The purpose of this article is to understand China’s changing strategic views on North Korea during Hu Jintao’s era and to consider the implications for South Korea’s policies toward North Korea and China. Sino-North Korea cooperation can be theoretically explained by the alliance transition theory, a modified one from the political realist perspective. The implications of the alliance transition theory are that China would strengthen its alliance with North Korea, seek to weaken the South Korea–U.S. alliance, and induce South Korea to cooperate with China, while preventing North Korea from getting close to the United States. However, it is noteworthy that even in China, there exist various groups of strategic thinking in international relations on China’s roles in North Korean issues. North Korea’s incessant provocations have effects on mobilizing the Developing Country Diplomacy School as well as the Rising Great Power Diplomacy School against North Korea. Such incidences would soon reverse the rule of thumb of North Korea’s strategic value rising alongside regional tensions, calling into question in China, again, the strategic value of North Korea. China still maintains its previous policy priorities at askance, but since North Korea’s second nuclear test, the contents have been changing reflecting the changing security environments and its recalculation of national interests. As the more the North Korean nuclear crisis deepens, threatening peace and stability on the Korean peninsula, the more China would positively think over North Korea’s contingency intensifying cooperation with the United States. In such transition, the stronger the rising great power thinkers, the less the diplomatic space for North Korea exists. North Korea would stop being a buffer zone but a strategic burden in their perspective, transforming China’s relationship with North Korea from a special relationship to a normal state-to-state relationship.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to understand China’s changing strategic views on North Korea during Hu Jintao’s era and to think over implications for South Korea’s policies toward North Korea and China. This article also explains China’s strategic perspectives on why there exist gaps between changing perceptions and policies toward North Korea.

Sino-North Korea relations, in general, have long been considered as those of close allies, in which China has had special geopolitical, historical, as well as normative interests in North Korea. Chinese leaders often described the relationship as that of lips and teeth. The Sino-North Korean Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance signed in 1961, which includes mutual military assistance if...
one party were to be attacked by a third party, is still effective—although Chinese sources often mention that it is de facto ineffective.\(^1\)

This line of ideas often leads to a conclusion that Chinese assistance to and security protection for North Korea is a natural course of action, possibly at any cost, even in a situation of contingency in North Korea. In fact, even after China’s normalization with South Korea, China and North Korea have maintained close contacts and cooperation in the military, cultural, educational, scientific, technological and sporting fields. Since 1994, in order to help North Korea tide over its difficulties caused by natural disasters and other factors, China has been providing North Korea with grain, crude oil and fertilizer as free aid. Therefore, some analysts argue that it is China that has really supported North Korea’s development of nuclear armaments.

The Sino-North Korea cooperation can be theoretically explained by the alliance transition theory,\(^2\) a modified one from the political realist perspective. The implications of the alliance transition theory are that China would strengthen its alliance with North Korea, seek to weaken the South Korea–U.S. alliance, and induce South Korea to cooperate with China while preventing North Korea from getting close to the United States.\(^3\)

However, recent studies on the Sino-North Korean relationship and developments of various bilateral relations in this region produced conclusions not necessarily supporting, but rather in opposition to the alliance transition theory. These studies illustrated that the Sino-North Korean relationship could be characterized as mutual distrust rather than “the special bonds.”\(^4\) North Korea has appeared to place its priority on security rather than ideology in its foreign policy throughout their bilateral relations.\(^5\) The periods when there was a cordial relationship between these two socialist countries were only during 1961–64 and 1970–73. Beside these periods, their relations have been stained with tension, gaps of perception, and distrust.

Since the normalization of diplomatic relations with South Korea in 1992, China has adopted an equidistance policy between South and North Korea. However, variables affecting Sino-Korean relations have been tilted in favor of South Korea since China adopted reform and opening-up policies in 1978. The establishment of the strategic cooperative partnership between South Korea and China in 2008 highlighted the current developments. The traditional friendly cooperative relationship formed with North Korea is less important in China’s foreign affairs than the strategic cooperative partnership established with South Korea in 2008.\(^6\) In China’s strategic perspectives, North Korea is changing from a strategic asset to a strategic liability as China moves toward the status of a great power in international politics.

It is obvious that North Korea and China were unable to free themselves from the Cold War linkage and their special bonds resulting from the Cold War structure should not be underestimated. However, the transformation of Chinese views on North Korea has become salient since Hu Jintao came to power in 2002. Coincidentally, the North Korean nuclear crisis started with Hu Jintao’s era. In the reevaluation process of China’s overall foreign policies, the Chinese leadership accepted a new idea of reformulating the relationship with North Korea from “the blood-shared ally” to a “traditional friendly cooperative relationship,” suggested by its Ministry of Foreign Affairs.\(^7\)
Diversified Chinese strategic thinking

Chinese strategic thinking is no longer monolithic. A top-down approach, if any, in Chinese decision-making is more likely to be conducive to a misunderstanding of Chinese foreign policy. Chinese strategic thinking is diversifying as decision-making requires more professional support.

In dealing with North Korea, three ideal types of groups of Chinese thinkers can be identified depending on their criteria of analyzing China’s status in the world. The three schools are known as the Traditional Geopolitics School including chauvinistic nationalists, the Developing Country Diplomacy School, and the Rising Great Power Diplomacy School. Respective ideas of these groups are not necessarily isolated, but intermingled in reality. Table 1 illustrates an ideal feature of each school in each issue area.

Traditional thinkers

The first group, the Traditional Geopolitical School, pays more attention to China’s past glory and influence. This school can be divided into the traditional geopolitics group and the socialist group. Both place importance on the buffer zone role of North Korea for China in terms of geopolitics or ideological affinity respectively. The socialist group sharing ideological affinity with North Korea is certainly waning in terms of policy influence since ideological affinity, tying North Korea to China, has been removed in official Chinese foreign policy languages. However, geopolitics, a more traditional language, has revived among the old populace and elites, and the military. Before the second North Korean nuclear crisis occurred in 2002, traditional thinkers were dominant in policymaking on the Korean peninsula, regarding the relationship with North Korea as a special (traditional) one. Main supporters of this group in Chinese think-tanks comprise mainly Korea hands who studied in

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Table 1. Policy orientations of China’s strategic schools
North Korea, among Korean Chinese specialists, and in the People’s Liberation Army (PLA).

Since the nuclear crisis started, the influence of this school in China’s policymaking on the Korean peninsula has waned as the Chinese leadership started to think over the strategic importance of the Korean peninsula in a broader context of international relations and to place policy priorities on cooperative bilateral relations with the United States.

These people regard the nature of Sino-U.S. relations as competitive rather than cooperative and harmonious. In their eyes, the Korean peninsula is still the battleground for influence among great powers as having struggled for thousands of years. They also possess more psychological affinity to North Korea than South Korea because South Korea has allied with the United States.

In a recent survey of Chinese elites, 23 out of 30 supported either gradual reduction or withdrawal of the U.S. military on the Korean peninsula. Meanwhile, only seven out of 30 supported maintaining the current level of U.S. military presence. This group favors military intervention in case the United States unilaterally enters the territory of North Korea and Chinese core interests are severely threatened. Although the contexts are a bit different, a part of the summary of “Keeping an Eye on an Unruly Neighbor” written by Bonnie Glaser, Scott Snyder, and John Park was influenced by such thoughts, implying Chinese military intervention to the North Korean territory: “If the international community did not react in a timely manner as internal order in North Korea deteriorated rapidly, China would seek to take the initiative in restoring stability.”

Gong Keyu, a young Chinese scholar at the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, succinctly summarizes such a view in her new article that, “the historical interest of China in the geopolitical situation of Korea allows China to play a unique role in the relevant affairs on the Korean peninsula, which is of special geopolitical significance.”

Although the voices of this school are currently waning, they could be strengthened if China’s vital interests were ignored unilaterally and the Chinese economy were faltering in the future as a part of chauvinistic nationalism.

**Developing country diplomacy school**

The second group, the Developing Country Diplomacy School, relatively focuses on the current economic situations of China, identifying China as a developing country. They fully recognize its backwardness and the gap with developed countries, in particular the United States, in national capacity. They have taken the pragmatic approach mainly featured in the term, the “hide capacities and bide time” principle. Based upon such recognition, they support affirming its foreign policy goal to establishing peaceful relations for the purpose of continued economic development (at least) until 2020 when a “medium-level of well-being (xiaokang) society” will be reached.

The upholders of this school comprise the main stream of China’s foreign policy. The official languages of China’s foreign policy also reside in the line of this school. Prominent scholars in the area of American studies, the Sino-U.S. relations, and international relations are often found among supporters. They are mostly known as close advisers on international relations to China’s top leaders.
These people are very much afraid that should economic development be marred by friction with the United States, the Chinese Communist Party could be faced with serious domestic social/economic problems that would lead to a crisis of its own leadership. Therefore, they support a cooperative partnership with the United States while recognizing the dominant position of the United States in international relations in practice, and the integration of China into such an international system.

They pay more attention in their foreign policy to keeping stability in the region. When the second North Korean nuclear crisis occurred, they perceived the incident in a broad context of international relations and Sino-U.S. relations rather than in a myopic focus on the Korean peninsula. From this perspective, North Korea has been viewed as a liability, destabilizing regional stability and core strategic interests of China. This group became a driving force in seeking to transform the relationship with North Korea into a normal “state-to-state” relationship. This was well-illustrated in that Wang Yi, then deputy minister of China’s foreign affairs, suggested the transformation in the process of reformulating China’s foreign policy after Hu Jintao came to power in 2002.15

In the case of a North Korean contingency, they would prefer much more cautious policies toward the United States and China’s military interventions, taking reactive approaches to the initiatives of the United States. In fact, they are reluctant to intervene in North Korea. North Korean contingency situations sharply increase regional instability and unpredictability, and become also a major hurdle to China’s development strategy. Hence, it must be avoided. According to their views, current situations are very different from those of the 1950s when China intervened militarily in the Korean War. The current world is not in a cold war, but post-Cold War period. From their perspective, the level and depth of China’s interdependence in the world cannot be compared to the period of the 1950s. The consequences of entering into another Korean War would be unbearable for China.

**Rising Great Power Diplomacy School**

The third group of thinkers, the Rising Great Power Diplomacy School are noteworthy. Although Chinese official foreign policy remains in languages of the second group, representing the growing confidence and nationalism in China, ideas of the third group are gradually gaining power among Chinese populace and elites. At the seventeenth party Congress, their voices were apparent.

Focusing more on the principle of “taking necessary steps” (yousozuowei) rather than “hide capacities and bide time” (taokuangyanghui),16 they argue that China must take much more active steps in placing its interests and policy agendas in the international society as a rising great power. Although fully recognizing the importance of the cooperative relationship with the United States and seeking to avoid direct and all-out confrontation against them, they are willing to take more risk in disputes and confrontation to gain more space for Chinese national interests should China’s core interests lie in the developing country diplomacy group. Strong views of this school can be found among young intellectuals in international relations, speaking English well, as well as in young Internet users. This group mainly comprises specialists in international relations and often raises strong voices on the North Korean nuclear issues in the context of regional or global security.17
When North Korea conducted the second nuclear test in 2009, Zhu Feng, professor of Beijing University, even described it as a “slap in the face of China.”18 Zhang Liangui, a North Korea specialist at the Institute of International Strategic Studies of the Central Party School, further argued that China is the immediate victim of North Korea’s nuclear test, ignoring China’s core interests and urged that China should use its influence to change North Korea’s policy.19

In case of a North Korean contingency, they are likely to favor playing more active roles as a great power in the region in dealing with the issue, as well as in protecting its national interests, although, they hope to avoid direct military intervention on the Korean peninsula. They are likely to oppose a unilateral intervention in North Korea either by the United States or South Korea but to promote multilateral interventions, such as by the United Nations, if necessary.

**Tentative evaluation**

Both the developing country diplomacy and the rising great power diplomacy schools evaluate the strategic value of North Korea in a broader context of international relations, rather than the traditional geopolitics school thinking over the strategic value of North Korea in traditional bilateral relations. These perspectives of the former tend to regard North Korea as a liability causing more problems and costs in terms of the relationship with the United States and economic development. North Korea is also fully aware of the evolving ideas of these schools and to North Korea unfavorable implications.

However, it is noteworthy that the perspectives in the former do not necessarily demand a drastic change of China’s North Korea policies because they are also well aware of complex strategic situations in Northeast Asia. Chinese technocrat political leaders are cautious and moderate in changing current foreign policies, favoring gradual approaches. Chinese decision-making practice also requires consensus. All these conditions contribute to a change-averse tendency as well as a coordination-favored attitude in the making of Korea policy.

Given the conditions and debates among different thinkers in China mentioned above, Chinese current policy on North Korean issues can be summarized as follows. First, maintaining stability and peace on the Korean peninsula is the top priority of China’s policy on the Korean peninsula. Second, North Korean nuclear issues should be resolved by peaceful means. Third, in case of regime change, North Korea must not have an anti-Chinese regime. And if possible, a pro-Chinese regime should be induced. Fourth, escalation into an international military conflict that would harm China’s development should be avoided. Fifth, it is too early to have a unified Korea and such must be resolved through international management. Sixth, in contingency, China opposes a U.S. intervention on the Korean peninsula and seeks bilateral compromise and agreements with South Korea as well as the United States. Finally, if the Korean issue cannot be resolved by bilateral negotiations, China prefers taking it to the UN. Taking Korean issues to the UN must be a realistic way for consensus among the competing schools. This option can satisfy the traditional thinkers by deterring the United States and South Korea from securing their influence in North Korea, the Developing Country Diplomacy School by avoiding conflicts and inducing cooperation with the United States, and the rising to great
power diplomacy school by allowing China to take a more active role in international politics.

These Chinese policies and interests will be counted upon even in the most serious situations of military intervention and adjusted depending on the U.S. position on military intervention, acknowledging South Korea’s position, and the future state of North Korea.

III. Readjustment of Sino-North Korea relations

New direction of diplomacy

The characteristic of China’s diplomacy during the Jiang Zemin era (1989–2002) can be best described in the “hide capacities and bide time” principle, the core idea of the Developing Country Diplomacy School. However, the one during the Hu Jintao era (2002–present) has been gradually changing into the way of “taking necessary steps,” the main idea of the rising great power diplomacy school.

China under Hu Jintao followed a more active diplomacy in pursuit of “the Great Power.” It added the principle of “cooperation,” while emphasizing the previous two mottos of “peace” and “development” in Jiang’s era. When the second North Korean nuclear crisis occurred at the early stage of Hu’s succession to power, Hu’s China overcame the previous position of hesitant intervention to external matters. Instead, it took up an active mediator role, and established a solid international image by successfully launching the Six-Party Talks.

Chinese leadership under Hu has elaborated mottos such as, “Peaceful Rise,” “Peaceful Development,” “Peace (harmony) First,” and “Harmonious World.”

China’s foreign policy has placed more weight on relations with neighboring countries compared to Jiang’s foreign policy. Since 2003, China doubled its foreign investment in neighboring countries, including Myanmar, Cambodia, Bangladesh, and North Korea.

Regarding great power relations, during Jiang’s era, China had already laid out a new perspective of international relations called the “New Security Concept,” which depicted great power relations in terms of non-zero sum nature, placing emphasis on mutual benefits and cooperation rather than conflict. The introduction of this concept was to send a strong signal to the world for China to be a country accepting the status quo in international relations. China’s foreign policies started operating under pragmatic principles in the security environments in the late 1990s, to maintain China’s priorities on economic development and adjustment to the post-Cold War order. China regarded relations with the United States as the most important bilateral relations and sought to avoid conflicts with the United States under all circumstances.

The pragmatic approach and the pursuit of a more active international role naturally led China to a strategic reevaluation of North Korea under Hu. China works on transforming the relationship with North Korea from “a special relationship” to “a normal state-to-state relationship” under Hu’s leadership. When the first North Korean nuclear crisis broke out in 1993, the Korean peninsula became a subject of great power politics, although the nature of relations with its neighboring countries still remained. Such dual characteristics of the Korean peninsula in the Chinese foreign policy complicated the Chinese objectives, laid out specifically in a mixture of strategic and short-term interests.
**Initial adjustments of North Korean policy**

In general, North Korea’s strategic value to China usually rises when tensions among competing major powers in the region grow stronger, and it is followed by a rise in North Korea’s negotiating leverage over China. Therefore, North Korea often relied upon its brinkmanship diplomacy in the wake of reconciliation between the United States and China. Hence, it is ironic that the more successful the Chinese objectives of “peaceful rise” or “harmonious world” diplomacy are, the less important is North Korea in its strategic value to China.23

As many variables affecting Sino-North Korean relations are becoming less favorable to North Korea, the only choice North Korea has to raise its strategic value is not to highlight its positive profile but to rely on the negative leverage24 that it gains via sowing crisis which, in turn, prompts an increase of its strategic importance to China. In other words, given the current predicament, North Korea’s strategic value to China does not depend on what advantages North Korea can provide China, but how much trouble it could bring to China.

The second North Korean nuclear crisis of October 2002 started almost simultaneously with the commencement of the Hu Jintao’s regime. The crisis threatened China’s status-quo policy in Northeast Asia and forced China to reexamine North Korea’s strategic value. In response to the second North Korean nuclear crisis, China chose to abandon its timid observer status by playing an active role in mediating no less than 50 messages between the United States and North Korea during early 2003, while persuading the regional powers into holding the Six-Party Talks.25 During sessions of the Six-Party Talks, China took on the political and economic burdens of hosting the Talks. In the Talks, China held steadfast on to the principles of “resolution through negotiation” and “stability on the Korean peninsula.” It also prevented North Korea from further isolation and destabilization by providing heavy oil and food assistance. During this period, China became a key trading partner and supplier of strategic materials to North Korea. As a result, North Korea’s trade dependence on China reached over 70 percent, compared to 32.7 percent in 2003.26

In consideration of the Bush administration’s aggressive policy against North Korea—calling North Korea part of an “axis of evil,” whereas it used to be referred to as a “rogue state,” China must have realized that its status-quo policy was insufficient to maintaining stability on the Korean peninsula.27 China has thus decided to react flexibly to the changed international environment by persuading North Korea and the United States to maintain peace and stability on the Korean peninsula, while preserving the Kim Jong II regime.

However, the assistance extended to North Korea did not necessarily mean that the Chinese sought to restore the past alliance relationship. Hu’s diplomacy is a continuance of Jiang’s in many ways. Based upon pragmatism, China’s top priority has been to maintain good relations with the United States, which is vital to continue its economic development. This supposition is not one that North Korea would welcome, as China will attempt to manipulate its relationship with North Korea in accordance with what it considers to be most pragmatic. In addition, the personal ties between the two countries continue to weaken, while in relative terms, the relationship between China and South Korea is moving beyond mere economic cooperation by entering the realm of political and military cooperation as well. In 2003, South Korea
and China established the comprehensive cooperative partnership and in 2008, eventually the strategic cooperative partnership.

According to a Chinese source, the Chinese leadership seemed to make a strategic decision to economically engage North Korea much more actively around 2004, which was likely to be the only tangible solution in China’s strategic interests. The Chinese leadership was afraid of the consequent collapse of the Kim Jong Il regime, due to the adoption of containment policy or coercive measures by China and the United States. In such a case, stability and security of Northeast China would be in great danger. In turbulence, China must confront South Korea and the United States over the control of the North Korean situation. As a result, China most likely would not achieve its ambitious plan to reach US$3,000 per capita by 2020.

The Chinese leadership hoped North Korea would adopt the Chinese model, along with the Chinese Northeast economic development project. Between October 28 and 30, 2005, and January 10 and 18, 2006, Hu Jintao and Kim Jong Il paid reciprocal visits to each other. The two countries were able to reaffirm their friendship through these visits, agreeing upon resolving the North Korean nuclear problem and strengthening their economic cooperation. China would likely maintain its special position toward North Korea by way of its political support for regime survival and economic assistance, all for the purpose of pursuing its national objectives and interests on the Korean peninsula as well as the rest of Northeast Asia. Both Hu and Kim proclaimed the strengthening of the bilateral relationship as a strategic measure.

When the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao met Kim Jong Il in January 2006, he proclaimed three Chinese principles on its active engagement policy over the North Korean economy: “government guidance, enterprise participation, and the market mechanism,” placing “government guidance” as the first in priority. Furthermore, in May 2006, the Chinese leadership informed North Korean Foreign Minister Paek Namsun during his visit to Beijing that China suggested providing massive economic aid to North Korea if the Six-Party Talks resumed. The aid package included massive investment of Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs), political loans, and establishment of industrial parks. Such active economic engagement policy by China raised concerns over its consequences in South Korea, which may lead to China’s political dominance over North Korea. However, such economic engagement packages were not fully implemented mainly due to the first North Korea nuclear test in October 2006.

The Six-Party Talks must have increased the level of mistrust between North Korea and China. China pursued tension alleviation on the Korean peninsula at the expense of North Korea only for its economic development and strategic interests, and wanted to avoid direct conflict with the United States. On the other hand, North Korea responded with brinkmanship diplomacy, betting its regime survival, which imperiled China’s status-quo diplomacy. From the North Korean perspective, China was a selfish actor driven by its own interests, not a mediator for North Korea. It may have seemed that China was more interested in maintaining stability rather than siding with North Korea and solving the problem.

However, from the Chinese perspective, North Korea has been a troublemaker that may aggravate Chinese relations with the United States, rather than remain as a traditional blood-shared ally or important strategic partner. In order to manage North Korea, it has clearly maintained pragmatic policies in political aspects while
intending to influence North Korea by pursuing an active engagement policy in economical aspects.

It was obvious that China suffered its limits of influence over North Korean behavior when North Korea tested its nuclear device in October 2006 despite China’s strong warning. The test also proved that the level of mutual trust was not yet enough to prevent the test. Until the test, China’s policy toward the Korean peninsula had sought multiple objectives but priorities had not been formulated.

In a series of debates since the nuclear test, China’s policy priorities became apparent. The most important was to maintain stability; the second was to support the Kim Jong Il regime survival thus guaranteeing the stability of North Korea; and the third was denuclearization. These priorities would serve as a long-term Chinese policy objective to enhance its influence and ability to shape events on the Korean peninsula.30

In spite of China’s resentment and the high level of distrust against North Korea after the test, China adopted such policies for the following reasons. First, a high level of distrust of the United States existed. After the test, the United States adopted a conciliatory policy toward North Korea while China implemented the UN sanctions, making China embarrassed.31 Second, the military option would not be realistic. Third, there is little possibility of the collapse of the North Korean regime. Fourth, there was an assumption that the North Korean nuclear program would be a playing card for bluffing. Fifth, North Korea would be destabilized if China mobilized its strategic resources to force North Korea to give up its nuclear program. Sixth, the consequences of North Korea’s destabilization or regime collapse would have negative impacts on China’s core interests.

IV. North Korea’s second nuclear test and China’s responses

North Korea’s second nuclear test

In spite of strong warnings from the international community, in particular from China, North Korea conducted its second nuclear test on May 25, 2009, informing China, the United States and Russia only 30 minutes before the actual test was conducted.

The test yielded about 4kt TNT, which is 3kt TNT more compared to the about 0.5 to 0.8kt TNT yielded in the test of October 9, 2006. Although it is still short of the explosion energy released by the Hiroshima (15kt) and Nagasaki (22kt) bombs, North Korea has been surely successful in improving its nuclear capability and proved to be a grave threat to South Korea as well as the stability in the region.

There were two major explanations for North Korea’s pursuit of a nuclear weapons program. The first explanation was to regard it as a bargaining chip for North Korea for negotiations with the United States in order to get security guarantees and economic aid for regime survival. North Korea would not actually develop nuclear weapons if the United States takes the demands of North Korea seriously. Most Chinese Korea-hands and South Korean experts on North Korea have supported this assumption. The position of the Chinese government in the Six-Party Talks was also based on this line of assumption.

Meanwhile, scholars in international relations in China and conservatives in Korea and the United States have insisted that acquisition of nuclear weapons would be the
objective itself of North Korea for regime survival. Among Korea hands in China, Zhang Liangui, Professor of the party school has exceptionally been an arduous supporter of this view. The underlying idea of these groups was that the Six-Party Talks had been accepted by North Korea just to buy time to develop its nuclear capability and to get more economic aid.

The test has obviously strengthened the position of those advocating the latter—North Korea has not simply been bluffing—it has seriously and continuously been developing nuclear weapons. The Six-Party Talks as a major means for denuclearization and the reputation of China as the chair of the talks were seriously damaged.

Responses by Chinese academics and Internet users
It is not new that there are divergent academic views on North Korea in China. In China, after the test, on May 30, the Global Times (Huanqiushibao), a newspaper with close party ties, published its survey result of the responses by 20 top Chinese foreign affairs experts on whether China should support harsher economic sanctions on North Korea. The results were split right down the middle, and the Hong-Kong based news outlet Duowei News has termed these findings the “Shockwave of Fifty-Fifty.”

In internal debates after the test, positions for the traditional geopolitics were most seriously damaged. The Developing Country Diplomacy School, which is still considered a major line of China’s foreign policy, was frustrated, and the voices of rising great power diplomacy advocates were getting louder. The Rising Great Power Diplomacy School strongly urged tougher actions against North Korea.

For example, Professor Zhu Feng of Beijing University was quoted as saying publicly that North Korea has become a “strategic burden” for China by framing North Korea’s nuclear test as contrary to what China wants to achieve in Northeast Asia for both short- and medium-term objectives.

Professor Zhang Liangui participated in an online China News Agency Forum on May 25, 2009, and made the following comments:

North Korea’s 2nd nuclear test constitutes an unprecedented danger which the PRC has not experienced for thousands of years. North Korea nuclear test was conducted according to a premeditated and predetermined policy. To become a nuclear power has been a national policy for decades, and we should not see the 2nd test merely as North Korea playing nuclear cards to get more attention and economic aid.

He emphasized that the North Korean nuclear crisis is a crisis of nuclear proliferation and is a concern of regional security for North Korea’s neighbors. In particular, he lamented that the test was so close to Chinese territory. He concluded that the international community should take quick action now to prevent further nuclearization on the Korean peninsula and in Northeast Asia. Professor Zhu Feng from Beijing University and Professor Shen Dingli, Director of Center for American Studies of Fudan University all voiced similar concerns about North Korea as well.

It is also noteworthy that as of June 11, 2009, in an Internet survey conducted by the Global Times, Chinese participants also agreed that China would get more detrimental impact from the test than any other countries. About 62 percent of Chinese participants supported sanctions against North Korea and about 70 percent of participants recognized the necessity for change of China’s North Korea policy.
All these statements and public polls illustrate that perceptions of Chinese think-tanks and scholars on North Korea are changing negatively. Although there has been no manifest sign of policy change toward North Korea, such perceptional changes may provide a solid ground for and facilitate a policy change in the near future.

**Chinese government’s responses**

The Sino-North Korea relationship is changing from a “special” to a normal relationship in formal Chinese statements. After the test, China’s policy toward North Korea illustrated how much uneasiness there was. However, China still adopted a “balanced” strategy between South and North Korea, and between giving incentives and putting on pressure. The nature of China’s North Korea policy seemingly has not been changed.

The second nuclear test seriously damaged China’s reputation as the Six-Party-Talks coordinator. The function of the Six-Party Talks to prevent North Korea from becoming a nuclear power was seriously questioned. In addition, the test shook the Chinese position, based upon a card-playing theory that North Korea’s nuclear weapons issue can be resolved by removing security problems of North Korea and providing economic aid through negotiations.

China fell into a strategic dilemma. Although China continued to warn North Korea not to undertake another nuclear test as North Korea’s nuclearization is against China’s primary interests, North Korea completely ignored China’s demands in the year of Sino-North Korea friendship. It is stunning in that China provides 90 percent of oil, 80 percent of commodities, and 45 percent of food aid to North Korea. As Professor Zhang pointed out, North Korea’s test became a tremendous challenge to China’s foreign policy.38

The initial response of the Chinese government to the test was not as emotional as the one after the first test had been carried out. However, given the previous practices, China sent North Korea a signal of its resolute opposition to the test. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs solemnly and quickly announced that, “North Korea ignored universal opposition of the international community and once more conducted the nuclear test. The Chinese government is resolutely opposed to it.”39 China also canceled the schedule of Chen Zhili, vice-Chair of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress (NPC), to visit North Korea as a signal of unease.

On the next day when North Korea tested, China’s Minister of Defense Liang Guanglie met Korea’s Minister of Defense and expressed his resolute opposition to the test and North Korea’s possession of nuclear weapons.40 Given Chinese practice, the meeting and statement were unusual and exceptional. The PLA has been traditionally known as a bulwark of the traditional geopolitics school and a strong supporter for North Korea. A top leader of the PLA publicly criticized North Korea’s behaviors in front of a Korean military leader.

The leader of the 5th generation of China, Xi Jinping also publicly expressed his resolute opposition to the test.41, 42 Mr. Xi has been known to be very much reserved and discrete. His remarks signaled that even the next generation of China would resolutely oppose North Korea’s nuclear weapons. Given that Liang and Xi are not in the line of foreign affairs kou, it was extremely rare for them to express their views publicly in such a sensitive period.
China obviously revealed its unease against North Korea’s succession to Kim Jong Un, Kim Jong Il’s third son, by publicly dealing with the lineage of Kim’s family in the first issue in July of *World Knowledge (shijiezhishi)* sponsored by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.\(^43\) It was an extremely rare way in China although China would not intervene in North Korea’s domestic affairs should North Korea make such a decision.

On the other hand, China has still sought to leave a diplomatic space for negotiations with North Korea. China quickly absorbed reality and concluded that current policies toward North Korea be maintained. At the risk of confrontation with the United States and South Korea, China tried to tone down UN Resolution 1874 although it agreed to adopt a strengthened sanction against North Korea. China also established a hotline with North Korea while keeping its eyes on America’s informal contacts with North Korea.

China’s policy priorities in regard to North Korea were set in internal debates after North Korea’s first nuclear test. Chinese scholars often describe that

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\text{to maintain the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula is the objective of Chinese policy on the North Korean nuclear issue; the dialogue mechanism is the best way to achieve the objective; and to preserve peace and stability on the peninsula is the natural result after the objective is achieved.}^44
\]

However, there was a little twist. The most crucial one is to maintain stability and peace on the Korean peninsula. Given the consequences of instability and contingency on the Korean peninsula and China’s internal vulnerability, the goal has the most important strategic implication. The second is to maintain the Kim Jong Il regime in order to maintain stability in North Korea. The third is denuclearization. Even after the second test, the priorities have not been changed because strategic environments have not changed from a Chinese perspective.

China would not take any initiative against North Korea by mobilizing its resources before the United States surely demonstrates its determination by taking initiatives.\(^45\) China made an unpleasant and embarrassing experience after the first test. To abide by UN Resolution 1718, China had even prohibited sending a chocolate pie to North Korea. In the meantime, the United States held secret negotiations with North Korea in Berlin, Germany, and eventually compromised to reach the 2.13 agreement.\(^46\) China is afraid of playing the bad cop role and ruining the relationship with North Korea without any strategic benefits.

Although Chinese leaders, think-tanks, and the public have all been angered by North Korea’s nuclear test, the Chinese government will not make any drastic changes in its policies against North Korea without any change of strategic environments forcing them to adjust their current policies. On the other hand, it may be paying more attention to and be willing to discuss a “plan B” with other countries given the increasing danger of instability in North Korea and the negative consequences of nuclear proliferation in North Korea. As for the Six-Party Talks, China will continue to try to resume the talks although it recognizes the limits of the mechanism to prevent North Korea from being a nuclear state. China hopes to maintain a momentum of negotiation under the situation of no obvious alternative. Furthermore, China is seeking to take this mechanism as a foundation of multi-security mechanism in this region eventually replacing the bilateral alliance system.\(^47\)
Conclusion

The role of China is regarded as the most uncertain but important single variable among external forces in dealing with North Korea. However, it is not easy to identify China’s position on North Korean issues. This paper suggests that understanding strategic schools and debates in China is crucial in deciphering China’s evolving North Korea policies.

In general, Chinese foreign policy has been characterized as “responsive” rather than “initiative.” Chinese are believed to be not good at making detailed action plans. They like to set up principles and react to challenges rather flexibly combining situations with principles. The characteristic of China’s leadership, technocrats, and decision-making culture are rather resistant to any change. China’s policy principles related to North Korea well illustrate such a conservative nature when applied in practice.

However, it is noteworthy that even in China, various groups of strategic thinking in International Relations exist on China’s role in North Korean issues. North Korea’s incessant provocations have effects on mobilizing the Developing Country Diplomacy School as well as the Rising Great Power Diplomacy School against North Korea. Such incidences would soon reverse the previously mentioned rule of thumb of North Korea’s strategic value rising alongside regional tensions, calling into question in China, again, the strategic value of North Korea.

China still maintains its previous policy priorities at askance, but since North Korea’s second nuclear test, the contents have been changing reflecting the changing security environments and its recalculation of national interests. Currently increasing strategic cooperation between China and the United States would change the mathematics of China over North Korea’s strategic values as well.

The continuance of the North Korean nuclear crisis is a great burden for both South Korea and China. North Korea’s brinkmanship diplomacy forces China to dance in between its conflicting policy objectives. From China’s perspective, a continued nuclear crisis would instigate the conservative sectors of the United States, South Korea, and Japan which could cause conflicts with China, not to mention an escalation of military tension in the region. If the United States resorted to an extreme policy, this could leave China in an extremely awkward position. China must also consider the dismal consequence, the destabilization of North Korea if China and the international community adopted harsh sanctions against North Korea.

From China’s point of view, the most cost-effective option is to convince North Korea to resolve the problem as quickly and peacefully as possible while encouraging neighboring countries to provide assistance to North Korea for the sake of economic stability and regime security. However, China also recognizes that their wishful thinking is not easy to realize in the real world. Chinese perceptions of North Korea have deteriorated along with the North Korean nuclear crisis. However, Chinese foreign policy on North Korea has not yet been changed because security environments have yet to be transformed into a situation China favors. On the surface, paradoxically, China’s policies toward North Korea are to adopt a massive engagement package, including continuous economic assistance and strengthening military exchanges, in order to dissuade North Korea’s nuclear ambition while increasing China’s influence.
The more the North Korean nuclear crisis deepens, threatening peace and stability on the Korean peninsula, the more China will positively think over North Korea’s contingency intensifying cooperation with the United States. In this transition, the stronger the third group of strategic thinkers, the less diplomatic space exists for North Korea. North Korea would stop being a buffer zone but a strategic burden in their perspective, transforming China’s relations with North Korea from special relations to normal state-to-state relations.

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Notes
1. According to a Chinese official source, it became effective on September 10, 1986. See http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjwb/zzjg/yls/glgb2701/. Although Chinese official sources never mentioned that the treaty was nullified, Chinese scholars and officials often argue that the treaty is de facto ineffective.
3. Regarding this argument, see Hongseo Park, “Wooing the Foe’s partner?: US and China’s alliance strategies toward the two Koreas in their power transition,” Korean Political Science Review 42, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 302.
5. In particular, see Cheng, “Debates on Ideology or Security.”
6. Regarding Sino-North Korean relations, Policy Planning Bureau, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic of China, ed., China’s Diplomacy (Beijing: Shijiezhishi Publisher, 2007), 100. Yan Xuetong, Director of Institute of International Studies at Qinghua University, also made a similar argument when he attended the South Korea–China Future Forum held on June 16, 2009. See also the declassified documents, Schaefer, “North Korean ‘Adventurism’”; Person, “Limits of the ‘Lips and Teeth’ Alliance”; Armstrong, Juche and North Korea’s Global Aspirations.” In 2008, China also established a traditional friendly cooperative relationship with Albania.
9. International Crisis Group Report regarded the Developing Country Diplomacy School and the Rising Great Power Diplomacy School as one group called strategists. However, strategists have evolved into the two since 2002. See also the report by the International

10. For example, they are Yu Meihua from the China Reform Forum, Qi Baoliang from the China Institute for Contemporary International Relations, Yu Shaohua from the China Institute of International Studies, Piao Jianyi from the Chinese Academy of Social Science, and Wang Yisheng from the Chinese Academy of Military Science.

11. It comes from the author’s unpublished survey data conducted in December 2008 with specialists on the Korean peninsula or international relations in China. The sample number was 30.


14. For example, they are Wang Jisi, Director of the School of International Relations at Beijing University, Qin Yaqing, Vice-president of the Chinese University of Foreign Affairs, Wang Yizhou, Deputy Director at the Institute of World Economics and Politics of the Chinese Academy of Social Science, Li Bin, Vice Director at the Study of International Relations of Qinghua University, and Yang Jiemian, President of the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies. They were early supporters of China’s participation in multinational organizations in the late 1990s and early 2000s.


17. For example, they are Jin Canrong, Deputy Chair of the School of International Relations at People’s University, Yan Xuetong, Director of the Institute of International Relations at Qinghua University, Zhu Feng, from Beijing University, Sun Zhe from Qinghua University, Zhang Liangui from the Party School, Shen Dingli, Director at the Center for American Studies of Shanghai Fudan University, Ren Xiao from Shanghai Fudan University, Zhang Debin from Shanghai Fudan University.


20. This slogan is met with a certain reservation in China and it is still debated on whether it is appropriate.


31. For more detail see Scott Snyder, *China’s Rise and the Two Koreas* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2009), ch. 7.
32. For more details of different schools, see Heungkyu Kim, “Possible Scenarios for North Korea’s Contingency, Chinese Position, and Implications for Korea” (paper presented at the first workshop with CFK and Asian Society, Washington, D.C., January 12–13, 2009), 3–5.
45. Based upon author’s interviews with Qin Yaqing, Vice-President of China’s Foreign Affairs University, and Yan Xuetong, Director, Institute of International Relations of Qinghua University, who are leading figures in China.
46. The 2007 agreement among the six-party members defining initial steps to implement denuclearization of North Korea.
47. For a discussion of this line of argument, see Qingguo Jia, “Chinese Perspective: Alliance System and Comprehensive Security in East Asia” (paper presented at EAI Roundtable on a ROK–U.S. Alliance for the twenty-first century, Seoul, EAI, November 3, 2009); and Shulong Chu, “New Emergence Security Arrangements in Asia” (paper presented at EAI Roundtable on a ROK–U.S. Alliance for the twenty-first century, Seoul, EAI, November 3, 2009). See also the summary of Canrong Jin’s presentation (Korea Foundation on China’s Foreign Policy and the Korean Peninsula, KFES no. 3, 2009) Nb. This was published in pamphlet form and circulated to a small number of people. Please contact the author for further details.

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