

# Xi and the North Korea Challenge in the Trump Era

Written by Zhiqun Zhu

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ZHIQUN ZHU, MAR 26 2017

The vicious cycle of North Korea's missile/nuclear test followed by international sanctions that keeps repeating is a clear sign that the international community has failed to curb North Korea's nuclear ambitions. As President Donald Trump revamps America's Asia policy and Xi Jinping prepares to enter his second 5-year term as the CCP General Secretary, it is an opportunity to rethink the North Korea challenge.

North Korea's masterful diplomatic skills have ensured its successful maneuvering among major powers, like the proverbial shrimp among whales. It has proved repetitively that it often emerges as a winner in a messy situation in Northeast Asia. While others disagree over its strategies, North Korea has been working to improve its missile and nuclear technologies. It is extremely abnormal to let North Korea dictate the agenda of Northeast Asian politics.

Since Trump took office on 20 January 2017, North Korea has provoked the international community recurrently with missile launches and the assassination of Kim Jong-un's brother, Kim Jong-nam, in Kuala Lumpur with a VX nerve agent, a banned weapon of mass destruction (WMD). As a result, the United States cancelled a pre-arranged meeting in New York between North Korean diplomats and a group of former US officials in February.

Since 1992, when China and South Korea established diplomatic relations, China has been one of the very few countries that maintained close ties with both Koreas. After Kim Jong-un succeeded his father in December 2011, China-North Korea relations began to deteriorate. Meanwhile, China-South Korea relations quickly warmed up, with extensive economic and cultural exchanges and regular high-level talks. The relationship reached its apex in 2015 when President Park Geun-hye, defying pressure from the United States, attended the military parade in Beijing to mark the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II. However, after the US-ROK decision in July 2016 to deploy the THAAD anti-ballistic missile system in South Korea, China-South Korea relations plummeted. By the time President Park was forced out of office in March 2017, the bilateral equation had reached its lowest point in decades.

China's leverage over North Korea is often exaggerated. After decades of following the *Juche* policy, North Korea has become highly self-reliant. Trade with China, though important to North Korea, is not quite the lifeline of its economy. Locked in a strategic rivalry with the United States, China is unwilling to abandon North Korea now. Through continued interactions, it hopes Pyongyang will focus on growth instead of guns. Such a strategy has proved to be wishful thinking and is hurting Beijing's international image and national interests.

Kim Jong-nam's assassination was an additional blow to China, after Kim Jong-un executed his uncle Jang Song-thaek, who admired China's economic prowess. Kim Jong-nam, though seemingly disinterested in politics, could have possibly led a more liberal, China-friendly North Korean government. With him gone, China-North Korea relations are likely to worsen.

North Korea is not just an ungrateful 'white-eyed wolf,' as many Chinese commentators would call it, but has become a direct security threat. China stopped importing coal from North Korea for the rest of 2017, but no one is certain how this will be strictly implemented and whether it will be enough to compel Kim Jong-un to change his mind. The United States is still waiting for 'positive actions' from North Korea before appearing willing to deal with North Korea directly. In Washington's policy corridors, many believe that the United States should avoid talking with North Korea to reciprocate its conduct. Such an arrogant and short-sighted approach, however, is not just counter-productive, but

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shirks moral responsibility.

Trump must abandon the mistaken assumption that China alone can solve the North Korea problem. It is merely a cliché that China is the sole ally of North Korea and holds the key to the Pyongyang puzzle. However, the reality is that few Chinese still consider North Korea an ally. The 1961 Sino-North Korea Treaty of Friendship sits covered in dust. North Korea, too, on the other hand, shows signs of dislike for China. Recently, for instance, North Korea's Central News Agency publicly slammed Beijing for 'dancing to the tune of the US.'

Beijing has been flummoxed by Seoul's turnabout in its THAAD decision. It does not seem to fully understand the rationale behind the THAAD's installation or the priority of the US-South Korea alliance for Seoul. The THAAD is supposed to be a shield against North Korean missiles, but China views it as a regional security threat. The anti-ballistic system is, consequently, likely to deepen the distrust between the United States and China. However, the future of the THAAD is uncertain, as South Koreans shall elect a new president in May.

There exist, as generally accepted, three options to deal with North Korea: continued sanctions, a pre-emptive military strike, or a creative and constructive approach. Sanctions have failed and the military option is too risky, especially considering South Korea's interests. With tensions remaining high on the Korean Peninsula, all parties must resist the temptation to use force so that peace can prevail. A constructive way forward could be that China and the United States switch their approaches, as China takes more resolute measures against Pyongyang while the United States holds out carrots. With the prospect of no support from China and some security guarantee from the United States, North Korea is more likely to return to the negotiation table. Is there such a possibility?

Trump said during the presidential campaign that he was willing to invite Kim Jong-un to the United States for a meeting over a hamburger. While a historic Trump-Kim meeting in Washington or Pyongyang is unthinkable for most, it might be something needed now to achieve a denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

Meanwhile, US-China relations have showed some positive developments after the roller-coaster ride since Trump's election. A recent video showing Kim Jong-nam's son Kim Han-sol thanking both China and the United States for helping him, his mother, and his sister in the aftermath of his father's assassination suggests that the Beijing and Washington have been working in convergence on North Korean matters in the past few weeks.

Both Trump and Xi are leaders with a strong sense of mission. As they prepare to meet for the first time at Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort in April, one hopes that they can grasp the opportunity to defuse tensions on the Korean Peninsula. The United States and China must jointly address the North Korea challenge urgently, based on the consensus that North Korea has become a common security threat and that a peaceful resolution of the issue is still possible. Missing such an opportunity and miscalculating the situation are likely to turn the cold war in Northeast Asia into a hot war once again.

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## About the author:

**Zhiqun Zhu**, PhD, is a professor of political science and international relations at Bucknell University, USA.