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Transcript

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## CHINA IN THE WORLD PODCAST

Host: **Paul Haenle**

Guest: **Cheng Xiaohe**

Episode 94: Will China Change its Approach to  
North Korea?

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**Haenle:** Welcome back to the China in the World podcast. We are coming to you from one of China's premier universities: Remin University or People's University here in Beijing China. I am honored to be joined by Cheng Xiaohe, an associate professor at the school of international studies. He is also deputy director at the center for Chinese International Strategic Studies at Remin University. You may recognize Cheng Xiaohe's name, he's been one of the most vocal and active Chinese scholars on the North Korea issue often quoted in Western media and press regarding the issue, especially as of late. Cheng previously worked at one of China's most influential and oldest think tanks, the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations. Or known to us Americans as KICKER. Cheng earned his PhD in political science from Boston University. He has studied and lectured at leading academic institutions including Harvard's Fairbank Center, University of Michigan, and University College Dublin. Cheng, thank you very much for joining us on the China in the World podcast today.

**Cheng:** Paul, it is my great pleasure.

**Haenle:** This past week we have seen a harsh exchange of rhetoric between President Trump and North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un. There has been name calling. Trump has called Kim Jong Un Rocket man. Kim Jong Un in an unprecedented television address called President Trump a "dotard." His foreign minister called him "President Evil." All of this culminated this past Monday earlier this week, when North Korea's foreign minister accused the US of having already declared war, threatening to shoot down U.S. bombers even if they did not cross into North Korea's airspace. What do you make of these exchanges?

**Cheng:** I think the exchanges of harsh words between President Trump and leader Kim Jong Un are very counterproductive. You see North Korea has been very strong in making verbal abuse of/about other countries leader, like those in South Korea. But this time, North Korea has made strong attack against the United States. The United States is not in a position to start a war of words with North Korea. Secondly, it is very important to pay attention to substance rather words used by leaders. North Korea has violated Security Council resolutions and conducted ICBM test and nuclear test. That is wrong. I think about stir up some kind of war of words, North Korea may attempt to distract people's attention from the real substance things, including violation of Security Council resolutions.

**Haenle:** So you think it is counterproductive, that it plays into North Korea's hands because it allows them to move away from the real issue at hand which is the violation of UN security council resolutions, ICBM and nuclear developments. In the past, Presidents Bush and Obama, have said things about the North Korean leader, but on rare cases. Donald Trump seems to be quite out there quite often on twitter. Using rocket man, using very provocative language. After North Korea's foreign minister's UN minister UN Speech. Trump tweeted North Korea won't be around much longer. I want to get a sense from you, how do you think that affects Kim Jong Un's thinking. If what I hear often from Chinese experts is that North Korea is developing this nuclear program as a deterrent. Many Chinese experts don't think that Kim Jong Un wants to use the nuclear capabilities that he is developing, because he knows that will mean the end of North Korea when the United States and its allies respond. When Donald Trump says North Korea won't be around much longer, could this potential drive Kim Jong Un to use his new found capabilities in a pre-emptive matter—to get out in front of Donald Trump using military action against North

Korea?

**Cheng:** I think the words hurt people, even though President Trump uses very strong words against North Korea as well as Kim Jong Un, but I don't think the words could invite North Korea to use its nuclear weapons against the United States. Such behavior or act could be perceived as suicide missions, but nonetheless we need to pay enormous attention to words used by number one country's president on earth. On the one hand, his words have something to do with Mr. Trump's personality. His businessman, he had a very strong personality. He is compulsive. He is tough, and he wanted to do something. He wanted to show such a kind of strong personality and make him fight, not only with the leader of North Korea, Kim Jong Un, but with some other people across the world and the United States.

**Haenle:** It is part of his personality.

**Cheng:** His personality.

**Haenle:** Now, the foreign minister of Russia, Sergei Lavrov, compared the two leaders—Kim Jong Un and Donald Trump—to kindergarteners, to children in kindergarten. Have you heard similar thoughts in Beijing? How do Chinese experts, Chinese government officials view this rhetoric back and forth between Kim Jong Un and President Trump?

**Cheng:** The characterizations by Russia's foreign minister, I think is not appropriate. How you can treat two people one in his seventies and one in his thirties as kindergarten. The words expressed by Kim Jong Un and Mr. Trump have really grave consequences. We just cannot brush aside lightly. I think the words they used have significant policy ramifications. We have to be careful; we have to pay enough attention to the words.

**Haenle:** Well Dr. Cheng, I could not agree with you more on that point. I also think the language is counterproductive and hope we see a de-escalation of the rhetoric going forward. I want to ask you some questions about the debate in China. Where we are seeing increasingly divergent opinions. Recently, professor Jia Qingguo at Beijing's Peking University wrote a widely read article. In the article, he made three key points: 1. Given the proximity of North Korea to China, and the fact that North Korea has old equipment, North Korea's nuclear weapons development is very dangerous for China. 2. That the North Korean development of nuclear weapons could cause the United States to launch preemptive military strikes against North Korea, which is dangerous for China. 3. The more North Korea develops its nuclear programs, South Korea and Japan will spend more on their defense and they may decide to develop their own nuclear weapons program. That would be bad for China and that would further contribute to the destabilization of the region. Finally, he called for the initiation of contingency talks between the U.S. and China on North Korea. There was a lot of criticism of this article. There were some who supported this article. What is your own reaction to Professor Jia's articles?

**Cheng:** Professor Jia's articles are generating massive personal attacks from some Chinese people. I think that is sad. The personal attack is against him, not on the substance. Some have labeled professor Jia as a traitor. Some have said other things that are bad, in past years. I think Jia's speech made a point to the Chinese people that they need to think hard. On the one hand,

whether North Korea does pose a direct threat to Chinese national interest. Second, what China can do? Third, how China handles its relationship with the U.S. regarding shared the common threat from North Korea. I personally support professor Jia's positions.

**Haenle:** What does the reaction that this article by professor Jia and his proposals, the personal attacks, what does it mean about the debate in China? What does it indicate?

**Cheng:** The Chinese public and Chinese people are always divided, over everything, over every single issue. But no issue has made Chinese more divided than the issue of North Korea's nuclear and missile provocations. Such kind of divisions make it hard for Chinese decision makers to make the final decisions about what China should do to deal with North Korea. I think more and more Chinese realize that North Korea's nuclear missile program harms China. It harms Chinese people. It also harms Northeast Asia as a whole.

**Haenle:** So this debate, this vigorous debate is taking place within think tanks and academic communities certainly. I also see the debate among social media in the Chinese public. Does this reflect a similar ongoing debate at high levels of government. You had said in media quotes, that the leadership in China is not unified. That this is, on the issue of North Korea, that there are factions?

**Cheng:** I think it is certainly on the public opinion level, you can see the very divisions among the people. But on the top levels, we do not know how the leaders disagree with each other over this issue. I do not know. I do not know exactly. One thing for sure, in past years the Chinese policies towards North Korea remains unchanged. No nuclear, even though a lot of things have changed. No change is evident by Chinese decision makers.

**Haenle:** When people ask me, I often say the level of frustration in China regarding North Korea is the highest that I have ever seen it. But the policy has not changed in any fundamental way. Would you agree with that?

**Cheng:** Yes, I partially agree. On one hand yes, more and more Chinese become frustrated and disappointed with North Korea. On the other hand, China's policy has not changed in very significant ways, but it is changing. It is changing in incremental ways, For example, China initially opposed economic sanctions and now China had agreed to impose them against North Korea, and China even agreed to impose a cap on North Korea oil import. That demonstrates a very important change on Chinese policy, even though such a change is quite incremental. As the incremental changes accumulate, at one point we need to conclude incremental changes constitute a big change.

**Haenle:** Incremental change over time slowly builds up.

**Cheng:** Since 2007, China has agreed to submit North Korea nuclear missile issue to United Nations Security Council. China has endorsed the passage of 11 Security Council sanctions resolutions against the DPRK.

**Haenle:** Americans in the UN Security Council working on the resolution, often complain China

wants to water down the resolution. Russia as well. What do you make of that dynamic, what does that say about China's position?

**Cheng:** Ah yes, we witness some kind of discrepancy between the United States approach and China's approach to the North Korea nuclear issue. Vast differences between the two countries approach in dealing with North Korea. First, the relations are different. Technically, North Korea is a Chinese ally. North Korea is not a U.S. ally—it is their enemy. The U.S. and China treat quite differently and that's quite natural. Second, when the security council makes a decision to adopt economic sanctions against North Korea, China would be the first country to bear the brunt of such sanctions simply because China is the leading trade partner to North Korea. If the Security Council wants China to make a sacrifice, then China has the right to have second thoughts about any kind of sanctions against North Korea that will hurt China in the first place.

**Haenle:** Professor Jia Qingguo in his articles also sees three common misperceptions when it comes to China's relationship with North Korea and the issue with North Korea: 1. The notion that North Korea is a military buffer zone for China is an old concept. With planes and with missiles, you do not need large ground forces to do invasions. 2. North Korea is a socialist country and shares common ideology with China. He says North Korea's ideology of self-reliance is very different from Chinese socialism with Chinese characteristics. 3. This notion that both China and North Korea pay great attention and really cherish this friendship that was developed during the Korean war is also a misconception, in that the relationship has changed. It has become more of a normal state to state relationship, and he proposes or recommends that China view North Korea not through any special relationship but rather based on China's own national interest. That China's own national interest are what is most important now. What is your view?

**Cheng:** I basically agree with professor Jia's explanation of the relationship between China and North Korea. Certainly North Korea could be China's buffer zone, but now China is the second largest economy on earth. It is the second most powerful military power on earth. China is not afraid of being set back by any country as China did 50 or 30 years ago. I think China now does not need any kind of buffer zone. Only a weak, poor, and backward China needed such a buffer zone. Second, North Korea claims itself to be a socialist country, but it is quite different than what the Chinese Communist Party cultivates. Such a kind of ideology or similarity has been gone a long time ago. Third, you see the relationship between North Korea and China could not over simplify by friendship, mutual support, such kind of things. In the past more than half century of relations. Two countries are very complicated. Sometimes very choppy relationship. Since Kim Jong Un came to power, think of the relationship between China and North Korea as remains abnormal. I like to use new normal to characterize the relationship between China and North Korea. You see the leaders between the two countries have not changed with for the past years. President Xi has not met Kim. Xi never paid visit to North Korea in his capacity of party general secretary. He paid visit to South Korea twice.

**Haenle:** And met with the former South Korean president six times.

**Cheng:** They see the strategic dialogue between China and North Korea ceased to function. Totally ceased communications. Ceased trade between two countries. Trade between two countries has dropped in three consecutive years. The one in between North Korea and China was

only fraction between China and North Korea in 2015, and people to people relationship between China South Korea is much stronger than the one between China and North Korea. So generally speaking, relationship between China and North Korea is abnormal.

**Haenle:** This also seems to be something that is built over time. I remember when I was serving as White House representative to the six party talks, I traveled to North Korea in 2007/08. I never forget North Korea official telling me that I was encouraging North Korea to give over its nuclear declaration as part of the 6 party talks, and that China is the chair of the 6 party talks would not be pleased if North Korea does not turn this in on time. The North Korea official told me standing up that China was not North Korea's big brother, and that North Korea did not need to do what China wanted it to do. It seems there has been a degree of resentment on North Korea. Even though China on an American perspective is North Korea's lifeline. Without China, North Korea could not exist. Yet there seems to be this bad feeling. Almost a resentment of China's influence over North Korea or the way it feels that China is treating North Korea. What would you make of a statement like that. China is not our big brother?

**Cheng:** Certainly China does want to be a big brother to North Korea. China is did not want Soviet Union to be China's big brother. I think Chinese could share a similar feelings with the North Koreans. On the other hand, I think that North Korea has mixed feelings towards China. On one hand, China did save North Korea's military. Without Chinese military interventions in the Korean war, North Korea's regime would have collapsed. Certainly, there is rough history PRC and DPRK. China certainly at some point intervened in North Korea in foreign affairs, for example 1956 China worked with Soviet Union to intervene in North Korea's domestic power struggles. Also in the 1960s, North Korea has been influenced by Soviet Union and Chinese communist party during grand plenex. Certainly North Korea has some kind of grievance against China given the long histories between two countries. But I don't think the friendship or grievance would play larger role than departing in defining the two countries relationship. More importantly the two countries nationalist interest play a larger role.

**Haenle:** One of the things we have seen as of late, that you have commented on. Is that North Korea doesn't appear to be worried about provoking China. Following North Korea Sep 3 nuclear test, you were quoted in NYT saying that the timing of the test was inconceivable to you. It was the same day of course as Xi Jiping gave his speech at the BRICs summit which was being hosted here in China. You said that Chinese people were upset, were angry. That the test was inconceivable. Can you elaborate?

**Cheng:** On the eve of China's BRICS summit, that the DPRK made such provocations could certainly be perceived as big slap in China's face. China tries so hard in attempt to make BRICS summit a great success, and North Korea stole the show. North Korea tried to disrupt such a kind of gathering. China certainly got mad. You see in this years, North Korea becoming increasingly frustrated with China, China's leaders. North Korea's news papers and central news agencies published a number of accounts criticizing China. A few days ago, North Korea published another lengthy article severely and systematically criticized China's policies towards North Korea missile issues. All these commentaries point to one fact, that North Korea now is not happy with China. North Korea is disappointed with China. I think it is certainly, North Korea did something in attempt to humiliate China but Chinese people think that North Korea did all kind of things for

two major purposes: 1. To make weapon system more perfect, more reliable, more accurate, and more meaningful. What North Korea is doing right now to acquire a reliable accurate meaningful deterrent.

**Haenle:** In terms of the timing of that nuclear test, on September 3. You were quoted saying it was a slap in the face, it was on the same day as president Xi speech. Some Chinese scholars say there view was not purposely planned to coincide with BRICs summit but based on technical issues and timing related to technical issues it just happened to take place at the time. That North Korea still didn't consider that it show proper respect to China, when they discovered. Is it your view that it was deliberately timed, to send a message or signal to China?

**Cheng:** I think all of North Korea's nuclear missile provocations were acts of politics. A political act. I think that North Korea carefully timed its provocations. That North Korea did so on purpose, no doubt about it. If they think it was an accident, it is just a lack of political sensitivity.

**Haenle:** Right after that nuclear test, you were quoted saying that that test should force China to do something radical? Do you think China has fundamentally shifted after the nuclear test? What could China do in your view that would be a radical departure from its previous positions? What are the remaining tools in the foreign policy toolbox for China?

**Cheng:** I think given what happened between China and the U.S., North Korea regarded as the sad issue. Talking about THAAD system and tactical missile defense. I think it was a dramatic move by China to agree to put cap on North Korea's oil imports during the last Security Council resolution. The resolution 2375 contains number of important articles, and if the resolutions is forcefully and sweepingly implemented there will do harm to North Korea. For the first time, the oil—the strategic items—now put on the table. Put cap on oil imports for North Korea. That sends very strong signal to North Korea. China have no any kind of limit on putting sanctions on North Korea if they continue to pursue nuclear and missile provocations. This time China agree to put cap on oil export to North Korea, next time China may agree to total ban of oil.

**Haenle:** So you think as North Korea, basically when North Korea leader continues to press the nuclear and missile program. You have also said North Korea does not view this program as a bargaining chip, which gives me the impression they are going to move full speed ahead to get the capability to put a nuclear warhead on an ICBM. It seems to me that the North Korea leader is pushing hard to get that capability. At the same time the pressure form the U.S., South Korea, Japan, now we see even more from China—that pressure will continue to grow. Do we have enough time? Do we have enough time to put the kind of pressure on Kim Jong Un that is required to get him to stand back on further developing his nuclear program?

**Cheng:** I think the scholars are not always agreed that North Korea has acquired real nuclear deterrent. If North Korea acquired such a kind of nuclear deterrent, I think the war options would be ruled out. But now the ongoing sanctions will continue to bite North Korea, to break North Korea's heart. We are going to see more and more effect of such kind of sanctions. For North Korea, they are doing two things. Number one, as you mentioned to make full speed to acquire a reliable accurate nuclear deterrent, so the United States will not use force against its countries. Second, North Korea will stop all the provocations and attempt to pull the stakeholders like China,

U.S., and other countries to the negotiating table. They want to use nuclear and missile weapons as a bargaining chip. So, because North Korea is quite clear that time is not on its side. If North Korea continued to lead with the current sanctions, sooner or later the regime will collapse and the leader will be replaced by someone else. We have entered the final stage of North Korea's nuclear and missile games.

**Haenle:** We have a concept in the U.S. in foreign policy circles known as the red line. A red line. That once crossed, will demand a radical departure, a fundamental shift in the approach to a much more hard approach. I have been asking Chinese scholars recently if China has a redline? You have been talking about an incremental approach, is there anything that North Korea could do that would cause the Chinese leadership to overnight fundamentally shift to the kind of pressure that you are talking about—this more comprehensive economic strangle, cutting off crude oil all together in an effort to try to squeeze Kim Jong Un and get him to change his political calculus and consider stopping his nuclear weapons program? Are there redlines in Chinese thinking?

**Cheng:** For China, U.S., and other states. There are no redlines. No redlines for China. Incremental approach demonstrates the absence of redlines. I think that we may think hard whether it wise to draw red line, or whether it is unwise to draw redline. So far, North Korea press ahead, with all kinds of nuclear missile test. Steadily move towards real nuclear powers, and as you mention comprehensive measures—we have already adopted very comprehensive measures include military embargo, include economic sanctions, include the bans on North Korea export for 90% of its total export last year. So, there is only very limited remaining options on the table. You could total ban oil, total an of coin, total ban of North Korea overseas workers, suspending tourism with North Korea is very limited options on the table.

**Haenle:** Closing down Embassies.

**Cheng:** That is the reason why I like to say we are in the final stages. We have very few sanction related options.

**Haenle:** U.S. administrations like to talk about secondary sanctions, to target Chinese companies that are doing business. That we haven't fully leveraged sanctioning those companies. Is this something that could also contribute to the pressure?

**Cheng:** This constitutes a very significant pressure. The secondary would be a boycott would pose a dramatic threat to China's economic security. In the past year, month when Mr. Trump came into power many adopted a clear approach in dealing with North Korea missile provocation to press China. To force China to make a tough choice, between two sets one between war and one total oil ban on North Korea. President Trump is seemingly move ahead to create such kinds of situation, and China will be forced to make second set of choice to force China to select its relationship with North Korea or the relationship with the United States. Which one China want to select? China's come under tremendous pressure from the United States. But problem is Mr. Trump is playing with fire. Adopting such a radical highhanded approach if China refuses to make such a kind of choice, what the U.S. suppose to do? Does the U.S. want to start a trade war with China? That is beyond our imagination, that a trade war between China and the US could erupt simply because the two countries have different approach to North Korea. I also believe that such



highhanded approach adopted by Trump and his associates cannot be sustainable. China is not a small country. It is second largest economy and it is still growing, China is gaining more confident on the world stage. China deserves a respect from Mr. Trump and his administration, all to make relationship between China and US to make sustainable better to put the relationship on equal footings. To come out with each other. To do more talks. To do more policy coordination.

**Haenle:** China has put forward suspension for suspension. North Korea stands down on nuclear program. The U.S. and South Korea stand down on their military exercises and the THAAD missile defense system. In the U.S., there is very little appetite for this kind of proposal largely because Americans push back on this notion that there is some moral equivalency between what North Korea is doing to develop this dangerous nuclear weapons program to what the U.S. and South Korea are doing to defend themselves from this growing threat. I noticed a Washington Post article out today by Anna Fife out of Tokyo, who talks about track 1.5 between Americans and North Koreans. Americans say when they bring up suspension for suspension with North Korea, North Korea completely rules it out because they are intent on getting this nuclear capability as you have suggested earlier. They are not willing to negotiate away their nuclear program. To close out the podcast, I am going to ask you the easiest question of the day: what do you see as the best path forward to bring a peaceful resolution to this crisis? Is there a path?

**Cheng:** I would like to suggest, keeping pressure on: to add significant costs to North Korea's nuclear missile development. Such significant cost could change the equation of cost and benefits in the mind of North Korea's leaders. That is the one thing we have to do. Second, we have to keep talks open. Talks always necessary. No matter if countries engage in diplomatic dispute or military conflict, finally they are going to seek to settle their differences through dialogue and talks. Blocking talk would lead to only one option: war. But I think that it is for the time, and talks freezing, double freezes not bad idea. We need to substantiate such a kind of idea by concrete feasible actions.

**Haenle:** I will say I largely agree with your recommendation. I think the notion of coercive diplomacy where U.S. and China work closely together to find ways to put more pressure on the Kim regime in North Korea, with an aim to get the North Korean leadership to change its political calculus. But at the same time, we should work hard together as well to find channels for communication. I am not talking about going back to the 6 party talks. That had its day. We have sort of moved beyond. That is an outdated model largely because North Korea has walked away and said that they are not interested. Finding channels to engage North Korea and see what the pressure is doing, to see if there is an opportunity to negotiate with the North Koreans. It seems to me in order to do that, the Chinese would have to do what the Americans have been asking Chinese—more pressure. The Americans would have to do what the Chinese have been asking—opening channels of communication.

**Cheng:** Yes open channels to negotiations, and think hard about what kind of stuff United States and other countries would bring to the negotiations in addition to sticks, the country need to think about brining carrots. They need to think about what kind and how many carrots they want to offer if North Korea does want to make a change to nuclear missile policies.

**Haenle:** Dr. Cheng I have enjoyed talking with you this morning from Renmin University, or

‘RenDa’ as they call it here in China. I very much appreciate hearing your views and perspectives and joining China and the World.

**Cheng:** Thank you Paul, thank you for inviting me.