

China confronts dilemma over Korean crisis

By John Chan
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The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime headed by President Xi Jinping has been caught in a dilemma over how to deal with the rising tensions in the Korean Peninsula. A debate has opened up in Chinese ruling circles over its longstanding alliance with North Korea.

Sections of the CCP bureaucracy are looking to ease the crisis by accommodating to US demands to exert pressure and pull North Korea into line. Others insist that Beijing must continue to back Pyongyang to maintain the country as a buffer against the US and its allies, especially South Korea.

At the Boao economic forum last weekend, President Xi called for “comprehensive security and co-operative security, so as to turn the global village into a big stage for common development, rather than an arena where gladiators fight each other”. He added: “no one should be allowed to throw the region, or even the whole world, into chaos for selfish gains.”

Although most Western media interpreted Xi’s remarks as a being directed against North Korea, they are just as applicable to the US, which has recklessly ratcheted up tensions on the Korean Peninsula to put pressure on both Pyongyang and Beijing. Over the past month, the Pentagon has implemented its so-called “counter-provocation” plan that has included dispatching nuclear-capable B-52 and B-2 bombers to South Korea.

Layers of the Chinese military are deeply worried about the danger of war. An unnamed source in the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) last Thursday told the German news agency Deutsche Presse-Agentur (DPA) that the Chinese military is on high alert and drawing up contingency plans in the event that the Korean peninsula goes “up in flames”.

The source told DPA that a group of generals expressed concern about the security of the North Korea nuclear facility and also about a potential large scale influx of refugees into northern China.

“Contingency plans included the possibility that Chinese forces could cross into North Korea, if a clash broke out, to secure nuclear facilities and prevent any nuclear disaster,” the news agency wrote.

There are real concerns in Beijing about the stability of the small, isolated and economically bankrupt Pyongyang regime. Over the past four years, the Obama administration has maintained the economic blockade of North Korea and refused any talks unless Pyongyang gives up its small arsenal of nuclear weapons and dismantles its nuclear and missile programs.

Washington is maintaining the pressure on Pyongyang ahead of a possible test of a North Korean medium range missile. The head of US Pacific Command, Admiral Samuel Locklear, told the Senate Arms Service Committee yesterday that that the US was ready to shoot down the missile if it was headed towards US territory, bases or its allies.

Locklear disagreed with Republican Senator John McCain’s remarks that the relations between North Korea and the US were the worst since the Korean War in the 1950s, but declared that US military forces under his command were “ready” for any war against North Korea.

Beijing is well aware that the US is using the Korean crisis to build up its military forces, especially anti-ballistic missile systems, not just in preparation for war against North Korea, but against China itself. The Obama administration’s stoking up of tensions on the Korean Peninsula is part of its confrontational “pivot” to Asia, which is aimed at undermining China’s strategic position and influence throughout the region.

In response, sections of the CCP bureaucracy are suggesting an end to the alliance with North Korea and even regime change as a means of ending Washington’s ability to exploit the Korean tensions. In February, Deng Yuwen, deputy editor of CCP Central

Party School's *Study Times*, wrote a comment including the Treasury Secretary Jacob Lew, left without any specific agreement. British-based *Financial Times* declaring that North Korea no longer acted as a strategic buffer for China and could even turn against it. He advocated support for South Korea to integrate the North into a reunified country.

Although Deng was reportedly suspended indefinitely from his position last week, similar views are being aired in the Chinese state-owned media.

A commentary in the overseas edition of the *People's Daily* today criticised four countries—North Korea, US, South Korea and Japan—for infringing on China's national interests. What was unusual about the comment was its blunt warning to North Korea not to "misjudge the situation". It declared that North Korea "must take responsibility for the escalations of tensions in Korean Peninsula since last year" because of its missile and nuclear tests. While rejecting outside interference in North Korea's internal affairs, the comment suggested that if its actions were "affecting regional stability and peace, and creating an international problem, then it is not up to North Korea." In other words, an intervention by China could be justified.

Even China's hawkish nationalist commentators are not unequivocally backing North Korea. General Zhang Chaozhong, who last year called for war against the Philippines over disputed territory in the South China Sea, was comparatively mild on *China Radio Network* yesterday. He blamed the US, South Korea and Japan for generating the crisis, but simply called for "America [to] back off a bit, giving Kim Jung-un a step to get down" and "things will be resolved".

At this stage there are no clear signs that the new Chinese leadership will accede to US demands to force North Korea to make concessions. Beijing joined the US in imposing a new round of UN sanctions last month over North Korea's third nuclear test in February, but has not moved to block vital food and fuel exports to its ally. In recent years, China has pumped billions of dollars of investment into North Korea to help rebuild its infrastructure, including the construction of several "special economic zones" to exploit its cheap labour.

According to the *New York Times* last week, senior US officials sent to Beijing to push for the enforcement of UN and other sanctions against North Korea,

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