ISA Hong Kong Conference

Panel MA07: Changing Security Environment of the Korean Peninsula

Monday, June 27, 8:30 AM - 10:15 AM
B5-210, City University of Hong Kong

North Korea’s Nuclear Brinkmanship vis-à-vis the US and China:
‘Alliance Game’ and ‘Adversary Game’

(*Work in Progress. Please do not cite.)

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ABSTRACT

Whatever motivations lie behind North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs, North Korea has been aware that further nuclear and missiles tests would incur increasingly harsh international sanctions. In order to survive the sanctions, North Korea needs to entrap China to its side, for the North Korean economy is highly dependent upon China. In that context, this article argues that North Korea intentionally increases the level of its nuclear and missile threat in order to entrap China (thus, reducing its fear of being abandoned by China). That is, North Korea has elaborated its coercive diplomacy in order to press China to show a strong commitment to their mutual alliance. In order to develop the above argument, this article applies Glenn Snyder’s concept of the linkage between alliance game and adversary game to the trilateral relationship as an analytical framework. Then, it concludes with some policy implications for future trilateral relations.

KEYWORDS: North Korea, North Korea-China Relations, Brinkmanship, Alliance Security Dilemma, Korean Peninsula
Introduction

North Korea conducted its fourth nuclear test on January 6, 2016. This embarrassed China, as North Korea did so despite China’s strong opposition. Unlike in the case of the previous three nuclear tests, North Korea did not inform China of the test in advance. Moreover, though Wu Dawei, China’s special representative for Korean peninsula affairs, made a visit to Pyongyang in order to dissuade North Korea from launching a long-range missile, North Korea test-fired a Kwangmyungsong-4 on February 7, only three days after Wu’s return to Beijing.

North Korea claims that it has been developing unconventional military capabilities as a deterrent against a military threat posed by the US and South Korea. From North Korea’s perspective, no state, including China, should infringe upon North Korea’s sovereign right of possessing weapons for self-defense. Despite North Korea’s assertion, it is puzzling that Pyongyang conducted the nuclear and missile tests without fully considering China’s position in terms of the timing and the threat level of the tests. This is puzzling, because China’s participation in the UN-led sanctions is critical to implementing the sanctions effectively. As North Korea has furthered its nuclear development since 2006, when it conducted its first nuclear test, UN sanctions on North Korea have become harsher and harsher. Nevertheless, despite China’s strong criticism North Korea has been escalating its nuclear brinkmanship at the risk of provoking China’s increased commitment to the sanctions.

Bilateral trade volume between North Korea and China accounts for 90.1 percent of North Korea’s overall trade in 2014 and 91.3 in 2015.¹ Currently, thousands of North Korean workers are working in China. Their partially-confiscated wages have become one of North Korea’s main sources of foreign revenue. In addition to the legal trade between the two states, illegal smuggling through border cities between the two states may account for 50% of the official trade between North Korea and China.² Under such circumstances, if China were to

implement UN-led sanctions in a strict manner, the North Korean economy would be seriously damaged to the extent that North Korea should worry about its own survival. This being the case, then, why has North Korea been unnecessarily provoking China?

Indeed, as North Korea has increased the number of its nuclear and missile tests, the relationship between China and North Korea has deteriorated further. To a China that attempts to expand its political and security influence in the region in a way that is commensurate with its rapid economic rise, North Korea’s military adventurism has become a burden. China claims that it can create a new great power relationship with the US, for which China hopes to create an image of a responsible great power. If this is to occur, such a China should not stand behind North Korea’s rogue behaviors. Moreover, China has been enhancing its political, economic and security relations with South Korea, so that out of consideration for Sino-South Korean relations, China has to maintain a harsh stance against North Korea’s nuclear and missile developments. For example, after North Korea’s third nuclear test in 2013, China minimized political and military exchanges with North Korea, which included a significant reduction of mutual visits between high ranking officers. Also, since North Korea’s fourth nuclear test in 2016, China has been participating in the harshest sanctions the UN has ever imposed against a single state. In response to these developments, North Korea labelled China a ‘detested enemy’ and is reported to have urged its people to ‘crush China’s pressuring schemes with the force of a nuclear storm’.  

Given that North Korea exhibits behaviors that disrespect China’s opposition to North Korean nuclear and missile tests, has China’s stance not been a factor in North Korea’s deciding on the timing and the threat level of the tests? In other words, does China have any leverage in curbing North Korea’s military adventurism?

In order to address these questions, this article approaches Sino-North Korean relations from the angles of not only the ‘alliance game’ between the two states but also their individual ‘adversary games’ with their mutual enemy, the US. For example, given that China’s top priority with regard to the Korean peninsula is the peninsula’s stability, if North Korea increases

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the level of threat by conducting nuclear and missiles tests, China will respond by lowering its commitment in the ‘alliance game’ with the challenger to the desired stability. North Korea, while assuming a conciliatory stance toward the US in the ‘adversary game’. Yet, as North Korea heightens the level of threat, the US and South Korea would respond to it accordingly, increasing the level of their strategic military preparedness. For instance, the US and South Korea would conduct large scale military exercises, bringing US strategic assets to the West Sea or the East Sea. Should that occur, China would perceive the US (along with South Korea) as a greater challenger to the stability of the peninsula than North Korea. As a result, China would restore its estranged political and military relationship with North Korea, thereby increasing its commitment to the alliance with North Korea in the alliance game. At the same time, China would stand firmly against the US in the adversary game, for example, by not fully participating in UN sanctions or, if participating, implementing the sanctions only superficially.

Considering the interaction between alliance game and adversary game, North Korea, which has been developing nuclear and missile capabilities as a deterrent or offensive means against the US and South Korea, intentionally increases the level of its nuclear and missile threat in order to entrap China (thus, reducing its fear of being abandoned by China). In order to develop the above argument, this article proceeds as follows. First, as an analytical framework, it applies Glenn Snyder’s concept of the linkage between alliance game and adversary game to the trilateral relationship among the US (along with South Korea), China and North Korea. Second, it provides an overview of Sino-North Korean relations from 2006 up to the present. The period is divided into two: (1) from 2006 till before North Korea conducted the third nuclear test in 2013, and (2) from North Korea’s third nuclear test up to the present. The first one falls roughly into the Hujintao-Kim Jong Il period, and the second one to the Xi-Kim Jong En period. Thirdly, it concludes with some policy implications for future trilateral relations among the US (along with South Korea), North Korea, and China.

**Alliance Game vs. Adversary Game: North Korea, China and the US**

This article approaches North Korea’s nuclear brinkmanship not only in the bilateral context between North Korea and the US (along with South Korea), but also from the angle of
trilateral relations that involve China as a third party. In general, the literature on the role of a third party in crisis bargaining has focused on the idea that a third party influences the bargaining process as an observer, a conciliator, a mediator, an arbitrator, an adjudicator, an enforcer or an interventionist. In contrast, this article examines how a state interacts with its adversary within and in response to the regional security environment to produce a favorable outcome in its relationship with the third party.

Many analyses on the trilateral relations among the US, China and North Korea have adopted Lowell Dittmer’s concept of ‘strategic triangle’. Dittmer identifies three pattern dynamics of trilateral relations, namely the ménage a trios, the stable marriage and the romantic triangle, and claims that “the relationship between any two will be affected by each player’s relationship to the third”. Though his claim is valid, Dittmer’s three pattern dynamics are not directly applicable in the Northeast Asian setting. That is because, unlike Dittmer’s assumption in conceptualizing the ‘strategic triangle’, power capabilities among North Korea, the US, and China are asymmetrical and, moreover, China and North Korea are allies. That is, Dittmer’s three pattern dynamics do not cover a type in which two asymmetrical allies engage or confront with their common enemy to produce a bargaining outcome that is more to their advantage in their alliance relationship.

In that sense, Glenn Snyder’s research on the interaction between alliance game and adversary game provides a more useful framework. Snyder claims that a state under alliance simultaneously carries out not only an alliance game with its allies but also an adversary game with a competing state. First, he defines a fear of “entrapment” as “being dragged into a


6 Ibid.

conflict over an ally’s interests that one does not share,” and “abandonment” as being deserted.\(^8\) Then, he argues that, after an alliance has formed, the partners fear entrapment and abandonment. If an ally makes a strong commitment to the alliance, its fear of abandonment lessens while the fear of entrapment increases. If the ally makes a weak or vague commitment, the fear of entrapment lessens, but the fear of abandonment increases. He identifies this dynamic as the ‘alliance security dilemma’. Second, Snyder argues that, with an intention of influencing the behavior of its ally, a state can use its relations with their common enemy. Snyder simplifies the strategic choices an ally can make in its adversary game to two: conciliation and firmness. If a state does not want to be entrapped in a war between its ally and their common enemy, the state will take a conciliatory stance toward the enemy in the adversarial game in order to constrain its ally’s aggressive military posture toward the common enemy.

Snyder’s framework is applicable in analyzing trilateral relations among North Korea, the US, and China in that North Korea and China have been allies since 1961. China concluded the alliance with North Korea in hopes of having North Korea on its side in the context of the looming Sino-Russo ideological conflict in the 1960s. North Korea is China’s sole ally, as is China to North Korea, since North Korea and Russia discontinued their alliance relationship in 1996. Both North Korea and China perceive the US as their common enemy.

Adopting Snyder’s framework, North Korea and China can be seen to interact with each other in the alliance game, while they engage in the adversary game with the US, respectively, at the same time. In the case of the alliance game between North Korea and China, there exists an asymmetry in their fear of entrapment and abandonment. China, superior to North Korea in terms of military capabilities, has a relatively low fear of being deserted by North Korea when it is in conflict with a third party. In contrast, China has a high fear of entrapment into an unwanted war in which North Korea might become involved. The reason China has a high fear of entrapment is that China perceives North Korea to be an asset that serves as a strategic buffer between the US (along with South Korea) and China. Thus, if North Korea is involved in a war, China should be dragged into that war to preserve its strategic asset.

In contrast, North Korea has a higher fear of being abandoned by China than of being

\(^8\) Ibid., 467 and 183-186.
entrapped in an unwanted war in which China might become engaged. North Korea is well aware that China hopes to retain it as a strategic asset, but at the same time North Korea worries that China can behave in ways that are at odds with North Korea’s security interests if China finds it to be conducive to its larger security interests in dealing with the US.

Victor Cha claims that an alliance security dilemma arises when there are symmetrical fears of abandonment and entrapment between allies, while a conflict occurs when there are asymmetrical structures of abandonment and entrapment. For example, in order to reduce the fear of entrapment in the alliance game with North Korea, China could make a low commitment to the alliance, which would result in the estrangement of political and military relations between the two allies.

Such a conflict becomes more intensified as China and North Korea engage in adversary games with their common enemy, the US, with the intention of reducing fears of entrapment or abandonment by one another. In its adversary game with the US, China can either conciliate with the US (along with South Korea) or stand firm against the US. The modes of the former option include seriously participating in and implementing harsh UN-led sanctions, increasing its security relationship with South Korea, and expressing strong opposition to North Korean nuclear development. On the other hand, the modes of the latter option include passively participating in and implementing UN-led sanctions against North Korea, decreasing security cooperation with South Korea, and warning against US-led military exercises against North Korea by expressing its determined position supporting peace and stability on the Korean peninsula.

Given these two options, China will take conciliatory policies toward the US in the adversary game to reduce its fear of entrapment if North Korea initiates aggressive military confrontations with the US, which will, in turn, make North Korea harbor a higher fear of abandonment. China would do so because North Korea’s military adventurism becomes a

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10 China has been maintaining three principles in relation to Korean peninsula issues: Peace and stability on the Korean peninsula, a nuclear weapons-free peninsula, and resolution of the Korean peninsula issues through dialogue and negotiations. Though China participates in the sanctions against North Korea in order to induce North Korea to give up its nuclear ambitions (the second principle), China retains the first and third principles because it does not want the North Korean regime to collapse.
burden to China. North Korea’s nuclear development in China’s backyard tarnishes China’s image as a great power. Also, the advancement of North Korea’s nuclear program can be used as a justification for the US to strengthen the US-South Korea and the US-Japan alliances, paving the road to the creation of a US-South Korea-Japan virtual alliance relationship. From the Chinese perspective, the strengthened US-led alliance network would be used to contain China in the context of an intensified Sino-US strategic competition.

However, if North Korea increases the level of threat to the extent that the US (along with South Korea) mobilizes its strategic assets to respond to the threat, China would stand firm against the US in the adversary game at the same time as increasing its commitment to North Korea (such as restoring estranged Sino-North Korea relations) in the alliance game. China would do so because, as mentioned earlier, North Korea is an asset for China that serves as a strategic buffer.

Being aware of China’s strategic choices in the adversary game, North Korea would also attempt to manage its intra-alliance relationship with China via its own adversary game with the US. Whenever North Korea would conduct major nuclear and missile tests, North Korea would escalate the level of threat to the point at which the US (along with South Korea) would be forced to respond militarily. Upon a US response such as bringing in aircraft carriers and B-52 and B-2 bombers near the Peninsula, North Korea would expect China to identify the US not as a defender but as a challenger to the stability of the region. Once China perceives the US (not North Korea) as a challenger, China would stand firm against the US and strengthen its commitments to the alliance with North Korea.

In conclusion, North Korea resorts to brinkmanship through escalating the level of nuclear and missile threats in order to entrap China to serve its interests on Peninsula issues. To emphasize, this article does not assert that North Korea develops its nuclear and missile capabilities simply in order to entrap China. The deterrent or offensive targets of the North Korean WMD are the US, South Korea and Japan. Rather, this article claims that, when North Korea tests nuclear weapons and (or) missiles, it unnecessarily escalates the level of military tension in a way China opposes in order to entrap China to its side. The following chapters examine the above arguments with respect to Sino-North Korea relations since 2006, when
North Korea conducted its first nuclear test.

**Conclusion**

North Korea claims that it has been developing nuclear and missile capabilities to use them as a deterrent against a threat posed by the US and South Korea. In contrast, the US (along with South Korea) maintains that North Korea has been doing so with the intention of using them for offensive purposes. Whatever motivations lie behind North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs, North Korea is aware that further nuclear and missiles tests will incur increasingly harsh international sanctions. In order to survive the sanctions, North Korea needs to entrap China to its side, for the North Korean economy is highly dependent upon China. To reduce its fear of abandonment by China, North Korea heightens the level of its nuclear and missiles threats with no consideration for saving China’s face. Though such North Korean military adventurism upsets China, North Korea continues it in order to entrap China to its side, as explained above.

North Korea will continue its nuclear and missile tests to emphasize that it has WMD capabilities to launch a strike on the US mainland. Such actions are intended to bring the US to the negotiating table to develop a peace agreement between the US and North Korea. However, whenever North Korea conducts nuclear and missile tests, the international community will impose harsher sanctions. Then, as has been a repeated pattern since 2006 when North Korean conducted its first nuclear test, North Korea will heighten the level of threat to the extent that the US (along with South Korea) will react by strengthening its military readiness against the North Korean threat. Worrying that the US will take advantage of the North Korean situation to contain China, China will perceive the US as a challenger to the stability of the Korean peninsula as well as to Northeast Asia in general. As a result of North Korea’s deliberate attempt to change the challenger-defender framework, China would not fully implement the sanctions, though it participates in them in order to save face. North Korea will continue practicing brinkmanship by increasing the level of threat through its nuclear or missile tests.

The above speculation means that, when North Korea develops nuclear and missile
capabilities, North Korea would not take China’s opposition into full consideration. That is, China will not have leverage in curbing North Korea’s WMD program as long as its top priority regarding the Korean peninsula is to maintain stability on the peninsula.

All that said, North Korea’s brinkmanship strategy vis-à-vis China and the US would be seriously challenged when the US finally perceives that North Korea has developed the WMD capabilities to target US territories. Then, the US might make a surgical strike on North Korea’s nuclear and missile sites, even at the risk of such an action resulting in a Sino-US military confrontation on the peninsula. To note, in 1961 the US imposed a naval blockade surrounding Cuba at the risk of the breakout of a US-Soviet war. Under such circumstances, China might step back to avoid being entrapped into an unwanted Second Korean War. That is, North Korea could be caught in its own trap. Therefore, from the North Korean perspective, it will attempt to find the red line, on the other side of which the US would contemplate military attacks against North Korea. If it can find that line, it will escalate tensions to just short of it. However, it is not an easy task to find the line, as it will involve perceptions and misperceptions of the various players in the games, i.e., the US (along with South Korea), China and North Korea itself.