

Leif-Eric Easley, "China's Changing View of North Korea: Pyongyang's provocations may reshape Beijing's strategic interests," *Christian Science Monitor*, July 7, 2009; republished by *Yahoo News*, *USA Today*, *RealClearWorld*, *Las Vegas Tribune* and the *Arizona Daily Sun*; unauthorized Chinese translations appeared in *SingTao Daily* (Hong Kong) and *CCTV Online* (China).

North Korea's provocations are testing more than weapons and diplomacy. Pyongyang has again grabbed international headlines with its nuclear and missile tests, illegal trade and humanitarian violations. Recent actions by the United Nations, South Korea, Japan and United States, while well developed and coordinated, are alone insufficient. An effective long-term international response to North Korea hinges on how national identity changes underway in China reshape Beijing's strategic interests toward Pyongyang.

Owing to Beijing's historical and military relations with Pyongyang, and North Korea's increasing economic dependence on China, analysts have argued that the Chinese leadership holds the key to solving the "North Korea problem." But the Obama administration understands, as did the Bush administration, that exerting maximum and overt pressure on Beijing would be counterproductive.

The reason is that China has long seen its national interests served by the status quo on the Korean Peninsula. According to a Cold War perspective about strategic balance and a post-Cold War emphasis on internal development, Beijing prioritized maintaining a buffer state and preventing North Korea's problems from spilling over China's border. While Beijing retains these priorities, the chances of it getting tough with Pyongyang are low, regardless of external prodding.

However, the China of today is not the China that came to Pyongyang's aid during the Korean War – its national identity has evolved over decades of rapid development and international integration. The ideas of communist solidarity and laying low to focus on modernization are becoming obsolete to the Chinese people and the ruling elite.

Instead, China covets its traditional role at the center of Asia, entailing not only power, but also respect and responsibility. Such ambition is possible thanks to the success of an economic model that has brought China closer to the U.S., Japan and South Korea. Meanwhile, Pyongyang's bellicosity and failed economy have left North Korea isolated.

China's growing identity gap with North Korea shows signs of changing the way China views its own interests. Chinese now ask whether Beijing underestimates the strategic costs of a nuclear-armed North Korea, the reputational costs of being the largest backer of the Kim regime, and the economic costs of a disobedient client state.

There are also questions about whether China overestimates the usefulness of a buffer against American and South Korean forces, the challenge of North Korean refugees fleeing across the border, and the probability of international military conflict on the Korean Peninsula. Given China's globalization and the responsible great power it wants to become, the costs of maintaining an ally relationship with North Korea may come to surpass the costs of abandoning it.

The policy priority for Washington, Seoul and Tokyo should be to stay on the same page, especially through this period of North Korean leadership transition. Pyongyang's belligerence provides an opportunity to fundamentally attract Beijing to the allies' position and institutionalize regional security cooperation. Nuclear proliferation, illegal arms tests and trade, and holding foreign journalists for ransom are becoming anathemas to Chinese identity.

This does not mean that zero-sum thinking about political and economic influence on the strategic Korean Peninsula will suddenly disappear. However, the long-term interests that China shares with Japan, South Korea and the United States will become increasingly apparent.

Pyongyang's provocations are testing how China's changing national identity shapes its strategic interests and ultimately foreign policy. The extent to which Beijing cooperates with Washington, Tokyo and Seoul hangs in the balance.

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