

The Logic of China's North Korea Policy By Yun Sun

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US and South Korean analysts are annoyed and frustrated by China's policy toward North Korea. In their eyes, Beijing's policy not only jeopardizes the security of the US and the ROK and undermines international norms, but is detrimental to China's own national interests as well.

But judgments about whether China's North Korea policy is illogical or self-defeating depend very much on what people see as China's goals. Most Chinese analysts would argue that China's policy has its own internal logic; whether the US and South Korea see that logic is a different matter.

The widely accepted assumption is that China has three goals when it comes to North Korea: stability (no implosion and no war), peace (diplomatic normalization between the US and North Korea), and denuclearization/nonproliferation. Among these three, China prioritizes stability over peace and denuclearization. The secondary status of denuclearization is a sore spot for Washington and Seoul, which see it as the most important goal (or should be). And while different priorities lead to different approaches, North Korean actions have been destabilizing. Therefore, China's strategy is counterproductive in terms of its own priority, hence illogical.

This analysis misses a more fundamental, strategic aspect of China's views of its security environment and the North Korea issue. China is increasingly anxious and concerned about US strategic intentions toward China and the China-related utility of its military alliances in East Asia. For most Chinese, Americans and South Koreans cite the North Korea threat to justify the existence and strengthening of the military alliance, creating the impression that the alliance will lose its *raison d'être* after the North Korea issue is solved. The US and ROK have in recent years sought to "regionalize" and "globalize" the alliance with no clear indication that the future alliance would not "target" or "affect" China. This raises a fundamental question in China: why should China help the US and ROK on North Korea against its own security interests?

The announcement of the US pivot to Asia has intensified these suspicions and concerns. Most Chinese and US analysts believe that the problem between their two countries is structural. They share the view that the rise of China inevitably threatens the US status as a superpower. This power structure dictates that some of the most important goals and policies of the two countries will conflict. Therefore, the US pivot to Asia, including its perceived "meddling" in South China Sea disputes and increasing deployments in the Asia Pacific, are seen as specific steps to counter China's rise. The US-ROK alliance is an intrinsic element of this strategy (with or without the North Korea problem). Hence, China's logic regarding

North Korea policy is clear: China will not help the US and ROK solve the North Korea problem or speed up a China-unfriendly resolution since China is "next on the list."

Many Chinese analysts see Seoul's ambiguity when it comes to addressing China's concerns as unfortunate. For them, Seoul is using ambiguity toward China's concerns to maximize its policy flexibility, play the US and China against each other to improve its own position, and act as a middle power balancer between the two. Therefore, when South Koreans criticize China's North Korea policy or lobby for a change, Chinese respond with the old "stability" argument, but privately think that "You can't have your cake and eat it too."

To be fair, China's North Korea policy is problematic. North Korean provocations cost China dearly: financially, politically, and when it comes to security. Ample debates within the Chinese policy community on what it should do about North Korea are a powerful demonstration of how serious the issue has become and how uncomfortable China is. However, when China puts the issue in the broader context of US-China relations and regional dynamics, North Korea isn't the most serious or fundamental challenge to China's national security and strategic interests. The current policy is problematic, but the alternative seems worse. That's why China chooses to muddle through while hoping economic reform will bring about a North Korea modeled after China.

To dissuade China of this logic will be extremely difficult. It will require serious and reliable reassurances by the US and South Korea that the future of their alliance will not come at China's expense. This could be strategically unwise and politically impossible. Given the amount of distrust China harbors, it may not even work. But without such dissuasion, lobbying China for a policy change on North Korea will fail.

China might change its strategic calculation if North Korea launches new provocations and drags the region into a military conflict. China may not be willing to step into a direct conflict with the US and will try to manage tension through other channels. However, as shown by China's response to the two nuclear tests and provocations in 2010, Beijing's tolerance for North Korea is quite high. People often wonder what China can NOT tolerate when it comes to North Korea.

A third possibility is that North Korea implodes or China falls before it rises. These might happen, but so far no country is basing its policy on those possibilities.

China knows that it has to live with the US-ROK alliance. There is practically nothing China can do to stop it, although Beijing doesn't like that either. As long as China is hostile toward and suspicious about the strategic intentions of the US and China's "utility" in the future US-ROK military alliance, Beijing sees no reason to change its policy on North Korea issue to speed up any resolution of the problem.

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