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**PACIFIC FORUM**  
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# Chinese Views on Korean Unification

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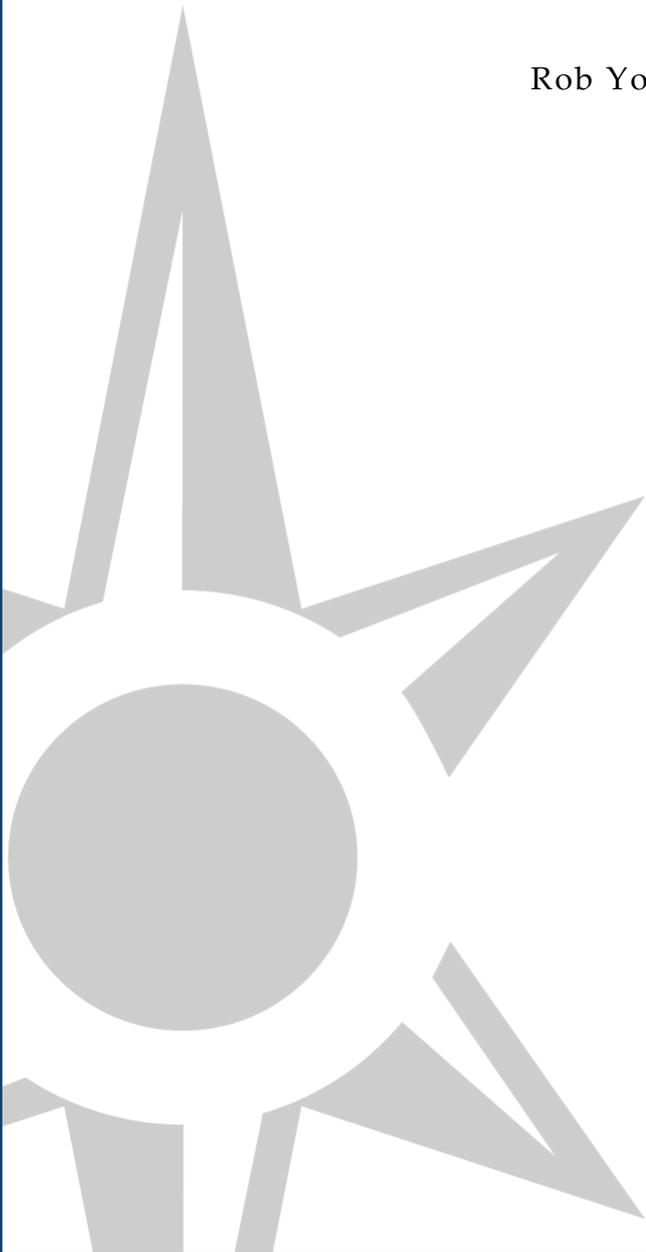
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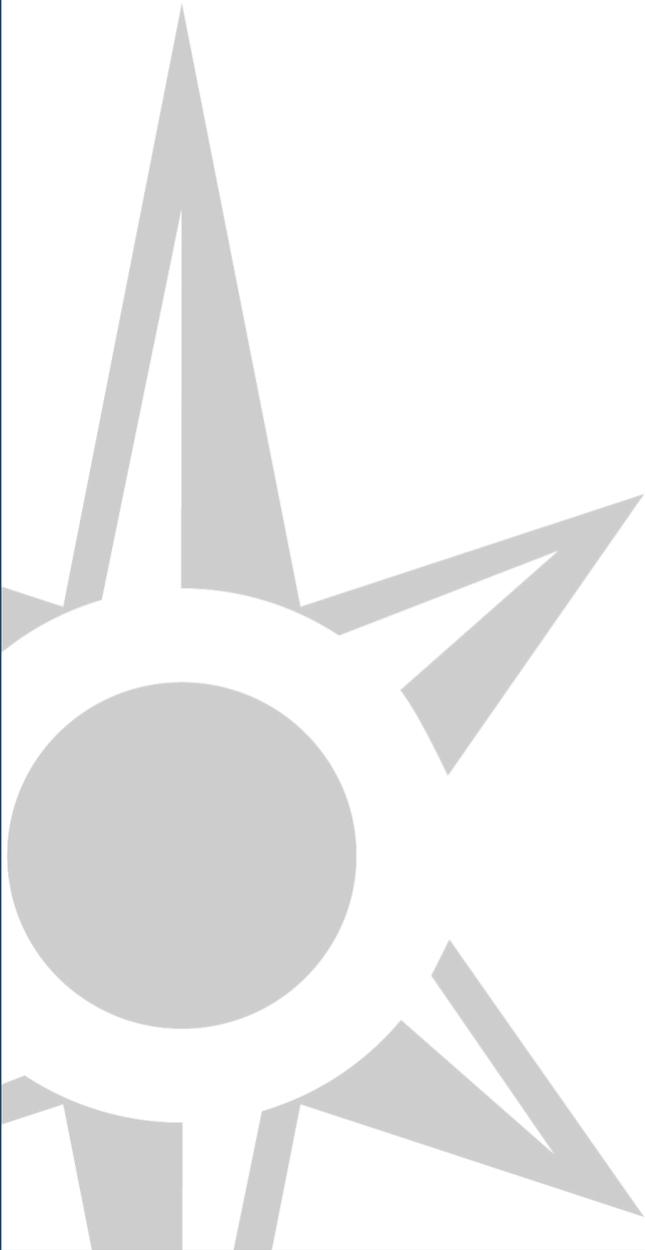
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# Executive Summary

For years the United States and South Korea have urged the People's Republic of China, as a treaty ally of North Korea and by far the biggest trading partner of Pyongyang, to play a more proactive role in urging reconciliation between the two Koreas. Beijing has repeatedly stated its opposition to a nuclear North Korea, urged more dialogue among the concerned parties, and at times backed penalties against Pyongyang for its proliferation, but also often declined to condemn specific North Korean behaviors Seoul and Washington object to and not signed on to sanctions it considers potentially destabilizing.

To gain a clearer insight into the PRC perspective on North Korea, Korean unification, and practical measures that may be implemented to foster unification, Pacific Forum surveyed 18 Chinese experts—based inside and out of China—on the Korean Peninsula and the PRC's foreign policy priorities. The project, sponsored by the UniKorea Foundation in Seoul, revealed more of Chinese experts' views of peninsular dynamics, the parties with the greatest fault/responsibility for the ongoing standoff, and whether specific potential actions would worsen or lessen tension on the peninsula. The anonymous survey revealed that the authors

- a) Mostly considered China the most effective actor in the standoff and the US the least, but with a relatively high number considering South Korea the most responsible actor and North Korea the least.
- b) Were nearly united in opposition to new US and UN sanctions.
- c) Were completely united in opposition to an increased US troop presence on the peninsula, which they said Beijing would regard as a national security threat, and supportive of US troop withdrawal, even if they considered the DPRK's actions the most destabilizing.
- d) Supported an "independent" foreign policy by South Korea.

Pacific Forum also notes that many potential respondents to this survey declined to participate, citing increased official scrutiny of Chinese experts on these subjects, which may cast doubt on the PRC's willingness to engage South Korea and the US in a meaningful manner. That said, with a progressive South Korean administration that favors moving toward South Korean wartime operational control by 2030, and a conservative US administration reportedly considering withdrawing troops from the peninsula and prioritizing domestic and hemispheric security over deterring adversaries abroad, the PRC may see the US policy toward the peninsula that it hopes for in the near future.

Our recommendation is therefore that, if the US moves forward with downsizing its troop presence on the Korean Peninsula, it should do so on the condition that the PRC enter into an agreed-upon framework for peninsular security, which includes fostering of inter-Korean ties and penalties for violation of the agreement's terms.

*Cover Image: Flags of China and North Korea are seen outside the closed Ryugyong Korean Restaurant in Ningbo, Zhejiang province, China, in this April 12, 2016 file photo. © 2016 Reuters*

## Introduction

China has loomed—literally and metaphorically—over the Korean Peninsula for millennia. The continued division of the peninsula stems largely from two decisions by the People’s Republic of China’s leadership—first, Mao Zedong’s decision to approve Kim Il Sung’s 1950 invasion of the South, and second, the PRC decisions to commit its “People’s Volunteer Army” to North Korea’s defense against US forces when that invasion failed. Since then, the governments of Beijing and Pyongyang have maintained a “lips-and-teeth” alliance,<sup>1</sup> though one that has not precluded disagreement.

During the Sino-Soviet split, “disagreement” included North Korea’s strategy of vacillating between the PRC and Soviet Union for opportunistic reasons, Deng Xiaoping’s disapproval of the North’s hereditary leadership transfer from Kim Il Sung to Kim Jong Il, and its official opposition to North Korea’s nuclear weapons program. In the aftermath of the first North Korean nuclear test in 2006 and its last nuclear test in 2017, the PRC joined the rest of the UN Security Council in denouncing the North’s nuclear brinkmanship and imposing sanctions.

Because of this, and because the PRC is the largest trading partner of the North, hopes that Beijing would play a proactive role in promoting inter-Korean relations have persisted. As recently as the Park Geun-hye administration (2013-2017), even conservative South Koreans considered working with China to promote reunification a viable strategy.<sup>2</sup> Yet today, 75 years after the Korean War, the division continues and the two Koreas have never been further apart, with third-generation leader Kim Jong Un declaring in 2024 that unification with South Korea is no longer desirable<sup>3</sup> and throwing his support behind Russia’s Ukraine invasion. China, along with Russia, talks increasingly of a multipolar world in which the US cannot so easily impose its will and its norms on other countries, and both ignored the pleas of the Biden administration (2021-2025) to

impose penalties on North Korea’s advanced weapons systems testing.

Yet hopes persist. Following tense Sino-South Korean relations under the conservative Yoon Suk Yeol administration (2022-2025), the new progressive Lee Jae Myung government has signaled a return to China outreach, including calls for Beijing to play a “constructive role” in fostering inter-Korean dialogue.<sup>4</sup> The return of Donald Trump to the White House has stimulated talks of a return to the US-North Korea summitry of 2018-2019.

What role will China play in this process? There has been an upswing in North Korea’s relations with Russia, including sending manpower to support the Ukraine campaign, for which it has received Russian scientific and military aid, perhaps of a kind that China is not comfortable offering.<sup>5</sup> Yet, China remains by far the North’s biggest economic partner, and while both Moscow and Beijing are fixtures of an emerging world order, the 2025 China Victory Day Parade, in which paramount leader Xi Jinping was joined by Kim Jong Un and Russian President Vladimir Putin, as well as other figures like Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Myanmar junta leader Min Aung Hlaing, showed the PRC’s outsized influence over the emerging multipolar order.

China’s influence over the Korean Peninsula in the Trump-Lee era cannot be overlooked. As decision-making processes of the Chinese Communist Party remain opaque, Pacific Forum, with support of the UniKorea Foundation in Seoul, in the first half of 2025 surveyed 18 Chinese experts to gain insight into how China views the future of the Korean Peninsula. Survey participants included Korea specialists who have written scholarly papers about inter-Korean relations, as well as experts on broader Chinese foreign policy priorities. Offered anonymity to encourage them to speak freely, the experts were asked to assess the efficacy of the policies of the two Koreas, as well as those of the PRC and the US, in fostering better relations on the peninsula. In addition, they were asked to provide recommendations for all parties involved.

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<sup>1</sup> Pratik Jakhar, “Lips and Teeth”: *The Enduring China-North Korea Relationship*, n.d., Aug. 17, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/lips-and-teeth-the-enduring-china-north-korea-relationship/>.

<sup>2</sup> The progressive Moon Jae-in administration (2017-2022) also worked with Beijing to promote closer relations with North Korea, but this been typical of progressive South Korean parties even if, as has been the case in the past decade, South Korean sentiment toward the PRC has been trending negative.

<sup>3</sup> Oliver Slow, *North Korea’s Kim Jong Un Abandons Unification Goal with South*, Jan. 16, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-67990948>.

<sup>4</sup> “South Korean President Lee, Xi Pledge Closer Economic, Security Cooperation,” English, *Reuters*, June 10, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/en/south-korean-president-lee-speak-chinas-xi-tuesday-ytn-tv-reports-2025-06-10/>.

<sup>5</sup> Adam Simpson, “With New Weapons, Cash and Battleground Experience from Ukraine, North Korea Has Become Much More Formidable,” *The Conversation*, Aug. 13, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.64628/AA.9rx9hjgvw>.

The survey results revealed that the experts:

- a) Mostly considered China the most effective actor in the standoff and the US the least, but a surprisingly high number considered South Korea to be the most responsible actor and North Korea the least.
- b) Were essentially united in opposition to new US and UN sanctions.
- c) Were completely united in opposition to an increased US troop presence on the peninsula, which they said Beijing would regard as a national security threat, and supportive of US troop withdrawal, even if they considered the DPRK's actions the most destabilizing.
- d) Supported an "independent" foreign policy by South Korea.

The authors requested responses from many more experts than were recorded in this report; many scholars, at varying stages of their careers, expressed discomfort with participation in the survey even with the promise of anonymity, citing a worsening climate for scholars on topics considered sensitive by the PRC government.

Those experts who did participate expressed unanimous approval for US troop withdrawal, many of them hold South Korea in a relatively positive regard, and many more support greater South Korean autonomy in its decision-making. This last point assumes greater significance amid rumors that Washington is considering at least a partial drawdown in its troop presence on the peninsula<sup>6</sup> and early drafts of its *National Defense Strategy* suggest that the Pentagon is moving toward greater emphasis on its domestic and hemispheric security.<sup>7</sup>

The Lee administration, like its progressive predecessors, has also set the goal of transferring wartime operational control (OPCON) of South Korean troops from the US to Seoul—and Lee's stated goal of achieving this by 2030<sup>8</sup> suggests that he hopes to achieve it before he leaves the presidency. While during his campaign he called the US troop presence helpful for regional stability, he has also recently

criticized the "submissive mindset" of those who say South Korea needs foreign troops and cannot attain self-reliance in defense.<sup>9</sup>

Governments in Washington, Beijing, and Seoul therefore seem to back a reduced US commitment to the Korean Peninsula, or at least increased South Korean autonomy. Under these conditions we would advise the Trump and Lee administrations that a commitment to downsizing the US troop presence on the Korean Peninsula and giving Seoul a greater say in its own defense, should be conditioned upon the exertion of PRC influence on North Korea to enter into a peninsular security framework, with rewards for compliance and penalties for violation. To be clear, this is *not* what we would advise in a vacuum, but it would be preferable to seeing US influence diminish with no agreement in place at all.

## Methodology

To obtain authentic perspectives from Chinese experts on Korean Peninsula issues, the authors designed and distributed surveys containing specific questions via email. The survey consisted of three sections: potential paths toward Korean unification, the major actors involved in the process, and prospective impacts of unification. Email distribution was chosen because it allowed for targeted outreach to specific contacts while providing a relatively secure communication channel. The research team included a statement on privacy protection in the correspondence.

Prior to contacting Chinese scholars, the authors and the research team conducted a thorough literature review of Chinese scholarship on the Korean Peninsula. From this review, 18 scholars based in mainland China who had published peer-reviewed articles on the subject were identified. The first round of surveys was distributed to these scholars, but the response rate was very low. Through follow-up conversations, the research team learned that research related to North Korea is not actively promoted in PRC and that many scholars hesitate to engage with foreign research institutes; as such,

<sup>6</sup> X et al., "Report of a U.S. Troop Drawdown Stirs Alarm in South Korea," *Los Angeles Times*, May 23, 2025, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2025-05-23/reports-of-a-u-s-troop-drawdown-stirs-alarm-in-south-korea>.

<sup>7</sup> Paul McCleary and Daniel Lippman, "Pentagon Plan Prioritizes Homeland over China Threat - POLITICO," Sept. 5, 2025, <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/09/05/pentagon-national-defense-strategy-china-homeland-western-hemisphere-00546310>.

<sup>8</sup> Hwang Joo-young, "Lee Proposes Wartime OPCON Transfer by 2030," *The Korea Herald*, Aug. 13, 2025, <https://www.koreaherald.com/article/10553383>.

<sup>9</sup> Park Chan-kyong, "Lee Defends South Korea's Military Autonomy in 'Message' to US," *South China Morning Post*, Sept. 23, 2025, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3326431/south-koreas-lee-pans-submissive-reliance-us-troops-comments-aimed-washington>.

collaboration often requires prior approval from university authorities. Few scholars, therefore, were willing to commit to the survey.

To increase the response rate, the research team explored alternative channels of communication. Using social media platforms such as WeChat, the team reached out to selected scholars to introduce the project before sharing the surveys. Ultimately, email remained the preferred mode of distribution, as it posed the lowest risk of attracting attention that could potentially endanger their safety. In the end, 18 respondents participated, with four based outside China, one based in an autonomous region of China, and the rest in the mainland.

Once links were established with scholars who had answered the survey, the authors worked closely with the UniKorea Foundation to draft a follow-up survey to share with previously engaged experts. These questions focused on future scenarios, such as: "If the North Korean regime were to collapse, what would be the likely consequences?" To accommodate different preferences for engagement, the team also offered alternatives to email, including online meetings. One expert, formerly based at a Chinese university but currently working abroad, opted to respond through a Zoom meeting, while one other respondent preferred email as the safest medium.

Only these two experts responded to the follow-up survey than during the initial round. The primary reason, again, was security concerns. Chinese scholars have grown increasingly cautious about engaging with overseas think tanks, particularly those based in North America. Combined with the sensitivity of the research topic, this made many reluctant to provide additional opinions on issues concerning the Korean Peninsula. Since the warming of PRC–North Korea relations in 2018, academic publications on North Korea have not been encouraged in China, partly to preserve stable bilateral relations (see next section). Despite these challenges, the authors were able to obtain feedback from both rounds of surveys, including input from Chinese experts on the Korean Peninsula. However, due to the current political climate in China, several leading experts declined invitations to participate in the virtual launch event for this paper on Oct. 2, 2025.

## Literature review

The number of academic, policy, or long-form analytical publications on Korean Peninsular security and unification by experts from China has declined since 2018. Of the 20 articles reviewed for this study, only six were published after 2018. Moreover, these six were not academic works produced within the PRC; rather, they were either published outside China, appeared as blog or website posts, or focused primarily on nuclear issues. The PRC has been highly cautious in managing China–DPRK relations and monitoring domestic discussions on sensitive topics has been one of the approaches the Chinese government has adopted to safeguard improving ties with North Korea. Wang Fan, senior specialist at the Center for International Security and Strategy at Tsinghua University notes, for instance, that deteriorating China–DPRK relations could create opportunities for other countries to intervene in Korean Peninsula affairs, undermining China's position on the peninsula, its regional influence, and its national security.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, research on unification and related issues has declined. Nevertheless, the authors of this study were able to identify valuable points of consensus among the available Chinese publications.

The nuclear issue remains one of the most prominent and frequently discussed topics in China with regard to the Korean Peninsula. Although the arguments remain consistent, Chinese scholars have favored this subject because prevailing conclusions generally align with the Chinese government's position, making it a relatively safe area for academic discussion. Denuclearization has unequivocally been China's preferred policy option, given its direct relevance to national security. With a 1,300-km (800-mile) border with the DPRK, any military conflict triggered by nuclear escalation would severely threaten China's security and regional stability, with potentially uncontrollable consequences. As noted by Ying Fu, China's former vice foreign minister, China consistently advocates for denuclearization and promotes dialogue as the proper means to address the issue, but has no concrete solution for resolving the DPRK's nuclear program.<sup>11</sup> Scholars, such as Zhu Qin, director of the editorial department of *Korean Studies Review*, also emphasize that denuclearization contributes to upholding the international nuclear

<sup>10</sup> Wang Fan, "中国视角：朝核问题现状及解决途径 [China's Perspective: The Current Situation and Solutions to the North Korean Nuclear Issue]." *Peace and Development* 1 (2020): 11.

<sup>11</sup> Ying Fu, 朝核问题的历史演进与前景展望 [The Historical Evolution and Future Prospects of the North Korean Nuclear Issue, <https://ciss.tsinghua.edu.cn/info/xzgd/113>].

non-proliferation regime and aligns with the vision of a “community with a shared future for mankind,” a concept Communist Party Chairman Xi Jinping has made central to his diplomatic outreach.<sup>12</sup>

The trajectory of China–US relations also shapes Chinese views on Korean unification. Given the US military presence in South Korea, unification raises the possibility of American troops stationed north of the 38th parallel, a scenario that poses serious security risks for China and the Northeast Asian subregion, and could contribute to the rise of extreme Korean nationalism in a unified Korea.<sup>13</sup> From China’s perspective, reductions in US troops from the Korean Peninsula would be a necessary condition for supporting unification, as Zhang Liangui, professor at the Institute of International Strategy notes, and Beijing would likely welcome a nationalist Korean position that resists the deployment of US forces.<sup>14</sup>

Several Chinese scholars highlight potential benefits and risks for China arising from a unified Korean Peninsula. On the positive side, unification could provide China with enhanced geopolitical leverage, economic opportunities, and domestic political advantages. A unified Korea would secure China’s border, reduce the flow of defectors into Chinese territory, and thus contribute to greater border stability, as noted by Gong Keyu, deputy director of the Center for Asia-Pacific Studies at the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies.<sup>15</sup> More broadly, unification could reshape the Northeast Asian order in ways that strengthen China’s aspiration to reassert itself as the regional leader. The current rationale for the US military presence in South Korea—detering threats from the divided peninsula—would dissolve after unification. This could ultimately diminish the justification for US troops on the peninsula, weakening Washington’s alliances in Asia and

strengthening China’s regional influence, as argued by Prof. Jin Qiangyi of Yanbian University.<sup>16</sup>

From an economic perspective, unification presents more opportunities for China. Fudan University Prof. Zheng Jiyoung argues, along with Jianzhong Jiang that a unified Korea could emerge as a new partner and growth engine for China’s foreign trade, fostering favorable conditions for regional economic integration.<sup>17</sup> Establishment of a China–Korean Peninsula Economic Corridor would not only bolster China’s Belt and Road Initiative but also serve as a counterbalance to US-led alliances in Asia, writes Zhu Qin, director of the Center for Korean Peninsula Studies at the Institute of World Development.<sup>18</sup>

Chinese scholars caution that unification could introduce significant risks, however. If led primarily by South Korea, US influence in the process could expand, raising the critical possibility of American troop deployments north of the 38th parallel. Such a scenario would compel China to increase its defense budget and would mean the end of the DPRK as a buffer state, heightening security vulnerabilities, writes Gong Keyu of the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, Gong notes that unification might diminish China’s traditional influence, as it has historically occupied a special role in managing inter-Korean relations.<sup>20</sup> Liang Li-chang, lecturer at Huaibei Normal University argues that a unified Korea could also foster stronger Korean nationalism; in its more extreme form, this could intensify unresolved historical and territorial disputes with China.<sup>21</sup> Economically, a unified Korea could emerge as a formidable competitor, benefiting from lower production costs and potentially challenging China in global markets.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Zhu, Qin, “新时代中国的朝鲜半岛战略与角色 [China’s Strategy and Role towards the Korean Peninsula in the New Era].” *Journal of Yanbian University (Social Sciences)* 52, no. 2 (March 2019): 5–12.

<sup>13</sup> Glaser, Bonnie S., and Yun Sun, “Chinese Attitudes toward Korean Unification,” *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies* 24, no. 2 (2015): 71–98.

<sup>14</sup> Zhang, Liangui, “当前朝鲜半岛的三个关键问题与中国对策 [Three Key Issues on the Korean Peninsula and China’s Countermeasures].” 71.cn, Jan. 24, 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Gong, Keyu, “The Unification of the Korean Peninsula and China: Benefits and Negative Impacts.” *Institute for the Future Korea-China Relations* 5 (2015): 61–77.

<sup>16</sup> Jin, Qiangyi, “朝鲜半岛问题与中美博弈 [Sino-US Strategic Maneuvering and the Korean Peninsula Issue].” *China International Strategy Review*, 2012, 148–49.

<sup>17</sup> Zheng, Jiyoung, and Jianzhong Jiang, “Korean Peninsula Division/Unification and China: From the Economic Perspective of China.”

Essay. In *Korean Peninsula Division/Unification: From the International Perspective*, 83–118. Seoul: Korea (page 92)

<sup>18</sup> Zhu, Qin, “新时代中国的朝鲜半岛战略与角色 [China’s Strategy and Role towards the Korean Peninsula in the New Era].” *Journal of Yanbian University (Social Sciences)* 52, no. 2 (March 2019): 5–12.

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<sup>19</sup> Gong, Keyu, “The Unification of the Korean Peninsula and China: Benefits and Negative Impacts.” *Institute for the Future Korea-China Relations* 5 (2015): 61–77.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid

<sup>21</sup> Liang, Li chang, “朝鲜半岛统一问题与中韩战略合作伙伴关系 [On the Issue of Korean Peninsula Reunification and Sino-Korea Strategic Cooperation Partnership].” *Dongjiang Journal* 4 (2015): 61–67. <https://www.aisixiang.com/data/96292.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Chen, Gong, “Benefits of Korean Unification Likely to Be Internal.” *Global Times*, June 18. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/201806/1107401.shtml>.

**Findings**

*The Survey*

Pacific Forum’s survey asked the surveyed experts 11 questions. It began with a series of questions regarding the stances of the People’s Republic China, United States, South Korea, and North Korea: how important to these governments are 1) peace on the Korean Peninsula and 2) unification of the Korean Peninsula. They were then asked how effective these governments’ strategies were for achieving unification.

The fourth question asked how important the following prospects are as prerequisites for peace on the Korean Peninsula: 1) complete denuclearization of North Korea, 2) lifting of US sanctions on North Korea, 3) lifting of UN sanctions on North Korea, 4) a peace treaty formally ending war on the Korean Peninsula, 5) the establishment of a confederation between the two Koreas, and 6) the withdrawal of US troops from the peninsula.

The fifth question asked how the People’s Republic of China would view a series of outcomes, with the range of choices including 1) a threat to the PRC’s national security, 2) unwelcome but acceptable, 3) progress, 4) essential progress, and 5) unknown or not applicable. Those outcomes were: 1) Korean unification, 2) an inter-Korean confederation, 3) US troop withdrawal, 4) more US troops on the Korean Peninsula, 5) an increase in South Korean military defense systems (missile defense systems, aircraft carriers, etc.), 6) further US sanctions on North Korea, The results are as follows:

7) end of US sanctions on North Korea, and 8) the unification of the Korean Peninsula.

Then, the survey asked respondents 1) which country they consider to have made the greatest contribution to peace on the Korean Peninsula and why, and 2) which country poses the greatest threat to peace on the Korean Peninsula and why. In conclusion, they were asked what practical means the four countries could carry out to encourage peace on the Korean Peninsula.

Table 1

<b>How important do you think peace on the Korean Peninsula is to the following countries?</b>					
Country	Not important	Important but not crucial	Crucial	A national priority	Unknown/Not applicable
The People’s Republic of China	1	1	11	5	0
The United States	2	8	7	1	0
The Republic of Korea (South Korea)	1	0	4	13	0
The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea)	1	0	3	14	

Table 2

<b>How important do you think reunification of the Korean Peninsula is to the following countries?</b>					
Country	Not important	Important but not crucial	Crucial	A national priority	Unknown/Not applicable
The People's Republic of China	0	9	7	2	
The United States	1	12	5	0	
The Republic of Korea (South Korea)	0	5	5	8	
The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea)	2	3	5	8	

Table 3

<b>How effective do you think the strategies of the following countries have been in promoting peace on the Korean Peninsula?</b>					
Country	Not at all effective	Occasionally effective	Mostly effective	Consistently effective	Unknown/Not applicable
The People's Republic of China	0	4	7	5	2
The United States	4	6	5	3	0
The Republic of Korea (South Korea)	2	7	5	2	0
The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea)	4	6	5	2	1

As can be seen the tables above, respondents consider peace to be of a higher priority to China than to the United States, though less so than to the two Koreas. They give China the highest marks for efficacy in terms of promoting peace also, with none considering China's approach "not effective," which

is not true of the other three governments. China also scores highest in the "consistently effective" and "mostly effective" categories, which the other three countries falling mostly into the "occasionally effective" category, followed by "not effective."

Table 4

<b>How important would you consider the following actions for promoting peace?</b>					
<b>Action</b>	<b>Not important</b>	<b>Somewhat important</b>	<b>Important</b>	<b>Very Important</b>	<b>Unknown/Not applicable</b>
<b>Complete denuclearization of North Korea</b>	0	5	6	7	0
<b>Lifting of US sanctions</b>	0	2	5	10	1
<b>Lifting of UN sanctions</b>	0	3	7	7	1
<b>Another US-North Korea summit</b>	1	7	6	4	0
<b>A treaty officially ending the Korean War</b>	1	2	3	12	0
<b>An inter-Korean confederation</b>	2	4	4	8	0
<b>Withdrawal of US troops</b>	0	4	5	9	0

Table 5

<b>How would the People’s Republic of China view the following actions?</b>					
<b>Action</b>	<b>A national security threat</b>	<b>Unwelcome</b>	<b>Progress</b>	<b>Crucial</b>	<b>Unknown/Not applicable</b>
<b>A peace treaty ending the Korean War</b>	0	1	12	5	0
<b>An inter-Korean confederation</b>	0	4	10	1	3
<b>US troop withdrawal</b>	0	0	6	12	0
<b>A meeting between the leaders of North Korea and the US</b>	0	3	12	2	0
<b>More US troops on the Korean Peninsula</b>	16	2	0	0	0
<b>More weapons/weapons systems for South Korea</b>	15	3	0	0	0
<b>More US sanctions</b>	5	9	1	0	4
<b>End of US sanctions</b>	0	2	13	2	1
<b>The unification of the Korean Peninsula</b>	0	3	11	3	1

As seen in table 4, the experts personally favor the denuclearization of North Korea, a peace treaty ending the Korean War, and the establishment of an inter-Korean confederation. Their assessment of how useful an inter-Korean summit would be in reaching this is more divided. The experts also

overwhelmingly favor the lifting of US sanctions and drawdown in US troop presence on the peninsula.

In table 5, they overwhelmingly express the view that the PRC also favors US troop withdrawal, and would also positively regard the end of US sanctions and continued US-North Korea summitry. Their answers

also suggest that the PRC would support an inter-Korean confederation and the eventual reunification of the peninsula, though with less enthusiasm. Their answers suggest that PRC would regard additional

US troops on the peninsula, and a better-armed South Korea as developments that are not just unwelcome, but a threat to PRC national security.

Table 6

<b>In your view, which country has made the greatest contribution to peaceful unification?</b>	
<b>Republic of Korea/ South Korea</b>	8
<b>Democratic People’s Republic of Korea/ North Korea</b>	1*
<b>United States</b>	0
<b>People’s Republic of China</b>	10

\* One respondent listed both Koreas.

Table 7

<b>In your view, which country poses the greatest threat to peace on the Korean Peninsula?</b>	
<b>Republic of Korea/ South Korea</b>	2*
<b>Democratic People’s Republic of Korea/ North Korea</b>	5**
<b>United States</b>	14
<b>People’s Republic of China</b>	0

\* One respondent listed both Koreas as the greatest threat.

\*\* One other respondent listed both Koreas and the United States as the greatest threat.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, most experts considered China the most responsible power in dealing with the Korean Peninsula and overwhelmingly the United States as the least. In the words of one respondent: Since the 1990s, China has actively promoted the Six-Party Talks, supported the United Nations' sanctions against North Korea [due to] its repeated nuclear tests, and has always adhered to the principle of denuclearization of the peninsula. However, due to traditional policies and geopolitical considerations, China has always taken into account North Korea's feelings and reactions and does not want to offend North Korea too much. This has to some extent restricted China's adoption of reasonable and powerful policy options toward North Korea.

As another put it:

“China’s Korea policy is basically neutral despite an ‘alliance’ relationship with [North Korea]. That means China would support any arrangement that helps stabilize the region, regardless of the future format. This separates China from other players in the Korean game.”

However, nearly as many of the experts chose South Korea as the most responsible party. One respondent described Seoul as having the greatest incentive to

promote unification, but that its polarized political process may get in the way:

“The peaceful reunification of the Korean Peninsula is in the best interest of South Korea and the expectations of its people. The South Korean government has been actively promoting inter-Korean talks since 1970, hoping to ease the situation on the Korean Peninsula through the talks. ... However, South Korea's party politics is bipolar, especially in terms of attitudes toward North Korea, which make it difficult to ensure policy continuity.”

In terms of why the United States is the least responsible party, one scholar wrote:

“Look at Ukraine, nothing more needs to be said. [The US] is good at igniting fires and constantly tempting [countries in Europe] to join NATO, but they will withdraw once the situation becomes unfavorable. If countries in the region cannot control the regional security agenda, it is not impossible for Northeast Asia to repeat Europe's mistakes.”

In the words of another:

“Since [1945], the United States has continued to intensify conflicts on the Korean Peninsula through

multiple means such as military pressure, economic blockade, diplomatic isolation and public opinion attacks, forcing North Korea to take tough countermeasures, causing the regional situation to fall into a vicious cycle of ‘escalated confrontation-security dilemma.’”

However, a minority view positioned North Korea as the least responsible party:

“After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and South Korea, North Korea has focused on developing nuclear weapons, attempting to use nuclear deterrence to guarantee its security and influence. This policy option of North Korea fundamentally undermines the peace and stability of the peninsula and is the ‘root of all evil.’”

The respondents were offered the chance to offer recommendations to each of the four governments involved in the peninsular standoff. Their responses in most cases amounted to telling the PRC to continue doing what it has done, to encouraging North Korea to halt its brinkmanship and engage in good faith, and for the United States to take a less active role on the peninsula in general, lifting sanctions, scaling-back military exercises, and stop attempting to draw South Korea into a US-Japan-ROK trilateral.

Their advice for South Korea was perhaps the most interesting. They generally encouraged Seoul to assume more responsibility for its own affairs and enter into a “normal” relationship with the US rather than a military alliance. Some respondents urged South Korea not to involve itself in matters far from the peninsula, such as the Taiwan Strait and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, seemingly indicating that experts within the PRC view these arenas and the Korean Peninsula as interconnected.

Regarding steps that could be taken to foster peace, the experts suggested a phased roadmap. “There should be a commitment to ease sanctions on North Korea in exchange for phased denuclearization, and an ‘action-for-action’ roadmap should be formulated, such as lifting some economic restrictions after North Korea freezes its nuclear facilities,” one suggested. Many also called for the resumption of cultural exchanges, along with former inter-Korean

cooperation projects like the Kaesong Industrial Park and Mt. Geumgang Tourist Region.

#### *Follow Up Questions*

Having learned the basics of Chinese scholars’ views on Korean Peninsular security dynamics, Pacific Forum, in consultation with the project sponsors, asked follow-up questions to obtain more policy-specific answers from scholars who had given detailed answers to queries about recommendations for the peninsula.<sup>23</sup> These questions included whether they believed unification would take place; how China views the deepening partnership between North Korea and Russia; and what China expects in the event of North Korean regime instability.

Unfortunately, only two of the original respondents answered these questions. Two respondents cannot be said to meaningfully represent the range of opinion in the PRC regarding peninsular security, but we can note that the two responses differed considerably. While both felt that Korean reunification appeared far from imminent, one respondent, a scholar based in China, gave a party-line answer to the question on North Korea-Russia ties, stating that China respects other countries’ sovereignty, does not interfere in their affairs, and that these ties were a reaction to increased US hostility to both Pyongyang and Moscow. The other scholar, based outside China, indicated that North Korea’s support for Russia’s Ukraine operation stems at least in part from China’s discomfort with Moscow’s actions and hesitance to support Russia’s Ukraine invasion openly.

Both scholars suggested that regime destabilization would not be to China’s benefit and would present an opportunity for other powers—not just the US, but Russia and Japan—to gain influence. One highlighted the dangers of lost nuclear weapons and materials, said that China would require US and South Korean help to manage a refugee crisis, and added that Beijing would demand that Seoul and Washington avoid “purges,” in the form of tribunals and other political prosecutions of former North Korean officials.

The scholar based outside China repeatedly stressed the need for increased cultural exchanges between

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<sup>23</sup> Whether due to time constraints or concerns about repercussions, several respondents to the original survey declined to answer it in full, leaving

some or all questions regarding what they would recommend to the parties involved blank. Others gave short answers that lacked detail.

the two and giving North Korea the opportunity to catch up to South Korea before reunification could seriously be attempted, and that this would be essential for any deal between the two Koreas. Asked what sort of penalties the parties to such a deal—North Korea included—should face for violating it, the scholar said repercussions should be economic rather than military.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

It is the authors' view that the US-ROK alliance has been a force for stability in the region and hope that it will persist. This paper takes no stance on the likelihood of a US forces drawdown on the Korean Peninsula, of OPCON transfer to Seoul, the PRC's interest in exerting pressure on North Korea to enter into the type of multilateral framework Chinese experts support, or its willingness to put pressure on North Korea to adhere to the terms of such a deal. However, we note that the alliance has faced tumult and strain before and endured, even deepened. Were South Korea governed by a conservative administration, and the US by a Democratic president, or a more traditional Republican leadership in the vein of Reagan or Bush, the answers provided by the Chinese scholars might not prove especially helpful.

This time may be different, however: The current leadership in the United States seeks to reduce its foreign commitments and responsibilities, and South Korea wants to take a "pragmatic" approach to both China and North Korea, while preserving the alliance. To that end, President Lee has asked the US president to take the lead in facilitating peace on the Korean Peninsula and even supported a Nobel Peace Prize nomination for Trump in connection to this outreach.<sup>24</sup> Under such circumstances, the long-time objective of South Korea progressives of wartime OPCON control<sup>25</sup> would appear closer than ever to attainment.

If troop reduction, or at least the increase in South Korean autonomy and primary responsibility for its own defense, is what South Korea and the United

States are determined to seek, we recommend that they make these steps conditional on actions by North Korea *and* China. China has consistently urged a diplomatic process for resolving such matters but has generally shied away from staking too much on them. US officials should make clear that getting North Korea to the table now is China's last, best chance to see a troop reduction. China has increasingly flexed its diplomatic muscles elsewhere, including the Iran-Saudi Arabia agreement in 2023.<sup>26</sup> Some of the Chinese experts surveyed called for a step-for-step approach, as well as a multilateral framework. US and South Korean negotiators should call upon China to produce such a plan in detail and use its influence to pressure North Korea into accepting it. They should note that the durability of such a deal and both Koreas' adherence to it will do much to impact China's international reputation as a negotiator.

We cannot ascertain whether the PRC will consider such terms persuasive, but the opportunity to see a decreased US presence in China's "back yard" may prove motivating. If the views of our surveyed experts reflect those of CCP officials, there may be lingering respect for South Korea—which may be strengthened by their push for a more autonomous foreign policy.

Lastly, we note with regret that more Chinese scholars did not participate in the survey due to concerns for their careers and possibly their safety. This is, unfortunately, consistent with other reports regarding academic freedom, free speech, and independent inquiry in China.<sup>27</sup> The lack of these freedoms reflects poorly on China's aspirations for leadership in Asia and raise concerns about its capacity to play a positive role in diplomacy.

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<sup>24</sup> Kang Hyun-kyung, "'Trump for Nobel Prize': Can the Initiative Offer Relief to Lee Jae-Myung amid Double Whammy?" - *The Korea Times*, Feb. 6, 2025, <https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/foreignaffairs/20250206/south-koreas-opposition-party-seeks-to-nominate-us-president-donald-trump-for-nobel-peace-prize>.

<sup>25</sup> Clint Work, "No More Delays: Why It's Time to Move Forward With Wartime OPCON Transition" • Stimson Center," *Stimson Center*, June 21, 2022, <https://www.stimson.org/2022/no-more-delays-why-its-time-to-move-forward-with-wartime-opcon-transition/>.

<sup>26</sup> Giorgio Cafiero, "A Year Ago, Beijing Brokered an Iran-Saudi Deal. How Does Détente Look Today?" - Atlantic Council," March 6, 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/iran-saudi-arabia-china-deal-one-year/>.

<sup>27</sup> Jennifer Ruth and Yu Xiao, "Academic Freedom and China," *Academe Magazine*, n.d., <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/resources/obstacles-to-excellence-academic-freedom-chinas-quest-for-world-class-universities/>.



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