The Shift of Security Environment in Northeast Asia: The US–China Conflict and its Implications for Korea

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ABSTRACT
This essay attempts to highlight how the nature of the US–China conflict is deep and structural, and therefore likely to have conflicting long-term impacts on the currently unfolding high-wire nuclear negotiations between North Korea and the United States. China is seen as the country with the greatest influence over North Korea, something China denies. On numerous occasions, Trump has openly criticized that “China was behind” North Korea’s defiant attitude that stalled the nuclear negotiations. How the “China factor” influences the US–North Korean negotiations continues to draw keen attention.

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At the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok, Russia, on 12 September 2018, Chinese leader Xi Jinping reportedly hinted that he would support a trilateral peace declaration to end the Korean War. The truth of such a statement would mean that Beijing has made a concession to help break the current North Korea–US stalemate in denuclearization talks. According to media reports, Xi indicated that China would be willing to accept a trilateral declaration to officially end the war, whose parties include the two Koreas and the United States but not China. The Radio Free Asia’s Chinese language edition carried a report about the matter. In the report, Xi posits, “There is a Chinese saying, ‘Let he who tied the bell on the tiger take it off.’ They should continue to make efforts. We also need to assist them.” The Chinese foreign ministry website has not published Xi’s remarks, and the state media has not reported on it.

A formal declaration to end the Korean War, demanded by North Korea, has been an obstacle throughout negotiations between Pyongyang and Washington. What further complicates negotiations is the so-called “China factor.” China is fully aware that the United States is reluctant to officially discuss the issue of declaration of ending the Korean War with North Korea because of China itself. Both the United States and China view such a declaration from the perspectives of their own geopolitical interests, which boils down to the question of the US Forces Korea (USFK). The USFK was established in 1957 as part of the South Korea–US Mutual Defense Treaty. It was the...
direct response to the North Korean attack against South Korea in 1950 that triggered the Korean War. Today, its presence in the region also serves as a key manifestation of the US strategic global rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region, particularly vis-à-vis China’s rise.

As the negotiations between Pyongyang and Washington have slowed due to the issue of the peace declaration, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un recently displayed his willingness to make a significant concession. He told Chung Eui-yong, director of South Korea’s National Security Office and a special envoy to North Korea, that “the declaration has nothing to do with the withdrawal of the USFK and the US–ROK military alliance.” The real problem, however, lies with China’s growing competition with the United States in the Asia-Pacific region and, particularly, in Northeast Asia. Geopolitically, strategically, and structurally, the presence of the USFK is often described as a “dagger” to China’s throat. The United States seems uncertain of the future implications of signing the peace deal or even endorsing such a declaration with North Korea, as doing so would unwittingly or inevitably serves as a convenient “justification” for China to demand the withdrawal of the USFK.

In rationalizing the presence of the USFK, the United States has traditionally referred to the “North Korean threat,” which was also cited when it deployed a THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) missile battery in South Korea. Both Washington and Seoul clarified on numerous occasions that the deployment of the advanced missile defense (MD) asset was to intercept North Korean missiles. However, China displayed a great displeasure. China vehemently opposed the deployment of such a cutting-edge MD asset near its vicinity because it believed the US missile shield would jeopardize its regional strategy. Similarly, the United States recognizes that a formal end to the Korean War would seriously undermine its strategic landscape in the Korean Peninsula, which has become “East Asia’s Balkans,” in which powerful countries’ interests frequently converge and collide.

The end of the Korean War would signify that a new “peace regime” will replace the current “armistice” arrangement that has lasted over a half-century. Further, the question will arise whether the ROK–US combined military exercises will still be justified in the future. Following this logic, China is likely to demand the USFK’s withdrawal, by raising a very compelling proposition that could be summed as the following: “The Korean War is finally over. Now peace is settled on the Korean Peninsula. It is a new era of peace. It means no more military tensions and no needs for maintaining the US military in Korea. Then, why would the US troops wish to stay?”

During the earlier summit between Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-un in the Chinese city of Dalian (7–8 May 2018), Xi allegedly requested Kim to side with the Chinese on the issue of the USFK. This report is consistent with Trump’s loud and open speculation that “China was behind” North Korea’s defiant attitude during negotiations.

In fact, when it comes to the declaration of ending the Korean War, China has never changed its official stance that it must be included not only as a signatory party but also as an active participant in all processes, despite Xi’s reported remarks that some

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3. North Korean Leader Kim Jong Un Wants to Denuclearize during Trump’s First Term: Seoul Officials.” CNBC, 6 September 2018.

4. For instance, see the interview with Chinese security expert (Lee 2011).
observers have misinterpreted. Xi’s verbatim full remarks were not available in the mainland Chinese media.\textsuperscript{5} Even with this limitation, it is unlikely that Xi meant what the media alleged. Rather, Xi seemed to underscore the consistent Chinese position that the United States and the two Koreas should be primarily responsible for resolving the Korean conflict, not China. Contrary to media reports, China recently proposed a “four-party” declaration to Washington to end the war (Kim 2018). However, there is apprehension in Washington in looking at China’s role. Even though China cooperates with the United States on the North Korean issue, but the two are also increasingly becoming strategic competitors in the region. The results of the peace declaration, and more broadly, how China, whose wealth and power continues to grow, will alter the security landscape in East Asia leave room for uncertainty. A keyword by the speech of the US Vice President at Washington’s Hudson Institute on 4 October 2018, was clearly “competition” with China.\textsuperscript{6}

**Into a “G-Zero” World**

International affairs surrounding Northeast Asia faces a high level of unprecedented uncertainty. The United States under the Trump administration emphasizes “America First” and alienates its allies, disrupting an alliance system it architected. In this time of uncertainty, North Korea has switched gear, from a nuclear brinkmanship to an epoch-making negotiation with the United States that could potentially lead to its denuclearization. However, doubts are rampant at this time whether this will bear fruit. China seeks to recover international order in the region in which North Korea is located based on the past “Sino-centralism.” Meanwhile, Japan strengthens its military power with a banner of becoming a “normal country.” In broader parts of Asia, and also in parts of Europe, “internationalism” is replaced with “nationalism” and “free trade” is replaced with “protectionism.” The sense of a world “reset” is felt more pronounced than any other time in history, not only due to the changes within Asia but also those in Europe including “Brexit.” Unfortunately, it is uncertain where the geopolitical order in East Asia is headed.

Today we do not live in a world vigorously maintained by the American leadership. We do not live in a world where it is led by China either. Even worse, implications behind the aforementioned changes stand open to speculation. Ian Bremmer concludes that we are heading toward the “G-Zero” world (Bremmer and Roubini 2011). That is, we are not heading toward singular leadership under American or Chinese superpower, but toward an unknown era “without leadership.” Therefore, we are heading to a world of “zero” leadership. While the United States relegates its global leadership position it has held since the World War II, the rising China is unable to transcend the United States might and influence any time soon, leaving the international order “without order.”

\textsuperscript{5}Author’s interview with multiple Chinese journalists.

\textsuperscript{6}See “Remarks by Vice President Pence on the Administration’s Policy Toward China,” White House, 4 October 2018: https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-vice-president-pence-administrations-policy-toward-china/. It was arguably the most important speech of the whole Trump administration. “Cramer: Pence’s Speech Blasting China was ‘the Most Important’ of the Trump Administration,” CNBC, 24 October 2018. https://www.cnbc.com/2018/10/24/cramer-pence-speech-on-china-most-important-of-trump-administration.html.
Under the Trump administration, the United States positioning away from its traditional role of exercising global leadership in the international society is clear. At the same time, China has yet to substitute the American role through its “rise” (崛起). The competitive and conflicting structure between the United States and China for dominance in Northeast Asia is likely to persist and will have ramifications on the Korean Peninsula, where the two previously fought against each other during the fierce 1950–53 Korean War.

**The Short-Lived Bromance Between Trump and Xi**

The United States and China are the two primary outside variables that influence Korean geopolitics. As such, it is necessary to understand the nature of their relationship – its past, present and future – especially as there is an unprecedented uncertainty in their relationship today, amid deepening trade conflict, the Taiwan issue, the South China Sea and the cyber espionage. There is a widening understanding that the United States engagement policy toward China for the past 40 years has failed. In other words, the US effort to tame China into the international order designed by Washington was a failure. Moreover, some argue that it was only “wishful thinking” on the part of the United States that, in fact, unwittingly “allowed” China to now become the most threatening competitor to America. The sense of US policy miscalculation and its perception of competition against China have expanded since the United States “pivot to Asia” around the late 2011 (by then the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton) to this day.

Such is the case despite favorable personal impressions expressed by Trump toward Chinese leader Xi Jinping during their Mar-a-Lago summit in April 2017. Pundits hyped a “bromance” between Trump and Xi, but the purported romance fizzled out soon amid increasing rivalry, competition, and mistrust between the United States and China. The fundamental reason the US–China relationship chills even further can be attributable to the fact that their relationship is increasingly becoming “locked” in a trap that is structural in nature. For instance, the old formula of mutual dependence in trade cooperation in which China exports cheap products and the United States buys them is increasingly not sustainable, as Chinese products are technologically innovative and now directly competing with American high-tech sectors. In the security realm, the increasingly competitive nature will manifest through the issues such as the North Korean nuclear issue. Now, they are even competing in the extraterrestrial space. China is still militarily weaker than America. Therefore, China may occasionally back down in a tactful display of compromise in the short term but it is unlikely to be a sustained posture by the Chinese. China’s actions could be subtle and discreet. For instance, it may affirm its continuing commitment to the UN economic sanctions against North Korea, while leaving a backdoor open in reality.

It should be noted that the “worsening” relations between Trump and Xi does not necessarily mean that it will inevitably lead to a war between the United States and China. However, even if that were the case, it does not bode well for those small and medium nations that are “stuck” between the two giants, particularly the countries in East Asia, and notably South Korea. Even a “low-level conflict” between the United States and China can amount to a national-level challenge. The discord between Seoul
and Beijing over the deployment of THAAD was a case in point. Even if it was inherently a competing power projection between Washington and Beijing over military dominance in East Asia, it was Seoul that has borne the brunt of it as China retaliated against Seoul, not Washington.

**When Conflict is the Zeitgeist**

In analyzing US–China relations, scholars broadly pay attention to three factors: (1) mutual trade dependence, (2) personal relationship between top leaders, (3) perception between the peoples of the two nations. When an unorthodox and unpredictable Donald Trump was elected as the president of the United States, pundits in China paid more attention to the personal friendship between the two leaders as the barometer to watch, and eventually predicted that the US–China relationship could still be “smoothed” out as long as Trump and Xi maintained a favorable personal relationship. However, even though the bromance of Trump and Xi was brief, the US–China relationship is not solely determined by the personal chemistry of the leadership.

It is important to examine the bilateral relationship on a grander scheme and from a structural aspect as well. Along this line, we should also look at the Zeitgeist (the collective psyche) that influences the political ethos that shapes the bilateral relationship. We should understand how leaders feel their historical mandate (or legacy). For instance, the Xi Jinping government in China sees the present as “a period of strategic opportunity” (zhanlv jiyu qi 戰略機遇期). Xi set a lofty goal of China becoming a strong and prosperous socialist country, which is on par with the Western developed nations, particularly its primary rival, the United States, by 2050. Some interpret 2050 as the year when China overtakes the United States. Xi’s sense of “strategic opportunity” has been emboldened by the election of Donald Trump, a political novice and TV show host, as president of the United States, and who was eager to dismantle the traditional American leadership in the world.

Historian Niall Ferguson once depicted the US–China relationship as “frenemy” (friend + enemy), where the love-hate relationship is evident, and where cooperation and competition coexists (Larson 2010). The term frenemy, however, tends to put more emphasis on the “friend” aspect. That is, although the United States and China spar over many issues, there are more areas in which the two benefit from being friends rather than enemies. Rational choice theory, for example, assumes that actors in international relations would pursue “win-win” through cooperation rather than conflict. It is their rational choice to maximize their interest through cooperation. The same logic also supported an optimistic view that the United States and China will not collide into major conflict. This, however, overlooked the risks “frenemy” imposes on the international society, especially when they “buck-pass” important international issues to each other. The North Korean nuclear crisis is one such case. For instance, the United States holds China to be responsible for resolving the issue. Trump even said, “North Korea is China’s problem to fix” (Lee 2016). However, China argues the inverse,

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7. Xi Jinping 定调‘十三五’：中国发展的重要战略机遇期.* 人民网, 21 July 2015. [http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2015/0721/c1001-27339233.html](http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2015/0721/c1001-27339233.html).
because the North Korean nuclear crisis was born out of hostility between Pyongyang and Washington.

In a statement on 12 September 2016, the Chinese foreign ministry reported, “Since the North Korean nuclear issue is actually a matter between North Korea and the United States, the United States should take responsibility.” Similar statements were repeated on 19 September 2017, and 26 January 2018. It is as though China has been making an annual proclamation that it is not responsible for the North Korean nuclear issue, and it does not want to be associated with it. However, a sudden and important shift has been made amid the rapid developments on the Korean Peninsula toward a view that China is being “sidelined.” On 19 April 2018, the Chinese foreign ministry reported, “As a ‘party’ (dang shi fang 當事方) to the Korean Peninsula issue, China is willing to play an active role.” What is noteworthy here is that China, this time, is identifying itself as a party to the issue of the Korean Peninsula, departing from its previous stance to project itself as a “mediator.”

**History of American Isolationism: Trump as the “Result” of Declining American Leadership, Not the “Cause”**

The so-called “China’s rise” is often identified as the primary factor that destabilizes the world. However, it may be equally argued that the relative “decline” of America is also responsible for begetting the instability. And the American decline, stemming from American isolationism, is not a sudden product of the Trump administration but has been in the making for the past two decades. For instance, the “Trump phenomenon” is depicted as a temporary “deviation,” not a “representation” of the mainstream American society. A China expert at Harvard University, William Overholt, however, disagrees. He points out that the declining American leadership started not from the advent of Trump but even before him (Evans 2011). According to this view, Trump is the “result” of the declining American leadership not the “cause.” In other words, the appearance of Trump ironically represents the collective psyche of the American society or “Zeitgeist” of the United States, as we will examine.

American “isolationism” does not derive from the election of Donald Trump, but from far earlier – over 20 years ago. When Bill Clinton was elected as president (in 1993), the American people focused more on domestic problems than international issues. After all, the Cold War was over. There was no major enemy outside of American borders that could compete with America. Furthermore, when the Operation Restore Hope in Somalia was unsuccessful, with 18 US soldiers dead, the American society under Clinton became more critical toward American intervention in foreign disputes.

Regarding China, Clinton was doling out carrots to induce Beijing, arguing that “Just as democracy helps make the world safe for commerce, commerce helps make the world safe for democracy,” and supported China’s entry to WTO (which materialized in 2001). Clinton believed that the increase in commerce would lead to a further

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8The original Chinese wording was: “朝核问题的实质是朝美矛盾，美方应承担起应有责任。”
9The original Chinese wording was: “作为半岛问题当事方，中方愿为此发挥积极作用。”
10“Bill Clinton on China,” On The Issues. http://www.issues2000.org/celeb/Bill_Clinton_China.htm.
opening of China, relaxing the economic control of the Chinese Communist Party over the Chinese people and improving the Chinese civil society, which would eventually lead to improvement of human rights conditions in China and eventually its transformation into a democratic society – as in Taiwan and South Korea. Looking back, US Congressman Dana Rohrabacher reflected that such an approach to China was a “stupid policy” and argued that the United States mistakenly allowed China to become a major economic power without requiring political reforms. He concluded: “We created a monster,” criticizing US strategic miscalculation toward China.\footnote{“We have created a monster’ – How to Start a Cold War.” YouTube footage, available at: \url{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6jrSwj4yYcc}.}

Succeeding Clinton, the George W. Bush administration (2001–2009) declared the “War against Terror” after the September 11 terrorist attacks in 2001. Standing on the debris at the Ground Zero in New York, he declared, “You are either with us, or with the terrorists.”\footnote{“Bush: ‘You Are Either With Us, Or With the Terrorists’ – 2001-09-21.” VOA, 27 October 2009. \url{https://www.voanews.com/a/a-13-a-2001-09-21-14-bush-6641197/549664.html}.} The televised words are still remembered today. The “War against Terror,” however, also resulted in reminding America that there is a “limit” to the power of the United States. According to the Pew Research conducted in over 54 different countries and 175,000 people, the image of the United States was greatly damaged during the years under the Bush administration (Pew Research Center 2008).\footnote{“Global Public Opinion in the Bush Years (2001–2008).” Pew Research Center, 18 December 2008. \url{http://www.pewglobal.org/2008/12/18/global-public-opinion-in-the-bush-years-2001-2008/}.} As a response, the US diplomacy switched from “unilateralism” under the Bush administration to multilateralism under the Obama administration, seeking to accommodate room for cooperation with other countries in terms of sharing global leadership. In this regard, Obama wanted to work with China to share global responsibility and global governance. Such a change, however, also signaled the decline of the singular American influence in the world.

Inaugurated during the global financial crisis, the Obama administration (2009–2017) commenced under self-awareness as the United States as a “reduced” superpower. American citizens were even more critical toward their government’s spending money on the wars outside of the United States. The American public began to voice national priorities such as “recovering economy,” “ending the war,” and “not starting a new war.” In this situation, the Obama administration also focused on the domestic issues, and the “Zeitgeist” the American collective psyche called for. Diplomatically, Obama displayed even more repulsion to America playing the traditional role of the “world police.” For instance, even after Obama drew the “red line” with Syria for the latter’s using chemical weapons on civilians, he did not take any military action in the end, going against his vow. This “inaction” not only undermined the American credibility but also emboldened countries such as China to rise to challenge the status of the United States.

During this period in the Obama administration, however, there was an “exceptional” shift in the diplomatic strategy: the “pivot to Asia” to restrain the rise of China. This strategy, as mentioned, has seen failure. At this time, Xi Jinping’s China asked Obama’s America to share the global sphere of influence by proposing the “New Type
of Major Power Relations 新型大国關係 ."^{14} Xi famously told Obama that the Pacific Ocean is “big enough” to hold both China and the United States together.^{15} Under the guise of this proposal, China essentially requested the United States to leave Asia.

The Ambition of the “China Dream" (中國夢)

Xi Jinping’s attending the Davos World Economic Forum was the boldest Chinese attempt to compete with the United States’ dominant position in world economic and strategic institutions. At Davos, Xi proclaimed that China would seize the role as the leader of “globalization” when Trump was preaching isolationism. Under Xi, China created a World Bank of its own called the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Xi then frontloaded a new Silk Road project, “One Belt, One Road,” (later renamed “Belt & Road Initiative”) which links Asia with Europe. Xi also declared China a “major maritime power 海洋大國” in 2014 and has been continuing military buildup in the South China Sea. China’s ambition is not limited to Asia, but goes beyond. Today, it is also the largest trading partner and investor for most African countries. In September 2018, Xi invited all major leaders from the African continent to Beijing, enticing them with the prospect of economic projects.

China has a national objective of the so-called “Two Centenaries” (兩個一百年). The first hundred years refer to “building moderately prosperous society (全面建成小康社会) by the 100th anniversary of the establishment of the Chinese Communist Party by 2021. The second hundred years refer to achieving the “dream of rejuvenation of the great Chinese nation” (中华民族伟大复兴的梦) by the 100th anniversary of the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 2049.^{16} China under Xi is confident in judging that it has already completed the “rise” (崛起), that is the fulcrum, of becoming a superpower. Now the goal is to become a “strong nation” (強國) that rivals the sitting power, the United States.

Broadly, it is necessary to pay attention to how China’s collective consciousness (or Zeitgeist) of its rise is projected to its increasingly assertive behaviors in diplomacy. With transformative expansion in economic, political, and military power, China’s global status soars. China under Xi perceives that international society has to accept, if not be forced to accept, the changed status of China in the global arena. To be specific, it is not China, but the world, that has to accept and adapt to the new world order.

Compared to other Chinese leaders, Xi is regarded as pursuing a strong national power with his realist worldview and pushing much more aggressive diplomacy. He is focused more on realizing the “China dream” (zhongguo meng 中国梦) instead of cooperating with the United States Therefore, China will not make concessions to the United States in matters it calls “core interests” (hexin liyi 核心利益). Xi has made numerous public speeches in this regard. The main policy discourse under Xi is to

14“如何理解习近平再强调的中美新型大国关系?” 人民网， 19 May 2015. http://cpc.people.com.cn/xuexi/n/2015/0519/c385474-27021248.html.
15“习近平同美国总统奥巴马会晤.” 新华网, 25 September 2015. http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-09/25/c_1116681366.htm.
16To make it simple, the Chinese Community Party since the 19th Congress, began to refer to the year 2050.
17“将军梦就是强国梦.” CCTV. http://news.cntv.cn/special/xddtjs/index.shtml.
forcefully react to the United States instead of taking a passive posture. China believes that the United States will try to contain China regardless of whether China cooperates in matters such as North Korea, or not. China under Xi is likely to increasingly stand up to the United States in international affairs, and is more likely to project itself as an alternative “solution” provider. In the official wording, it is called “Chinese solution” (zhongguo fang’an 中國方案).

On the North Korean nuclear issue, China has also emphasized that Washington and Pyongyang should accept the China-proposed “freeze-to-freeze” (雙中斷) formula as a solution. According to the Chinese formula, North Korea should “freeze” its nuclear and missile tests, while the United States should “freeze” its military drills near North Korea. Incidentally, the current nuclear negotiation between the United States and North Korea has progressed along the Chinese formula. In the aftermath of the Singapore summit, Trump declared that the United States would stop war games with South Korea. North Korea, meanwhile, has also stopped its nuclear and missile tests.

US–China Conflict and Prospect of Security Environment in Northeast Asia

Trump and Xi collide against each other with their respective slogans of “Making America Great Again” and the banner on “Rejuvenating the Great Chinese Nation” (中華民族偉大復興). According to publicized report in July 2017, written jointly by scholars of China and the US, the intensification of the US–China competition and the possibility of strategic miscalculation are the most dangerous factor for the potential conflict in the future between the two (Wang, Yuan, and Zhao 2017). If the United States and China collide, it will most likely happen in Asia (Bremmer 2016). Therefore, the vacuum of global leadership (G-Zero), featuring mistrust, distrust, and rivalry between two competing superpowers, will have tremendous impact on the regional security landscape of Asia.

For America, since Trump did not “cause” the decline of American leadership but rather is the “consequence” of it, the decline of American leadership is the problem of the collective psyche (Zeitgeist) of American society as a whole. Such a problem is organic, structural, and embedded in the American society’s collective thinking and worldview. It would also indicate a passive conjecture that future US presidents after Trump will not likely turn the tide back to the traditional American leadership.

If this tentative conclusion is correct, then it will have seismic implications for the security environment in East Asia. Although the United States has made numerous public statements to actively engage Asia, there is a lack of assurance that the United States is willing to pay for the price and sustain the risks to maintain its leadership in Asia. The current trade war with China is not so much an American effort to safeguard its traditional leadership as to secure the interest of “America first.” Trump also expressed that he wanted to retract American troops from South Korea because it was financially burdensome. He clearly sees the alliance from the monetary transactional angle, not from the traditional security perspective. Ian Bremmer even predicts that the United States could withdraw from Asia in between 10 or 20 years (Bremmer 2018). For instance, the withdrawal of US troops from Japan and South Korea, if materialized, would usher a high level of instability to the regional order in Asia, as it
will pave the way for China to dominate the region economically, strategically, and politically. By then, almost all the states in Asia would have to seriously worry about how to defend their national interests on their own, without America.

The Future of North Korea amid US–China Conflict

So far, we have examined that the nature of the US–China conflict is deep and structural. The question arises, how will this affect the nuclear negotiation between the United States and North Korea? As of this writing in 2018, Xi Jinping has met with Kim Jong-un three times in the span of three months, from March to June. During the third visit by Kim to China (June 19), Xi promised Kim “three unchangeables” (san ge bubian 三個不變): (1) the support of the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese government for the development of Sino-North Korea relations; (2) Chinese people’s friendly feelings (youhao qingyi 有好情誼) toward North Korean people; and (3) China’s support for “socialist North Korea 社會主義朝鮮.” What deserves special attention is the fact that Xi addressed North Korea as “socialist North Korea” (she-huizhuyi chaoxian), an open support of North Korea as a “socialist” country.

On the contrary, the Trump government urged Kim to accept an American-proposed denuclearization deal that would provide Kim’s country with prosperity “on par with South Korea,” (Thiessen 2018) a prospering democratic state with American sponsorship. In fact, South Korea is a signature success story of “democratic transformation” in Americas’ foreign engagement. However, Xi is known to be a dedicated socialist and a believer in Marxism. During the 19th Party Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in October 2017, Xi proclaimed the “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era 习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想.” Xi wants to usher a new era as the West declines.

In particular, the election of Donald Trump in the United States gave the Chinese leadership renewed confidence in China’s choice of its development path, which has painstakingly resisted accepting the Western development model. In March 2018, Xi remarked that the decision by China’s Communist Party to adhere to the political theories of Karl Marx was “totally correct 完全正確.” Naturally, this raises a question of whether Xi’s vision for the future state of North Korea is compatible with that of the United States. This aspect is important because even though both the United States and China want North Korea’s denuclearization, their respective visions for the future North Korea and the type of its political institution may be starkly different. Xi is clear; he wants a socialist North Korea, like China. This will greatly affect how Xi will deal with Kim and what kind of advice he offers in his ongoing negotiations with Trump.

18“关于中朝关系，习近平说了三个 ‘不会变’,” 中国日报网. 22 June 2018. http://china.chinadaily.com.cn/2018-06/22/content_36435372.htm.
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