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Transcript

CHINA IN THE WORLD PODCAST

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Episode 17: Debunking the Myths of China's
Perspective on North Korea (Part I)

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Haenle: You're listening to the Carnegie–Tsinghua “China in the World” podcast, a series of conversations with Chinese and international experts on China’s foreign policy, international role, and China’s relations with the world, brought to you from the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center here in Beijing. I’m Paul Haenle, the Director of the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center, and I’ll be your host.

I’m talking to you today from the School of International Studies at Peking University, and I’m joined by my friend Doctor Wang Dong, associate professor at the School of International Studies and director of the Center for Northeast Asian Strategic Studies. Wang Dong, thank you very much for joining us today.

Wang: Thank you, Paul, for inviting me.

Haenle: We’d like to talk to you today to get your insights on recent developments on North Korea and what you think they might mean for China. I’d like to start by asking you for your sense of where the China-North Korea relationship stands today, one year into President Xi Jinping and the new leadership’s tenure in office. We have seen notable changes and developments in relations in the past year. I’d be interested in your perspectives on that, and how would you characterize relations between China and North Korea today?

Wang: Okay, thank you. I think since the new leadership came into power, I think there is also a notable change in terms of China’s approach towards its relations with the DPRK, and particularly, I think what I always want to emphasize to my friends and colleagues is the fact that I think that Chinese leaders have now increasingly understood that without denuclearization, there would be no durable stability. In fact, I believe that China has this trained goal of wanting to have both stability and denuclearization, but often times I think there are kinds of misunderstanding or perception. Elsewhere, people will tend to believe that China sort of values stability over denuclearization or wanted to get stability at the expense of denuclearization. I think that is really a misperception of what the [China’s] real intentions and goals are when it comes to the North Korea nuclear issue.

Haenle: So, there has been some talk about this that I’m aware of that denuclearization has sort of moved up in terms of priority for the Chinese leadership, and you see this, I think, you can look at the statements that are made by Chinese leaders. You can detect some of this. Can you give us a sense, however, from a policy standpoint or from a Chinese behavior or how China is responding to certain things that North Korea does, how can foreign observers see in a concrete way that this has changed and that denuclearization is now more important?

Wang: I first want to say I fully agree with your observation, and this is also my personal observation and conviction as well. Let me give you, I think, a few very concrete examples or evidence, if you like. I think first is that China actually, along with the United States, worked out this most recent round of sanctions through the UN Security Council. So this is one, the first example you want to cite.

Haenle: This is in the aftermath of...

Wang: Yeah, the aftermath of this sort of nuclear test.

Haenle: ... their nuclear test.

Wang: So China, I think, has been quite strict in terms of implementing the sanctions, and you may also remember last year the Ministry of Commerce published a list of items, you know, that are supposed to be on the sanction list. A lot of observers, I think, pay a lot of attention to that because it is something quite extraordinary. It's actually unprecedented, it has never happened before, and I would take this as a very positive indication that China, you know, is essentially making a public statement to the international community that we are quite serious about this. Of course, at the same time, also sending a very strong message to North Korea that 'you better comply because we are very serious about this.' So, I think as you also mention that there has been a series of very important public statements, including I think once with the North Korean visitors, high level visitors. I think the...

Haenle: You mean while they were in Beijing?

Wang: Yes, while they were in Beijing. I think the General Choe Ryong-Hae, right? So the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-Un sent him to Beijing, and in the meeting, during the meeting between President Xi Jinping and General Choe Ryong-Hae, basically President Xi put very clearly the priorities. Number one is denuclearization, and number two is peace and stability. Number three is trying to resolve this issue through diplomatic means, and you see that very consistently, you know. Foreign Minister Wang Yi and many other Chinese leaders are making that same kind of statement. So what I see is really a consensus among the highest leadership in China in the priorities and preferences of China.

Haenle: Is this a shift in view because of the new leadership or is it because of North Korean actions, or is it because of both?

Wang: I would say certainly the leadership also matters, you know. For political scientists, we study political science, we do know that leadership matters, and leaders' personalities, perceptions, beliefs, these are all variables that matter when we try to explain policy changes. In this particular case, I would not argue that this is some sort of fundamental shift or change. Rather I would like to call it a recalibration of China's policy towards North Korea, and I always want to emphasize this that there is also a lot of continuity, of course, understandably, in terms of China's policies towards North Korea because of the long history that we've had with North Korea. Also, I think that North Korea's actions, its own behavior, of course, is one of the most important factors, I think, if we try to explain the recalibration in China's policy towards North Korea. Of course, North Korea's very provocative and irresponsible action of carrying out a third nuclear test is one of the most important reasons that really, I think, prompted the Chinese new leaders to take very tough actions. In fact, that happened during the leadership transition as well. So, we do see...

Haenle: 春节—during 春节, Spring Festival.

Wang: ... yes, exactly, so that's precisely my argument. There is a lot of consensus, continuities between the previous leadership and the current leadership. So we shall not see this as a sort of sudden, complete, 180-degree sort of shift in terms of policy. No, I think it's just China has made

its own commitment about denuclearization very clear. So, I strongly believe that China and the United States do have a shared interest on this issue, and this is something, I think, very important to keep in mind because sometimes people forget about that.

Haenle: One additional question on this issue is this issue of Chinese public opinion. If I go on to Weibo or if I go on to the social media sites, it's very clear to me that this particular generation of Chinese are, perhaps, looking at this relationship with North Korea much different than previous generations. You see a lot of criticism towards North Korea and towards the previous policy of China's unconditional support to North Korea. You see a lot of discussion about this on Weibo. What kind of impact is that having, changing public opinion, the discussions that are taking place among netizens on Weibo—how much of an impact is that having on the leadership and on the way China approaches this issue?

Wang: Well, I think this is a very important question and also, I think, a question with a lot of theoretical implications with real policy implications. From a scholarly point of view, this is actually one of the questions we have been asking, I think, for quite some time. Scholars and people are trying to see to what extent public opinion really has an effect on Chinese foreign policy-making. I think that generally speaking my answer to this question is that with time, public opinion has [gained increased] importance [in] the role it plays. [This effect] could tend to be complicated. So, [it all depends] on the real setting, the background context, the real issue [under] discussion, but generally speaking I think now more and more policy-makers will have to take into account public opinion. So I'm sure that if you talk to a lot of foreign ministry officials, they will tell you that they always worry about, or really care a lot about public opinion [as] expressed on the cyberspace, on the internet, including the netizens. So, [I have observed] a very significant shift in the Chinese public's perception and opinion towards North Korea's nuclear issue, especially after the third nuclear test. This is also part of the reason why I believe there is a real recalibration of China's policy towards North Korea. In fact, there are quite a number of public polling data out there. One of the polls, in fact, was conducted by one of the leading polling companies in China right after the third nuclear test. It was a nationwide polling survey. It found out that actually, among the surveyed Chinese public, I think about 32.3 percent of the Chinese public have extremely strong views on this issue. They would even agree that whatever it takes, including military means if needed, to force North Korea to give up nuclear weapons. It is certainly because the public really understands the stakes there and the potential fallout from failure in the test.

Haenle: This was nationwide?

Wang: Nationwide, people are just concerned, worried about that, and when people look at the irresponsible behavior [at play], particularly in terms of the North Korean pursuit of nuclear weapons, people get very angry about that.

Haenle: I also understand that the citizens in the northeast part of China, close to the North Korean border, were very concerned and very upset because the nuclear test was done close to the Chinese border, and many citizens were worried about radioactive fallout and how they would be affected. I can imagine that also has an impact on public opinion, especially on that part of China. Let's look at North Korea and talk a little bit about developments in North Korea. Last December,

we saw the purge and the execution of Jang Sung-taek, who was the uncle of Kim Jong-Un and brother-in-law of Kim Jong-Il. [It] took many by surprise, I think, including China, and still remains a mystery to many. Jang Sung-taek was widely considered an advocate of economic reform in North Korea and was in charge of North Korea's economic relations with China. Within the allegations against Jang, some included selling North Korean assets at a reduced price to a foreign country, and many believe this reference to a foreign country was China. What's your interpretation of the purge of Jang Sung-taek? Was this a power struggle between Jang and Kim Jong-Un, or was this an ideological struggle between pro- and anti-reform elements?

Wang: Well, this is also, I think, one of the most discussed issues after the incidents, the purge and execution of Jang Sung-taek. Well, personally I, because I have also done some research and have talked to many scholars, including in the United States and China and South Korea and elsewhere, and I believe this is more of a case of a power struggle between Jang Sung-taek and Kim Jong-Un instead of representing an ideological struggle between the pro- or anti-reform camps. Why is that? Because I think if you look at the course, in terms of public statements, you have to cover this up because if they want to put up an accusation against Jang Sung-taek you have to find [out] from what he has been doing the wrongdoings. Naturally, China would come up [in] that process. But I don't think the new leader, new North Korean leader, Kim Jong-Un himself, would be against reform because it is very clear since he assumed power that he has been doing a lot of [what] we can call "baby steps" [in terms] of reform measures, and so back and forth. There are different interpretations among scholars regarding whether they should present the real reform initiative or if it is just a way to muddle through. I tend to believe that Kim Jong-Un really wants reform. Of course, North Korea doesn't use this term, reform. But, that's why [Kim Jong-Un] always puts up this so-called parallel strategy: try to have economic construction and pursuit of nuclear weapons. That's sort of (built) into their statements and party resolutions. We know [North Korea's] economic development is always very important because I think that at the end of the day, North Korean leaders understand that their legitimacy also comes from providing a decent living standard to their own people.

Haenle: So you think economic reform is part of Kim Jong-Un's plan?

Wang: Yeah, yeah, it's just way before the incident of Jang Sung-taek we have seen that Kim Jong-Un doing this, but because, of course, he is also constrained by a variety of different factors: domestic factors, international factors. He has to consolidate his power, he has to play tough against the international pressures, and so on.

Haenle: So, let me ask you then about sort of that vision of an economic reform. I know Chinese leadership for some time has been encouraging North Korea to consider economic reform and opening up. I remember on a trip that Kim Jong-Il took to China by train, of course because he never flew, the Chinese leadership sent him first to Dalian and then to Shanghai, and my understanding of this was it was really deliberate to say 'look at these cities that benefitted from China's own economic reform and opening up' to kind of demonstrate to the North Korean leader that these benefits could be available to North Korea. It hasn't, at least to my view, had a huge positive impact on North Korea. I mean, do you think the North Korean leadership sees it in their own interest to do economic reform that would require some opening world to the outside world, or do they see that as a potential threat to the longevity and the stability of the regime?

Wang: Well, you know, it's always difficult to know what's really in the minds of North Korean leaders, but if we can speculate, I would argue that North Korean leaders do want reform because they know that's how you can have economic development. Also, I think that opening up is an integral part of that, and you cannot have economic reform without opening up. So, actually I think after Kim Jong-Un came into power, there has been new developments in terms of joint development zones between China and North Korea. I think you are right. This has been, if you want to look back, going for years and decades. China has been trying to influence North Korea's behavior through demonstration, through trying to persuade North Korea that this is how you get your economy developing and how you get prosperity and improve the living standards of your people. This is something that I would label, I call it, a peaceful development strategy. Although, Chinese leaders have not publicly put out such a label, but from a scholarly standpoint, this is what China has been doing for decades, trying to guide or persuade or convince North Korea to follow the footsteps of China's reform in opening up.

Essentially, my guess is that the Chinese leaders' approach towards the resolving of the nuclear issue is that if you can convince North Korea to start reforming and opening up and taking part in the globalization process, that process will be irreversible. As soon as you get hooks into this globalization process, there is no way to come back. But we have to think in the sort of broader strategic context in a more sometimes realist way, a pragmatic way on how to approach this issue because you cannot just assume that putting up pressure or threatening to use force can force North Korea to change its behavior. I think the United States has been doing this for years, and it didn't work. So, of course, I also understand that there has been some sort of accusation against so-called 'China enabling North Korea to pursue nuclear weapons,' but I really think that's a misplaced criticism because all China wants to do is to find a much less costly way to resolve this issue because we understand that if anything goes wrong, there will be a real, major conflict. Hundreds of thousands of people will lose their lives, and that's prohibitively costly path that we do not want to go down. If anything, if possible, we want to choose a peaceful development strategy.

Haenle: Thank you very much for spending time with us today.

Wang: Thank you, Paul.

Haenle: We appreciate you sharing your insights, which are always extremely valuable and important. So, thank you very much. That's it for this edition of Carnegie–Tsinghua “China in the World” podcast. I encourage you to explore our website at www.carnegietsinghua.org, and see the work of all our scholars at the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center. Thanks for listening, and be sure to tune in next time.