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China's Position on the North Korea Crisis

Justyna Szczudlik

The deepening crisis on the Korean Peninsula raises concerns in China. The PRC does not want the North Korean regime to collapse or the Korean states to re-unify, but fears an escalation or outbreak of a heated conflict. However, China's authorities have not changed policy towards North Korea, but have sharpened their rhetoric. Only when the North's actions really threaten Chinese provinces or seriously undermine Xi Jinping's position as leader will more decisive steps be probable.

Whenever North Korea conducts a missile or nuclear test, China condemns it, calls for talks, and supports UN sanctions. North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's provocations not only undermine security in the region but also show how little influence China has on North Korea. The North thus undermines China's position as a global power—Xi's main goal. Recently, China-North Korea relations have clearly deteriorated. Proof of it is found in the Chinese authorities' impatience with the North Korea provocations and Kim's bolder actions, seemingly without consideration of China's concerns. To date, Xi and Kim have not met.

China's Perception of the Crisis. China treats the tensions on the peninsula as a bilateral U.S.-North Korea problem in which the Americans' aggressive policy towards the North is the source of the crisis. In that sense, the North Korean missile and nuclear programmes are treated as defensive in character. The U.S. involvement in Iraq and Libya, and the events in Ukraine, which, after giving up its Soviet-era nuclear weapons, was unable to defend itself from Russian aggression, are treated in China as confirmation of its perception of the Korean Peninsula crisis.

According to the Chinese authorities, the U.S., together with Japan and South Korea, would like to use the crisis to establish a stronger military alliance that aims to contain China. There is a conviction in China that U.S. President Donald Trump has not changed the policy of his predecessors, at least in terms of security and military engagement in the region. Vindication of this view is found in the deployment to South Korea of the U.S. THAAD anti-missile system, the joint U.S.-South Korea military exercises, and more frequent U.S. aircraft carrier visits to the peninsula region.

In that sense, China argues that the U.S. would like to create a "strategic vacuum", that is, it wants to the security situation in the region to deteriorate as justification of its military presence in Asia. Therefore, following the Chinese reasoning, the U.S. aims to make China's ties to both North Korea and South Korea worse and is why Trump appeals for greater Chinese pressure on Kim and has not stopped the THAAD deployment to South Korea. The U.S. also has encouraged its Asian allies to increase their military capabilities. This is being pursued by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who seeks a revision of the constitution to send its Self-Defence Forces abroad.

"Lips and Teeth"—North Korea in Chinese Foreign Policy. China is North Korea's ally under the 1961 Mutual Assistance Treaty, which prohibits alliances against the other. In China, the bilateral relations are traditionally defined as close as "lips and teeth". This definition is closely linked with Chinese strategic goals. North Korea is treated by the Chinese government as a buffer state to the U.S. presence in the region and its allies—Japan and South Korea. China's main goal is to maintain the *status quo*. China does not want

the North Korean regime to collapse, which could mean an influx of North Korean refugees to northern Chinese provinces and bring chaos to East Asia. China is also opposed to unification, which could lead to a Korean state that is an ally of the United States.

China provides Kim's regime with both financial and material aid (food, grain, energy resources, etc.) and imports North Korean goods (e.g., textiles) and raw materials. China is North Korea's main economic partner and accounts for 90% of its foreign trade. Support for the regime is also important to China as a factor in the development of its northern provinces. This is one of its arguments against the North's economic isolation

China's Crisis Management. The Chinese authorities declare their goal is a North Korea without nuclear weapons. They argue that possession of them may lead to the collapse of the non-proliferation regime, for example, by inducing Japan and South Korea to acquire nuclear weapons, and this may lead to a physical conflict. Therefore, China supports the UN sanctions on North Korea, which should result in reducing North Korean funding for the development of their nuclear programme. At the same time, China argues that the sanctions cannot be too drastic and should not affect ordinary citizens or exert excessive pressure on the Pyongyang regime. For this reason, and its own economic interests, China has been implementing the sanctions within a very limited scope. Given China's political interests, it has in fact accepted that the North possesses nuclear weapons and that this state of play is an important deterrent factor in China's interest.

The only forum China accepts for resolving the crisis is the United Nations. Therefore, it supports the UN sanctions but then often exerts pressure to mitigate them compared to the initial proposals. The Chinese authorities oppose unilateral sanctions imposed directly on Kim's regime, as well as so-called secondary sanctions on companies or people from other countries that cooperate with North Korea (e.g., in August, the U.S. imposed sanctions on people and companies from both China and Russia). China also expressed its dissatisfaction with Trump's decision to include North Korea on the U.S. state-sponsor of terrorism list.

China is trying to present itself as a state that actively works towards resolution of the conflict, or at least its de-escalation. It has proposed what it calls "double suspension", which assumes a halt to the U.S.-South Korea joint military exercises to convince Kim to put on hold the nuclear or missile tests, and could lead to talks. In fact, it is not a constructive idea to mitigate the conflict but merely to dismiss allegations of Chinese inactivity on the matter. The Chinese proposal is fundamentally ineffective since it casts responsibility for the crisis on the U.S. and South Korea.

While China's proposal is largely a sham, it is trying to reach out to Kim. The aim is not to solve the crisis but to push the authorities in Pyongyang to ease the conflict. This would reduce tensions in the region and allow China to resume pursuit of its interests, and to show that it actually can have an impact on North Korea, strengthen China's global position, and continue to expand economic relations with the North. This was likely the main rationale behind Chinese special envoy Song Tao's visit to Pyongyang on 17-20 November. However, he did not meet Kim, which may indicate the visit was a failure.

Perspectives. China has tools to influence North Korea, but it will not use them until the North's actions directly threaten China's security and its economic interests in its north-eastern provinces bordering North Korea. Those instruments are primarily economic, which would further isolate the regime, such as the complete suspension of aid, full implementation of the UN sanctions, or halting trade altogether. However, under the current circumstances, China's territorial integrity and security and economic interests are not directly threatened (there is no influx of North Korean refugees and trade is developing, even rising). In that sense, China has no direct reason to exert greater pressure on Kim, and it is not in its interests in north-east China. Economic isolation would destabilise North Korea by worsening its economic situation.

With the crisis on the Korean Peninsula deepening, it is worthwhile to try to talk with China as a country that has influence on the Kim regime. The EU, which is not militarily involved in the region, could encourage China to propose a more realistic plan than the "double suspension" idea to mitigate the conflict. Poland may also become a partner for dialogue with China when it takes its seat as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council in 2018. Poland shares China's view of the UN's key role in such crises and supports the non-proliferation regime. It also favours diplomatic activities that would facilitate potential talks with North Korea and give Kim room to take a positive step without losing face (perhaps even attributing the success to North Korea), but which is made much more difficult when the North is facing intensive pressure—a view similar to China's position.