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NORTH KOREA AS A LAND OF COOPERATION BETWEEN AMERICA AND CHINA

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North Korea is one of the security issues that the United States and China often find conflicting positions with one another. Washington wants Beijing to implement the sanction more thoroughly and to exercise its influence over Pyongyang to give up nuclear weapons program. While opposing North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons in principle, Beijing also opposes Washington's maximum pressure approach. Beijing claims that the United States should lift sanction and provide security guarantees so that North Korea feel safe to give up its nuclear weapons. The contrasting positions, however, do not mean that the United States and China are ready to engage in another war on the Korean Peninsula. On the contrary, North Korea's problems can provide an opportunity for security cooperation between the two great powers in the midst of strategic competition.

Key Points:

- North Korea's problems can provide an opportunity for security cooperation between the two great powers in the midst of strategic competition.
- Many security experts in the West tend to agree that there are four flashpoints where the United States and China may conflict militarily, which are the South China Sea, East China Sea, Taiwan Strait, and the Korean Peninsula.
- Chinese analysts do not agree on where a massive military conflict is most likely to occur between the United States and China.

Keywords: North Korea, Korean Peninsula, Security, Conflict Nuclear Weapons, China and US.

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Many security experts in the West tend to agree that there are four flashpoints where the United States and China may conflict militarily, which are the South China Sea, East China Sea, Taiwan Strait, and the Korean Peninsula. This begs the question of where the Chinese security analysts see the greatest potential of an armed conflict among these four areas. In order to prevent such an event in the real world, it is crucial to understand how Chinese strategists rank the likelihood of military conflict among the four flashpoints. With this question in mind, I spent two weeks in China to meet with Chinese scholars at the government-affiliated think tanks and universities in May 2019.

The Chinese analysts that I interviewed offered various answers. Some chose the South China Sea as the place with the highest likelihood of military conflict, while others selected Taiwan Strait. Soon I found that even Chinese analysts themselves could not agree on where a massive military conflict is most likely to occur between the United States and China. Nonetheless, what immediately captured my attention was that almost all of the Chinese interlocutors chose the Korean Peninsula as the area with the least possibility of military conflict between China and the United States. Some of them even stated that the Korean Peninsula is not an area of conflict, but an area of security cooperation between the United States and China.

This was an interesting puzzle for me. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Korean War was the first and only war that China and the United States directly fought with one another in history. Therefore, by the logic of extending this historical precedent, one may well assume that the Chinese security experts should be worried most about the possibility of another war with the United States at the same place. Indeed, there was a gathering storm of war on the Korean Peninsula as the confrontation between Washington and Pyongyang heightened at the end of 2017.¹ Yet, the security experts in China still worry less about the possibility of Sino-US war on the Korean Peninsula, compared to other areas of concern. Why?

Some of the Chinese interlocutors reminded me that the Korean Peninsula is not a Chinese territory, unlike the islands in the South China Sea, Senkaku/Diaoyu islands in the East China Sea, or Taiwan as a whole, all of which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) claims as part of China. These regions

are listed as China's "core interests" in Xi Jinping's remarks on territorial sovereignty that the Chinese government is determined to protect at all costs, and this is the key difference between the three regions of concern and the Korean Peninsula.² It also implies that there is a greater room for policy flexibility and negotiation for China concerning Korean affairs compared to other regions.

Other Chinese scholars explained to me how different China is today compared to China in 1950 when the country entered the Korean War. Mao Zedong decided to fight the American forces because he was worried about potentially expensive political and financial costs of maintaining large forces in the border area if China had not intervened in the Korean War and allowed the US forces to take over North Korea. Mao was also worried that the victory of American forces might embolden the remaining elements of resistance to his power both at home and in Taiwan.³ But now the situation is reversed: Xi Jinping does not need to worry about military resistance against his authority as much as Mao did in 1950. Rather Xi has to worry about the political and financial costs of another Korean War that would certainly affect China's political stability and economic development in a negative way. Therefore, it is a reasonable assumption that Beijing wants to avoid another war with the United States on the Korean Peninsula as much as possible. At a minimum, the CCP is not as resolved to fight the American forces for the affairs of the Korean Peninsula as much as it did in 1950.

This observation reveals further China's dilemma vis-à-vis North Korea. On the one hand, while the Chinese leaders have promised to Chinese people that they will not lose any piece of territory that they regard as part of China to foreign countries, this does not apply to North Korea. Therefore, there is less "audience cost" for not protecting North Korea, compared to other regions of concern.⁴ If the CCP decides to fight the American forces only to save North Korea, then China has to pay "the real costs" of human sacrifices, economic shock and political resistance at home. On the other hand, Beijing cannot just sit idly and let the United States pressure North Korea with economic sanctions and political isolation, because such pressure can push Pyongyang either to the brink of regime collapse or the direction of even more adventurous, thus dangerous, military provocations by Pyongyang. Therefore Beijing needs to neutralize the effects of Washington's' pressure on Pyongyang, which creates the misperception that Beijing is determined to protect North Korea at

all costs. In the end, Beijing appears to view North Korea as an object of crisis management rather than an ally in practice.

China's dilemma with North Korea opens an opportunity for security cooperation between Washington and Beijing. Among the scholars of Chinese politics in the West, there is a near-consensus that China aims to maintain the status quo when it comes to North Korea; Beijing does not want to see the sudden regime collapse or contingency in Pyongyang. It does not want to see another war on the Korean Peninsula either. To prevent such events, Beijing is ready to confront Washington in the short term. But China's priority on maintaining the stability will work in the opposite direction under certain conditions. That is, (1) if a contingency happens within North Korea caused by North Korean people or (2) if North Korea's provocations drive the situation to the point of war, China would be willing to cooperate with the United States, precisely for the same goal of maintaining the stability on the Korean Peninsula.⁵ Once the crisis is likely to spiral out of control, Beijing will be even more compelled to communicate with Washington for crisis management rather than to confront the United States with readiness to face a bigger crisis of another massive war on the Korean Peninsula.⁶

In short, when Chinese strategists say that they worry less about the possibility of another war on the Korean Peninsula, they do not mean China is ready to abandon North Korea. Yet it may also be an exaggeration that China is ready to protect North Korea at all costs, even taking the risk of another all-out war with the United States. In the end, North Korea is not a part of China, and today's China has much more to lose from another war on the Korean Peninsula than Mao did seventy years ago. In order to understand each other's strategic intent more accurately, Beijing and Washington should maintain high-level contacts and create more opportunities for strategic communication regarding the Korean Peninsula. We should not forget that the tragic history of the Sino-America war on the Korean Peninsula was the outcome of failure to maintain the channels of communication available to leaders in Beijing and Washington.⁷

The views expressed in these articles are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of DKI APCSS, the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, the U.S. Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.
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³ Thomas Christensen, "Threats, Assurances, and the Last Chance for Peace: The Lessons of Mao's Korean War Telegrams." *International Security* 17, no. 1 (1992). p.148.

⁴ Audience cost is a term in international relations theory that describes the penalty a leader incurs from his or her constituency if they escalate a foreign policy crisis and are then seen as backing down. See Michael Tomz, "Domestic audience costs in international relations: an experimental approach," *International Organization* 61. Fall 2007. pp.821-40.

⁵ For a possible scenario of security cooperation between the United States and China to secure and destroy Pyongyang's nuclear weapons in a Korean contingency, see Oriana Skylar Mastro, "Conflict and Chaos on the Korean Peninsula: Can China's Military Help Secure North Korea's Nuclear Weapons?" *International Security* 43. No. 2 (2018): pp. 84-116

⁶ For example, as the tension was escalating to its highest point between Washington and Pyongyang in 2017, Beijing openly joined the US efforts to pressure Pyongyang by implementing sanctions against North Korea. See Simon Denyer, "China bans North Korean iron, lead, coal imports as part of U.N. sanctions," *The Washington Post*, August 14, 2017.

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