted: 6/18

## **Bibliography**

- Bodeen, Christopher. "USS George Washington Visit Poses a Dilemma for China." *Huffington Post*, November 26, 2010.
- Buckley, Chris. "China sees 'trust deficit' before Xi's U.S. trip." *Reuters*, February 7, 2012.
- Cha, Victor D. *The Impossible State: North Korea, Past and Future*. Ecco. April 2012.
- Chase, Michael S. and Benjamin S. Purser III. "China unbowed, vigilant and still rising." *Asia Times*, March 17, 2012.
- "Chinese premier discusses "multilateral issues" with N. Korea." *Yonhap*, October 4, 2009.
- Deng Shasha. "China sends condolences over death of DPRK top leader," [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2011-12/19/c\\_131315765.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2011-12/19/c_131315765.htm), December 19, 2011.
- Glaser, Bonnie S. "China's Policy in the Wake of the Second DPRK Nuclear Test." *China Security*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2009, pp. 1-11.
- Glaser, Bonnie S., Scott Snyder, See-Won Byun, and David J. Szerlip. "Responding to Change on the Korean Peninsula: Impediments to U.S.-South Korea-China Coordination." Center for Strategic and International Studies. May 2010, [http://csis.org/files/publication/100506\\_Glaser\\_RespondingtoChange\\_Web.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/100506_Glaser_RespondingtoChange_Web.pdf).
- Kirk, Donald. "Sympathy? Condolences? South Korea weighs response to Kim Jong-il's death." *Christian Science Monitor*, December 20, 2011, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-Pacific/2011/1220/Sympathy-Condolences>

-South-Korea-weighs-response-to-Kim-Jong-il-s-death.

"N. Korea-China trade jumps 62 percent in 2011: Data." *Yonhap*, January 1, 2012.

"N. Korean economic reliance on China further growing: Report." *Yonhap*, October 1, 2010.

Secretary Clinton on Passing of Kim Jong-il, U.S. Department of State. December 19, 2011, <http://translations.state.gov/st/english/texttrans/2011/12/20111220100015su0.2711865.html#axzz1wyu3Fke4>.

Shi, Yinhong. "China and the North Korean Nuclear Issue: Competing Interests and Persistent Policy Dilemmas." *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, Vol. 21, No. 1, March 2009, pp. 33-47.

\_\_\_\_\_. "New Games in Tightly Fixed Structures: North Korea's Volatile Desperation and China's Cornered Strategy." *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, Vol. 23, No. 3, September 2011, pp. 353-368.

"Stable Sino-N. Korea Ties Benefit Region." *Global Times*, October 11, 2010.

Thompson, Drew. "Silent Partners: Chinese Joint Ventures in North Korea." U.S.-Korea Institute, Johns Hopkins SAIS, February 2011, [http://uskorea.institute.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/USKI\\_Report\\_SilentPartners\\_DrewThompson\\_020311.pdf](http://uskorea.institute.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/USKI_Report_SilentPartners_DrewThompson_020311.pdf).