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Transcript

CHINA IN THE WORLD PODCAST

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Episode 101: The North Korean Nuclear
Dilemma – Part I

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Haenle: Welcome back to the China in the World Podcast, we're recording today at one of China's top universities, Peking University, where I'm honored to be speaking with Dr. Jia Qingguo, professor and dean of the School of International Studies here at Peking University, and one of China's foremost scholars of international relations and China's foreign affairs. Dr. Jia, welcome to the China in the World Podcast.

Jia: Thank you.

Haenle: The topic for our discussion today is North Korea, and this is a long-standing issue which both you and I have worked on and examined for years, even decades maybe in your case. And this has risen to the top of US-China relationship under president Trump and President Xi, in many ways like it's never been before, in terms of it being urgent and being addressed between the two countries. Let me start by asking you a very broad question, but an important question, and that is, in your mind, what is the desired end-state that we should be seeking with respect to the north Korean issue? Do we have agreement between the united states and China in what we want to achieve in a broad perspective?

Jia: Well, I think the desired end-state is two-fold. One is denuclearization of North Korea. The second is to bring North Korea into the existing international system and try to help it to be stable and prosperous.

Haenle: Those two goals that you just described are enshrined in the September 19, 2005 joint statement, which was an agreement of course in the Six Party Talks of which China was the chair, and it gave kind of a road map for how we were going to achieve denuclearization, but at the same time, normalize relations with North Korea, achieve a peace treaty, and all the rest. That was under Kim Jong-Il, the previous leader. Kim Jong-Un, of course, walked away from the six party talks and has abrogated the agreements that North Korea has made and is conveying very clearly that he's not interested in giving up his nuclear weapons. So, with that, it seems to me we have a tougher challenge now under Kim Jong-Un but what you're saying is that our goals remain the same, even though the challenge may be different under this leader.

Jia: Certainly. I think it was Kim Jong-Il who walked away from the agreement and then his policy was inherited and probably enhanced by his son, Kim Jong-Un. That is, he wants to have a nuclear—wants to be a nuclear weapons state. I think our goals remain the same, but of course the situation we're facing is very different. We are still working on it by taking a sort of two-pronged approach. One is to increase sanctions to push North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons. The other is still hope that North Korea will come back to the negotiating table so that we can go back

to the earlier agreement, how to help North Korea back to become a sort of normal state, if it promises to give up nuclear weapons.

Haenle: Of course, we're speaking just a few days after representatives from North Korea and South Korea met at the demilitarized zone which separates the two Koreas for the first formal dialogue between the two countries in more than two years. They discussed North Korea's participation in the upcoming Olympics that South Korea is holding. They did not discuss denuclearization, that was not on the agenda. Do you see this as a thawing of North-South relations and what is the significance of this meeting in your perspective in relation to what we just talked about: the denuclearization of North Korea and trying to achieve the desired end-state that you described?

Jia: I think as far as denuclearization is concerned, this recent set of interactions between the south and North does not mean very much. I think from the South Korean perspective, it wants to have a good winter Olympics games. From North Korea's perspective, it wants to have more time to, you know, develop its nuclear weapons. So this may appear to be a sort of temporary reconciliation between the two sides, and then, I don't know, maybe the situation will go back the old state after the Olympics games.

Haenle: Because of course the North, the South Korea and the United States then begin their normal spring rotation of military exercises, and at that point would you expect the situation to return to where it was before the new year?

Jia: I think so, I think so. I think if the North Korea does not give up Nuclear Weapons, I think the pressures will be increased rather than lowered. So I think the situation will remain tense.

Haenle: So we have a temporary pause perhaps, over the next couple months until we get through the Olympics.

Jia: Yeah.

Haenle: We've talked previously on this podcast about debates within the Chinese expert community on policy towards North Korea. In your view, has the debate shifted in recent months, over the last year, in favor of those in China who emphasize the threat North Korea poses to China, similar to the arguments that you have made, and urge closer cooperation with the international community? Has that side of the debate gained traction over those in China who want to rekindle China's traditional ties with North Korea?

Jia: I think the situation has not changed very much. I think the dynamic for change comes from North Korea. If they continue to develop Nuclear weapons, if they have another nuclear test, or missile test, probably it will push the dialogue in the direction of getting tough on North Korea.

But if it decides not to do anything for an extended period of time, and then the pro-reconciliation or restoring the traditional ties argument probably will gain strength. It's up to North Korea.

Haenle: So it sounds like you attribute some shift in the debate to North Korea's actions, their provocative missile tests and nuclear tests, and this helps to shift the debate in China to those who emphasize the threat that North Korea poses. How much credit would you give to President Trump's policies, his fiery rhetoric with North Korea, and then the pressure campaign the administration is putting on. Does that have an impact on Chinese thinking and posture?

Jia: It doesn't have a strong impact on China's internal debate on how to deal with North Korea, but it certainly strengthens the hand, to some extent, of the people who argue for a tougher position on North Korea.

Haenle: Trump's rhetoric does?

Jia: Yeah, because one of the arguments against China taking a tough position on North Korea is that if we take a tougher position, then we will draw the North Korea ire against China, so if the US stands firm, then probably this kind of argument loses its power.

Haenle: It gives China some cover then, it's basically an international pressure campaign and not just China.

Jia: Exactly.

Haenle: Interesting. How would you describe today the state of the China-North Korea relationship and how would you describe the leverage China has with North Korea? These of course are two topics which many American analysts in the US government I'm sure are trying to better understand.

Jia: In terms of the state of the relationship between the two countries, I think it's cool, and even a bit cold, because North Korea is really unhappy that China is actually implementing the ever-tougher sanctions of the UN. So the Chinese government has issued a few orders to implement the UN sanctions in China. That probably made North Korea very unhappy. I just read a piece of news saying that the ambassador of North Korea in Beijing has received instructions from Pyongyang not to go out of the embassy to attend any of the activities in town.

Haenle: The Chinese ambassador cannot—

Jia: No, the North Korean ambassador here in Beijing. He's not supposed to attend any official functions outside the embassy, as a way to show that the North Korean government is not happy with the Chinese government, in terms of its efforts to implement the sanctions. And also, the

delegation the Chinese government sent to Pyongyang last year led by Song Tao was not well received. So North Korea is not happy.

Haenle: And you attribute that to the sanctions—the tougher sanctions—that China has signed on to and the fact that China is implementing them in a stricter fashion.

Jia: Certainly that's a major aspect of it, and also the Chinese delegation tried to persuade North Korea that it should give up Nuclear Weapons. It's in its best interests to give up nuclear weapons, and they don't like to hear that. Well, a lot of people assume that China has a lot of leverage against North Korea. China-North Korea trade occupies probably 80-90% of North Korea's trade with the outside world. And also, China supplies North Korea with strategic stuff like oil. So if China can threaten to cut off all these things and make north Korea comply, that's the assumption. But the reality is very complicated. First, I think it underestimates North Korea's resolve to have nuclear weapons. To North Korea, the nuclear weapon is not just another weapon, it's a weapon that can protect, that it depends on protecting the regime. So, it puts so much into the development of nuclear weapons that it becomes a sort of—they've invested too much stake there and cannot give up. Second, if China cut off oil for example, oil supply to North Korea, this would probably cause a big havoc—economic havoc—to North Korea. It's like some kind of a nuclear weapon: it's better not to use it, because if you use it then there's economic havoc then you have a type of humanitarian disaster. Who is going to be responsible for that? And also, this is not something that China wants to have. Thirdly, if North Korea has a big economic problem, then it may get into some kind of political turmoil.

Haenle: Internal?

Jia: Yeah. Then we will have maybe a civil war, maybe an accidental nuclear weapon explosion, or something. It's very dangerous. China doesn't want to see that either.

Haenle: You've talked about the importance of coercive diplomacy, putting pressure on North Korea in the context when you talked about the desired end state, that it does require some pressure to get North Korea back to the table to change Kim Jong-Un's political calculus about the need for nuclear weapons. We have to get him back to the negotiating table in a state of mind in which he's going to consider the notion of giving up his nuclear weapons, and I think you agree that some pressure is required. China, as you've mentioned, has increasingly signed on to tougher and tougher sanctions. The United States is talking about the importance of cutting off sources of revenue which the regime in North Korea uses in the development of its weapons programs, like North Korean exports from overseas workers, and also has urged China to cut off its oil. So pressure is required, I think you've agreed to that, to get Kim Jong-Un in a better state to the negotiating table. How do you calculate then—how does China think about—because on one hand, I hear that pressure is required and increasing pressure is required, on the other hand, I hear

you sort of suggesting there's a limit to that. How does China think about that limit and the balance that it's trying to achieve in terms of applying that pressure?

Jia: We have a lot of leverage, in theory, but when it comes to practice, the leverage is not that strong, that's my argument. With regard to the need for sanctions, I think that frankly we need sanctions. Tougher sanctions, proportional to the provocation. So China wants to have the sanctions but only to the extent that is necessary. So basically, we agree to impose sanctions then see what happens. It takes some time to see the effects, and then if North Korea does another provocation then we agree to another round of sanctions which are tougher. Then we want to have some time to see the effects. Maybe when the sanctions really hurt, when North Koreans feel it, then they will change their mind. So basically, we want to take this measured approach.

Haenle: And in your mind, are these sanctions beginning to have an effect? Are they biting with the North Koreans? Is that part of the reason they've decided to open diplomatic engagement with the South?

Jia: I think it's biting. I think they feel it. I think that's why they are not happy with China.

Haenle: There's been some discussion, even on this podcast we've talked to a number of Chinese scholars, about this notion of Chinese red-line, I think you and I have talked about this, and the concern here in China that North Korea's actions were coming dangerously close to crossing over a Chinese red-line. Examples that Chinese experts had given were things like if there was a nuclear test and radioactive fallout came into China and harmed Chinese people, or North Korea conducted a full range flight test of its ICBM into the Pacific Ocean, or an atmospheric nuclear test over the Pacific Ocean, these have been examples of where Chinese leaders might determine that this has crossed China's red-line and therefore we're going to fundamentally change our approach and cut off oil and take much more drastic measures. Do you think that there are red-lines that North Korea could potentially cross when it comes to China?

Jia: I don't know where our red-lines are to tell you the truth. I don't think that the Chinese government has been saying 'no nuclear weapons' is our red-line, but North Korea already has nuclear weapons. But I can imagine that if North Korea tried to mess up the Taiwan issue, that would be a definite red-line. If North Korea openly condemns China, that probably would become a red-line. Other than that...

Haenle: What about nuclear safety issues? I know citizens in the northeast part of China are very worried about radioactive fallout, in fact there were tremors in China after the latest nuclear test, there seems to be much more growing concern about safety at Yongbyon, the plutonium production factory. Chinese citizens were harmed, or god-forbid killed, because of some nuclear safety issue with respect to North Korea.

Jia: I think this is an issue that's gaining attention in the top leadership, but the problem is there is always the question of degree. To what extent the damage is caused. I assume that if there is big damage, the Chinese government would say 'no, forget it. You have to stop.' But if it's some minor damage like the recent round of earthquakes caused by the nuclear test, some of the buildings along the border with North Korea—

Haenle: Chinese students had to hide under the desk.

Jia: —That's also a kind of damage, but I don't think we have a clear idea as to where we draw the line in regards to how much damage is caused that you cannot put up with. I don't know, I don't see any—I'm not aware of any red-line along that line.

Haenle: I want to thank you very much for your time. This issue, I think over the year, will continue to develop and we're going to have to stay, in the United States and China, closely connected to this and I hope I can come back and call on you for your advice and insights and expertise.

Jia: Sure, thank you very much.

Haenle: Thank you, Professor Jia.

Thanks for listening to part one of this two-part podcast with Professor Jia Qingguo. Be on the lookout for the release of part two in mid February when professor Jia and I discuss the possibility of a US preemptive strike on North Korea, the stability of Kim Jong-Un 's regime, and the importance of crisis management and contingency planning between the United States and China. And if you like our podcast, please be sure to leave us a rating and comment on iTunes. I also encourage you to head to our website to look at the work of all of our scholars at the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center, as well as explore the more than 100 episodes of the China in the World Podcast. Thanks again for listening.