

National Perspectives in North-East Asian Rivalries: A Strife 4-Part Series

The entries forming this series are all reprinted, in a lightly edited form, from the Strife blog (at strifeblog.org) where they were published in January 2018. All web references were last accessed on 18 March 2018, unless otherwise stated.

Introduction: One Region, Different Standpoints

Andrea Fischetti

East Asia is home to one fifth of the world's population, and some of the global economic powerhouses. In particular, the second and third world largest economies, the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Japan, are located in Northeast Asia. The region may subsequently be characterised as one of crucial importance for international affairs not only for the size of its economy, but also from a strategic point of view.

In this area, North Korea in particular has been in the limelight during the past year due to its aggressive nuclear program and tests, which resulted in strategic and diplomatic tensions. This country, however, is not the only cause for disputes in Northeast Asia. The whole region is deeply divided in terms of culture, ideology, and politics, resulting in some cases, in inter-state relations characterised by 'hot economics, cold politics'.¹

Although current tensions in East Asia are considered of increasing importance by the international community, many of the Northeast Asian divisions and rivalries are primarily fuelled by historical roots. Amy King and Brendan Taylor identify a 'history spiral' in this region:² a competitive approach common to all regional

¹ June Teufel Dreyer, 'China and Japan: "Hot Economics, Cold Politics"', in *Orbis*, Vol. 58, No. 3 (2014), pp. 326-341.

² Amy King & Brendan Taylor, 'Northeast Asia's New "History Spiral"', in *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (January 2016), p. 113.

actors, to 're-remembering' and rewriting history.³ The lack of effective international multilateral organisations is a further reason why this region is 'ripe for rivalry'.⁴ Therefore, the purpose of this series is to explore the national perspectives of Northeast Asian countries. Understanding what Pyongyang's priorities are, how Japan sees itself, what worries China, and where do the differences between Taiwan and China come from, can help to understand regional disputes as well.

In the first article, Ashley Ryan takes us to Pyongyang, where the North Korean thought and perspective on international affairs is unveiled. She analyses the strategic thinking of Kim Jong-un and explains what is the ultimate goal of Pyongyang, arguing that what North Korea has been doing so far is both rational and coherent in strategic terms.

In the second article, Andrea Fischetti explains why Japan is a pacifist country, and how Japan's pacifism affects Tokyo's approach to disputes with its neighbours such as China and South Korea. According to Fischetti, the post-war period largely shaped culture and society of Northeast Asian countries, and the differences in culture and society now encourage rivalries as countries have different perspectives on the same issues.

In the third article, Dean Chen explores the Taiwan issue and the nature of cross-strait relations, analysing Taiwan's national perspective. The author argues that Taiwan and China have mismatching identities, which from an ontological security perspective, results in a rivalry characterised by misunderstandings.

Lastly, in the fourth article, Riccardo Cociani analyses the strategic and political challenges that the North Korean tensions pose to Beijing. Adopting a Chinese perspective, he explores China's approach to tackling these challenges, with an eye to regional security.

This series offers a unique opportunity to explore the ideas and points of view of some of the main regional actors in Northeast Asia. Thanks to Ryan, Fischetti, Cociani, and Chen, these different perspectives come together in one place, and all contribute to further our understanding of Northeast Asian rivalries.

³ *Ibid*, p. 112.

⁴ Aaron L. Friedberg, 'Ripe for Rivalry: Prospects for Peace in a Multipolar Asia', in *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (1994), pp. 13-14.

Part I: The View from Pyongyang

Ashley Ryan

The view from Pyongyang is fundamentally different than that of the West. Pyongyang has not only a more monolithic perspective than that of London or Washington (the natural consequence of any dictatorship), it is a culturally and qualitatively dissimilar viewpoint. In order to analyse the outlook of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), however, it is first necessary to understand the mindset of its leader, Kim Jong-un. For all the American bombast about Kim being crazy, there is widespread acknowledgement amongst senior Western officials that he is, in fact, quite sane. For instance, a high-ranking CIA representative confirmed that Kim is a 'very rational actor'.⁵ This means that Kim's actions are more predictable (and more influenceable by the actions or inactions of the international community) than they would otherwise seem to be. Why is this so?

The Kim dynasty is largely interested in its own survival.⁶ Beyond this, the culture of the country dictates that the concept of 'face' is essential, and this feeds into how the DPRK relates to other countries and how it engages in diplomacy. For example, it has been noted that during the far-right violence in America (in Charlottesville, Virginia) that took place in August 2017, the DPRK was notably quiet, despite escalating rhetoric concerning Guam in the preceding weeks. It has been suggested that this sudden de-escalation occurred, at least in part, because it enabled Kim to save face⁷ while stepping back from the brinkmanship in which he had been engaged. In all likelihood, the DPRK never intended⁸ to follow through on its bellicose statements about Guam, but after US President Donald Trump had responded aggressively⁹ to the DPRK's threats, Kim may have felt he did not have the option to back down

⁵ Guy Taylor, 'CIA says North Korean Dictator Kim Jong-un is not Crazy, but 'Very Rational'', in *The Washington Times*, 4 October 2017, [online](#).

⁶ Andrei Lankov, 'Kim Jong Un is a Survivor, Not a Madman', in *Foreign Policy*, 26 April 2017, [online](#).

⁷ Zack Beauchamp, 'While Trump was Distracted, North Korea Calmed Sown. That's not a Coincidence', in *Vox*, 15 August 2017, [online](#).

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ J. Borger & J. McCurry, 'Donald Trump Vows to Answer North Korea Nuclear Threats with "Fire and Fury"', in *The Guardian*, 9 August 2017, [online](#).

from 'American intimidation'¹⁰ without losing face in the eyes of his citizens. A significant loss of face could work to delegitimise the Kim family's claim to special authority over the nation and, ultimately, it could thereby leave their dynasty open to challenge and overthrow. It would be wise for Western leaders to note this ratchet effect, which can occur during particularly tense moments, as well as the release mechanism which allowed rapid de-escalation. This phenomenon should be taken into account in future negotiations.

The DPRK sees a world in which imperialist powers loom threateningly, a narrative which has unfortunately been strengthened in the mind of Kim Jong-un over recent months, not least by Trump's bellicose rhetoric.¹¹ No doubt intended as a deterrent, Trump's comments instead served to confirm Kim's fears – that he is, or will soon be, an American target for regime change. For example, in May 2017, Pyongyang claimed they had foiled a CIA 'biochemical plot'¹² to assassinate Kim (although commentators noted it was possible this was an internal coup attempt, expediently ascribed¹³ to America). In either case, Kim seems genuinely concerned about the possibility of an assassination, and in February he took on some ex-KGB agents¹⁴ to advise and train his bodyguards. The South Korean intelligence agency has described Kim as 'extremely nervous'¹⁵ about the possibility that he may be assassinated in a 'decapitation operation'. Reinforcing his concerns, it has been reported that the US Navy's Seal Team Six¹⁶ (who conducted the raid in which Osama bin Laden was killed) trained alongside South Korean special forces in March 2017 in order to practice a surgical strike on Kim in the event of war.

More importantly, Kim has taken careful note¹⁷ of the fates of Muammar Gaddafi and Saddam Hussein. According to an ex-CIA

¹⁰ Beauchamp, 'While Trump was Distracted'.

¹¹ Lisa Marie Segarra, 'Read President Trump's Speech Threatening to 'Totally Destroy' North Korea', in *Time*, 19 September 2017, [online](#).

¹² Ewen MacAskill & Justin McCurry, 'North Korea Accuses CIA of Biochemical Plot to Kill Kim Jong-un', in *The Guardian*, 5 May 2017, [online](#).

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Yoshihiro Makino, 'Ex-KGB Agents Hired to Protect Kim Jong Un from Assassins', in *The Asahi Shimbun*, 25 August 2017, [online](#).

¹⁵ Julian Ryall, 'How 'Nervous' Kim Jong-un is Trying to Avoid being Assassinated', in *The Telegraph*, 16 June 2017, [online](#).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Lankov, 'Kim Jong Un is a Survivor'.

analyst¹⁸, the lesson Kim has taken from these scenarios is that, until he has significant nuclear power of his own, he will remain vulnerable to the vagaries of Western decision-making about whether or not he should remain in power. State media in the DPRK also makes reference¹⁹ to this idea. The annual military exercises (*Foal Eagle* and *Key Resolve*) between America and South Korea do nothing to dispel tensions, particularly as Pyongyang fears that the drills will one day be used as cover to achieve the element of surprise²⁰ in an invasion. Also, Kim feels he is under significant time pressure to achieve military independence. Currently, in the event of the DPRK being attacked, China is bound to act in their defence per the terms of the Sino-DPRK Treaty²¹ of 1961, which was most recently renewed in 2001 (but is due to expire in 2021). Recent diplomatic signalling, however, has shown China may already be reluctant²² to defend the DPRK – and is therefore unlikely to renew the treaty beyond 2021. Also, Kim likely feels the proximity of American allies and weapons (including South Korea, Japan and the US military base on Guam) all too keenly. In all probability, he believes that if the DPRK is not a militarily independent nuclear power by the end of the next four years, the Kim dynasty – and therefore the DPRK – will be at imminent risk of an American (or American-backed) attack.

This time pressure is underpinned by the national ideology²³ of the DPRK, *juče* (self-reliance), which is both political and religious in character. *Juche* means that Kim is understood as the embodiment of God by his people, rendering the ideas of religious and political leadership inseparable. Various commentators have argued about the extent to which North Koreans actually believe this, but it nonetheless seems clear that Kim, at least, sees himself as the rightful authority over all Koreans (reintegration of North and South Korea is essential to the idea of *juče*). Indeed, under this

¹⁸ Robert Baer, 'Viewpoint: North Korea's Gaddafi Nightmare', in *Time*, 5 April 2013, [online](#).

¹⁹ Benjamin Haas & Justin McCurry, 'In the Court of Kim Jong-un: A Ruthless, Bellicose Despot, but not Mad', in *The Guardian*, 8 September 2017, [online](#).

²⁰ Damen Cook, 'What's the Big Deal About These US-South Korea Military Exercises?', in *The Diplomat*, 23 March 2017, [online](#).

²¹ James Tunningley, 'The Deterioration of the People's Republics: China's North Korea Problem', in *The Diplomat*, 25 April 2017, [online](#).

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Michael Brabazon, 'Trump Misreads North Korea's Sacred Dynasty at his Peril', in *The Guardian*, 23 September 2017, [online](#).

system Kim is positioned as the rightful saviour²⁴ of humanity and civilisation. This concept may sound oddly familiar, and it should, because it mirrors the fundamental notions of American exceptionalism. The real danger in the war of words²⁵ between Kim and Trump, then, is that both men arguably believe that they are the saviour²⁶ of their people, and that their nations are the proverbial shining city upon a hill for the rest of humanity.

Juche, however, is also about practical things. At its core, *juche* aims to ensure the sovereign independence of the nation by ensuring it does not need economic, military or other links with other nations in order to function successfully. Another important idea in the DPRK is *byungjin* (parallel advance), which pursues nuclear weapons on the basis that – once an effective nuclear deterrent²⁷ has been generated – the fiscal savings achieved can be used to benefit the nation. These ideas underpin Kim's strategy of nuclear development, and can be seen in the symbolic name of one of his latest test missiles – the *Juche Bird*.

The so-called 'provocation cycle' that the DPRK go through when testing new missiles is, perhaps, a strategy designed to intentionally worry the international community. After all, domestically speaking, it legitimises Kim's massive military spending and gives him greater political authority.²⁸ Ultimately, though, the cause of this military build-up is simply that Pyongyang is wrestling with the same security dilemma that all states must confront. Kim, quite rationally, fears his own assassination or overthrow. He sees America as the primary threat, notes his geographical proximity to various American allies, and sees nuclear weapons as the only functional deterrent. In the contemporary world, and considering Trump's hawkish stance, he may not be entirely wrong about that.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Ashley Ryan, 'Little Rocket Man and the Frightened Dog Barking: A War of Words', in *Shield Blog*, 4 November 2017, [online](#).

²⁶ Gary Silverman, 'How the Bible Belt Lost God and Found Trump', in *Financial Times*, 13 April 2017, [online](#).

²⁷ Haas & McCurry, 'In the Court of Kim Jong-un'.

²⁸ Jean H. Lee, 'Donald Trump is Giving North Korea Exactly what it Wants', in *The New York Times*, 11 August 2017, [online](#).

Part II: The View from Tokyo

Andrea Fischetti

Characterised as a peace-loving nation, Japan has earned this favourable international reputation through a combination of its culture and society. Also, the Constitution does not allow the country to possess offensive military capabilities.²⁹ Nonetheless, it is involved in territorial and political disputes with most of its neighbours, and at times, its foreign policy is perceived as assertive by other regional actors such as the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of Korea (ROK). Therefore, this article will explore the reasons why a so-called pacifist country such as Japan is involved in so many disputes. From a geopolitical perspective, Japan is situated in a region where history and historical memories still resonate politically, and continue to drive regional actors' foreign policies, resulting in territorial and diplomatic disputes as well as long-lasting rivalries. In fact, the national perspectives of Japan and its neighbours are inseparable from their past experiences.

The 'abnormalcy' concept

Firstly, in order to understand Japan's perspective, it is necessary to consider the nature of its 'abnormalcy'. Realist scholars believed that the phenomenal economic development that Japan experienced during the second half of the 20th century would inevitably result in rising military ambitions. This was seen to be especially true, considering Japan's imperialistic and militaristic past. However, Japan did not try to translate its economic might into military capabilities, nor did it attempt to challenge the hegemony of other powers. As a consequence, Japan has been considered an 'abnormal' country, due to its 'pacifist' behaviour.³⁰

²⁹ Thomas U. Berger, *Cultures of Antimilitarism: National Security in Germany and Japan* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); Peter J. Katzenstein, *Cultural Norms and National Security: Police and Military in Postwar Japan* (Cornell University Press, 1996).

³⁰ P. Kennedy, 'Japan: A twenty-first-century power?', in Craig C. Garby & Mary Brown Bullock (eds), *Japan: A New Kind of Superpower?*, (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); Kenneth N. Waltz, 'The Emerging Structure of International Politics', in *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (1993), pp. 44-79; Idem., 'Structural Realism

The idea that Japan is not a 'normal' country, has been reinforced by its US-drafted constitution, implemented in the aftermath of the Second World War by American occupying forces. Japan's Constitution, not only contains a peace clause, but is also considered rare due to its longevity.³¹ In other words, Japan may be considered an abnormal country because despite its economic power, it has not tried to develop modern offensive military capabilities; instead, the country has preserved a foreign-drafted pacifist constitution for over seven decades.

Whether it deserves the title of 'abnormal' is debatable, as it would imply the existence of some sort of international standard;³² nonetheless, considering its legal framework, society, and behaviour on the international stage, it is understandable why Japan is considered a pacifist and exceptional country.

Yesterday's rivalry, today's dispute

Domestically, Japanese society has been able to overcome its wartime experiences thanks to policies that guaranteed 'peace and prosperity'. During the post-war period for example, Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida developed the 'Yoshida Doctrine, which included a number of 'pacifist' policies that were aimed at preserving peace while focusing the country's capabilities on achieving economic prosperity.³³

However, while Japan has been enjoying decades of 'peace and prosperity', the spectre of its behaviour in wartime has remained very much alive among its neighbours. After the war, Korea was divided in two different countries. Not only did this division result in numerous diplomatic and strategic issues, but also, as 'halved' parts of a single country, neither ROK, nor the Northern side – the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) – have managed to

After The Cold War', in *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (2000), pp. 5-41.

³¹ Comparative Constitutions Project, *Timeline of Constitutions*, (2017), [online](#); Zachary Elkins, Tom Ginsburg & James Melton (eds.), *The Endurance of National Constitutions* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

³² Yoshihide Soeya, David A. Welch & Masayaki Tadokoro (eds.), *Japan as a 'Normal Country'? A Nation in Search of its Place in the World* (University of Toronto Press, 2011).

³³ Yoshida Shigeru, *Yoshida Shigeru: Last Meiji Man*, ed. & trsl. by Hiroshi Nara (Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

equal Japan's economic development. This is perhaps unsurprising, considering the long-lasting effects of Korean War, in combination with economic sanctions, and trade restrictions. Furthermore, the diplomatic and strategic issues on the Korean peninsula have been exacerbated by the DPRK nuclear programme, and more specifically the recent missile tests.

Similarly, the PRC has been dealing with its own problems following the Second World War, despite the fact they were on the winning side, unlike Japan. Yet, it did not feel like a victory for Beijing: as numerous social and economic issues affected the country, China had to watch Japan's remarkable growth and development. While the Land of the Rising Sun was enjoying peace and prosperity, the PRC was dealing with the trouble of overcoming the 'century of humiliation', a period of foreign occupation, territorial losses, and military defeats that took place between the nineteenth and the twentieth century.

Northeast Asian rivalries fuel many disputes: all actors in the region have, to different extents, disputes with their neighbours, and Japan is no exception. What is notable is the vital role that historical memory plays in this volatile regional context. Accordingly, Japan's involvement in disputes with other regional actors can be very largely be attributed to history.

Following the war, Japanese society welcomed the advent of peace and prosperity, quickly adapting to the new image that Japan projected of itself at international level. The Japanese military was totally discredited, and with the help of US occupation, the country developed anti-militaristic norms.³⁴ Japan's national identity of a pacifist country is also demonstrated by public opinion polls on the country's priorities³⁵, and the influence that the strong popular support for peace and prosperity has on the policy making process.³⁶

As a result, at the dawn of the 21st century, Japan's domestic memories of war were not forgotten, but were instead relegated to the past. By contrast, wartime memories were still vivid in among the populations of local neighbours including China and Korea. A fact that has been reflected in the

³⁴ Thomas U. Berger, 'From Sword to Chrysanthemum: Japan's culture of Anti-militarism', in *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Spring 1993); also, Katzeinstein, *Cultural Norms and National Security*.

³⁵ Asahi Shimbun, 'Abe Naikaku Sijiritsu 59%', in *The Asahi Shimbun* (December 2012).

³⁶ NHK, 'Seiji ishiki getsurei chōsa', 2007, [online](#).

Chinese 'obsession' for power balance between the United States, Japan, and China,³⁷ or in the long-lasting dispute on the comfort women issue between South Korea and Japan, inciting several diplomatic incidents regarding Japan's apologies for sexual slavery during the Second World War.

In the case of China, for example, the dispute on the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands has been emblematic in defining its approach to Japan: China has to show strength, to overcome its past 'humiliations'. China sees the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) as an occupant of its territory, namely the 'Diaoyu Islands' (considered Chinese according to Beijing's historical view).

Conversely, Tokyo's official stance is that 'the Senkaku Islands are under the valid control of Japan. There exists no issue of territorial sovereignty to be resolved concerning the Senkaku Island'.³⁸ Furthermore, as Japan's military capabilities are intended for self-defence purposes only, what the Chinese consider an aggression, is seen as self-defence in Tokyo, a legitimate 'resolute stance' (*kizen to shita taido*), also considering that the Senkaku Islands (*Senkaku-shotō*) are controlled by Japan as per the 1971 Okinawa Reversion Agreement. The Japanese perspective on this issue, which does not involve acknowledging a dispute due to the above reasons, only appears to be even more assertive in the eyes of Beijing. This is the essence of the regional security dilemma facing North-east Asia today.

Similarly, Japanese society finds it difficult to justify the ROK's continued emphasis on the comfort women issue. On the one hand, Japanese occupation and wartimes memories have not been forgotten in South Korea, and they remain a highly debated topic. On the other, having apologised multiple times, and considering itself a pacifist country and a 'contributor to peace',³⁹ Japan sees South Korea's insistence on this matter as unjustified. Further to social, cultural, and political differences, the divergence in perspective among these countries is also a result of the different kinds of narratives and government-led propaganda they are subject to.⁴⁰

³⁷ Gilbert Rozman, 'China's Quest for Great Power Identity', in *Orbis*, Vol. 43, No. 3, (Summer 1999), pp. 383-402.

³⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 'Senkaku Islands Q&A', 2016, [online](#).

³⁹ Japan National Security Council (JNSC), 'National Security Strategy' (December 2013).

⁴⁰ Giulio Pugliese & Aurelio Insisa, *Sino-Japanese Power Politics: Might, Money and Minds* (Palgrave, 2017).

Conclusion

Japan's national identity is that of a pacifist country, and one who is far more interested in promoting diplomatic relations than remembering historical disputes or rivalries. Despite its geopolitical role in a number of disputes, the country has enjoyed peace and prosperity for many decades, its society identifies itself as pacifist, and its behaviour on the international stage reflects its pacifist values. From alternate perspectives, it could reasonably be argued that its neighbours are generally more prone to fuel disputes, yet Japan's conviction in its pacifist national identity might also mean it is failing to address these issues properly. In order to fix the conflictual relationship with its neighbours and prepare for future challenges, Tokyo should focus on taking into account its international image from the viewpoint of countries such as China or South Korea.

Part III: The Taiwan Issue and Mismatching Identities: An Ontological Security Perspective

Dean Chen

The Taiwan issue is concerned with the political status of Taiwan: whether it should reunify with Mainland China, declare independence as Republic of Taiwan, or maintain the status quo of being *de facto* independent but *de jure* remaining within the 'One China' framework. While mainstream perspectives focus on Taiwan's geopolitical significance and power politics involving the People's Republic of China (PRC), United States, and Japan, this article looks at this issue from an angle of identity mismatch. The 'national identity' is concerned with how a nation perceives the 'self'. The PRC's identity as the representation of Chinese national rejuvenation with national reunification as an integral element is in contrast with the gradual development of Taiwanese identity as a separate country.

'Ontological security' provides inspiring theoretical perspectives to understand this identity mismatch. It is security of the self, the subjective understanding of who oneself is, which

enables and motivates actions.⁴¹ For individuals, having relatively stable understandings of the self enables them to make sense of their lives and act independently. When one is faced with ontological insecurity, connected to deep fear of uncertainty, one struggles to 'get by in the world'.⁴² Like individuals, nations also have identities. Similarly, they need certainty and security of the self. In the context of cross-strait relations, i.e. the relations between PRC and Taiwan (officially Republic of China, ROC), with both sides challenging each other's ontological security, the insecurity of identity within both societies underlies their respective narratives and actions. Therefore, as argued in this paper, ontological security can contribute to understanding entrenched cross-strait divisions.

For the PRC, the 'Taiwan issue' is a matter of reunification. Mainland and Taiwan belong to 'One China',⁴³ but are currently governed by two different authorities. National reunification has been an integral part of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) pledge since the establishment of the PRC in 1949. The 'reunification narrative' has created strong path dependency, to an extent that any change in direction of the unification policy would seriously undermine the CCP's legitimacy. This strong commitment to reunification also prevails in the general public. Being taught in school that Taiwan is an 'inalienable part of China',⁴⁴ while the notion of Mainlanders and Taiwanese being 'compatriots' is disseminated by official statements and state media,⁴⁵ it is no wonder that the Chinese public strongly believes in reunification. In fact, Beijing has never ruled Taiwan, and the island basically functions like an independent country. But in the PRC's official historical narrative, Taiwan was a province of Chinese dynasties, but was lost during the 'century of humiliation'. This narrative associates this era, stretching from 1840 to 1949, in China with foreign invasion,

⁴¹ Jennifer Mitzen, 'Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma', in *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (2006), pp. 341-370.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ The source was available [online](#), with the link being operational when last accessed, on 18 December 2017; at the time of publication, the material is no longer available.

⁴⁴ Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council PRC, 'The One China Principle and the Taiwan Issue'. The source was available [online](#), with the link being operational when last accessed, on 18 December 2017; at the time of publication, the material is no longer available.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

subjugation and civil unrest. For instance, during this period, Taiwan was allegedly lost the Japanese Empire and separated from the Mainland due to communist-nationalist rivalries. Taiwan is one of the lost 'seven sons', a scar of China's painful memories of colonialism and civil war which should be healed by reunification. In other words, Taiwan's reintegration is an indispensable part of China's national identity – a China without Taiwan is incomplete, and China's 'national rejuvenation' could not be done without reunification.⁴⁶ Accordingly, the Taiwan issue is a matter of ontological security for the PRC.

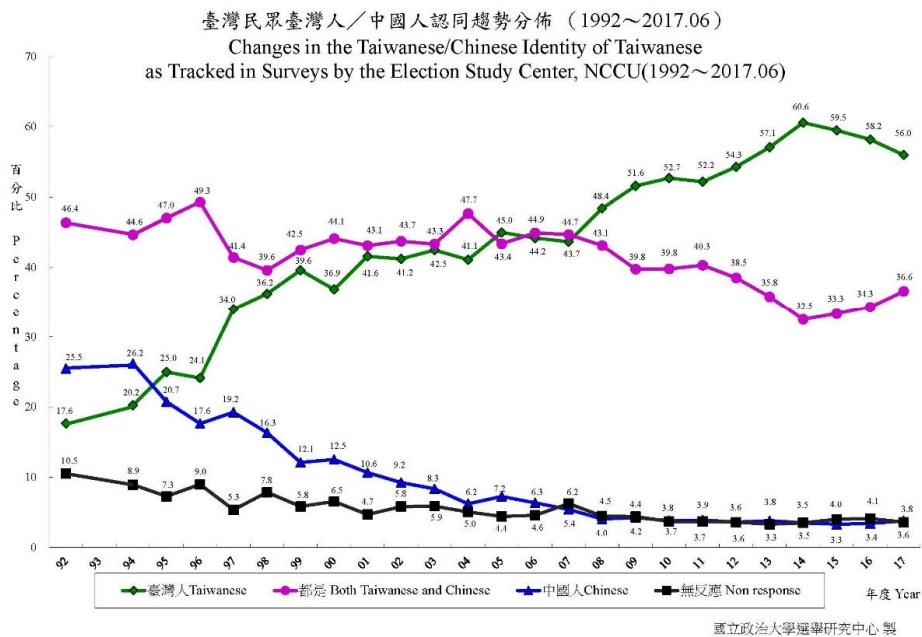
On the other side, the story is very different. The political parties and the electorate are deeply divided on the issues of national identity (Taiwanese or Chinese) and Taiwan's future political status (declare independence or unify with Mainland China). These cleavages created an identity crisis within Taiwanese society. Identity and the future status of the country are highly politicised, often being focal points in elections. Hence, Taiwan's self-identity bears a conflicting nature and threatens its ontological security. The absence of consensus regarding Taiwan's status and future not only undermines domestic social cohesion, but also weakens Taiwan's coherence facing the external world.

Amid this debate, Taiwan's public opinion diverged from Mainland China. Although Taiwan maintains the 'Republic of China' legal framework, the percentage of Taiwanese identifying as 'Chinese' has significantly declined since mid-1990s, while exclusive 'Taiwanese' identity has risen significantly. According to a more recent survey, 58% of Taiwanese prefer to maintain the status quo, followed by 23.6% supporting independence, and 11.8% supporting reunification (see chart below).⁴⁷ In addition to external factors such as Taipei's loss of representation in the UN and pressure from the PRC, the domestic process of 'de-sinicisation', i.e. the policy of diluting 'Chinese-ness' has also contributed to this shift. The then pro-independence president Lee Tung-hui initiated this process in the mid-1990s. For instance, during pro-independence Chen Shuibian's presidency, between 2000 and 2008, the government changed the history curriculum: Taiwanese history and Chinese

⁴⁶ Li Zhengguang, 'Taiwan Integral to National Rejuvenation', in *China Daily*, 20 October 2017, [online](#).

⁴⁷ Election Study Centre National Chengchi University, 'Taiwan Independence vs. Unification with Mainland Trend Distribution in Taiwan 1992/06 – 2017/06,' [online](#).

history were taught separately, so as to differentiate Taiwan from China. This reflects the narrative of Taiwan as ‘Asia’s orphan’ – ruled by successive external forces but never by the Taiwanese themselves.⁴⁸ Pro-independence politicians disseminate the idea of Taiwan, as an immigrant society, is comprised of diverse cultures, rather than Chinese culture as the prevalent one.⁴⁹ By diluting the ‘Chinese-ness’ of Taiwan, pro-independence forces seek to distance Taiwan from China. These actions can be explained by the deep controversies in Taiwanese society: in order to assert that Taiwan is different from – and to avoid the unification with – China, especially facing the PRC’s rise as a great power, it is necessary to create an alternative narrative. The manifestation of anti-Chinese sentiment was especially evident during the Sunflower movement in 2014,⁵⁰ to protest against a cross-strait trade deal. Activists accused Taipei’s government of colluding with Beijing. More specifically, their concerns were economic integration being used as a mean to integrate Mainland China’s political orbit.



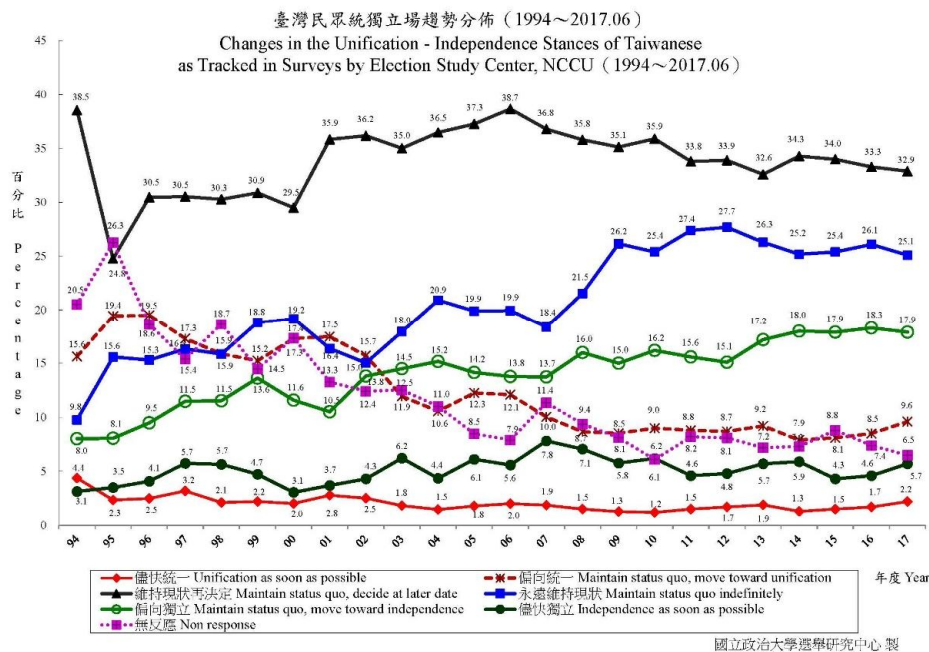
(Credit Image: Election Study Centre National Chengchi University)

48 給下一代的承諾書-十年政綱 [‘Promise for the next generation – Ten Year Policy Framework’], [online](#).

49 *Ibid.*

50 Cindy Sui, ‘Will the Sunflower Movement Change Taiwan?’, in *BBC News*, 9 April 2015, [online](#).

The identity mismatch linked to ontological security underlies cross-strait relations. For both the Chinese government and the majority of its citizens, Taiwan being a part of China is a given. In contrast, many Taiwanese people no longer identify as Chinese. Deeply engrained identities and narratives on both sides lead to incomprehension and misunderstandings, evident in 'online nationalism',⁵¹ Mainland Chinese netizens posted pro-China content on Taiwanese Facebook pages after the 2016 Taiwanese elections. The entrenchment of insecurities about the 'self' and conflicting narratives lead to protracting cross-strait division.



(Credit Image: Election Study Centre National Chengchi University)

So, what is the way forward? To address deep ontological insecurities is not easy. Cross-strait relations in its current tense state is harmful to both sides and regional stability. In order to break the cycle of reinforcing incomprehension and conflict, it is vital to tap into ordinary citizens' minds and encourage people-to-people exchange. It is only when both sides are open to genuine understanding of each other's concerns and identities (and why they are so) that Mainland China and Taiwan can transcend this vicious

⁵¹ Lucy Hornby, 'China Battles to Control Growing Online Nationalism', in *Financial Times*, 8 January 2017, [online](#).

cycle and pursue sustainable peace.

Part IV: The View from Beijing

Riccardo Cociani

There is nothing easy regarding Beijing's strategic calculus about North Korea (Democratic People's Republic of Korea, DPRK). China's difficult relationship with the DPRK rests upon balancing its vital interests: first, peace and stability on the Korean peninsula; second, its denuclearization; third, the preservation of its influential relationship with DPRK; fourth, crisis-prevention.⁵² In short, China seeks to balance the maintenance of the status-quo, while simultaneously trying to change it. By changing it, China aims to maintain the upper hand. A cost-benefit analysis of the losses and gains resulting from the pursuit of each of its interests mentioned above would require China to adopt a more assertive military stance.

Of critical importance to any strategic calculations is context: not just the territory involved, in this case the Korean Peninsula, but also the global strategic landscape. Any Chinese military strategy involving the DPRK must also take into account China's other priorities. How should China balance its security stance vis-à-vis the DPRK while simultaneously trying to provide a stable global landscape to allow its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to grow? How to balance foreign and domestic security concerns? What is the best strategy to allow China to reach its 'New Normal'? This article will first highlight the major factors influencing China's perceptions of the DPRK threat; and second, it will contend that China is adopting a more assertive military stance. Ultimately, this paper will argue that the likelihood of a Chinese military intervention on the Korean peninsula has now increased, and moreover, that Beijing would benefit from a tougher military stance.

Security 'with Chinese characteristics'

⁵² S. Yinong, 'Painful Lessons, Reversing Practices, and Ongoing Limitations: China Facing North Korea Since 2003', in Carla P. Freeman (ed.), *China and North Korea: Strategic and Policy Perspectives from a Changing China* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 18.

China's East Asian insecurity rhetoric blames United States (US) troops, bases, and regional allies for surrounding China with a 'containment by alliance' coupled with efforts to undermine China from within.⁵³ Of greater importance for China is the proliferation of nuclear weapons on the Korean peninsula. Conventional scholarly wisdom held that, should the DPRK acquire nuclear weapons, other states like Japan, South Korea and even Taiwan also would have pursued their own nuclear program. This has not been the case and it remains unlikely. China's concern of a 'nuclear containment', therefore, only rests in theory. There is also the risk of proliferation of nuclear material and weapons to non-state actors, such as terrorist groups. Xi Jinping cannot afford this; the BRI must remain unthreatened and its economy must grow according to its 'New Normal'.⁵⁴ This complicates China's pursuit of its interests and begs the question: will China intervene? The increasing securitisation of the Sino-DPRK border,⁵⁵ ⁵⁶ the opening of China's first overseas base in Djibouti,⁵⁷ and the most recent report of a military base in Afghanistan⁵⁸ indicate an increasingly assertive China, raising the perspective of Chinese interventionism.⁵⁹ While it is noted that China has historically breached its policy numerous times,⁶⁰ the DPRK may bring the official birth of Chinese interventionism. By no means will this situation create a stable Korean peninsula and increased pressure from the international community will test China's non-

⁵³ W.C. Chung, 'The Rise of China and the Security Dynamics in the Korean Peninsula' in Mingjiang Li and Dongmin Lee (eds.), *China and East Asian Strategic Dynamics: The Shaping of a New Regional Order* (Plymouth, 2011), p. 100.

⁵⁴ Jing Zhang & Jian Chen, 'Introduction to China's New Normal Economy', in *Journal of Chinese Economic and Business Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2017), pp. 1-4.

⁵⁵ AFP, 'Troops, Cameras, Radiation: China Preps for North Korea Crisis', 19 January 2018, [online](#).

⁵⁶ 'Every time China-North Korea relations worsen, there's always a report of China moving troops around the border', quoted in Sarah Zheng, 'Chinese Border Troops Hold Drills in Sub-zero Temperatures amid Tensions on Korean Peninsula', in *South China Morning Post*, 28 November 2017, [online](#).

⁵⁷ Sarah Zheng, 'China's Djibouti Military Base: "Logistics Facility", or Platform for Geopolitical Ambitions Overseas?', in *South China Morning Post*, 1 October 2017, [online](#).

⁵⁸ Kemel Toktomushev, 'China's Military Base in Afghanistan', in *The Diplomat*, 18 January 2018, [online](#).

⁵⁹ Jacques Neria, 'Chinese Troops Arrive in Syria to Fight Uyghur Rebels', in *Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs*, 20 December 2017, [online](#).

⁶⁰ Kerry Brown, 'Is China's Non-Interference Policy Sustainable?', in *BBC News*, 17 September 2013), [online](#).

interference sustainability.⁶¹

For China to reach some of its most important vital interests, it may have to reconsider its relationship and alliance with Pyongyang. At the same time, the Sino-DPRK alliance comes with its own benefits, too: a buffer zone. This provides Beijing with faster access to North-Korea, thereby allowing China to reach and secure the DPRK's nuclear reactors and weapons before the US and its allies could. Furthermore, this middle-ground impedes the American military from reaching China's border. It also allows China to project its political, economic and diplomatic outreach to the North. Of critical importance to the DPRK are Chinese energy exports. This buffer zone therefore presents a Chinese political extension covered by Beijing's economic and diplomatic power, with the possibility of military action.

China, the US, and the DPRK: the future of the Korean peninsula

Only time can tell what Beijing's next significant move will be. China's strategic calculus, more than ever, must also find a balance with 'Xi Jinping Thought' (*XiJinping xindai zhongguotese shehui zhuyi sixiang*). China's pursuit of the status quo appears to be trickling down to its end.⁶² For the time being, it appears that China is biding time to create enough room for political, diplomatic, and strategic manoeuvre to rebalance the strategic calculus on the Korean peninsula. This does not signify a particularly decisive shift when historically compared. Nevertheless, the stakes appear higher than ever not only for China, but for the US too.

U.S. President Donald Trump's rhetoric against the DPRK misguided; evoking military action without clear end goals will not solve anything. In fact, Trump's rhetoric is accompanied by an inappropriate military approach: limited strike against DPRK nuclear facilities will not lead to limited conflict.⁶³ Only time would be limited, before DPRK and China would intervene militarily. Limited

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Chung, 'The Rise of China and the Security Dynamics in the Korean Peninsula', p. 108.

⁶³ Most recent military threats only indicate a tactical reaction to an eventual DPRK provocation. It remains difficult to assert with confidence what the US's end goals in a war against DPRK would be. This only raises doubts whether the US has an actual military strategy intended to reach those goals.

strikes, therefore, may lead to unlimited war. Their post-9/11 military interventions point to this lesson.

Trump's threats are more likely to upset Beijing, ultimately raising hostility between the US and China, while simultaneously pushing one another further away. Instead, they should seek military rapprochement, which unfortunately appears unlikely for the time being. Furthermore, as Oriana Skylar Mastro points out, the deterioration of Sino-DPRK relations over the past two decades would lead Beijing not to intervene to protect itself, but to 'secure its own interests'.⁶⁴ In addition, during Xi Jinping's most recent visits to the People's Liberation Army (PLA), he called for them to be ready to fight, to win any war, and to 'neither fear hardships nor death'.⁶⁵ The PLA's current modernization and restructuring further indicates this: by practicing joint warfare capabilities, the CCP expects its armed forces to fight and win on its own. Yet, following the current Sino-American strategic mistrust, this would bring the US and China closer to war rather than closer to peaceful cooperation. Therefore, should Trump's brinkmanship rhetoric cause conflict, the US and the rest of the world should not expect China to come to their help: China's self-interests will trump American and global worries.

The deployment of the US's Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system to South Korea in 2017 represents just this. China has strongly opposed its deployment.⁶⁶ The anti-ballistic missile defence system is currently deployed to counter the DPRK's ballistic missiles. Although THAAD's effectiveness⁶⁷ in the Korean peninsula is disputed, China feels particularly threatened by its capabilities, most critically its radar performance. THAAD can detect airborne objects over 1000km away, which is well within Chinese airspace. In addition, THAAD could strengthen the US alliance system in East Asia 'by virtue of [its] technical characteristics'⁶⁸ by allowing American and South Korean radars, and even Japanese ones if it also acquires THAAD, to be connected. Not only would this

⁶⁴ Oriana Skylar Mastro, 'Why China won't Rescue North Korea: What to Expect if Things Fall Apart', in *Foreign Affairs*, 12 December 2017, [online](#).

⁶⁵ Tom Phillips, 'Xi Jinping tells Army not to Fear Death in Show of China's Military Might', in *The Guardian*, 4 January 2018, [online](#).

⁶⁶ The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 'China's Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation', 11 January 2017, [online](#).

⁶⁷ Joe Cirincione, 'No, we cannot Shoot down North Korea's Missiles', in *Defense One*, 17 September 2017, [online](#).

⁶⁸ Marc R. DeVore, 'Off the Radar? China THAAD and Northeast Asia's Alliances', in *Global Asia*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (2017), p.70.

improve the alliance's cohesion, but also improve the chances of hitting targets. Lastly, increased detection and response capabilities signify that any Chinese offensive would have very little surprise effect, thereby hindering its chances of military success. To check and balance THAAD, China may expand its nuclear arsenal and target South Korea 'should hostilities erupt between China and the US'.⁶⁹

Conclusion

Today, China would be better positioned to open its 'lips and teeth'⁷⁰ and tell DPRK that it will 'show your strength, carpe diem' instead of 'hide your strength, bide your time'.⁷¹ Xi cannot afford a conflict over the Korean peninsula. He has already stated that China will not rescue the DPRK if it causes a conflict.⁷² The US has shown its willingness to fight directly against North Korea, meaning US boots on the ground and closer to China's border, with North Korean refugees attempting to cross into China's mainland. Xi must carefully and simultaneously balance China's pursuit of stability on the peninsula, the strengthening of China's national security, and the pursuit of Korean peace. Currently, China appears to be attempting to wedge into the DPRK via diplomatic, political, and economic channels in order to restrain Kim Jong-un;⁷³ any serious escalation will witness a Chinese military response to protect itself. Time is of the essence.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p. 69.

⁷⁰ Mao Zedong described the Sino-DPRK relationship to be as close as 'lips and teeth'.

⁷¹ Famously put by Deng Xiaoping, this has shaped Chinese foreign policy and military strategy for the past three decades.

⁷² Skylar Mastro, 'Why China Won't Rescue North Korea: What to Expect if Things Fall Apart', January/ February 2018, [online](#).

⁷³ Son Daekwon, 'China's North Korea Solution', in *The Diplomat*, 25 July 2017, [online](#).