6月

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10月

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12月

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4月

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3

NORTH KOREA — A YEAR OF CRISIS

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(translated by Linda Jaivin)

Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump
Source: ML Martin, Flickr

ON 3 SEPTEMBER 2017, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) conducted its sixth nuclear test at the Punggye-ri Nuclear Test Site in Kilju county. That evening, Pyongyang's national television station announced that this hydrogen bomb test, the largest to date, had been a complete success, further claiming that the test had not resulted in any radioactive fallout or harmed the surrounding environment. China, however, has had to deal with plenty of fallout in the sphere of international relations, Sino-American relations in particular.¹

A Crisis Detonates

A few months earlier, on 28 July, North Korea fired a guided missile. It flew at an altitude of 3,000 kilometres for forty-five minutes. Experts estimate a possible effective range of 10,000 kilometres, making it capable of reaching cities in the United States including Denver and Chicago. On 29 August, North Korea launched a guided missile from a site close to Pyongyang. It was the first to fly across Japanese territory, landing in the Pacific Ocean, 1,180 kilometres east of Cape Erimo. Two weeks later, it launched another guided missile along a similar trajectory, which landed in the ocean, 2,200 kilometres east of the cape. North Korea continued to conduct ever-larger nuclear tests, including of missiles it claims are capable of carrying nuclear payloads, attracting widespread international concern.

On 4 September, the United Nations Security Council convened an emergency session, unanimously passing a resolution concerning new sanctions (Resolution 2375) against North Korea one week later. The decision forbade the purchase of North Korean textiles and the sale of natural gas liquids, banned new hiring of North Korean labour, and demanded the closing of all joint enterprises with North Korea. The resolution, which was drafted by the US, originally proposed to ban all petroleum exports to North Korea, but China and Russia only agreed to setting quotas for refined petroleum: two million barrels per year from 1 January 2018.

Shen Zhihua 沈志华, a pioneering Chinese historian of the Korean War, publically urged Beijing to reassess its long-standing policies towards North Korea.² Quoting Mao Zedong's dictum 'Who are our friends? Who are our enemies? This is a question of the first importance for the revolution', he said that this was also a pressing issue for China in North-East Asia. He noted that 'Sino-Korean friendship' was no longer what it used to be, and should be seen as a holdover from the Cold War, much like the opposition to North Korea of the US, Japan, and South Korea.

Shen pointed out that stability on China's borders was crucial to the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative. The Korean Peninsula

was not the only site of tension on China's borders: Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, Burma, India, and Mongolia, he said, were all causing China anxiety. Meanwhile, the establishment of formal relations between China and South Korea in 1992 undermined the political foundation of the Sino-Korean relationship. China and North Korea had grown apart in foreign affairs, economics, and politics; the alliance had crumbled; and the short-term outlook for an improvement in relations was not good. What is more, with each North Korean atomic test, America

had ramped up its military power in North-East Asia, and this, in turn, had led to North Korea carrying out another test. The result was an intensification of the cycle of North Korean atomic testing and the increase in America's military presence; this put pressure on both China and South Korea. While attending to the potential risks of a change in its North Korea policy, China needed to decide whether, if Sino-American political cooperation cannot restrain North Korea, the two countries ought to consider military cooperation as well.

Opinions like this have naturally attracted the ire of Chinese nationalists, who have accused Shen of selling out China's sworn ally and even selling out China itself. Some even claim that he might be an American spy. China's official media reported neither on Professor Shen's ideas nor the controversy around them.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi 王毅 has expressed China's firm opposition to and strong condemnation of North Korea's nuclear tests.³ He has also stated that based on China's opposition to Western domination of international relations theories (which stress 'hegemonic stability' and the imposition of universal values, while diminishing individual

Shen Zhihua

Source: Wikimedia Commons

Wang Yi

Source: Wikimedia Commons

sovereignty), the correct path to de-nuclearising the Korean Peninsula lies in actively constructing a new form of international relations based on win-win cooperation and negotiation. He went further to say that the choices were stark: for the situation to heat up to the point of conflict or even war, or for all sides to cool down and focus on political and diplomatic solutions to the nuclear question.

In discussion in the UN General Assembly on 21 September, Wang stated that the joint declaration and roadmap

for the de-nuclearisation of the Korean peninsula set out by the six-party talks of twelve years ago (China, US, Russia, North Korea, South Korea, and Japan) stood on the correct side of history and, therefore, would never go out of date. He said: 'no matter how the situation develops, no matter how long it takes, and no matter what difficulties are encountered along the way, we all must hold fast to the goal of denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula, and persist in dialogue and negotiation, and firmly guard the peace and stability of the area.'

Containing the Fallout

China strictly censors official news reports touching on the tests, as well as debate and discussion online. China Central Television stopped all reporting on the nuclear tests after 4 September. The *Global Times* wrote and then cancelled an editorial on the subject and an article published on the *People's Daily* Weibo account was then deleted. And in the weeks following 4 September, on sites including sina.com 新浪, the phrase 'hydrogen bomb' 氢弹 entered the lexicon of banned 'sensitive' words. But Chinese

netizens have long figured out how to get around Internet controls, and the Korean nuclear issue remains a hot topic as these examples show:

We have to change the situation of Chinese people adopting the American standpoint in looking at problems... the North Korean nuclear tests are in the interest of promoting peace. With a North Korea actively opposing America on its doorstep, China has no reason to reject this.

Korea is China's bargaining chip. This kid, North Korea, tends to be disobedient, but no way would it dare to resist China, so China has an absolute right to take the initiative. China and North Korea's historical origins and practical needs are based in geopolitics... it's best not to fight any war, but if a war starts, then China's only choice is resist America and aid Korea.

The crisis on the Korean peninsula has led to America needing China's help, and this is a very good opportunity for China. China must not simply grant their wishes. We ought to tell America, if you continue your provocations in the South China Sea, China won't help you on the Korean peninsula. Let's see who blinks first! This kind of discourse would quickly be criticised as trading off Korea for the South China Sea, selling out a friend and seeking praise for it, which is both immoral and unjust. But then some would say it's the lesser of two evils, and to sell out a friend is better than to sell out your country: selling out a friend offends morality, but selling out your country offends the law.

Chinese netizens also mocked Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's call on China to carry out a strict economic boycott of North Korea, and Foreign Minister Julie Bishop expressed hope that China would consider cutting off North Korea's supply of oil while worrying that this could prompt a trade war between China and the US. They have directed sharper abuse at the Taiwan authorities, who have both blamed North Ko-

Australian graffiti artist Lush Sux's portraits of Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un, Vienna

Source: Wikimedia Commons

rea for destroying the region's peace and called on all parties not to use Taiwan as a bargaining chip.

In October 2017, the Workers' Party of Korea sent a congratulatory message to the Chinese Communist Party on the opening of the Nineteenth National Party Congress in Beijing. That evening, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences commented on television that this showed that while the nuclear tests had strained Sino-Korean bilateral relations, the relationship between the two ruling parties had not been adversely affected. Several days later, on the day the Congress was closing, Professor Qi Kai 戚凯 of the China and Overseas Security Research Institute of People's University wrote in a much-noted article in the *Financial Times*' Chinese language site (which is blocked in China itself) that it had been a grave error on China's part not to have stopped the rapid development of North Korea's nuclear capability.⁴ This left China, Qi wrote, unable to either advance or retreat. China's diplomacy on the Korean peninsula was based on a vision of good relations with both North and South Korea, the emergence of a relatively prosperous North Korea, and the maintenance of China's traditional influence over North Korea. These three points would, in turn, enhance China's sway on the Korean peninsula and North-East Asian af-

fairs, and enhance its influence regarding Japan and America. There is a big gap between what is hoped for and the way things are. Chinese diplomacy around Korean nuclearisation deteriorated into paranoia more than ten years ago during the six-party negotiations — unexpectedly, these negotiations had been intended to solve concrete problems but became a contest for influence and a stage for displaying power. After the talks, to which Chinese media gave unprecedented twenty-four-hour coverage, concluded, the venue opened to visitors at one hundred yuan per ticket. Qi described all of this as part of China's craving to be seen as a major power, even if it pays for such glory by sacrificing the rationality and judgement it needs in diplomacy.

Professor Qi has written that China ought to take a few profound lessons from the question of Korean nuclearisation: that the process of becoming a great country requires taking a long-term strategic view, rational thought, and the ability to judge both strength and the chance of success.

In October, China's Ministry of Commerce requested all regions of China to carry out the United Nations' decision of 12 September within 120 days. While North Korean firms and joint ventures would be shut during that time, North Korean workers could continue working in China until their contracts are up. This included the entertainers at Beijing's Myohyangsan and other cold noodle restaurants, attendants at the hotel of the Huaxi Village Socialist New Farm, construction workers in Shenyang, and auto parts workers in Dandong.

Fire with Fire, Freeze for Freeze

On 20 October, Choe Son-hui 崔善姬, chief of the North American department of North Korea's foreign ministry, described nuclear capability to be 'a matter of life and death' for North Korea. The country, she said, would not negotiate on this issue with the US, which simply had to peacefully co-exist with North Korea as nuclear-armed nations, or it would 'return fire with fire'. According to Russia's state news agency, *Rossiya Segodnya*, the

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, speaking at a non-proliferation conference in Moscow, stressed the importance of diplomacy for the resolution of the crisis, and that the most important goal was to prevent the outbreak of military conflict, lest it lead to a major catastrophe. He urged the international community to support the Russian–Chinese Roadmap for peace on the peninsula. The roadmap consists of three phases: a ‘freeze for freeze’ (North Korea to stop missile and nuclear tests in exchange for the US and Korea suspending their joint military exercises); direct diplomatic talks between Washington and Pyongyang, and Seoul and Pyongyang; and, finally, multilateral talks to ensure both regional and global security. Both Russia and China are concerned that the crisis will lead to a further build-up of American military power in their region.

THAAD missile launch

Source: Wikimedia Commons

Meanwhile, the *China Daily* reported that during the period of China’s National Day and eight-day Golden Week holiday, no Chinese tour groups travelled to South Korea, which, for the last decade, has been one of Chinese tourists’ top destinations. The paper reported that this was a result of South Korea’s deployment of the Terminal

High Altitude Area Defense system (THAAD). This was a well-planned protest, and not solely about THAAD.

At a regular press conference of Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang 耿爽 on 23 October, a reporter asked: ‘According to the latest trade figures released today, in the past nine months of this year, China’s trade with the DPRK raised by 3.7 per cent. China’s exports to North Korea increased by twenty-one per cent, while imports from North Korea dropped by sixteen per cent. What do these figures mean in terms of how enthusiastic China is in enforcing relevant UN Security Council resolutions?’⁵

Geng answered:

First of all, China has been comprehensively, accurately, earnestly and strictly implementing the DPRK-related resolutions adopted by the UN Security Council and fulfilling its due international obligations. There is no doubt about that. Second, as close neighbours, China and the DPRK maintain normal exchanges and cooperation. Third, I want to stress, as is stated in the Security Council resolutions, that measures imposed are not intended to have adverse humanitarian consequences for the civilian population of the DPRK or to affect negatively or restrict those activities, including economic activities and cooperation, food aid and humanitarian assistance, that are not prohibited by resolutions.

Geng stressed that the use of military force would only create more trouble.

Postscript: Political Games

The XXIII Olympics Winter Games opened on 9 February 2018 in Pyeongchang. The meticulously planned opening included the dramatic entry of North and South Korean athletes together under the Korean Unification Flag. North Korea's formal head of state, the ninety-year-old Kim Yong-nam travelled to Pyeongchang at Kim Jong-un's behest, along with Kim Yo-jong, Kim Jong-un's younger sister, who was the first of the Kim dynasty to step onto South Korean soil. This seemed to be a very big turning point in the resolution of the crisis. However, the real drama had taken place the day before.

On 8 February, 50,000 people, along with missile launching vehicles, took part in a military parade to mark the seventieth anniversary of North Korea's army. Kim Jong-un made a speech on the occasion, saying that the military parade was a demonstration to the outside world of North Korea's position as a military power. He declared that invaders would not take even 0.001 millimetres of territory or be allowed to harm the dignity and

US Vice-President Mike Pence and South Korea's President Moon Jae-in at Pyeongchang 2018 Winter Olympics
Source: euronews, Flickr

autonomy of the sacred motherland. The army originally celebrated its foundation day on 25 April; this was the first year the date was moved to 8 February, prompting observers to speculate that it was a show of strength on the eve of the Olympics.

Also on 8 February, a sponsor of the Pyeongchang Olympics, Samsung Group, donated one of their limited-edition Winter Olympics smartphones to every athlete taking part in the games, except for those from North Korea and Iran. The reasoning was that the phones were luxury items, and therefore could not be given to citizens of two countries under economic embargoes. The Iranians and North Koreans objected, and after arbitration by the International Olympic Committee, it was decided that the Iranian athletes could have the phones, but not the North Koreans.

Several days before the opening of the Games, American Vice-President Mike Pence said that he did not rule out the possibility of meeting members of the North Korean delegation in Pyeongchang. The official newspaper of Pyongyang's ruling Workers Party, however, made it clear that its delegation did not plan to meet up with their American counterparts, that it had never asked for such a meeting, and had no intention to use the games for political purposes. By the time Pence arrived on the 8th, the line had changed: there was no chance of contact, and he had requested the South Korean government to ensure that the routes taken by the

two parties would never cross. Pence's communications director later told the *Washington Post*: 'We are not going to let the North Korea propaganda machine hijack the messaging of the Olympics'.⁶

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, meanwhile, at a press conference in Beijing, told reporters that as the biggest neighbour of the Korean peninsula, China supported the 'positive interactions' of the two sides in Pyeongchang. He hoped this would be the first step towards the gradual establishment of dialogue and negotiation between the two Koreas. At the same time, however, he warned that they were unlikely to be able to do this, and that South Korea alone would not convince Pyongyang to denuclearise, without support and mutual efforts from all parties — meaning the six parties. The long and twisting road of the dream of peace has ended up where it began.

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