Policy Forum 01-05A: China and the End of North Korea

The NAPSNet Policy Forum provides expert analysis of contemporary peace and security issues in Northeast Asia. As always, we invite your responses to this report and hope you will take the opportunity to participate in discussion of the analysis.

Recommended Citation

"Policy Forum 01-05A: China and the End of North Korea", NAPSNet Policy Forum, July 26, 2001, https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/nautilus-institute-policy-forum-online-china-and-the-end-of-north-korea/

Nautilus Institute Policy Forum Online: China and the End of North Korea

Nautilus Institute Policy Forum Online: China and the End of North Korea

PFO 01-05: July 26, 2001

China and the End of North Korea

By Robert Dujarric

Contents:

I. Introduction

The following essay is by Robert Dujarric, Research Fellow at the Hudson Institute, Washington DC.

Dujarric is the author of "Korea After Unification" (Indianapolis IN: Hudson Institute, 2000).

Dujarric argues that the social and economic changes underway in the PRC are undermining the authority of the Communist Party and will eventually lead to a political transformation. He concludes that a post-communist China will not put the same emphasis on maintaining relations with the DPRK, opening the door for the ROK, the US, and Japan to push for absorption of the DPRK.

II. Essay by Robert Dujarric

"China and the end of North Korea"

by Robert Dujarric Research Fellow, Hudson Institute, Washington DC.

Thinking about the collapse of North Korea has focused on internal developments within the DPRK. As Jiang Zemin is reported to prepare for a visit to North Korea, we should consider the possibility that events in China will cause the demise of the DPRK.

China is a significant provider of aid to North Korea. In addition the PRC gives North Korea strategic depth, in the political rather than military sense. With Russia in dire straits, Moscow has become fairly irrelevant to the Korean question. China, however, is not. It is a huge country, with a large economy by continental Asian standards and, unlike South Korea and Japan, it is not in the "US camp." Thus the PRC's existence serves North Korean interests by preventing American hegemony in the region. Moreover, though the Chinese Communist Party has abandoned Marxist-Maoist orthodoxy, the presence on its northern border of a communist-ruled nation can only be reassuring for Pyongyang.

But will China remain under the control of the Communist Party for long? Admirers praise Deng Xiaoping for freeing the economy while retaining the political dictatorship, thus eschewing Gorbachev's failed course of political opening and economic stagnation. Nevertheless, despite China's poor human rights record, there has been a tremendous political transformation in China. Many Chinese now work for the private sector and are therefore free from the domination of party cells that used to allocate them housing and controlled their entire lives. Chinese now travel abroad, and more than 50,000 are currently studying in America. Numerous foreigners, including many from democratic Taiwan, now live and work in China. Chinese can also communicate by phone or email in ways that were unthinkable twenty years ago.

These changes have sapped the authority of the Communist Party. It has lost many of the economic tools through which it controlled society and it has failed to prevent a much freer flow of information. Its legitimacy has been undermined by the absence of a new ideology to replace the defunct Marxist-Leninist one (it is difficult to believe that many Chinese take seriously Jiang Zemin's "Three Represents" thesis) and by corruption. The travails of state-owned enterprises, the burden of non-performing loans on banks, and the tens of millions of unauthorized migrants from the rural areas to the cities have exposed cracks in the economic system. The ability of Falun Gong to emerge and reports of rural unrest against taxation indicate that the authority of the Party has severely decayed. China is experiencing processes that Samuel Huntington described in his "Political Order and Changing Societies" (1968). The gap between social mobilization and economic development is creating social frustration and the weak political institutionalization of China will create political instability as the system fails to satisfy desires for political participation.

The next ten years may thus see the end of communist rule in China. What will replace the Communist Party is unclear. China is without the solid middle class and strong property rights which

allowed Taiwan and South Korea to evolve with relatively little violence from dictatorship to liberal democracy. Neither does China enjoy the powerful civil society that had survived communism in Poland and made a fairly smooth transition to liberal democracy possible. China also faces ethnic unrest in its outlying provinces that will further complicate regime change.

Though we cannot predict what regime may emerge from the breakdown of communism in China, we can make a few predictions. First, the new China will not be ruled by the Communist Party anymore. Second, it will be, at least for a few years, a less self-confident country and will have less energy to devote to international affairs. Third, it is quite possible that the new regime will emphasize improving relations with the United States and Japan in order to receive economic and political support to stabilize its control over the country.

These developments will undermine the North Korean position. The post-PRC Chinese leaders will be too focused on internal questions to focus on Korean affairs and will be more eager to curry favors with the United States and Japan. To save money they are likely to end aid programs to the DPRK. This situation will open a window of opportunity for South Korea, the United States, and Japan, to push for a final settlement of the Korean question, that is the unification of the entire peninsula under the aegis of the ROK. Even with the PRC out of the way, peacefully removing the North Korean regime will be difficult, but it will be much easier than under current circumstances.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

Produced by The Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development
Northeast Asia Peace and Security Project (napsnet-reply@nautilus.org)
Return to top
back to top

View this online at: https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/nautilus-institute-policy--orum-online-china-and-the-end-of-north-korea/

Nautilus Institute
608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email: nautilus@nautilus.org