

CHINESE PERSPECTIVE ON NORTH KOREA AND KOREAN UNIFICATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines some of the widely held assumptions and key questions surrounding the Chinese perspective on the Korean Peninsula, including the North Korea nuclear issue and Korean unification.¹ Doing so will have implications on a number of issues, including how much China is willing to work with Washington and Seoul in pressuring North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons, whether China will support Korean reunification, the prospects of the Six-Party Talks, whether China will team with Seoul and Washington in case there is a sudden turmoil within North Korea, as well as how Beijing sees Washington's policy on Pyongyang. The goal of this paper is to flesh out the Chinese elite sentiment on these key issues that shape China's attitude toward the peninsula.² The results underscore China's own fears and concerns, which have largely eluded the attention of the other stakeholders in the region.

Key Words: *China; North Korea; unification; nuclear weapons; Chinese university and think tank experts*

INTRODUCTION

The chant among North Korea watchers these days is: How does China think about North Korea? Recently, South Korea had its share of misjudging China on the matter. In the wake of the Cheonan incident, Seoul mistakenly believed China would side with Seoul and condemn North Korea. China did not.

China's political attitudes toward the Korean Peninsula and its role in managing North Korea have been a constant source of intrigue for many Asia watchers in South Korea, the U.S., Japan and other stakeholders in the region. Trying to understand Chinese elite sentiments about the Six-Party Talks, the security situation on the peninsula and Korean reunification, have only increased with the uncertainty over the future of North Korea under the helm of the young leader Kim Jong-un, as well as China's own leadership shuffle in 2012.

At present – one year after the death of Kim Jong-il – North Korea displays an outward appearance of stability and unity with Kim Jong-un at the center. China has shown clear support for North Korea in this transition. The ties between the two appear to have further deepened. For example, Kim Jong-un's first-ever meeting with a foreign delegation, since he assumed his new post as the nation's Marshal, was Wang Jiarui, head of the Chinese Communist Party's International Liaison Department on August 2, 2012. Days before, North Korea's state media published a snapshot of Kim Jong-un riding on a giant swing at an amusement park. Sitting next to Kim was a foreign diplomat, the Chinese Ambassador to North Korea Liu Hongcai. What's the current status of Sino-North Korean relationship and how will it evolve from here?

The goal of this paper is to understand the Chinese elite sentiment on the key issues that shape China's attitude toward North Korea and the peninsula in general by surveying the views of Chinese scholars on Korean affairs. It is important for us to pay attention to Chinese scholars' opinion on North Korea because China is likely to play a bigger role in North Korea's future now as the young heir's dependence on China for economic and political support is expected to deepen. In fact, it is now common behavior for the international community to turn to China for clues about North Korea when something happens in the latter, whether it is a new move in the military or economic reforms. Admittedly, we are living in a world where it is increasingly difficult to construct a geopolitical formula for North Korea, without factoring China into our equation.

A common challenge for a foreign researcher on China is the access issue. Government officials are in large part not available for interviews. Chinese scholars are good subjects for this study because they are accessible by foreign researchers and they reflect the often murky, internal sentiment of the Chinese government, so much so that Chinese scholars are often criticized by their Western peers for lacking "independent" views.

Some results, shown here, defy the commonly-held assumptions about China's attitude toward the Korean Peninsula, and may serve as an opportunity for policy communities, especially in Seoul and Washington, to reconsider conventional ways of thinking and explore creative diplomacy to work with China on the North Korean issue.

NORTH KOREA'S DEPENDENCE ON CHINA

Statistics vary. But different estimates put North Korea's dependence on China for up to 90 percent of its energy supply, 80 percent of its consumer products and 40-45 percent of its food supply.³ Simply put, North Korea is a country whose survival depends on China.

North Korea's dependence on China stands to deepen under the helm of the young new leader Kim Jong-un, whose lack of experience and lack of affinity with the North Korean people only increases uncertainty surrounding the regime's future, and China is de facto the only "ally" Pyongyang can turn to for both political and economic support. (Ally is a frequently used term by outside observers to describe the relationship between the two. We will later examine how Chinese themselves describe it.)

In fact, a number of security experts have highlighted this point, often with a tint of dramatization. They range from China possibly absorbing North Korea as the "fourth province"⁴ in its northeastern region⁵ to North Korea becoming China's "economic tributary."⁶ Ryu Kil-jae at Kyungnam University in Seoul categorically declared the bellwether for the future prospect of North Korea under Kim Jong-un: "The key is North Korea's dependence on China."⁷ No doubt, popular commentary on Sino-North Korean relations suggests that China wields decisive influence over North Korea. China chairs the Six-Party Talks, an aid-for-denuclearization negotiation platform since 2003. China's role has been highlighted as much as North Korea's provocations in international headlines. In fact, a longtime mantra of the U.S. State Department also holds that "China is the key to North Korean belligerence."⁸ Against the backdrop of the information blackout surrounding Kim Jong-il's death in December 2011, some analysts went so far as to argue that "China is the only country that has eyes inside North Korea."⁹

It is then important to understand China's political attitude toward North Korea. This paper examines some of the widely held assumptions and key questions surrounding the Chinese perspective on the Korean Peninsula and Korean reunification. Doing so will have implications on the prospects of the Six-Party Talks, whether China will cooperate with Washington and Seoul in case there is an invocation of a contingency plan in North Korea, how much China is willing to pressure North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons, whether China will support Korean reunification, as well as how Beijing sees Washington's strategy toward Pyongyang.

Just like policy makers in Washington and Seoul, China's policy makers are part of a robust and often very competitive community. Among the foreign policy items, North Korea is the most divisive among the senior leadership in China.¹⁰ There are a multitude of actors in China that shape and influence its policy toward North Korea. In fact, this multiplicity of actors is becoming an increasing feature of Chinese foreign policy towards North Korea.¹¹ While externally, China's North Korean policy remains unchanged, in private Chinese experts say that North Korea is a case of how it is getting harder to achieve consensus.¹² There is also more pluralism of views on North Korea than there used to be.¹³ There are different actors in China's policy making toward North Korea, each with their own, and sometimes conflicting motivations, interests, and influence.

DEBUNKING THE VIEW THAT CHINESE SCHOLARS ARE "IRRELEVANT"

Long-held outside perception has characterized Sino-North Korean relations as "blood ties (血盟)," knotted out of the Cold War confrontation against the United States. That commonplace view needs correction, according to this paper's findings. Unfortunately, Chinese experts themselves are partly responsible for feeding such a sweeping generalization, as they often follow the official Communist Party lines in their remarks on North Korea. In some instances, they do not divert a single word from their written speeches before the international community, prompting audience members to discount them as not having freestanding scholarly views.

Ironically, Chinese experts, in faithfully representing the official views of the government, help outside researchers to understand China's stances. In fact, this is a much under-appreciated item. Often, the real problem does not lie in Chinese scholars representing the official views of the government, but in their not sharing more, not talking more, not elaborating more. The author's personal experience points out "trust" as the most important factor in preventing them from coming forward, while the socio-political environment of China has an evident share.

Another popular and persistent outside perception states that the Chinese academic community is "irrelevant" in terms of policy considerations as they are not part of the decision-making process. This reflects a lack of understanding of reality on the ground. In China, there is a lack of a "revolving door" system, as seen in many other countries, in which a faculty member of an academic institution enters government service and returns to the university, upon the completion of his public service. The argument goes that Chinese scholars don't have "ears" inside the decision-making process, or the Chinese division of bureaucrats and academics don't allow the latter access to policy-deliberation processes.

The view needs correction. The clear division of public service and academics, and their lack of cross-breeding is a matter of convenience to keep the order of

its pay and promotion system, rather than to serve as an information “barrier” to keep secrecy. For example, a Chinese government employee has a fairly good expectation of when he can be promoted next time and what kind of pay level he can expect based on the number of years he worked in the government. This is also the case for an academic working at a university. However, when a professor becomes a government official, for example, an issue naturally arises as to how to determine his seniority and his pay level. China attaches great importance to social stability (Hu Jintao’s national slogan was to “build a harmonious society”) and is normally unenthused to dismantle a pre-existing system that they have been accustomed to, unless absolutely necessary.

This picture of “segregation” between government employees and academic scholars is compounded by the tendency to protect one’s turf and preserve one’s in-group interests. This however doesn’t, in any manner, indicate that Chinese scholars are “irrelevant” to policy deliberations. On the contrary, Chinese scholars are active participants in policy suggestions and formulations that ultimately shape China’s foreign policy. As a graduate student in China, the author observed on numerous occasions how the government “outsourced” various projects to universities that had foreign policy implications. In internal deliberations, often both government officials and scholars convene together. Some Chinese scholars are well-sourced in knowing the internal sentiment of the government. Government officials are often the former students or classmates of Chinese scholars, and they tend to maintain an extensive human network. It shouldn’t be forgotten that China is a society of *guanxi* (networking).

The view that Chinese scholars are “irrelevant” in foreign policy considerations on North Korea is one of the most popular and unwarranted assumptions held by outsiders who grossly simplify the picture. Whether to be included in policy suggestions and the deliberation process is more a function of the *guanxi* network than a codified “government vs. academics” division by default.

HOW THE SURVEY WAS DONE

A total of 46 Chinese experts on Korea affairs were surveyed during November and December of 2011. Most were academic experts, including some in government-affiliated think tanks. The format of the interview was written, not oral. The term “Chinese experts” in this paper indicates scholars and researchers who are affiliated with universities or state-run think tanks. There was no participant who was a private consultant. There was no participant from a private security-consultancy firm. Some of the interviewees are well-known public figures this author interviewed over the years for journalism reporting on North Korea and Korean Peninsula news. They are the ones who participated in international forums on Korean affairs and penned articles and academic papers

on the topic. In the United States, some of them are also known as “Chinese experts on America,” reflecting the multilateral aspect of Korean affairs in the broader Asia-Pacific region.

In addition to the author’s personal acquaintances, invitations to participate in the survey were sent to scholars of international relations at universities and think tanks whose website profiles of academic interest include Korean affairs. These institutions are located in Beijing, Shanghai, and China’s northeastern region near the North Korean border where research on North Korea and Korean affairs is robust.

SENSITIVITY OF THE TOPIC

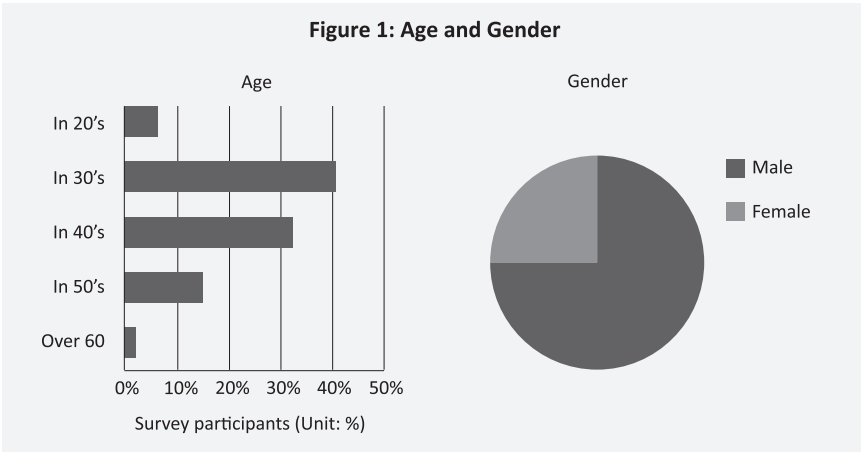
North Korea remains a sensitive topic in China. Media coverage related to North Korea’s leadership, succession, personal traits of the young leader, internal power competition, have been often censored. Indeed, a few Chinese scholars cited “sensitivity” in their decline to participate in the survey. “Sensitivity” of the survey and its relevance to policy implications on North Korea was a source of trepidation by participants who preferred a minimum disclosure of their personal information. That concern was honored, but resulted in limitations in forming a detailed demographic profile of the Chinese participants.¹⁴

The same sensitivity was a concern for this author as well. The author made it clear at the outset of the survey that the survey was intended to fulfill the academic requirement of a Ph.D. degree, and that the results would be made public. The author’s information, including academic affiliation and mobile phone number, in case there were questions, was provided as well.

In this survey, demographic questions included gender, age, and travel experience to both Koreas. While this author knows their institutional affiliations, the paper does not cite the information.

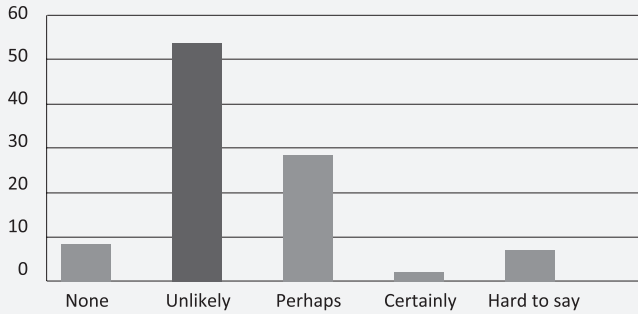
On average, it took participants 21 minutes to complete the survey. It was a relatively long time commitment. (In trial runs, it took six to seven minutes and was introduced as such.) No honorarium or gift was given to survey participants. No complaint was made for the survey taking longer than was represented. But most Chinese participants expressed that they wanted to be informed of the results.

The survey was conducted in Chinese and the results, shown here, were translated from Chinese.

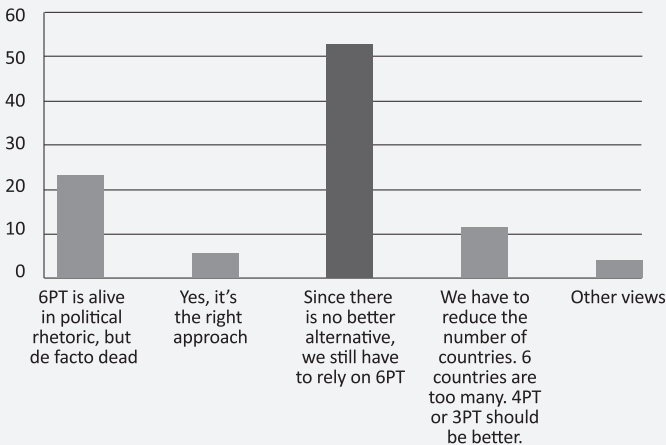


As seen above, the typical profile of a Chinese scholar in this study is a male, in his 30's and 40's.¹⁵ Over a half of them have been to South Korea and 20 percent of them have been to North Korea. (Relatively speaking, the "20 percent" figure cannot be underestimated, as it tended to be higher than that in other countries. (A former South Korean unification minister, for example, never visited North Korea during his term, even though he was the most senior South Korean official directly in charge of inter-Korean affairs.) Another difference may be that Chinese scholars, given the country's special ties with North Korea, tend to visit North Korea regularly. For example, a scholar this author knows visits North Korea about three times a year. All in all, a face-to-face interview format, not an e-mail survey, could have yielded more participation from the older scholars, one reviewer of this paper pointed out.

RESULTS

Figure 3: How likely do you think North Korea will give up nukes?

Over half of the Chinese scholars (63 percent = “None” + “Unlikely”) polled believe North Korea is unlikely to give up its nuclear weapons. Among them, 9 percent said the chance is “none.” This question touches upon the core of the most controversial argument surrounding North Korea’s nuclear drive: that is, whether Pyongyang sees its nukes as “tradable” in exchange for economic aid and diplomatic recognition, or it sees its nukes as something non-negotiable. The implication is obvious. If North Korea will stick to nuclear weapons, no matter what, then the Six-Party Talks automatically lose its rational for existence because the talks’ chief aim is to persuade Pyongyang to give up nuclear weapons. Even the Chinese, arguably the country that often defends North Korea in the international debate on North Korea’s nuclear programs, doubt North Korea will ever renounce its nuclear weapons. As chair to the Six-Party Talks, this may be seen as a “self-

Figure 4: Do you still believe Six Party Talks (6PT) is effective in resolving Pyongyang’s nuclear drive?

defeating” confession by China. Then, an obvious question will challenge the usefulness of the six-nation negotiation regimen.

A quarter of Chinese scholars believe that the Six-Party Talks are de facto dead, while 53 percent said that as long as there is no other alternative, we have to rely on the Six-Party Talks. The result is interesting in that the Chinese government officially and repeatedly has been endorsing the Six-Party Talks, often invoking the relevant parties to return to the talks.

Figure 5: The biggest challenge facing Six Party Talks

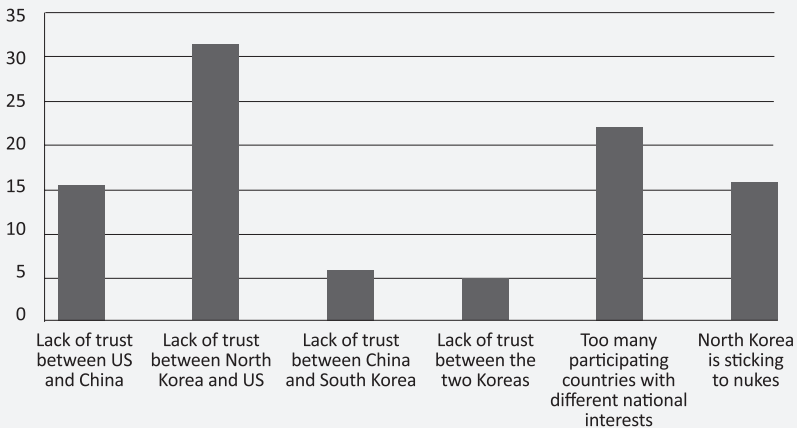
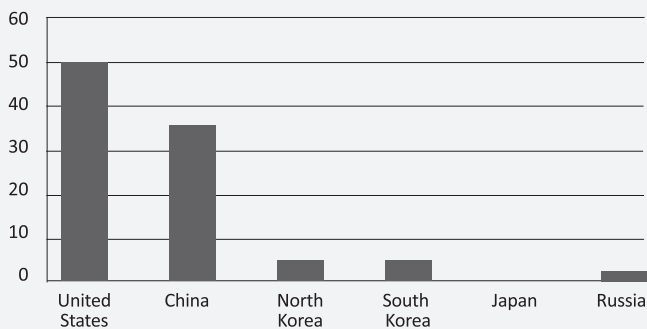


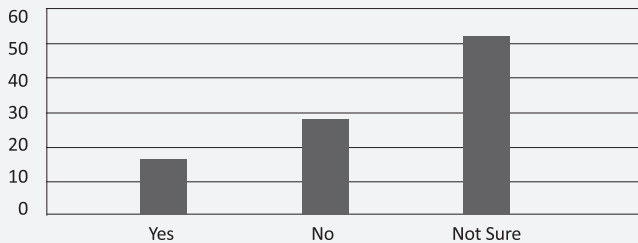
Figure 6: Among the six countries participating in the Six Party Talks, which country do you think holds the largest leverage in resolving North Korea's nuclear drive?



Chinese scholars believe that a lack of trust between North Korea and the U.S. is the biggest challenge facing the Six-Party Talks (33 percent), followed by the lack of trust between the U.S. and China (16 percent), and a lack of trust between the two Koreas (16 percent). One out of five Chinese scholars also pointed out that the number of participating countries in the Six-Party Talks is too many, with their different national interests (23 percent).

This is one of the most interesting elements in the survey. While the international community believes that China has the most influence over North Korea, Chinese experts indicated it is actually the U.S that wields the most influence over North Korea, followed by China. This is a counter-intuitive result, challenging the commonly-held assumption by the outside world. But then, for this author, the view isn't aberrant, but has been consistent over the years. This is definitely one question that needs more discussion. Yet it is one good example that also illustrates the difference between how international media frames the narrative surrounding North Korea and how the Chinese themselves see the matter.

Figure 7: Do you support the unification of the two Koreas?



Eighty-two percent of Chinese respondents either oppose the Korean reunification or are ambivalent. China is a key stakeholder of the Korean Peninsula and it is imperative for South Korea to gain support from its giant neighbor to achieve reunification. South Koreans may look at the results with disbelief, but Seoul often misreads China. For example, in the wake of the Cheonan incident, Seoul wrongly believed China would side with Seoul and condemn North Korea. It did not.

Figure 8: If the Korean Peninsula is unified under South Korea's initiative, what do you think is the likely relationship between unified Korea and China?

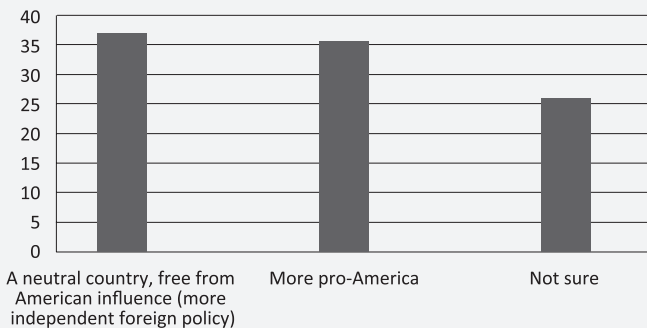
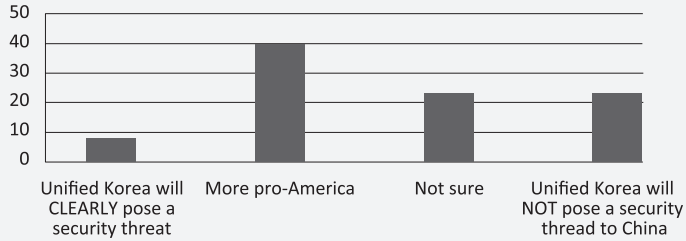


Figure 8 shows the Korea-U.S. relationship after unification has been achieved under the South Korean initiative. The results show a bit of ambivalence, while some believe that a unified Korea will take a more independent foreign policy

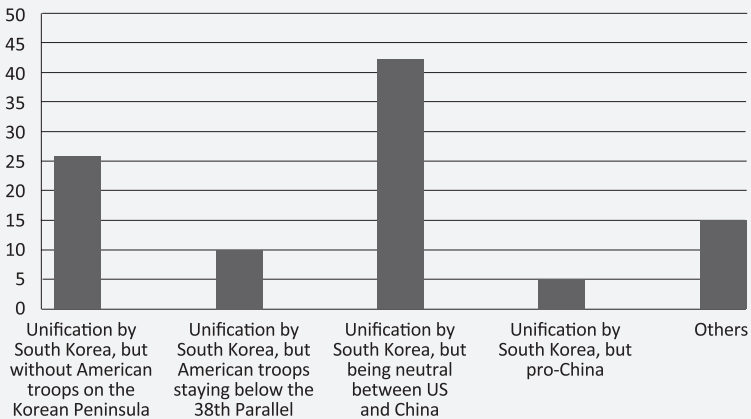
position away from U.S. influence, others think a unified Korea is likely to be more pro-U.S. But the Chinese attitude becomes clearer when the question is addressed on the future relationship between China and Korea, as seen in Figure 9.

Figure 9: If the Korean Peninsula is unified under South Korea's initiative, what do you think is the likely relationship between unified Korea and China?



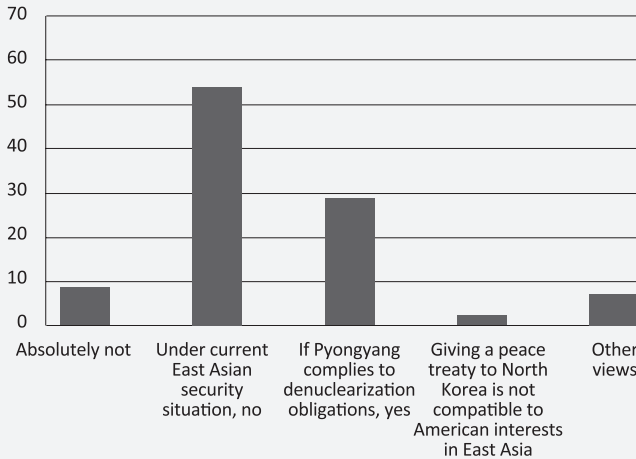
About 50 percent of Chinese scholars believe a unified Korea is likely to pose a threat to China. This result partly explains why China is concerned about Korean reunification, which would likely be achieved under the South Korean initiative. As will be elaborated on later, China fears that a reunified Korea would become stronger, and is likely to become nationalistic and therefore pose a threat to China, including igniting territorial claims over “Gan-do,” today’s Manchuria. Many Koreans see it as their “lost territory.” It is notable that only a quarter of Chinese respondents are confident that a unified Korea will not pose any security threat to China.

Figure 10: If you conditionally support the Korean unification, what is the condition?



When Chinese scholars were asked to cite one condition for them to support the Korean unification under South Korean initiative, presence of American troops in the unified Korea is a major concern for China (36 percent). Most Chinese (43 percent) prefer a unified Korea which is neutral between the U.S. and China. Interestingly, the Chinese don't necessarily require a unified Korea to be "pro-China" in order to support Korean reunification.

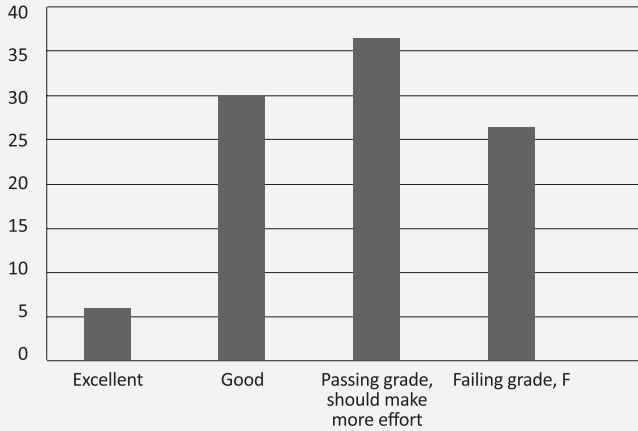
Figure 11: Do you think the American government is willing to sign a peace treaty with North Korea to resolve Pyongyang's nuke issue permanently?



This is a question that has often been raised among academics, but also one that seldom gets media attention. Signing a peace treaty and normalizing a relationship with the United States has been North Korea's primary demand for years, and was newly reaffirmed by Kim Jong-il's first son, Kim Jong-nam (which was revealed in his e-mail correspondence to Japanese journalist Yoji Gomi who had interviewed Kim Jong-nam on numerous occasions). Signing a peace treaty will also officially end the Korean War, which has been in a state of truce since 1953. An overwhelming number of the respondents (77 percent) believe that the U.S. is not likely to sign a peace treaty with North Korea to resolve North Korea's nuke issue once and for all under the current security environment in Asia where the interests of China and America collide. Many Chinese experts doubt the U.S. will be willing to sign the treaty. They believe the U.S. is status quo oriented, and the tension generated by North Korea serves the U.S.'s justification for having its troops in East Asia, whose primary aim (according to Chinese scholars interviewed separately by this author) is to contain China, while the North Korean threat serves as a convenient ruse.

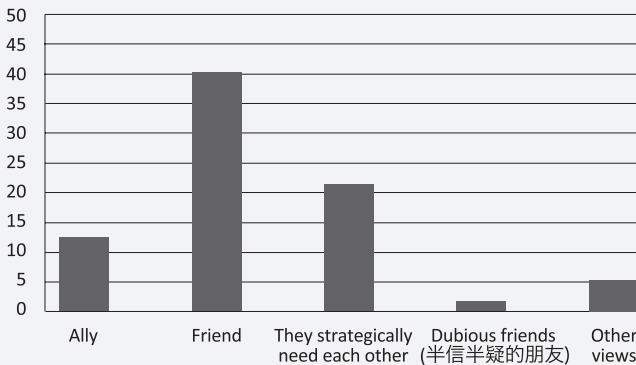
One out of four Chinese scholars said China's effort to contain North Korea's nuclear drive is a failure. The self-admission of failure is unlikely to appear in any official Chinese documents, especially when China is chair for the Six-Party Talks.

Figure 12: With regard to China's effort to goad Pyongyang to denuclearization, which grade would you assign?



However, they are willing to admit it in private. For some years, the strategy by Washington and Seoul has been to influence North Korea through China. And the result shows the Chinese self-assessment of their country's performance. The fact that a quarter of the respondents said China failed in persuading Pyongyang to choose the path for denuclearization is the reflection of the current stalemate. But it then poses an important question of what may motivate China to exercise its much touted influence on North Korea to goad it to denuclearization?

Figure 13: You believe the current relationship between China and North Korea is...

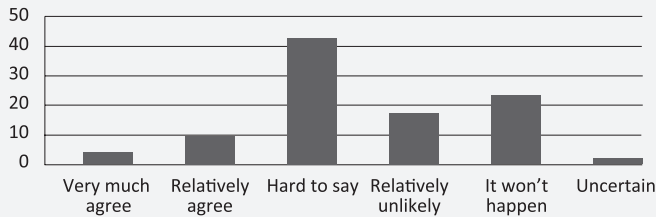


About half of the Chinese scholars believe the current relationship between China and North Korea is "dubious friends," while 25 percent said the two countries need each other for strategic purposes. Only 4 percent said the two are friends. Thirteen percent said they are allies. This is a wakeup call for the news outlets which tend to portray the duo as having "blood ties" since the Cold War period. This actually

reflects the feedback the author has been getting from Chinese scholars for years. In fact, the Chinese expression “半信半疑的朋友” (literally meaning “half-trusting and half-suspicious friend”) was the direct expression by a prominent Chinese professor in his lecture to Chinese university students. The students giggled upon hearing it (a sign that they also agreed on the characterization of the two nations’ relationship). It is also worth noting that a quarter of the respondents said that Beijing and Pyongyang formed a relationship out of their mutual strategic needs.

In fact, unlike popular commentaries on the staunch ideological affinity of the two, their relationship has also been shaped by mutual tension and mistrust. For example, the 1992 establishment of diplomatic relations between Beijing and Seoul deeply hurt Pyongyang’s feelings. Therefore, the correct question to ask is what prevents the couple from breaking away from each other? And what “missteps” have Seoul and Washington made in their strategy to work together with China? It also has a bearing on the recent Cheonan incident. Despite the tumultuous relationship between Pyongyang and Beijing, the question goes, why did China decide to side with North Korea in the end?¹⁶

Figure 14: In recent years, there have been media reports, predicting the collapse of North Korea. Do you agree?



In the wake of the “Arab Spring,” there was an increase in news reports, citing experts, on the growing possibility of North Korea’s collapse. However, Chinese scholars were skeptical about media reports of the “imminent collapse” of North Korea. This question is particularly relevant in the aftermath of Kim Jong-il’s sudden death and increased uncertainty over North Korea. Since 2008, Washington and Seoul have prepared contingencies to be ready for North Korean uncertainties, including the possibility of implosion or a power struggle or a military coup within North Korea. If the Chinese believe the possibility for the collapse of North Korea is not high, then they are also unlikely to cooperate with Washington and Seoul, which think the opposite. In fact, Seoul and Washington have mapped out a detailed plan for what to do, in case North Korea suddenly collapses. They have also been urging China to join. So far, there has been no public indication that China has participated in any of the U.S.-Seoul plans. China is believed to have its own contingency plans. It is apparent that if the Chinese don’t communicate with Washington and Seoul, it will increase room for miscalculation.

CHINA'S INFLUENCE INCREASES AS CHINA'S POLICY ON NORTH KOREA BECOMES MORE PROACTIVE

In the past, China's policy on North Korea was characterized as reactive rather than proactive. Perhaps the death of Kim Jong-il was a clear exception. (It's not yet clear whether that was the watershed moment in China). The abrupt death of Kim Jong-il on December 17, 2011 sparked a palpable information thirst to know what was going on inside the reclusive country, as uncertainty surrounding the untested leader Kim Jong-un became a subject for intense speculation. China's status as the only country that maintains regular high-level contacts with Pyongyang, as well as its much-touted clout over North Korea, was once again turned into a coveted diplomatic currency. As each country was scrambling to craft its own appropriate diplomatic response, fears of possible miscalculations among different stakeholders were also brooding. This again made the status of China as the "gateway" to North Korea all the more prominent.

Kim's sudden death also exposed – surprisingly – how little Seoul and Washington know about what's happening within the North's leadership. In the past, they had normally been the ones who first detected signs of unusualness or cried foul over the North's stealthy nuclear and other illicit activities. Apparently, Seoul and Washington were caught off guard when North Korea's state media announced Kim Jong-il's death. By then, more than two days had passed since the leader's death. No doubt, it was a serious intelligence flop. And being a "late-comer" deprived Seoul and Washington of viable up-and-coming strategies, while Beijing was taking the driver's seat in shaping the development of the situation in its best interest. In fact, Beijing's "sudden" transformation was well noticed.

China was the first country to express condolences after the death of Kim Jong-il. China was the first country to endorse the untested young successor, Jong-un, calling him the "great leader." It was again China that, within hours after North Korea's announcement of Kim's death, took the initiative for diplomatic coordination by rounding up ambassadors from the U.S., South Korea, Japan and Russia, and counseling them not to "provoke" North Korea during this highly volatile time. The next day, then President Hu Jintao personally visited the North Korean Embassy in Beijing, flanked by other top Politburo members, and paid condolences to the late Kim, a further signal to the world of the importance Beijing attaches to Pyongyang.

China's top leader's move was a subtle, yet clear warning to other stakeholders in the region not to "misjudge" the situation as an opportunity to topple the North's regime.¹⁷ Since Kim Jong-il's stroke in 2008, South Korea and the U.S. have developed military contingency plans involving North Korean instability. China sees North Korea as its "backyard" and wants stability. It also regards North Korea as a strategic buffer against the presence of U.S. military in East Asia.

China, therefore, hopes for a smooth power transition in the North and has rallied all-out support around the untested young leader, Kim Jong-un.

Looking back, China's rapid and decisive response in the aftermath of Kim's death set the tone for the rest of the world, which was still struggling for a diplomatic recipe on how to react to the event. China's "trend-setting" move was successful. Even South Korea, which was attacked by North Korea in 2010, expressed condolences, despite a few hardliners' clamoring for taking advantage of the situation as an opportunity for "unification." China's *Global Times*, the international news arm of the official People's Daily, said China played the role of "stabilizer" on the volatile situation. The series of rapid initiatives China displayed also fueled the belief that Beijing had its own well-planned manual to prepare for North Korean contingencies. Previously, it had shied away from discussing such matters with Seoul and Washington, for fear of antagonizing Pyongyang.

All in all, Kim Jong-il's sudden death once again highlighted the prominence of China as a key, if not the most influential, stakeholder on the Korean Peninsula. But do Chinese scholars see China's measure of influence that way? To such a claim, Chinese security experts usually resort to modesty. For example, while discussing post-Kim Jong-il North Korea, Wang Junsheng of the Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies under the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, penned: "Beijing's influence over Pyongyang is limited."¹⁸ What is unspoken in the modesty is that China has the ability to influence the North Korean regime *when* it wants to, and it is a primary stakeholder in the international narrative on North Korea.

As China competes with the U.S. for leadership in Asia, it will utilize the "North Korean card" to counter the U.S.'s "return to Asia" strategy. China has increasingly seen South Korea, a major American ally in Asia, as colluding with Washington to contain China since the conservative South Korean president Lee Myung-bak was sworn in in 2008. For years, China has been wary of the Seoul-Washington military alliance. That doesn't bode well for Seoul's national mandate to unify the Korean Peninsula. Power politics in the region dictates that without Beijing's endorsement, Korean unification will remain an elusive goal to achieve, especially now as North Korea, under Kim Jong-un's helm, will be more dependent on China for economic aid.

Against this backdrop, with regard to China's stance on North Korea, some analysts resort to a wholesale assumption that China will "never" give up North Korea, nor will China ever support Korean unification. In fact, that's a popular sentiment, which is similar to the sweepingly pessimistic view that states North Korea will "never" give up nuclear weapons. Surprisingly, the Chinese scholars surveyed also largely share this pessimism. But then, it was also the Chinese scholars, including a former senior government official who used to be in charge of North Korean affairs, who privately shared with this author that "the question of North Korea's

nuclear weapons is not so much one of whether North Korea wishes to stick to nuclear weapons, but is more dependent on the concerted effort of other countries to make North Korea give up nuclear weapons.”¹⁹ This statement gives room for optimism, even if pessimism prevails today surrounding the likelihood of North Korea’s giving up nukes. China worries about the nuclear "domino effect" on East Asian countries, including South Korea and Japan. However, the lack of strategic trust between China and the United States has been deterring China from being enthusiastic about pressuring North Korea.

Today, China and North Korea appear all the more closer to each other in the aftermath of Kim Jong-il’s death. But the survey results point out that China’s sculpting of such an appearance is strategic rather than genuine. The results debunk the widespread belief that states: “China will never give up North Korea,” or “China and North Korea are Cold War allies.” Only 13 percent of respondents view the bilateral relationship as an alliance. Even a smaller percentage of respondents (4 percent) see them as genuine “friends.” Rather, almost half of them (47 percent) feel ambivalent about their relationship, as defined by the Chinese expression “*ban xin ban yi de peng you*,” which literally means “half-trusting, half-suspicious friend.”

On the other hand, a quarter of the Chinese scholars said that China and North Korea strategically need each other. The obvious implication is the Cold War rivalry structure that has put China (together with North Korea and Russia) in one camp²⁰ and the U.S. (together with South Korea and Japan) in the other. The Chinese response is that this Sino-North Korean “wedlock” is a necessary part of their joint coping strategy against the U.S. camp, and it acknowledges that the two have their own trust issues. Outside strategists, therefore, need to explore creative ways to work with China in approaching the North Korean issue, instead of resorting to the wholesale belief, resiliently propagated in the media, which states the two are “blood allies” and that they will always stick together.

The danger of such a wholesale belief is that it only limits Washington’s and Seoul’s policy options. Resisting old habits and maintaining flexibility in judgment is especially needed today, as China and North Korea have been showing the outward appearance of deepening their ties after Kim Jong-il’s death. The appearance may last for a while, as Kim Jong-un stabilizes his power grip. Yet it should be noted that China’s strategy toward North Korea is fluid too. A few prior incidents endorse this view.

In the aftermath of North Korea’s nuclear test in October 2006, China issued an unprecedentedly strong condemnation against North Korea, characterizing Pyongyang’s move as a “flagrant” (“*hanran*” in Chinese²¹) act. In the Chinese language, the term “*hanran*” is a very undiplomatic language to be used. But the Chinese foreign ministry used the term because, according to a source, this was

the very word uttered by the Chinese top leadership.²² In terms of Washington-Beijing ties, it was also a time when China was nearly part of the U.S. camp in terms of cooperating together to pressure North Korea. But two factors kept China from staying in league with Washington. First, China didn't feel it was gaining any tangible reward by cooperating with Washington. Second, the more China pressured North Korea, the farther North Korea drifted away from China's sphere of influence. Chinese strategists then began to sound alarm that China was not benefiting by helping Washington. In fact, they feared that Washington's strategy was to drive a wedge between Pyongyang and Beijing.

In the summer of 2009, the Chinese leadership held a heated internal debate on its North Korean policy and decided, finally, not to abandon North Korea. After the conclusion was drawn, in October of the same year, China dispatched Premier Wen Jiabao to Pyongyang to ink a series of agreements, including a firm pledge of commitment for bilateral ties. The North's official newspaper, *Rodong Sinmun*, said the visit "clearly illustrates the Communist Party and the government of China attach great importance to the friendship between the two countries," adding that its significance was commensurate with marking "a new chapter" in Sino-North Korean history. During Kim Jong-il's meeting with Hu Jintao in May 2010 in Beijing, Hu told Kim: "Strengthening Sino-DPRK friendly and cooperative relations is the consistent policy of the Communist Party of China and the Chinese government."²³ What we're seeing currently is the continuation of China's 2009 policy adjustment on North Korea. In other words, China's all-out friendly gesture toward North Korea in the aftermath of Kim Jong-il's death should be seen in the larger picture of the continuation of China's policy since 2009, not an abrupt impromptu gesture.

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It is this author's position that China's foreign policy stance toward North Korea is not an immovable principle, but remains fluid. Once again, a sweeping statement such as "China and North Korea will 'always' stick together" is an over-blown statement. For instance, China's policy shift in 2006 to harshly criticize North Korea was very unusual, given China's "traditionally friendly ties."²⁴ But China's policy shift three years later in 2009 to mend back ties with North Korea was also unusual. What shouldn't be missed is that China's policy on North Korea vacillated in that mere three-year period. That, this author argues, means something. And the biggest determining factor for China's foreign policy change is its calculation of its national interests.²⁵ Remarkably, this fundamental principle in international relations has often eluded the purviews of outside analysts. As China's perception of its own national interest changes, so will its relationship with North Korea.

To this end, Seoul and Washington need to do more confidence-building efforts with their Chinese counterpart. For example, as seen in the survey data, so few

of China's experts on Korea have ever visited South Korea (just 60 percent) and even more surprising that only 20 percent of them have visited North Korea. South Korea should be focusing on inviting those "Korea experts" to visit South Korea for extended study tours, as part of a long-term effort to manage and resolve the Korean Peninsula problem.²⁶

The year 2012, and the period immediately following it, will be critical as China has its own leadership shuffle. How the dynamics between China's new leader Xi Jinping and North Korea's Kim Jong-un will evolve will be a keenly watched item among security experts. The duo's relationship will also be naturally influenced by outside variables as well, such as Washington's relationship with Beijing and Seoul's positioning with China in the post-Lee Myung-bak administration. Here, the results of the current survey – which are not meant to be comprehensive but a ballpark indicator – will come in handy in appreciating the overall Chinese elite sentiments on North Korea and the Korean Peninsula and where the ball goes from here. Over the long-term, the United States and South Korea also need to seek to reassure China that South Korea and U.S. intentions in general, and especially in connection with North Korea, are not incompatible with China's interests.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Many individuals offered helpful feedback, including Jin Canrong of Renmin University in China who read the entire dissertation that incorporated this paper, David Straub of Stanford University who offered detailed comments, and Edward Baker at Harvard University, who pointed out a numerical typo.
- ² This paper was revised from the previous paper presentation to KEI on January 24.
- ³ These are commonly cited numbers by the South Korean media which credit them to the government and think tanks.
- ⁴ “东北” (*dong bei*) in Chinese.
- ⁵ Kim Bo-geun, “Let us prevent Kim Jong-un's North Korea becoming China's fourth province in its northeastern region.” *Economy Insight*, published by the *Hankyoreh Sinmun*, January 1, 2012, <http://www.economyinsight.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=1066>.
- ⁶ Kim Tae-wan, “North Korea falls into China's economic colony,” Economic dependence approaches 70%, *Hankyung* newspaper, December 22, 2011, <http://www.hankyung.com/news/app/newsview.php?aid=2011122235331&sid=010512&nid=005<type=1>.
- ⁷ Lee Yoon-sang. “North Korea's dependence on China is the key,” *Money Today*. December 19, 2011, <http://news.zum.com/articles/1203248>.
- ⁸ Bruce Jones, during Q&A session at a Brookings-Tsinghua Center for Public Policy conference, March 20, 2009, Beijing, China.
- ⁹ Victor Cha, “Kim's Death is Watershed Moment for North Korea,” *Financial Times*, December 21, 2011, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/d21bbc9a-2a0d-11e1-8f04-00144feabdc0.html>.
- ¹⁰ Author's interview with Linda Jakobson, East Asia Program Director at the Lowy Institute for International Policy, September 2010.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*

- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ A Chinese security expert privately told this author that another reason behind China's reluctance to discuss the sensitive matter with Seoul and Washington is because "they cannot keep their mouth shut. Whatever we say in confidence, we will see it printed later."
- ¹⁵ A Chinese reviewer of this survey later suggested that a personal face-to-face would have yielded more participation from the older generation of scholars. The survey was done through e-mail, with a link to an electronic survey website. It may be the case that the older generation of Chinese scholars (and people in general) are more willing to accept a personal interview, rather than a mass e-mail survey. It's not established whether the lesser participation of the older generation of Chinese experts was due to their lack of ease with computer or personal habits.
- ¹⁶ For the history of China's strained relationship with North Korea, please see, Choi Myeong-hae, *Sino-North Korean alliance* (Seoul: Oreum, 2009).
- ¹⁷ Jack Pritchard, former president of Korea Economic institute, had the view that the Chinese move should be seen as a "normal" diplomatic maneuver with a set of goals in mind, rather than a particular one. Author's interview, January 26, 2012, Washington.
- ¹⁸ Wang Junsheng, "Don't ignore DPRK's concerns," *China Daily*, January 5, 2012, http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2012-01/05/content_14383565.htm.
- ¹⁹ Author's interview. November, 2011.
- ²⁰ Together with North Korea and Russia.
- ²¹ 悍然 in Chinese.
- ²² A Chinese scholar, attending the Asan China Forum, on Dec 11, 2012, in Seoul, said that the word "*hanran*" was chosen by Hu Jintao himself.
- ²³ "Top leaders of China, DPRK hold talks in Beijing," Xinhua News Agency, May 7, 2010, <http://kp.china-embassy.org/eng/zcgv/sbgx/t692927.htm>.
- ²⁴ *chuan tong you hao guan xi*.
- ²⁵ Sunny Lee, "China's North Korean policy decoded," *Yale Global Online*, July 28, 2011, <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/chinas-north-korean-foreign-policy-decoded>.
- ²⁶ I thank David Straub of Stanford University for this suggestion.