

# Impact on Sino-American Relations upon North Korean Issue

*By John, Fung Kai Tsun, MA, Sociology, University of Kent*

The missile test from North Korea has put China and United States in a difficult position. On one hand, the two giants were economically co-dependent (from 2010 to 2015, China had been the States' second largest trading partner, with the States being China's largest). On the other hand, their relationships were hindered by complications in regional politics. Leaders of the two nations have been trying to diffuse the current situation, but the road to co-prosperity is fraught by conflicting interests and the resulting struggle may drag the whole region into turmoil.

China has been getting tough on North Korea since the start of Chairman Xi Jinping's term. In the 2015 victory parade, the then South Korean President Park Geun-hye was invited instead of Kim Jong-Un, signaling Beijing's disapproval of Kim's status as the supreme leader. The United States, on another continent, harbours a cautious and sustained hostility since the 'end' of Korean war. A volatile figure such as Donald Trump naturally poured gasoline on the smouldering embers and his 'tough on North Korea' talk was answered with missiles from Pyongyang. Thus, in exchange for China's cooperation in the North Korea problem, the Trump administration offered trade agreements on consumer goods that China desperately needs (ironically, one of it is beef). However, for China, both cooperation with the States and sanctioning North Korea were pills too bitter to swallow, as China's prestige in East Asia depends on its defiance against the imperialistic west. As China rejected America's olive branch and refused to economically pressure Pyongyang into denuclearization, some remarked that would be the end of a 'Sino-American honeymoon' and the beginning of a new cold war.

As China Times noted, since the start of the 21st century, the North Korea problem has been the litmus test of Sino-American relationship. The two giants' have been dancing on top of and beyond the Armistice Line, every step knocked the region off its delicate balance and every swing pushed more nations into the fold as collaterals. The true danger of North Korea becomes clear to us, it is not of its warheads or its leaderships' superficial irrationality, but of the responses China and America were to be forced to make in response to an escalating situation.

## **Scenario one: North/South Korea decimated, regional balance of power non-existent**

Despite repeated international protests, North Korea continued to test-fire its nuclear missiles. With evidence of it being close to possessing weapons of mass destruction, United States, South Korea and other western nations may launch a pre-emptive attack and topple Kim's regime. On the flipside, should North Korea make enough headway in its nuclear program, it may launch a pre-emptive strike on South Korea and unify the peninsula at long last. Either case would not be good news to both China and America, since the disappearance of buffer states forces the two giants to deal with issues that are most likely be settled in a hard way (such as territorial disputes). As tension increases, one side may act upon a perceived threat to national security and resort to war.

Should there be a pre-emptive war, the first strikes would likely belong to North Korea. Although in possession of nuclear weapons, Pyongyang lacks an economy to sustain a war and thus must turn to China for material support. However, as Sino-North Korean relationships hit its lowest point, China would refrain from any participation and ultimately allow the South Korea, by extension the United States, to emerge triumphant. As America's sphere of influence touches China's border, it would be hard for the latter to retain any sense of regional security and may launch a pre-emptive strike against the newly united Korea in order to negotiate for a military buffer zone.

### **Scenario two: Korean peninsula maintain its status-quo, but with worsening Sino-American relationship**

Since the end of World War Two, China and America have kept their spheres of influence within Southeast Asia to themselves. North Korea to China and USSR, and South to the US. Although recently China has shown signs of cooperation with America in denuclearizing Pyongyang, there were fundamental difference between the two in terms of regional interest. For instance, in order to keep North Korea under its belt, China has ignored the United Nations Security Council's decision to sanction North Korea and continue to ship food and material over the Yalu River. America has always been critical to China's leniency since some of those shipments can be used as raw-materials for weaponry.

Though an embargo in the scale of the one in 1950 would be highly unlikely, China and America will exhibit hostility against each other in fields such as trade agreements, rendering mutual cooperation an increasingly unlikely option. At the same time, the United States may form a geopolitical blockade against China by allying with the latter's neighbours - Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, India... All of which were visited by Hillary Clinton during her last term as the secretary of state. Although China was neighbored by Pakistan, its geographical remoteness makes it unlikely to be of significant strategic value in the East Asian theatre (especially the Korean Peninsula).

### **Scenario three: A peaceful resolution**

As told to Donald Trump by Xi Jinping, China wishes to 'solve the North Korea problem in a peaceful manner' and, at the same time, 'steadfast on his goal to denuclearized Korean peninsula'. Naturally, this is the outcome everyone wishes for, for Kim Jong-un to suddenly see the truth and bury his nuclear device, for him to return the Six-party talks, and for every representative to smooth out every conflict in the conference room. The first step to such a utopia, of course, would require the United States to refrain from actions that may excite or worry Pyongyang, such as military exercise in the peninsula and with its East Asian allies.

However, yielding to international society may threaten Kim Jong-un's ruling legitimacy and the US may not give up its political and military presence in East Asia. On top of that, before Pu Gui-hui's impeachment, there were plans to assassinate Kim Jong-un. The road to utopia seems to be fraught by treachery.

### **Conclusion**

Nuclear testing from Korea has severely destabilized the regional balance of power and forces United States to engage in a geopolitical deadlock against China. Ultimately, the North Korean problem rests on the decisions made by the North Korean leader. Of the three scenarios, war is most likely to happen and it would be the Korean that would suffer the most.