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Transcript

CHINA IN THE WORLD PODCAST

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Guest: **Zhao Tong**

Episode 77: China's North Korea Calculus Under
Trump

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Haenle: Well Dr. Tong Zhao, it's a pleasure to have you on the China and the World podcast, thank you.

Zhao: It's my great pleasure.

Haenle: You've been a scholar here at the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center since the summer of 2014.

Zhao: Right.

Haenle: So, a little over two years.

Zhao: Almost three years.

Haenle: Almost two and a half, yeah, getting there. And you've done great work. You cover a pretty big portfolio—in your portfolio, nuclear arms control. You have issues related to strategic stability, especially here in the Asia Pacific—nonproliferation. Broadly speaking, you look at China's foreign and security policy, with a strong focus in the region on issues like North Korea and the South China Sea. That's quite a portfolio [with] critical issues, and a lot of these issues were touched on in the U.S. presidential campaign by our new president, Donald Trump, and I want to talk to you about some of those. Before I do, I just want to learn a little more about your background. We're approaching the Chinese Spring Festival as we're recording this. Are you going back to your hometown?

Zhao: Yes.

Haenle: And where is that?

Zhao: It is in Henan province.

Haenle: Henan province, in the central part of China.

Zhao: Yes, it is well known for the Shaolin temple. Known for its martial arts.

Haenle: The Shaolin temple, did you grow up near there?

Zhao: Not far away, and I visited there at least three times I think.

Haenle: I remember when I was studying Chinese, one of the phrases that I learned early on, the Henan and the Yellow River, 黄河是中国文化的摇篮.

Zhao: Exactly

Haenle: The cradle of Chinese civilization.

Zhao: Henan is currently one of the most populated provinces in China. It has more than 100 million people.

Haenle: So did you grow up in a small town or a big city there?

Zhao: It's a medium sized city. I think it has over 400,000 people, if my memory serves.

Haenle: Now I can imagine that if you're growing up in Henan, in the central part of China, going to Tsinghua must be every kid's dream.

Zhao: Well it was pure luck.

Haenle: How did you end up at Tsinghua University studying for your undergraduate?

Zhao: Well [in] my time, science and engineering majors were highly pursued by high school students. So, you know, teachers always told us, if you can do math or physics or chemistry, you should do those. So naturally, without much consideration, I chose physics as my major.

Haenle: And you have to score quite well on the college entrance exam.

Zhao: Yeah, a lot of preparations.

Haenle: So you spent a lot of time studying growing up?

Zhao: Yes, that's why I'm now wearing my glasses.

Haenle: And at Tsinghua, what was your major? What did you primarily study?

Zhao: I studied in the Department of Physics.

Haenle: And while you were at Tsinghua, my understanding is that Doctor Li Bin was one of your professors. Li Bin, of course, is a non-resident senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment, and he's well known and well regarded in China on these nuclear issues. Did he have a big impact on you?

Zhao: Very much so, and I was so fortunate to be able to meet him when I was an undergraduate studying physics. I registered for his class on science, technology and international security, which greatly interested me and since then, I started working in this interdisciplinary field of science and arms control, and later became a student of Professor Li Bin when I was doing my graduate study. So he has been very helpful and very inspiring for my career development.

Haenle: And now you're a colleague of his at the Carnegie Endowment.

Zhao: Very honored to be so.

Haenle: So you also did your Master's degree here at Tsinghua.

Zhao: Yes.

Haenle: And then decided that you would go to the United States, Georgia Institute of Technology, at the Sam Nunn School of International Affairs, to continue your studies. How did you decide, and why did you decide to go to the United States, and what did you pursue there in terms of your PhD?

Zhao: At that time, there was no Chinese university offering a PhD program on that interdisciplinary subject of science and international security. So I had to go to a U.S. university, and at that time, Georgia Tech was just opening a new program exactly on this subject. And so I applied and got admitted.

Haenle: And was there a professor that you wanted to work with there, or was it primarily just the subject, the degree?

Zhao: It was primarily the uniqueness of the program that really attracted me, and I was very happy to be able to work with professor Adam Stulberg, who became my advisor later.

Haenle: Following Georgia Tech, or was it while you were at Georgia Tech, you did a Stanton Fellowship at the Harvard University Belfer Center. Can you explain a little bit to our listeners what a Stanton Fellowship is, and what you did with that Fellowship at Harvard?

Zhao: Basically, the Stanton Nuclear Security Fellowship offers stipends for scholars at different levels to pursue research related to topics such as nuclear arms control, non-proliferation, nuclear safety, security, etc. So I was very lucky to be able to go to the Belfer Center at Harvard to work with the Managing the Atom Project, as well as the International Security Program. Both are very well-known projects and programs in this field, and I had great mentors and colleagues in that program.

Haenle: And how long was that fellowship?

Zhao: It's a one-year program. I learned a lot from that experience.

Haenle: And it was from there that you applied for this position at the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center, is that right?

Zhao: Yes.

Haenle: Well we're delighted to have you on board, and as I said you've done quite a bit of good work over the last two-plus years. In many ways, it seems like your area of research is going to become more important as we enter this very new period of U.S.-China relations with Donald Trump as our president. I just want to start out generally by asking you, you know, we've heard the comments that he's made in the campaign on the issues that you cover on U.S.-China relations, we've seen his Twitter activity, the statements he puts out on Twitter. A lot of those areas, as I said, touch on areas that you cover. In the campaign, he suggested that perhaps Japan and South

Korea should get their own nuclear programs, and that caught a lot of people by surprise. He also indicated that China is not doing enough on North Korea, and that he as president would put pressure on China to do more. He also, on the other hand, said that he's going to sit down with Kim Jong-un and eat a hamburger with him. So he's said a couple of things on North Korea. He's also, I think, criticized China for upsetting the strategic balance in the region through its reclamation activities in the South China Sea. So he has said a number of things that impinge on these areas that you work on. I just wanted to get your general reaction as you look at our new president. What conclusions do you come to from a broad standpoint, about his views on these issues, what the U.S. administration might do, and what it might mean for the United States and China?

Zhao: Well, first of all, he seems to take a utilitarian approach towards dealing with very important international relations issues. He talked about letting South Korea and Japan go nuclear. I think the intention behind that rhetoric was to put pressure on those two allies to spend more to defend themselves rather than really wanting them to have nuclear weapons.

Haenle: ... And more to contribute to funding the alliance relationship, perhaps?

Zhao: Yes. And also talking about pressing China on Taiwan, on the South China Sea, in order to make China make concessions on trade disputes with the United States; which means Trump doesn't have a principled approach towards foreign affairs, which is problematic. In the nuclear field, for example, it's very unlike the approach taken by President Obama, who was very committed to the idea of promoting nuclear arms control, a world free of nuclear weapons; to tighten control over loose nuclear materials, increasing nuclear safety, promoting nuclear non-proliferation. He made that very clear at the very beginning of his term, and he devoted great efforts throughout the eight years towards promoting those objectives. But Trump didn't seem to have any idea, any objective, to begin with in the nuclear field, for example. One day, he talked about "let there be an arms race" with Russia on nuclear weapons. And on the next day he said "let's do another round of nuclear reduction negotiations with Russia." [These are] two completely different and opposite proposals, which sends very conflicting and confusing signals to the international community. Again, on non-proliferation, he said one day about allowing South Korea and Japan to go nuclear, and on another day his senior government officials like General Mattis walked it back on that rhetoric. So without principles, without a consistent approach to these very important and fundamental national security issues, I think he's confusing everyone.

Haenle: So he doesn't have a principled approach towards the nuclear issue per se? You're implying that he has another goal in mind, or another objective in mind, in talking about these issues. What is it, then, that Chinese experts, Chinese leaders have concluded that Donald Trump is trying to do when he talks about these issues? What is his aim, and what are your concerns about that? And are there potentially opportunities for the United States and China in this different type of approach that he seems to be using?

Zhao: Well, I [think] the conclusion drawn by Chinese decision makers is that Trump is simply playing his role as a big businessman, making deals and doing bargaining, quid pro quos. On the issue of Taiwan, clearly he is simply using Taiwan as a bargaining chip to induce Chinese concessions in other issue areas, which is, I think, very problematic for the United States and

Taiwan, because I'm not sure that Taiwan wants to be used as a bargaining chip. Taiwan wants U.S. attention for the sake of Taiwan itself. There might be some opportunity in the sense that if Trump is really using Taiwan as a bargaining chip, there might be room for quid pro quos, because as people always say, any problem that can be resolved by money is not a problem. However, even in that sense, I don't think China will easily give up under Trump's pressuring in other issue areas, because the perception is obviously that if we agree to renegotiate all the very important existing agreements between the two countries simply because Trump wants to get a better deal, we certainly should stand strong on our current position, because if we concede now, we will have to concede later on other issues. That's why I think that China won't easily be coerced into cooperation on the South China Sea, on trade, simply to have U.S. cooperation on Taiwan. So I think the Trump approach won't easily work.

Haenle: It's interesting, I think, you know, his phone call with Taiwan president Tsai Ing-wen, [It] caught people by surprise, but there were a lot of people who thought, you know, it's not a bad thing for him to talk to the leader of Taiwan. I think people were really off guard when he implied [about] the One China Policy, that he hadn't decided yet whether he was going to accept that. And a lot, I think, of American observers initially say, 'look, Trump wants to use the One China policy as a card in negotiating with China.' But the One China policy is not a card on the table. The One China policy is the table itself. It's the foundation that allowed us to establish relations in the late 70s. And both sides benefited from the One China policy. And so it is not something, the One China policy, at least from my perspective, that only China benefitted from, that you could use as a card to press China. Perhaps, I suppose, there are people out there who say, 'well it was important for us in 1979 to have this One China policy, but as the years moved on, perhaps now it is not as important to us, and maybe it is more important to China.' Maybe that's what Donald Trump is suggesting.

It seems to be a risky strategy to me, but I will tell you, Tong Zhao, the one thing I'm surprised at is what I just heard you say, which I've hear other Chinese say as well, which is that it's possible that the Chinese side would consider making some concessions in other areas if they can make some progress on Taiwan. And of course that is another issue, which is we've never viewed Taiwan as some sort of chip that we have to bargain with. In fact, we have maintained good relations with the people of Taiwan, and that relationship has been important to the United States. So I have a lot of misgivings with the notion, as an American, with the notion that you would use Taiwan to negotiation, and if you could get some concessions from the Chinese side on trade and on North Korea and on the South China Sea, that you are somehow willing, as a U.S. administration, to give up certain things with respect to Taiwan. I'm not sure how president Tsai Ing-wen would feel about that, and the Taiwan people. But are there scholars who say, 'well, if Donald Trump wants to bargain on Taiwan, we're ready to go?' Is there that viewpoint in China that, as long as we can make some progress on bringing Taiwan back into the fold, we will think about things that we can do in trade, and things we might be able to do more to pressure North Korea? Is there that kind of thinking in China?

Zhao: I don't think China will make significant concessions on trade and other issues simply to make the U.S. government keep its existing Taiwan policy. China might be able to offer significant concessions in return for the United State to stay away if...

Haenle: ...to change its fundamental position on Taiwan.

Zhao: Right. In China's favor. I don't see that happening. And even though Trump himself is talking about it in the sense that Taiwan is being used a bargaining chip, I'm not sure that this is the view embraced by most of his senior officials and advisors. In fact, I think many of his senior advisors, they want to pay more attention to Taiwan simply to improve relations with Taiwan, in and of itself. They see Taiwan as a democratic entity, and view it as important to help Taiwan be able to make independent decisions. So I think that reflects deep internal friction within the Trump administration, and who will have greater influence and who's view will dominate, there is still a great degree of uncertainty.

Haenle: Now you raise a very interesting point because it seems that many of the advisors who recommended the call, for example with Tsai Ing-wen, want to see an improved relationship with Taiwan, want to see greater cooperation with Taiwan, and they were pleased with [the fact that] Donald Trump made the phone call with Tsai Ing-wen. But his comments indicate that he's not looking at Taiwan in that regard, that perhaps he's looking at Taiwan as something he can bargain away. And I think that perhaps in that context, we have a disconnect between his advisors, who are advocating a more positive relationship, a strengthened relationship with Taiwan, with what Donald Trump indicates that he's wanting to do with Taiwan.

Zhao: And I think the disconnect exists in many other issue areas in U.S.-Russia relations, in U.S. policy towards the South China Sea, in U.S. policy towards the Korean Peninsula—so it's not an isolated issue.

Haenle: The other big area, of course, that you watch closely, is on North Korea. And my own view on this is even if Hillary Clinton were elected president, I think we would have seen a very different posture coming out of the United States on North Korea. We've seen significant advancements by North Korea, especially under this leader Kim Jong-un. A lot more nuclear tests, a rapid number of missile tests, and I think the threat assessment has changed in the United States in terms of how long it might take North Korea to put a nuclear warhead on top of an intercontinental ballistic missile that could range the United States, and that's a serious threat, and I think one that the U.S. administration cannot ignore. And even if it was president Hillary Clinton right now, my sense is the administration would be engaging very intensely with China and with South Korea, Japan and others about what to do about this growing threat.

Now Donald Trump has indicated that, in his view, China is not doing enough, and that he plans to put more pressure on China. What's your reaction when you hear that? Does he have a point here? Is there more that China can do? What can the United States and China do together on this problem, because obviously this problem is not getting any better. It's getting much worse as we go along.

Zhao: Well first of all, it's not a surprise that Trump wants to further pressure China to impose more economic pressure on North Korea. But I think in China there is a general doubt about whether more coercive pressure—economic, military—might really do the work of fundamentally changing North Korean policy about its nuclear missile programs. Because the Chinese understanding of the logic is very straightforward, that North Korea's fundamental motivation for its nuclear program is its threat perception, primarily from the United States. And more American pressure will only encourage North Korea to double down its investment into its nuclear missile program. Secondly, China doesn't believe that more pressure will lead to a good outcome, because

even if we, the international community, including China, are able to implement a complete economic embargo against North Korea, completely cut off any economic relationship with North Korea, and if we are able to force the North Korean regime to face the reality of economic instability, social instability, and even regime collapse, how would we be sure that in that situation, believing that itself has nothing more to lose, the regime will choose to cooperate rather than to be even more provocative, to embrace more brinksmanship? To be more provocative?

So China doesn't see the U.S. approach of imposing more coercive pressure as having a good so-called "exit strategy." Even if we are able to force the North Korean leaders to the brink. And for China, I don't think China has any incentive to substantially step up its economic pressure over North Korea, or even completely cutting off its economic relationship with North Korea, simply because doing that will very likely be seen by North Korea as China declaring war against the regime. Because all those measures can greatly and directly contribute to the regime collapsing. And in that dire situation, China cannot make sure North Korea wouldn't directly threaten China, given that North Korea is currently a nuclear-capable country. Making that nuclear capable North Korea a Chinese enemy is the worst-case scenario that China doesn't want to put itself into. So I do not think there is any way that China would go along with that approach. And China sees that as a very unfair proposal from the West, because all the West wants China to do in that approach is to let China be the one to provoke and enrage North Korea, and then take all of the subsequent consequences of North Korean retaliation. So I don't think China sees that as reasonable.

Haenle: So the North Koreans tend to say that the reason they're building their nuclear program is because they feel under threat by the United States. And I think we've heard this from the North Koreans time and time again. I think the one thing to keep in mind, at least from an American standpoint, is that I think our friends in South Korea and Japan, and increasingly in the United States, are feeling under threat from the North Koreans. And it no longer is this one-sided threat. Clearly the enhanced capabilities on the North Korean side, in terms of its nuclear program, its missile program, are creating a great deal of anxiety in the region. So I understand your point that the Chinese policymakers don't frankly think that more pressure will get the desired outcome that we're looking for, plus the North Korean missiles are not pointing at China right now, and China doesn't want those missiles pointed at them. And so if Chinese leaders conclude that more pressure is not the answer, what is the answer? What can we do to stop and reverse the progress that North Korea has made in its nuclear program? As I understand it, Chinese leaders and policymakers are opposed to North Korea's nuclear development. So in that regard, we have similar goals. So what do we do if pressure is not the answer?

Zhao: First of all, I think it is not uncommon for countries to have different threat perceptions. In the case of U.S.-North Korea, I think both countries feel mutually threatened. And it's not a surprise at all, as the Director for National Intelligence James Clapper pointed out recently. North Korea is a very paranoid country. So I think we have to base our decision-making on the understanding that North Korea really believes itself to genuinely be threatened. From the Chinese view, China believes the only long-term approach to address the North Korean crisis is that we have to somehow, in a gradualist approach, bring North Korea back as a normal member of the international community. And the best way to do that is through gradually encouraging North Korea to liberalize and open up its economy. And over time, that hopefully will lead to a greater increase of social and political openness. That seems to the Chinese to be the only nonviolent way

to solve the problem. So for China, instead of making it harder for North Korea to do trade with the outside world, instead of making it harder for North Korean laborers to work in foreign countries, to expose themselves to the outside world, instead of making it harder for North Koreans to open restaurants and other businesses in foreign countries, we should encourage this. This is the way that we can introduce North Koreans to the outside world. We encourage people to people exchanges, encourage information flow into North Korea.

Haenle: I recall when China's president was Hu Jintao, and when I was working as the White House representative to the six-party talks, this was part of China's approach, which was really to try to encourage North Korea to move along a similar path, frankly, that China had moved along in terms of opening its economy and reforming. And [during] Kim Jong-il's last trip to China, when he came to China, the Chinese side put together an itinerary for him that took him to Dalian and to Shanghai, in large part to show Kim Jong-il that if North Korea can reform and open up, look at what can happen. Look at this city of Dalian, how it's developed quite rapidly over the last 10-20 years, how beautiful Shanghai has become, look at the economy that is thriving there. But for some reason, the North Koreans up to this point have not done so. And I understand that this has caused considerable levels of frustration at the senior levels of Chinese leadership. So with China's real urging, and in fact pressure, North Korea has resisted this economic opening. What do you think is the greatest inhibitor to North Korea opening up economically? Why have they not taken China's advice in this regard?

Zhao: I think, as you mentioned, there were signs that Kim Jong-il was interested in doing economic reform and opening up a little bit. Kim Jong-un, the current leader, is even more interested in devoting resources to economic development and conducting legitimate trade with foreign countries. But of course, they also have significant hesitations for reasons we understand, maybe a swift opening up will introduce great political uncertainty that threatens the regime. However, I think they haven't completely ruled out that option. I don't think they are stupid. They clearly understand that they cannot survive, they cannot sustain their regime, their country, being a completely isolated country from the outside world. However, they want that process to be very controllable. So if it is to happen, it has to be a gradualist approach. And for outsiders, for the international community, I think we should encourage making it easier for them to open up, rather than making it harder by imposing all of the sanctions.

And also the efforts by South Korea and some other countries to deliberately encourage regime change through the importing of information, encouraging the defection of officials and civilians, further discourages North Korea to open up. So I think we have to reach a common understanding of what's the most viable long-term approach. If we agree that maybe gradually encouraging North Korea to open up is the best way, maybe we should have a coherent strategy, rather than someone doing something that undermines this goal while others try to promote this approach.

Haenle: What you're describing in terms of this encouraging North Korea to open up economically, and over the long term become a more normal country, sounds like a process that's going to take some time, but of course the backdrop of that is that their nuclear and missile programs are developing rapidly. And this is of course the dilemma, is the feeling on the U.S. side and with South Korea and Japan and others, is that time is not on our side, and that we no longer have this time to see this gradual opening, because the threat is growing much stronger, and no

democratically elected U.S. president can stand by and watch this threat grow, where American service members in South Korea, and citizens of South Korea and Japan, are at greater and greater risk. Donald Trump has indicated, and there are signals coming from the administration, that they're looking at military options, potentially pre-emptive options. I have a sense of how you might think of those, but I'd like to let you react to some of the things that you're hearing coming out of the administration about the potential for pre-emptive strikes and military action against the North.

Zhao: Well that's the biggest problem China has about the American approach of dealing with North Korea. That is, only addressing the superficial phenomenon but not the root cause of the problem. And the military approach is, I think, apparently not addressing the root cause but may be able to take the North Korean nuclear weapons capability out. But that is a very risky option. For many years, the United States has been contemplating possible military options in case there is a need. We all know [that] in the early 1990s, there were plans to do so, but later there was this general framework agreement that prevented the military option [from] being implemented. So today, after decades, North Korea's overall conventional military and nuclear capabilities have advanced greatly, and the risk of a pre-emptive military strike is even higher. I don't think the United States is confident that it can completely identify, track and take out all North Korean nuclear weapons and long-range conventional rockets. And even if only a small portion of those capabilities survived, that could constitute a catastrophic retaliation capability by North Korea. So that's a very risky option, and the risk only increases with the coming to office of Mr. Trump, who doesn't have much experience, and some of his senior officials like Mr. Tillerson also don't have much experience. So the concern is that they might make a rash decision to order a pre-emptive strike if they got the intelligence report that there was a sign that North Korea was about to conduct an ICBM test. Doing that would certainly encourage North Korea to retaliate, but no one can tell what the retaliation would mean, and how to contain further escalation of that conflict. So I think that the risk is simply too high, and we should really be more careful in contemplating those options.

Haenle: The Director of National Intelligence, James Clapper, recently in comments—I think on Capitol Hill, testifying in the Senate—indicated that getting the North Koreans to give up their nuclear weapons is not something we're going to be able to do, and perhaps we ought to think about capping the North Korean nuclear program through negotiations and other means. Is this something that Chinese policymakers have been thinking through? My own view is that this would be very difficult for Donald Trump, as president, given how tough he's talked, to present that to the American people as an outcome that is worthy of giving him any due credit. I can't imagine Donald Trump saying to the American people, 'you know, I've fixed the North Korean nuclear problem. They can go ahead and keep all of the nuclear weapons they have, they can't just build more.' It doesn't seem politically viable to me as an option, especially considering Donald Trump as president and all of the tough talk that he's engaged in during the campaign. How much is this discussed in China as a viable option? I know that the Chinese government official position is that it wants to see North Korea give up its nuclear program, abandon its nuclear program, and that's enshrined in all of the agreements that have come out of the six-party talk framework. But is there discussion on this idea of capping the program?

Zhao: Well first of all, as we just discussed, there are simply no other better options. The military one, besides all of the risks we just discussed, the discussion in the international community about the military option, only encourages the North Koreans to take alternative measures, for example, to pre-delegate the launch authority of their nuclear forces in case their national leaders are taken out in a surgical strike, and will only encourage them to build deeper tunnels, more reinforced underground facilities to protect their strategic military assets. So I don't think the military option is a viable one, even in the future.

Given that, I think of course pursuing long-term denuclearization is always the ultimate objective of the United States—China, and everyone, including North Korea itself—acknowledges that as the long-term objective. But everyone also acknowledges, I think, including James Clapper, that that goal won't be achieved overnight. And we certainly won't be able to achieve that if we simply cannot achieve a near-term, much easier objective, which is to cap and freeze North Korea's nuclear missile capabilities. North Korea, I think, is apparently very interested in such ideas. It has publicly proposed such discussions over the past couple of years, offering to suspend its nuclear tests in return for South Korea and the United States to suspend their joint military exercises. And that was considered to be unacceptable by the United States. But my question for my American colleagues is, what small concession would you be willing to offer in return for a small concession from North Korea? If everyone agrees that a step by step approach is the most likely way forward, everyone should be able to offer small concession simultaneously. But I haven't gotten a good answer from my American colleagues.

Haenle: Well my own sense is...when I worked in the U.S. government and was working on the North Korea issue, we had that roadmap and the six-party framework. And of course, part of that was the North Koreans would take steps to denuclearize, and the other parties, including the United States, would give concessions along the way to North Korea, and over time that was a pathway that would lead to North Korea giving up its nuclear program in exchange for concessions and ultimately for normalizing U.S.-North Korea relations and, as you say, bringing North Korea in to the international community as a more normal country. I think Kim Jong-un has stepped in and said, 'we're not interested in giving up our nuclear weapons program.' And North Korea has abrogated all of the commitments that the country made in the context of the six-party talks, including all of the areas that the United States and the other parties said they would do in the form of concessions for North Korea. So it's hard to imagine that the North Koreans are serious about negotiating.

Perhaps they are interested in a cap and freeze, but I don't think that has a lot of support in the United States. I think the United States—certainly the U.S. official position and the Chinese official position—still remains that we need to get North Korea to give up its nuclear program, and I think the U.S. government is still marching in that direction. We'll see what happens in the new Trump administration. And the other thing, and my last question to you is, he also said, against the backdrop of all that tough talk, he also said he'd be willing to meet with Kim Jong-un over a hamburger. I'm not sure why he talked about a hamburger, but that's what he talked about. And I think you were quoted over the summer as saying that could be a real game-changer. I'm skeptical that that's really something he's considering. I don't think that he is considering that, I think he just simply said that, because it came to the top of his mind at that particular moment. But you said favorable comments in response to that, and I wanted to get your sense on what you thought about that, as an approach.

Zhao: First of all, I certainly encourage President Trump to think more about the engagement approach, especially given that North Korea, given its past behavior, tends to be able to offer major compromises when its leader gets to meet with the top leader of the United States. When they met at the national leader level, that's when real bargaining took place. That's when real concessions were made. And if Mr. Trump came to such a meeting with Kim Jong-un, I don't think he has to portray himself as accepting North Korea as a nuclear-capable country. We don't have to engage with North Korea by making explicit statements that we accept it as a nuclear capable country, we simply don't have to make that statement. We can simply choose not to talk about it. And that shouldn't prevent us from engaging with North Korea, because apparently, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un is very interested in having a talk with Mr. Trump. If we take note of the fact that North Korea has refrained from conducting any major military provocations since late October last year, this is very unusual if we consider how frequently North Korea conducted nuclear and missile tests in the first ten months of 2016.

Haenle: What do you think that means?

Zhao: We don't have to guess, because one senior North Korean official openly said, "North Korea has been waiting for the Trump administration to clarify its North Korea policy," [on the] eve of the recent New Year's speech by Kim Jong-un, in which he mentioned North Korea entering the final stage of preparing an ICBM test. I think it's possible that it was intended as a reminder to Mr. Trump that 'we are still waiting, and we do not necessarily [have to] do this ICBM test, but if you are willing to engage with us, maybe we can come up with a deal and we find it unnecessary to do the test.' I think they didn't immediately do a test, they didn't do it on inauguration day, as some people speculated. I think they are still waiting, but I think their patience is running out. It's better that Mr. Trump can quickly offer some hint at his willingness to be engaged and I'm sure Mr. Kim Jong-un will be more than happy to talk or engage in other matters.

Haenle: Well, we have a lot to look forward to. There, I imagine will be a lot of developments over the next year on this issue. And I hope we can sit down again and take a look at what's going on, and to try and get your viewpoint on these things, which I think is extremely important. Thank you very much for sitting down with me today for the China and the World podcast. Enjoy your trip back to Henan for spring festival, and let's talk again in the year of the rooster.

Zhao: Thank you. It's a great pleasure and I'm looking forward to future discussions.