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US-China Relations and the Korean Peninsula

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I. Ad Hoc “Concert of Power” and Potential Causes of Disruption

The history of US initiatives for multilateral arrangements on the Korean Peninsula is long. As evidenced in the initiatives proposed by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger at the United Nations General Assembly in 1975 and 1976, the United States from early on had presented to North Korea—which insisted on bilateral talks with the United States sans the People’s Republic of China—the idea of discussing a transition from the armistice agreement to a peace agreement, among other issues, in a multilateral framework involving China. The United States envisaged a plan of coaxing North Korea into dialogue with the Republic of Korea and consigning resolution of principal issues, including the development of a peace regime, to the two Koreas. As North-South tensions eased, it would gradually scale back its military commitment to South Korea. After the end of the Cold War, this line of thinking was succeeded by the four-power forum proposed by Secretary of State James Baker.

China, meanwhile, had been supportive of North Korea’s proposal to leave itself out of the picture during the Cold War. In the post-Cold War era, however, it sought to rein in North Korea’s pro-US inclination—which it could not control through bilateral relations—by taking part in multilateral talks. The Four-Party Peace talks (between China, the United States, and North and South Korea) that began in 1996 were the outcome of China’s aligning with a proposal by the United States and South Korea on establishing peace in the Korean

Peninsula.

With regard to North Korea's nuclear development, tripartite talks among China, North Korea, and the United States took place due to both China and the United States wanting to resolve the issue at a regional level with North Korean involvement rather than through the UN Security Council; this grew into six-party talks with the addition of Japan, Russia, and South Korea. Multilateral talks for peace in the Korean Peninsula are in themselves proof that there exist a host of issues on which the United States and China can cooperate. At least to date, there has been no strong security dilemma between the two countries regarding the Korean Peninsula and, in summit meetings between US President Barack Obama and Chinese President Xi Jinping, the Korean Peninsula has topped the list of issues for bilateral cooperation.¹ Throughout this time, tensions between the United States and China over strictly bilateral issues have never spilled over into the multilateral talks. So it is that these efforts have been described as an ad hoc "concert of power" between the two states.

North and South Korea, however, have different—even contrasting—takes on this ad hoc concert of power. North Korea views the US-Chinese concert as "control" by these powers. As for South Korea, while US-Chinese "collusion" would be out of the question, it is looking to gain a stronger voice by capitalizing on the US-Chinese concert, whether regarding the establishment of peace or North Korea's nuclear development.

II. "Nuclear Deterrence" Against the United States and Strategic Flexibility: Ambiguity of the US Rebalance

North Korea's reinforcement of its "nuclear deterrence" against the United States was effective in bringing about an axial shift from a US-Chinese attempt at "control" to a US-DPRK axis. After the first nuclear test by North Korea the center of negotiations shifted to the United States, and the six-party talks turned into a place for confirming the content of these negotiations. Furthermore, out of fear that North Korea's nuclear weapons capability will become a *fait accompli* by virtue of its repeated nuclear tests, the United States has been demanding that the former make visible denuclearization efforts, and neither bilateral nor multilateral talks have seen progress. In this context, another avenue that North Korea believed would be effective in shifting the axis of negotiations to the United States and itself was the use of force against South Korea. Its sinking of the South Korean navy vessel *Cheonan* and bombardment of Yeonpyeong Island in 2010, the year after its second nuclear

test, were intended to bring the United States to the negotiating table.

Meanwhile South Korea, which has piggybacked on US-Chinese cooperation, was also facing a risk that could disrupt the ad hoc concert of power; the restructuring of the US military presence on its soil, plans for which have been under way since the time of the George W. Bush administration, has created the possibility of South Korea representing a hedge against China. The US-ROK alliance is a localized alliance, the functions of which are mostly limited to deterring the North Korean threat, and consists primarily of ground forces. However, if and when the main troops of United States Forces Korea move to the city of Pyeongtaek facing the Yellow Sea and strengthen their coordination with South Korea's air and naval forces, the alliance will ascend to a regional one with an eye on China as well. This is what is commonly referred to as the "strategic flexibility" of USFK. As has been discussed largely negatively in South Korea, though, the country is bound to get caught up in a tug-of-war between the United States and China if USFK were to become a hedge against China.

At the same time, this has also given rise to concerns of entrapment on China's part. China not only strongly objected to US plans to conduct joint military exercises with South Korean forces in the Yellow Sea in response to North Korea's military attacks on South Korea but also, when North Korea threatened the South in the spring of 2013 after declaring that it was scrapping its non-aggression pact with the latter, Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated that China would allow no troublemaking on its doorstep.² While directed at both the United States and North Korea, the warning was also an expression of concern that tensions on the Korean Peninsula might lead to discord with the United States.

The realignment of US forces in South Korea has, moreover, been inextricably linked to the issue of returning the authority of "wartime" operational control (OPCON) to the South Korean military. The transfer was initially planned for April 2012, but South Korean President Lee Myung-bak and US President Obama agreed to delay it to 2015. The Strategic Alliance 2015 plan that was developed in the wake of this decision stipulated that the transition of wartime OPCON would be synchronized with the move of US forces to Pyeongtaek, both of which were to be completed by the end of 2015. Sure enough, when the plan came under review at the US-ROK Security Consultative Meeting of October 2014 and the OPCON transfer was once again postponed, the move of US forces to Pyeongtaek was also halted, if only partially. This does not mean, however, that plans to restructure the US forces in South

Korea have been dismissed altogether or that the concept of strategic flexibility has been negated.

South Korea will continue to be reluctant about engaging in antagonistic behavior toward China. The Obama administration's "rebalance to Asia" policy is essentially directed toward the People's Liberation Army Navy of China and, as such, is geographically focused on the South China Sea. The Korean People's Navy of North Korea does not have much of a regional presence, and the US naval and marine forces in South Korea, consisting only of support units, are unlikely to serve as hedges against China. Whereas South Korea draws on the term *rebalance* in advocating reinforcement of the US-ROK alliance to counter military attacks by North Korea, the United States does not consider North Korea's largely land-based threat on South Korea to be a major component of its rebalance policy. Thus, while both countries use the same term, there is evidently a substantial difference in what it signifies for the United States and for South Korea.

III. Strategic Flexibility on the Missile Issue: THAAD Deployment in South Korea

One issue that illustrates well how North and South Korea view US-China relations is the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile system to South Korea. THAAD would not go into action unless China were to launch a missile attack on South Korea, as it is an interceptor system designed to engage incoming missiles in the terminal phase. China objects to its deployment nonetheless, the reason being the radar system that comes with it. As noted above, the Bush administration's plans to give the US forces in South Korea strategic flexibility were mostly frozen at the 2014 Security Consultative Meeting. Still, if a THAAD system in South Korea has the potential to include China, this would mean that strategic flexibility remains in the area of missile defense.

It is said that the United States and South Korea have never engaged in concrete discussions on THAAD deployment to the latter. Although the South Korean army is keen on deployment, Seoul has maintained a position of non-decision. South Korea's hesitation to host a THAAD system and China's strong opposition to it both come down to the same reason: the strategic flexibility of the US presence in South Korea is manifested in the question of THAAD deployment.

On North Korea's part, THAAD provides an excellent means of causing a rift between the United States and China, as well as being an obvious target of criticism due to its potential

of neutralizing North Korean ballistic missile attacks on South Korea, thus constituting deterrence by denial. In the fall of 2014, when the possibility of THAAD deployment to South Korea first arose, North Korea's *Rodong Sinmun* called the plan a "product of the military strategy of the United States aimed at destroying the strategic balance in the region and overpowering neighboring countries" and criticized the United States for "relying on a strategy of oppressing potential adversaries in the region that confront it, particularly China, by besieging and restraining them militarily." The same commentary also spoke for Chinese concerns, pointing out that the X-band radar that would be deployed with THAAD has a detection range of "1,000 kilometers, putting China's major regions within its range."³

As seen above, the reason why multilateral talks have stalled despite having been launched can be described thus: even though there exist a host of issues regarding the Korean Peninsula that the United States and China could work together on, there is a large discrepancy between North and South Korean perceptions of what constitutes appropriate US-Chinese relations. If the deployment of THAAD in South Korea were to bring US-Chinese tensions to the Korean Peninsula, it is uncertain whether or not the United States and China would still move forward with multilateral talks on issues on which they could cooperate.

* The views and opinions expressed in this column are the author's alone and do not represent the views of the Japan Ministry of Defense or the National Defense Academy of Japan.

¹ *CIIS yanjiu baogao; zhongmei fenqi guankong de lilun yu shijian- yi zhengzhi, jingji, anquan wei shijue* [CIIS Research Report: The Theory and Practice of Controlling Chinese-US Discord—From the Perspectives of Politics, the Economy, and Security], Beijing: Zhongguo guoji wenti yanjiuyuan, 2015, pp. 39–40.

² Wang Yi, "Jianchi heping fazhan shixian minzu fuxing zhongguomeng [Firmly Maintaining Peaceful Development and Realizing China's Dream of National Revitalization]," *Xuexi shibao* (February 17, 2014).

³ Ri Hak-nam, "Rash Act That Destroys the Strategic Balance in the Region," *Rodong Sinmun* (September 2, 2014).