

Debunking Chinese Thinking on a Peace Agreement and Peace Regime for the Korean Peninsula

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At least for the time being, China's foreign policy goals are focused on the preservation of the status quo in its peripheries, including the Korean Peninsula. China sees its long absence of war or military conflict as evidence of the well-preserved peace and stability of its security environment. Conversely, it conceives that this status quo has been conducive to achieving its foremost national goal, economic modernization. It continues to strive to improve its security environment within the equilibrium.

There seems to be one growing exception, however, in the case of the Korean Peninsula, however. China's support for the replacement of the Korean War Armistice with a peace agreement and a peace regime is in stark contrast to its status quo policy. Given China's long advocacy as a peace-loving nation, it seems only logical that putting an end to Korea's current technically-at-war status would make sense. Beijing has its own reasoning and logic behind its supportive call for a new peace arrangement on the peninsula. A confrontational international structure around the peninsula, for instance, can only be overcome by a peace agreement, a precondition necessitated by the Armistice. Hence, a peace agreement before normalization of this structure is perceived to be path-dependent.

However, serious challenges arise if a call for a peace agreement and regime is put forth without much thinking regarding the strategic implications. Chinese scholars and experts tend to overlook this factor in

their appraisal. On the surface, theirs is a just and righteous call that a peace agreement must replace the Armistice. It is critical to the installment of "perpetual peace" on the peninsula. It is also logical that such peace can be guaranteed by forging a peace regime, an assurance mechanism that will supplement the "peace" endowed by the agreement.

If Chinese claims are correct, why are they not embraced by others? There must be something wrong in what the Chinese widely believe. Although their analysis of the imperatives for a peace agreement and regime is undeniable, as we shall see, their call for a peace agreement and regime still remains contradictory to the status quo orientation of their mother country's foreign policy. Moreover, their work seems to lack insight regarding the strategic and structural implications of the full implementation of such a peace arrangement. Furthermore, Chinese pundits must define the meaning of a new peace in a more articulated way in the context of a new regional order to effectively defend their nation's support for a peace agreement and regime.

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Chinese Reading of a Peace Agreement and Peace Regime

The Chinese government and analysts highly value the idea of replacing the Armistice with a peace agreement and forging a peace regime as an operational framework for such an arrangement. China sees these two steps as an alternative choice to so-called cross-recognition of the two Koreas by their neighboring states. Since the latter has not materialized, China sees the call for a peace agreement and regime as a resultant development. A peace agreement and regime are viewed as a better alternative to North Korea and those who do not have formal ties to it, namely the United States and Japan. Chinese experts argue that a peace agreement between the United States and North Korea, for instance, would be a critical prerequisite to the normalization of their relationship and the further consolidation of peace and stability on the peninsula.

Chinese scholars and analysts (“Chinese” hereafter) are highly appreciative of their government’s long-time support for the ideas of replacing the Armistice with a peace agreement and the establishment of a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. China’s support can be traced as far back as 1973, when the two Koreas first mentioned a “peace agreement” in their joint statement, also known as the “July 4 Joint Statement.” Since then, the Chinese further highlight that regardless of who has initiated the discussions on a peace agreement and regime, the Chinese government has consistently conveyed strong support both in action and in words. During the first discourse of formal negotiations prompted by the so-called Four-Party Talks from 1997 to 1999, the Chinese further elaborate, China declared its desire to play a proactive role and make constructive contributions. As evidence of its stance, for instance, it delivered five principles for the reduction of tensions on the Korean Peninsula and four points for the establishment of a peace regime at the fourth plenary session of the Four-Party Talks in January 1999.

Most Chinese defend their government’s position on the basis of the following four imperatives.

1. A new trend in history

The Chinese claim that historical imperatives imply the need to overcome the prevalence of “Cold War thinking” held by the major powers and the two Koreas, which is still very much perpetuated by the Armistice. In other words, such thinking must transform into something more fit and suitable to the current phase of development in world history, that is, the “post-Cold War” world. In the post-Cold War era, the Chinese believe that economic security overrides traditional security on the priority list of the foreign policy agenda; prosperity and development are the key concerns of nations; sustainable development is the theme of the twenty-first century; and dialogue and cooperation, rather than confrontation and alliance, are the preferred means to solving international conflicts. In sum, new thinking is needed to serve the interests of the people and nations living in a new century.

The last time the Chinese government publicly expressed its concern over the remnants of Cold War thinking was in May 2008 during South Korean president Lee Myong-bak’s visit to Beijing. The spokesman of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, when asked about the Korea-U.S. alliance, depicted it as “a product of a bygone era.” He further elaborated the reasoning behind his statement as based on a premise that the situation in Northeast Asia has changed and the regional issues should not be viewed through a Cold War lens. From Beijing’s perspective, Cold War thinking is strongly embedded in the South Korea-U.S. alliance.

Chinese scholars and experts hold a similar view on the issue. They are explicit in their argument in relating the South Korea–U.S. alliance as a factor in those allies’ Cold War way of handling North Korea and security on the Korean Peninsula. The Chinese



still see the South Korea–U.S. alliance as a dominating factor in shaping the perception of the North in Washington and Seoul. In the Chinese assessment, Cold War thinking is one of the major obstacles to the realization of “perpetual peace” on the Korean Peninsula.

To substantiate their argument, the Chinese highlight those issues underscored by America’s outdated and outmoded strategic calculus and behavior. Although the Clinton administration once adopted an “engagement policy” toward the North, a “containment policy” eclipsed it. Strengthening the U.S.-Japan alliance was vigorously pursued beginning in 1997 by expanding the scope and range of the Japanese military forces’ maneuverability to support U.S. military activities within their vicinity. Moreover, the U.S. push of Japan and South Korea to host the so-called Theatre Missile Defense system, the Chinese argue, is another controversial aspect of the U.S. engagement policy. The Chinese interpret it as American unwillingness to offer security assurance to the North and the adversarial perception upheld by the United States regarding the North.

The Chinese find a similar trait in measures adopted for the South Korea–U.S. alliance in 2003. While the United States justified its military presence for the sake of the “peace and stability” of the Korean Peninsula, the Chinese counterargue that the U.S. decision at the fifth U.S.-ROK Future Alliance Policy Planning meeting to transform the forces into one with greater flexibility and much greater forward deployment capability is a salient example of America’s Cold War thinking. To the Chinese, the U.S. factor is the critical variable for the realization of a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.

Furthermore, the Chinese argue that the United States did not fare any better with a leadership change thereafter, as the new administration shifted its policy orientation on North Korea to containment. The Chinese find the cause of America’s refusal to continue the agreed framework with the North in the United States’ ever worsening perception of the North, once dubbed

part of an “axis of evil” and a rogue state. In the eyes of the Chinese, the United States wanted to seek “peace and stability” in a rather hard fashion. The fact that the possibility of subverting the regime in Pyongyang received full consideration in Washington validates the Chinese argument. They further proclaim that America’s inconsistent, even contradictory, policy toward North Korea is a significant risk factor for the stability and peace supposedly guaranteed by the current Armistice.

2. Changes on diplomatic fronts

Observing the changes on the diplomatic fronts of North Korea, Chinese analysts attribute the obsolescence of the Armistice to this factor. Although North Korea adamantly remained a hermit kingdom throughout much of the 1990s despite the demise of the bipolar system, it decided to come out of its isolation in diplomatic terms at the dawn of a new century. The Chinese argue that the changes on both North Korea’s diplomatic fronts and posture function as a requisite international condition to replace the Armistice by a peace agreement. Hence, such a peace agreement will be effectively at work as a result of the North’s improved relations with the West.

Beginning in 2000, North Korea normalized relations with Italy, Australia, and Great Britain. It also joined the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) that year. In the first half of the following year, it established diplomatic relations with the Netherlands, Belgium, Canada, Spain, Germany, Luxembourg, Greece, Brazil, New Zealand, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Turkey. As of today, the North has diplomatic relationships with twenty-five of twenty-seven EU nations, and is also formally recognized by the European Union. North Korea’s successive normalization with the western European states is significant because most of them once fought against the North in the Korean War.

In addition, North Korea was also given a chance



to normalize its relationship with the United States if it abided by all the requirements provided in the so-called 1994 Geneva Agreed Framework (the “Framework” hereafter). However, the North’s desire to improve relations with the United States failed to witness any progress other than symbolic, yet historic, visits by North Korean general Cho Myong-rok to New York in 1999 and then secretary Madeline Albright to Pyongyang in 2000.

In the eyes of Chinese experts, if North Korea and the United States can normalize their relationship, a critical international prerequisite will be fulfilled for the realization of a peace agreement and hence a peace regime. Although the two countries already missed their opportunity earlier with the Framework, however, the Chinese argue that persistent negotiations and dialogue with resultant improvement in confidence and trust will allow another opportunity to improve their relations to come to fruition. In this vein, the Chinese insist on the value of continual talks between the two in the readily available channels such as the Six-Party Talks, where the ideas of a peace agreement and arrangements are already incorporated in the formal agenda.

3. Shifting power structure

The Chinese are strong in their argument for a peace agreement and regime based on their keen observation of the changes in the balance of power or power configuration both at the inter-Korean level and at the regional level. They argue that the balance of power at both levels has long ago shifted in favor of South Korea and the United States. This shift has only intensified the sense of insecurity on the part of North Korea, according to the Chinese assessment. They attribute the North’s security anxiety and therefore nuclear aspirations to this change in the balance of power, heavily favoring not only South Korea but also the South Korea–U.S. alliance over the China–North Korea alliance. The current regional power structure clearly favors

South Korea and its alliance with the United States, and puts the North at a great disadvantage without any new security assurance to counter this power structure shift. China has its own limits in fulfilling the North’s desired security assurance.

At the inter-Korean level, South Korea has enjoyed this power shift due its successful economic development and subsequent accumulation of hard power. Such success has further put South Korea at a much greater advantage with its alliance with the United States. South Korea’s economic success has also resulted in significant improvement in its conventional military power, coupled with the nuclear umbrella provided by the United States. Conventional wisdom is that a state’s military superiority over its adversary will be commensurate with its economic strength, whereby South Korea clearly enjoys the advantage.

Hence, the Chinese argue that the power distribution across the peninsula has put South Korea at a far greater advantage over North Korea, further exacerbating the latter’s sense of insecurity. Although the two Koreas in theory are supposed to have overcome their sense of insecurity with their joint membership in the United Nations and conclusion of an agreement of non-invasion, cooperation, and exchanges, and a joint statement on a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula in 1991, the Chinese argue that the reality is in stark contrast to the theoretical perspective.

At the international level, the world system experienced a fundamental change with the end of the Cold War in 1990. The end of bipolarity meant the collapse of the Communist bloc, undermining the ideological factor as one of the major determinants for the outcomes of a foreign policy. Under the circumstances, the former Soviet Union, before its demise, established diplomatic relations with South Korea in 1990, and China followed in 1992. Overnight, South Korea became friends with the North’s allies. The South’s normalization success with those once regarded as formidable allies of the North gave way to a significant shift in the structural balance, favoring the



South.

Such new developments in the nature of international relations, the structural balance, and the diplomatic landscape of the region further isolated North Korea. In particular, the Chinese elaborate, China's failure to become an immediate alternative source of security and economic support to North Korea in the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse can be seen as the source of growing anxiety over security in the North. The Chinese say that the anxiety has led Pyongyang to rely more on "self-reliance" as a means to overcome its newly emerging predicament and defend itself, resulting in the first nuclear crisis in 1993, not to mention the second one in 2002.

4. Apparatus changes of the Armistice

The Chinese government and experts acknowledge the reforms that North Korea carried out on the organs and apparatus set up by the Armistice at its end. Hence, observers see the replacement as justified and necessitated by these changes. Out of frustration over China's normalization of relations with the South, and anxiety over the collapse of the Communist bloc, they reason, North Korea decided in the early 1990s to pursue organizational reforms and changes in the apparatus of the Armistice on its side, which resulted in leaving it only in name, disposing of its original functions.

Under the Armistice, there were supposed to be two organs to observe the cease-fire on the Korean Peninsula: "the Military Armistice Commission (MAC)," and "the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission (NNSC)." In 1991, however, North Korea declared the NNSC defunct, and forced the eviction of Czechoslovakia and Poland in 1993 and 1995, respectively. It followed the same course of action with China in 1995. In 1994, the North set up its own representative body, the so-called North Korean *Panmunjom* mission to represent itself at informal meetings with its counterpart, the United Nations Command (UNC).

Under the circumstances, the North further ar-

gues that even the legal basis for the Armistice is no longer viable and has lost its effectiveness because it is significantly undermined by the U.S.–South Korean alliance pact. While the UN forces were all removed according to the Armistice, U.S. forces still remain in the South at the 38th parallel on the Korean Peninsula. Although the U.S. military stationed in South Korea is a separate entity of the UN combined forces, the North Koreans argue that the U.S. forces are a shadow over the whole spirit of the Armistice, which demands the withdrawal of foreign forces from Korean soil.

A Withholding Factor: The U.S.–South Korean Alliance

On the basis of empirical observations and the experiences in the negotiation discourses, Chinese analysts are explicit in their statements on some critical potential obstacles against the fruition of a peace agreement and regime. Before looking into these impediments, there is one perception to bear in mind that China shares with North Korea on the security situation of the Korean Peninsula. The Chinese are sympathetic to North Korea's call for a peace treaty as a viable security assurance measure. Confronting a South Korea in alliance with the world superpower, North Korea's security is "threatened" and not assured. North Korea, therefore, the Chinese argue, has all the rights and privileges to desire the replacement of the Armistice with a peace agreement.

Without a peace agreement, the Chinese conceive that the Korean Peninsula still is technically at war, and the North is under a constant threat from the U.S.–South Korean alliance. From a strategic point of view, the Chinese further assert, South Korea's security score against its northern counterpart enjoys a greater margin not only through its alliance with the United States *per se*, but through its overwhelmingly superior comprehensive power underpinned by its economic strength. By a Chinese assessment, an asymmetrical power structure heavily skewed in favor of the South is



a natural cause for the North's sense of insecurity. To put it in perspective, the Chinese sympathize with the North's nuclear aspirations.

When a state is isolated, underdeveloped, and under a constant "threat" like North Korea, the Chinese explain that it is natural for the North to seek an alternative way to defend itself, and it decided to go with the nuclear option. As isolated as North Korea is, the Pyongyang government has long emphasized "self-reliance (*juch'è*)" in its defense policy. North Korea obviously is at a disadvantage in its conventional weapons against the formidable U.S.-South Korean alliance. The North's pursuit of nuclear weapons, in the eyes of the Chinese, may be attributed to the North's unfavorable security predicament.

According to the analytical work of the Chinese Korea experts, a strong sense of insecurity in Pyongyang can only be soothed by improvements in relations between the hermit kingdom and surrounding nations. One of the preconditions is tied to the official conclusion of the Korean War. The current war status can only end with the signing of a peace agreement by the involved parties. To make such a peace agreement viable and effective, it must be observed and practiced within a mechanical framework that must constitute a set of rules, norms, and institutions. An institutional arrangement will mean forging a peace regime. To the Chinese, a peace agreement and a peace regime are inseparable, indivisible, but complementary.

Nevertheless, the Chinese are concerned with dormant challenges that will arise in the course of the negotiation of the peace agreement and the regime.

The first and foremost issue of concern to the Chinese is the American military presence in South Korea and its ensuing behavior as a military ally. The U.S. military presence *per se* does not entail too much trouble. However, it is the on-going behavior that the United States and its allies continue to display in the name of the alliance, for example, a persistent adversarial view of North Korea, justification of joint military exercises, a rationale behind the military build-

ups in the South, and legitimizing efforts on the "absorption" and/or "subversion" of the North when given such opportunities. To most Chinese, America still is perceived as a major threat to North Korea's security, a source of instability by its refusal to offer any form of security guarantee, an agent provocateur with calls for subversion or regime change.

The Chinese further make clear that the political and strategic implications of the U.S. military alliance with South Korea undermine the prospects for a peace agreement and regime. The prospects for peace are diminished because of the adverse effects that the U.S.-South Korean alliance brings to the confidence-building measures that were once, and are, in place between North and South Korea. Opportunities to enhance trust and confidence are always present at both inter-Korean and external levels but never materialize due to this factor.

At the inter-Korean level, the Chinese explain, the two Koreas already have built numerous frameworks in which a wide range of interests is well incorporated. As a result, for instance, there is a variety of communication channels at various levels, from working level to a summit. There is a military hotline installed. The two Koreas, the Chinese analyze, certainly have discussed all sorts of practical problems associated with confidence-building measures in all their negotiation discourses over the years, but not deeply enough on the ways of implementing them. However, the Chinese argue that the absence of trust and confidence fails to produce expected outcomes in large part because South Korea is under the alliance constraint to pursue its own practical measures to improve them.

Notwithstanding the efficacy questions of these channels and frameworks, the Chinese attribute the cause of such failure to the alliance factor. The alliance restrains the allies from fully comprehending the North's feeling of insecurity. Hence, this lack of understanding acts as a cause of hindrance to the improvement in the inter-Korean relationship, not to mention that between the United States and North Korea. And



they see no breakthrough-like measures that can drastically change the strategic calculus of the allies and their foe overnight.

As long as the regional players prefer to rely on a military alliance, the Chinese claim, the military alliance and semi-alliance systems must all coexist. The so-called semi-alliance means the China–North Korean alliance. Such structures must be overcome in order to achieve the desired results of a peace agreement and regime. The change will, in the comprehension of the Chinese, have to be the key prerequisite to the improvement of confidence and trust among the potential signatory states of a peace agreement, and lead to the fruition of a peace agreement which will have to be based on the confidence and trust that they can build from overcoming structural difficulties.

Debunking Chinese Thinking

China has been consistent and persistent with its support for the ideas of a peace agreement and regime, regardless of their origin. However, the most bothersome aspect underlying the Chinese stance is that it is almost like blind love or blind faith in character. The Chinese often do not seem to take into account how strategic and tactical North Korea has been in initiating these ideas.

In the past, for instance, North Korea has made sporadic calls for a peace agreement and regime. Circumstantial evidence suggests that Pyongyang has the propensity to treat the question as more of a strategic tactic than a sincere aspiration. Empirical observations confirm Pyongyang's tactical motivations, which were basically out of:

- A desire to improve the relationship with the United States as was the case in 1974, 1993, 1994, and 2000;
- Frustration against Seoul's normalization with Beijing as was the case in 1993, 1995, and 1996;
- Anxiety for aid and assistance as in 1998–99;
- Or a wish to maintain a communication channel with Washington when the talks between the two fell into a stalemate as in 2002 and 2010.

As recently as January 2010, Pyongyang reissued the peace agreement and regime question as a precondition to returning to the long-halted Six-Party Talks. The quest was rejected by the United States and South Korea, because they see no connection between the resumption of the talks and the need for such agreement. The North's intention was clear: their pursuit of the questions was a ploy with strategic aims such as lifting the UN resolutions imposed after the nuclear tests and delaying the talks.

While the Beijing government was not explicit about its position, many Chinese scholars perceived the move in a somewhat different way, attaching more strategic meanings. However, the strategic implications interpreted by the Chinese were rather benign in meaning; they saw North Korea's actions as a call to improve relations with the United States and to subsequently gain security assurance before fully resolving its nuclear problem. They are also rather inconclusive on the viability of the North's call by not questioning its logic. Hence, the Chinese support still to date seems rather out of blind faith in the goodness of a peace agreement and regime rather than a firm belief in the feasibility and practicality of such an agreement and regime.

Second, Chinese conceptual work analysis on the ideas of a peace agreement and regime is often void of substance, heavily focusing on the conditions and challenges related to the replacement question of the Armistice with a peace agreement and regime instead. The Chinese have over the years produced an ample volume of literature on the Korean Peninsula peace agreement and regime question. Scholarly support for the value of a peace agreement is a common feature. However, when it comes to discussing how these conditions and challenges can be met, Chinese seem to have reservations about making a public statement in part because their government is not explicit about it.

Instead, some have addressed potential preconditions or issues-at-stake for consideration in an articulate way (for example, eligibility of participating par-



ties, legal basis for replacement, security assurance question, and framework for such assurance). Others have attempted to analyze some potentially challenging factors arising as the consequences of forging a peace mechanism based on a peace agreement (for example, the effects of a peace agreement and the ensuing consequences of a peace regime in the context of security assurance and the withdrawal of American military forces.)

Notwithstanding their academic contributions to the studies of a peace agreement and regime of the Korean Peninsula, however, the Chinese, to date, seem to prefer to remain reserved in articulating the implications of the conditions and challenges once they are sufficiently and effectively met. Admittedly, the Chinese in recent times have shown some capability in dealing with some of these implications, both strategic and structural. For instance, since they began to recognize the imperatives for a peace agreement and regime, they have realized the need to amend the alliance with North Korea, given the ratification of a peace agreement and forging of a peace regime. The Chinese, however, shy away from discussing the possible maximum extension of such an amendment, for example, obliteration or removal of the “1961 Friendship and Cooperation Treaty,” a pact underpinning the alliance.

Third, the Chinese avoid an in-depth articulation of a peace regime. As is well known, a peace agreement without a proper mechanism to fully observe it will not be viable. The problem arises largely because of lack of trust and confidence among the participating states. While a certain degree of confidence and trust may be a critical prerequisite to be first fulfilled before the realization of a peace agreement, however, confidence-building measures cannot all be realized at once.

If the sole purpose and intention is to terminate the war status on the Korean Peninsula, the Chinese argue, the concerned parties might desire to see such a peace arrangement come first, with the implementation of confidence-building measures to follow. The

Chinese further reinforce their argument with such precedent cases as the Four-Party Talks and the Six-Party Talks. They have high respect for the byproducts of the Six-Party Talks (for example, the “9.19 Joint Statement” and “2.13 Joint Statement”) and treat them as a framework full of confidence-building measures that can facilitate the institutionalization process of the talks. However idealistic their expectations may be, the Chinese fail to grasp the reality whereby it has become a fact that a peace regime is vulnerable to the breakdown of any one confidence-building measure. In the North Korean case, its nuclear tests and missile firings speak volumes.

Fourth, the Chinese have the propensity to extend the meaning of the peace regime on the Korean Peninsula into the regional context, often expanding the geographical implications beyond the peninsula. They like to associate the prospects for a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula with those of a regional multilateral security cooperation system. In other words, a peace regime founded on the Korean Peninsula can expand into, and function as, a regional one in lieu of such a regime at the regional level.

A critical question remains, however: Will it? The Chinese, unfortunately, are not persuasive. Their main reasoning stems from a simple belief that successfully institutionalized Six-Party Talks, for instance, will include fulfillment of confidence, trust, and cooperation. They base their argument on the resultant perspective whereby an institutionalized Six-Party Talks will embody multilateralism, regionalism, and security cooperation, paving the way for its transformation into a regional security platform.

A shortfall in such an argument is obviously that it does not account for other prerequisite questions: Will the United States be willing to share power (leadership) with China in the security realm? Can Russia and Japan contemplate a compromise on the territorial issues for security cooperation? Is it realistic to think that China and Japan can have a security cooperation relationship while Japan adheres to its alliance with the



United States? The Chinese argument can otherwise be a foregone conclusion.

Last and most important, the Chinese see a perpetual peace assurance in association with a peace agreement and regime. They believe such a peace arrangement is conducive to the peace and stability of the Korean Peninsula because it will have a thawing effect on the relations among the adversarial states, boosting confidence, trust, and transparency among them. What they overlook is the strategic and structural implications, and to a certain extent the ramifications, that new power relations will entail as a consequence.

Will North Korea feel its security assured merely by the normalization of ties with the United States? This may not be self-evident with its persistent demand for the withdrawal of American forces. Will China really be satisfied with the North's undermined strategic value to its security by the peace agreement and regime? Can it embrace such a peace arrangement at the cost of the Friendship Treaty with Pyongyang while the American alliance remains unamended? What are the Chinese alternative options to get rid of the old alliance structure, a long-perceived critical challenge to the fruition of a new peace arrangement on the Korean Peninsula?

The strategic implications of Korea's peace agreement and regime question cannot be taken for granted. It will mean power structural changes in the current balance of the power structure, and subsequently a new order. At the end of the day when a peace agreement is in full practice with a peace regime in place, a new era will dawn.■

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