



Chinese Debates on North Korea

by Bonnie Glaser, Scott Snyder, and John S. Park

In recent years, issues pertaining to North Korea have been hotly debated by Chinese institute researchers. The publication of conflicting views in authoritative media suggests that these debates are sanctioned by the Chinese leadership. At critical junctures in the six-party negotiations, Chinese leaders may see value in the publication of an article advocating greater pressure on Pyongyang or urging the United States to show greater flexibility. It is also possible that the publication of differing views by Chinese scholars reflects differences at higher levels regarding assessments of North Korea or Chinese policy toward Pyongyang. Tracking debates in China on North Korea is therefore important to identify potential fissures at the top and impending shifts in Chinese policy.

Chinese researchers highlight three issues as currently being intensely debated in Chinese academic circles. The first issue is whether the DPRK will give up its nuclear weapons. One school of thought holds that the right combination of pressure and inducements can persuade North Korea to abandon its production facilities and give up its nuclear weapons. The precondition for doing so, experts say, is that the regime feels secure and perceives that the benefits obtained from denuclearization exceed the risks of retaining some nuclear capability. Coordination among the other members of the Six-Party Talks is imperative to convince North Korea that the best option is to dismantle its nuclear facilities and give up its nuclear weapons, say Chinese officials. While proponents of this view state that the possibility exists that North Korea will give up its nuclear weapons, no one expects that the process will be smooth or the outcome certain.

In contrast, members of a second school of thought are extremely skeptical that North Korea's nuclear status can be reversed. One respected expert on North Korea and the Six-Party Talks bluntly predicted that the attempts to convince Kim Jong-il to give up nuclear weapons will fail: "We can have a nuclear-free peninsula or the continuation of Kim Jong-il's regime and stability on the peninsula. China hopes that Kim can sustain his regime, preserve stability, and give up his nuclear weapons, but they can't all be achieved and China will have to choose."

The second issue being debated is the strategic value of the DPRK to China. A growing number of experts, especially specialists on the U.S. and international relations, argue that North Korea is a strategic liability. The detonation of a nuclear device strengthened voices that favor imposing sanctions on North Korea, including a temporary or permanent reduction of oil shipments. Arguments in support of retaining close ties with North Korea include China's long-standing friendship with the DPRK, sealed in blood during the Korean War; the

need to maintain stability in the region and along the border regardless of Pyongyang's policies; the importance of retaining and expanding Chinese influence in both North and South Korea so China will be well-positioned to protect its interests in the event of reunification; and the need to preserve a buffer zone along China's border.

The contention that China must keep a buffer zone is challenged by a growing number of experts, however, regardless of whether they view North Korea as a strategic asset or a burden. A senior researcher maintained, for example, that keeping a buffer zone declined in importance with the end of the Cold War and "won't be important unless there is a new Cold War." He also asserted that "the Chinese military doesn't have special interests in preserving a buffer zone."

Related to the question of whether North Korea is a strategic asset or a strategic liability is whether to keep the 1961 Sino-DPRK Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance intact, revise it, or even abandon it. A small minority advocates that China nullify the treaty because the alliance no longer serves Chinese interests. A second minority group proposes that the clause that assures military assistance in the case of aggression by a third party against China or North Korea be excised. "If an ally doesn't act like an ally, then the other side might not want to do its part," asserted one Chinese analyst.

The majority favors retaining the treaty, but even those who adopt this position say that the Chinese government welcomes its ambiguity, which leaves both Pyongyang and Washington uncertain about the extent of China's support in a conflict. According to a Chinese scholar, this ambiguity strengthens deterrence.

Even if China were to modify or abandon the treaty, circumstances might arise that would require the Chinese to dispatch forces across the border into North Korea. Contingency plans exist to restore stability in the event that the country devolves into chaos – a scenario that Beijing neither hopes for nor predicts is likely. If intervention is deemed necessary, China's strong preference is to join a multilateral response team under United Nations auspices, but it is prepared to act unilaterally if the international community does not respond in time.

A third issue being debated, though only acknowledged by a small number of Chinese experts, concerns the likelihood of a rapid improvement in U.S.-North Korean relations and how such a development would affect Chinese interests. If asked, most officials and institute researchers insist that increased bilateral U.S.-DPRK contacts are beneficial to the denuclearization process and not contrary to Chinese interests. Probing questions from Chinese scholars about how far and how fast U.S.-DPRK relations will develop betray concerns,

however. In the near-term, the Chinese worry that their role in the Six-Party Talks will be circumscribed. However, their deeper and long run concern is strategic – that the U.S. and North Korea will forge a closer relationship that will adversely affect Chinese interests.

Some Chinese experts even worry that Washington and Pyongyang will cut a deal that will permit North Korea to keep its nuclear weapons in exchange for concessions by the DPRK. A leading Chinese analyst suggested, for example, that the DPRK could pledge to not proliferate and give up long-range nuclear missiles in return for U.S. acceptance of the country as a nuclear weapons state. In the event that the U.S. strikes a separate deal with North Korea that is not embedded in the six-party process, Beijing would be isolated in its insistence that Pyongyang give up its nuclear weapons and Sino-DPRK relations would be severely impaired. Chinese analysts vividly recall that the U.S. pressed Beijing to impose great pressure on India after its nuclear test in 1998, but then reversed its position and condoned India's nuclear program, leaving China hanging out to dry. China subsequently devoted two years to mending its ties with India.

Bonnie Glaser (bglaser@csis.org) is senior associate at the Pacific Forum and at CSIS in Washington, D.C. Scott Snyder (snyderSA@aol.com) is a senior associate for the Pacific Forum CSIS and the Asia Foundation. John S. Park (jpark@usip.org) is the director for the Korea Working Group at the U.S. Institute of Peace. This article is taken from "Keeping an Eye on an Unruly Neighbor: Chinese Views of Economic Reform and Stability in North Korea <http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/071227_wp_china_northkorea.pdf>," a report of discussions with North Korea specialists during a Center for Strategic and International Studies-USIP delegation visit to the People's Republic of China.