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Transcript

CHINA IN THE WORLD PODCAST

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Guest: **Jia Qingguo**

Episode 102: The North Korean Nuclear
Dilemma – Part II

February 13, 2018

Haenle: You're listening to part two of our podcast with Jia Qingguo. If you haven't already, I encourage you to go back and listen to part one, where Professor Jia and I discuss warming North and South Korean relations, Chinese economic leverage over North Korea, and changes in Beijing's approach to North Korea policy. Our conversation now picks up where we left off on part one, beginning with a look at the possibilities of a US preemptive strike on North Korea. Thanks for listening and I hope you enjoy the discussion.

I wanted to talk to you about the potential use of military force. There's been a lot of discussion in the United States and coming from within the administration on this issue. What do you see as the likelihood of this approach by the United States—some use of force—and how does the Chinese leadership view this?

Jia: I don't know how Chinese leaders view this, but I know that I'm very pessimistic on this issue. I think the chance for military conflict is still quite high, not because anybody wants to have a military conflict. I don't think President Trump wants to have a military conflict. Nobody wants to have a nuclear conflict, even Kim Jong-un does not want to have a military conflict. The problem is, you don't have any good way out of this. If you allow North Korea to have nuclear weapons, what will be next? The current imagination is that the next can be very bad. Kim Jong-un's government may use this—use the nuclear weapons—to blackmail South Korea and maybe other countries. Given its past track record, this is not unimaginable. Also, this probably would be the beginning of an end of the existing international nonproliferation regime, which is also bad. In addition to this, North Korea may do thing which it did not dare to do, like proliferation, in order to get some money back. So you don't know, but you know it can be very bad. Even though the military attack can be bad, when you balance it, it's difficult to make a decision. I think it depends whether the Trump Administration will use force to deal with this issue, it depends on its analysis, especially its assessment of how much damage North Korea can cause South Korea in response to the first strike. I think if the Trump Administration decides to launch a preemptive strike, the strike will not be a decapitation attempt or just targeted at the so-called nuclear facilities, it probably would be an all-out attack because of the alleged ten thousand artillery pieces pointing at Seoul. This will be war, not a preemptive strike.

Haenle: I appreciate your response, and I see the situation in very much the same ways. I often say I have a great deal of sympathy for the Trump administration because when I was in the National Security Council and was the representative to the 6-party talks, in the Bush administration we talked about potential use of force. At the time, the military establishment, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff or Secretary of Defense, would say we have military options but they come with huge costs. They were then kind of moved on from. I think the same in the Obama administration but the Trump administration and the current Chinese leadership, now that North Korea is so close to getting this capability, they have to compare the costs of use of force with the costs of North Korea having this capability. You've described many of those costs, including the potential to engage in commercial activity, proliferation of the capability to non-state actors—which would be extremely dangerous for not just the United States, but for the

international community—and there is some assessment of some analysts as you described that North Korea would use this capability for offensive purposes and may in fact try to use it to reunify the peninsula under North Korea's terms—as you described, blackmail South Korea. The potential to use it in that way, and if you evaluate those costs with the costs of using military force, that's a different calculation than we had to use at the time in the Bush Administration. So I appreciate your response and I agree.

Jia: It's a tough decision to choose between the lesser of the two evils.

Haenle: Exactly, and it's not a simple calculation that use of force will come with costs, therefore we can't use it, because it's possible that the costs to letting or having North Korea get this capability may be even larger. That's the dilemma that the administration in the United States is having to think through right now. I want to ask you about Kim Jong-un's regime. I always found when I was working in the Six-party talks, that my Chinese interlocutors had a good sense of what was happening in North Korea. What's your assessment of the stability and the durability of the Kim regime and Kim Jong-un's consolidation of power since becoming leader?

Jia: I think Kim Jong-un has done a remarkable job of staying there, quite unexpected by a lot of people. When he first came in, not many people felt that he could stay there for a long time. He was young, he had no experience—very little experience, and also the power or charisma he inherited from his grandfather has been diluted so much. But he has survived and he has done a lot of things. He appeared to be very strong but well, things can happen.

Haenle: Do you see any cracks emerging among the elites?

Jia: No, we don't know what's going on inside. Even the experts do not know what's going on inside North Korea because it is a country that is very closed, even to China, which is supposed to have a good relationship.

Haenle: So not just America has a hard time figuring out what's going on?

Jia: Maybe you have better access in other ways. But we don't know what's going on, but judging from the kind of pressure they receive because of the nuclear efforts from the international society, and also judging from the fact that life inside North Korea has been quite difficult. Imagine you were working for Kim Jong-un as a senior official, what would you think? Would you question the policy?

Haenle: Certainly not openly.

Jia: But people will question it, this is like walking to a dead end: very risky and very dangerous. You never know, maybe one day we'll wake up and we have a different situation.

Haenle: In that context then, do you think that the pressure, the sanctions, the increasing pressure put on by the United States, China, South Korea, and Japan, that kind of pressure and Trump's rhetoric, does that strengthen Kim Jong-un's position in North Korea or does that begin to cause friction within the internal dynamics in his team? Does that cause leaders, other officials within Kim Jong-un's regime to be concerned about what Kim Jong-un is doing and begin to question his leadership?

Jia: Kim Jong-un certainly wants to use it to rally people around him, that's for sure. At the same time, if people know what's going on, I think some of the top—the top leadership—they will know and they will be very worried. If I were one of them I would be very worried.

Haenle: So it's possible.

Jia: Well you never know. Remember we did not predict a lot of things that happened, like the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Romania regime, were overnight.

Haenle: So it could come someday unexpected, and one of the things you've talked about and wrote an article about in September of 2017 which attracted a great deal of attention, is an article you wrote calling for China to engage with the United States in contingency planning for a potential crisis or instability in North Korea. Why do you think that's important and why do you think the time is ripe to do that?

Jia: I think the time is ripe, probably a little late also, because the chance for outbreak of a crisis has dramatically increased because of the recent round of development of nuclear weapons on the part of North Korea. A crisis can break out for a number of reasons. One is a failed nuclear test. That could create a big havoc. The second is a preemptive strike on the part of the US. The third is UN sanctions, which have become tougher and tougher. They make life in North Korea very difficult. This may eventually become a cause of a crisis on the political side. Also, a crisis can be caused or triggered by a power struggle within North Korea. All scenarios have become more and more likely because of the development of Nuclear weapons on the part of North Korea. The chance for crisis to break out has never been higher. Then, the question is, if a crisis breaks out, are we prepared for that? I think we are not prepared for that. Of course all of us, the US, China, South Korea, maybe Japan and other countries, all have their own contingency planning. The problem with this is that they don't exchange ideas, at least not at a substantive level. When the crisis breaks out, we haven't talked to each other very much at a reasonably good level. Each of us would act according to our contingency plan. One of the items that I think must be included in China's and the US contingency plan, is to take control of the nuclear weapons facilities of North Korea.

Haenle: It may even be in the South Korean plan.

Jia: It may also be in South Korea's contingency plan.

Haenle: You would hope the US and South Korea would be lashed up.

Jia: The problem is, when each acts according to their contingency plan, they will bump into each other. Then they have to make quick decisions as how to deal with the situation under the crisis. That's very dangerous. To avoid an accident or unwanted military conflict, I think it's necessary now to engage in dialogues on contingency plans as soon as possible, especially between China and the US. We are talking about controlling the nuclear facilities. I think both countries want to control the facilities, because they don't want the facilities to be left in the hands of a disoriented military officer of North Korea, or to be controlled by other parties. The first one is very dangerous, the second one can lead to nuclear proliferation, so they should talk to each other as to who should control the nuclear facilities of North Korea. I don't think they really care who controls between the two, because whoever controls it cannot gain very much, and at the same time, it's quite costly for them to take care of the nuclear facilities. This is one thing that they need to talk about, and there are many other things they need to talk about, such as how to quickly restore order in North Korea in a crisis situation, and also who should do the job, and also who should deal with the refugees: what kind of arrangement we should make. Also to reassure each other, and what should we do after the crisis with regard to North Korea, and even the peninsula, whether we should have a new government in North Korea and how we should put together a government in North Korea—according to what kind of principles and who should do it. Maybe on the unification issue, South Koreans may be interested. All these things we need to talk about.

Haenle: You lay out a very reasonable and compelling case with a lot of common sense, and certainly I agree with you that it's important to do that. Are there opposing forces at these kinds of talks in China and what would their arguments be? It seems very reasonable to me the case that you're making.

Jia: Of course there are people that strongly disagree with me in China. First, they don't read the article. They don't read it very carefully or they misread it. They think that I'm urging China and the US to launch a joint attack against the North. They think colluding with the enemy is something intolerable. Even for those who have read it carefully, they are worried that if China and the US work more closely, this will send a message to Pyongyang, and would make North Korea an enemy of China.

Haenle: Just the fact of the kind of discussions taking place between the US and China would somehow signify that China has abandoned North Korea or that they're too aligned with the United States?

Jia: They are worried that this would prompt North Korea to turn their ire against China. Probably they would argue that a friendly nuclear North Korea is better than an unfriendly or hostile nuclear North Korea, as far as China's interests are concerned, so they don't want us to offend North Korea. There are a lot of people like this.

Haenle: Obviously, the militaries would have to talk because these kinds of contingency operations would be varied out by militaries on both sides. Is this something the PLA would be willing to engage in—this kind of discussion—or is that one of the main groups that would oppose such discussions?

Jia: I'm not sure. I would assume that a lot of people in China in the policy making circle would be supportive of this idea because they realize how dangerous this situation can be and how dangerous it is if we don't talk to each other and bump into a crisis. It's a political decision, but I think we already have some kind dialogue already.

Haenle: Secretary Tillerson had commented publicly that there's some of these kinds of discussions that are already taking place. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was here in August of last year and apparently had some type of discussions, I'm not sure to what extent, and it may have been the American side talking more than the Chinese side. The Chinese side may have been more in listening-mode, but that's nevertheless I think a good start anyways, because I would agree with you and frankly, when I was in the Bush administration and we urged these kinds of talks, I think there was great resistance then and in large part, to some of the things you've written and talked about, I think the debate has shifted and I think it's shifted in more positive ways. Hopefully we can engage more in this kind of discussion because I think it's very important, I would agree with you. I want to thank you very much for your time. This issue over the year will continue to develop and we're going to have to stay in the United States and China closely connected on this, and I hope I can come back and call on you again for your advice and insights and expertise.

Jia: Sure, thank you very much.

Haenle: Thank you, Professor Jia.

That's it for this edition of the Carnegie-Tsinghua China in the World Podcast. I encourage you to explore our site and see the work of all our scholars at the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center. Thank you for listening, be sure to tune in next time.