

A New Approach to Security in Northeast Asia:
Breaking the Gridlock Workshop
Wilson Center, Washington, DC, October 9-10

US-China Core Issues

The Korean Peninsula has been a bone of contention between the People's Republic of China and the United States since shortly after the founding of the PRC in 1949. The bitter legacy left by the clashes between Chinese and American troops during the Korean War was a dominant factor shaping the hostile relationship until 1971. The Korean War solidified US support for the Republic of China on Taiwan, prevented the reunification of China, and reinforced the ideological differences that divided Washington and Beijing.

Since the early 1990s China and the United States have had a clearly understood common interest in seeking to prevent North Korea from acquiring nuclear weapons, although Beijing and Washington initially differed in their assessment of the immediacy of the problem, with Beijing believing the North Koreans were less advanced in their nuclear weapons program than was the assessment in Washington. Over the last two decades, the two sides have not wavered in their desire to prevent Pyongyang from acquiring a nuclear weapons capability, but they have frequently differed on their respective views of how to deal with North Korea on the matter. Despite these differences over tactics, once Beijing took the initiative to host the six-party talks, there has generally been good cooperation between Washington and Beijing on the nuclear issue.

There are two areas, however, where the views of the United States and China on North Korea diverge, reflecting important differences in their underlying interests. For Americans, instability in North Korea leading to regime change could open possibilities for positive political and economic evolution that could, over time, reduce the security concerns caused by North Korea's militaristic and erratic behavior and enable Pyongyang to become a responsible member of the international community. Beijing for its part has consistently given top priority to its overriding security interest in maintaining influence in Pyongyang and in not permitting other powers to gain the upper hand there. For the

Chinese, instability or regime change in North Korea would place these interests at risk. Driven by these differing viewpoints, Americans have been susceptible to believing that regime change in North Korea might be a viable option. The Chinese have consistently rejected this view and argued that the United States greatly exaggerates instability factors in North Korea.

The second area of divergence has to do with the future orientation of the Korean peninsula in the event that Korean unification were to be achieved. The United States values its alliance with South Korea and would like to see a unified Korean peninsula remain a part of the western alliance system. China considers it more desirable to have a fractious failed regime on its border than a regime favorably disposed towards the United States, or a unified Korea that is part of the western alliance system. In contrast to the Soviet Union, which at the time of German unification was too debilitated by internal problems to enforce its preference that a unified Germany not remain in NATO, Beijing could interpose formidable obstacles to Korean unification on western terms. Nor is it certain which option Seoul would choose if discarding the US alliance was the price it had to pay for unification. Obviously, circumstances at the time would be important determinants of how developments would unfold, but the United States should anticipate that it could be difficult to reconcile US interests with those of Beijing in the event that conditions for Korean reunification were to emerge.

Under present circumstances, these potential differences are not sufficient to block cooperation between Washington and Beijing on Korean matters, since both countries have a common interest in preserving peace and stability on the peninsula. But the success of US policies regarding the Korean Peninsula will depend to a significant degree on the extent to which the United States can accurately calibrate areas of overlap and divergence in the interests of the two countries with respect to Korea. Measures by the United States and South Korea to strengthen the alliance in response to provocative North Korean behavior will exacerbate Sino-US differences, a factor that may assume greater relevance if China's power and influence in Northeast Asia continues to grow.