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Responses to PacNet #32R – The Illogic of China's North Korea Policy

R. Stapleton Roy, Kissinger Associates, former US Ambassador to China:

The piece by Ralph Cossa and Brad Glosserman is an eloquent presentation of the issue from a quintessentially American perspective. The problem is that the Chinese position is presented as illogical and the paramount Chinese interest is dismissed in the three words that "stability comes first." This makes the Chinese dilemma in dealing with North Korea incomprehensible to the reader.

The Korean Peninsula has posed a massive security problem for China for well over 100 years. In the Sino-Japanese war of 1894-95, the principal land battles were fought in what is now North Korea and Taiwan was lost in the peace settlement. Over the next two decades, the Japanese first made the peninsula a protectorate and then a colony, which became the launch pad for the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, where the puppet state of Manchukuo became a key base for Japan's invasion and occupation of vast swathes of China from 1937-45. In the Korean War China lost a million troops fighting to prevent the United States from establishing a foothold in North Korea, when MacArthur, with Washington's approval, made the egregious strategic error of crossing the 38th parallel, a consequence of the consistent US inability to understand the vital importance of the geographic region of North Korea to China's core security interests. The Chinese know this history; 99.9 percent of Americans do not. You cannot understand China's approach to North Korea except against the backdrop of this history.

Illogic is the wrong metric for assessing Chinese policy. China is struggling to deal with an irreconcilable contradiction posed by the nature of the North Korean regime, not by Chinese failures in logical reasoning. Beijing disapproves of every aspect of North Korean policy, including the dynastic succession arrangements and North Korea's self-destructive economic fumblings. Its opposition to Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program is as strong as our own. But unlike us, Beijing has an overriding security interest in maintaining influence in Pyongyang and in not permitting other powers to gain the upper hand there.

This is the contradiction that lies at the heart of Beijing's handling of North Korea. It became acute immediately following Pyongyang's second nuclear test in May 2009, which was deeply offensive to Beijing. But 2009 marked the 60th anniversary of the establishment of PRC-DPRK diplomatic relations, and Kim Jong-il's ill health had already started the succession clock ticking. What to do? Ignore the anniversary and get off on the wrong foot with Pyongyang when the succession could occur at any moment? We did not face these dilemmas.

Beijing's approach was a synthesis of these contradictions. It supported stronger sanctions against North Korea because of the nuclear test, but celebrated the anniversary and cultivated the likely new leader. It was a bad synthesis produced by bad options, but it was entirely logical. Pyongyang's sinking of the ROK Navy corvette Cheonan the next spring made the contradiction far more difficult to handle but did not negate the security factor at the core of the contradiction. As a result, the policy that resulted from the synthesis was unable to reconcile Beijing's competing interests, and it paid a heavy price in terms of the damage to its relations with South Korea and the undesirability from Beijing's standpoint of the predictable US-ROK response. These are well detailed in the Cossa/Glosserman article but without the necessary context for understanding why Beijing behaved the way it did.

Do we do better when confronted with similar contradictions? No. We fumble as well. Take our support for Israel, a country where we have influence but lack control. It is a core element of our foreign policy. It often undermines our ability to have a coherent Middle East policy. It was an unstated factor in the decision to invade Iraq and oust the Sunni leadership, which had the collateral consequence of upsetting the Sunni-Shia balance in the Middle East and strengthening Iran's influence. Despite our disapproval of Israeli settler policies, we don't cut off aid. We shield Israel against condemnation for atrocities against Palestinians. In short, our own synthesis of the contradictions spawned by our unremitting support for Israel often makes our policy in the region appear incoherent, or even, if one can use the word, illogical. And yet the drivers of our support for Israel are just as immutable as are Beijing's geopolitical interests with respect to North Korea.

Or take our relations with Mexico, a neighbor with a long common border. Mexico is a principal funnel for narcotics entering the United States. How usable is pressure as a means of forcing Mexico to take actions we desire? We've learned the hard way that when we apply pressure tactics to Mexico it often has the opposite of the desired result. We haven't closed our border with Mexico. We haven't cut off trade. An alien from outer space might be forgiven for concluding that the United States is indifferent to the flow of narcotics from Mexico because we haven't used all the tools available to us to stem the flow. The alien would be wrong of course. The problem is the complexity of relations between neighbors where many competing interests and historical factors come into play.

Cossa and Glosserman are excellent and thoughtful analysts who have shown convincingly that there are many collateral negative consequences for Beijing that flow from the Chinese effort to strike a balance among its contradictory and competing interests with respect to North Korea. But the

article does not contribute to understanding why Beijing behaves the way it does. Without that understanding we run a greater risk that our policy will fail to strike the right balance in seeking to build on common interests with Beijing while avoiding actions that magnify Chinese suspicions of our motives and inadvertently drive Beijing and Pyongyang closer together, a far from desirable outcome.

Authors' response:

We thank Ambassador Roy for his thoughtful, illuminating contribution to this debate. He's right, of course. As we clearly stated at the onset, ours was an American perspective (we'll leave "quintessential" for others to decide). We had hoped that at least one of our hundreds of Chinese readers would have responded with the Chinese point of view. None did! We are therefore grateful a well-informed American took on the task.

We fully understand the history and how this drives Chinese paranoia. But we remain convinced, as Ambassador Roy himself acknowledges, that Beijing's actions, however logical they seem from a Chinese perspective, do not serve China's 21st century interests. We remain encouraged by the number of Chinese colleagues we talk with who share this view and are pressing their government for a more balanced approach. Perhaps illogical was a bad choice of terms on our part. Self-defeating still seems to fit, however.

The fact that the United States also pursues self-defeating policies on occasion is not challenged here. The Chinese frequently point out that North Korea is their Israel and we have a certain degree of sympathy with this argument. It does not make Beijing's North Korea policy any less counterproductive over the long run, however. The Chinese frequently accuse the US of having a Cold War mentality. When it comes to North Korea, it appears that China has not even progressed that far.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.