

Increasing US-China rivalry and US-DPRK confrontation in 2010

Focusing on comparisons with the conflict phase of 2003-2006

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This year, following North Korea's attack on the Cheonan, both the US and South Korea have launched into a phase of serious confrontation with North Korea. However this is not the first time such a phase has occurred. The periods 1993-1994 and 2003-2006 were also characterized by US-DPRK confrontation. As is commonly acknowledged, the 2003-2006 confrontation concluded with North Korea scoring a technical victory over the US following North Korea's nuclear test in 2006 and the US-DPRK negotiations of 2007.

The new US-DPRK confrontation beginning in 2010 differs in several ways from that of the 2003-2006 period. In this paper I will compare the two situations, investigate their structural features, and make some predictions of future developments. First, in 2003-2009 the US-China relationship was characterized more by cooperation than rivalry, whereas from 2010 onwards rivalry has been the dominant aspect. Second, there are significant differences in the positions of the major actors. There are differences in the firmness of US resolve in the goodwill of the international community towards the US and North Korea's respective strategic positions; in North Korea's vulnerability and in China's position. Due to such differences between the two periods, this period can be expected to reach a different conclusion than the last one.

1. Emergence of the US-China rivalry dynamic

When it was inaugurated in 2009 the Obama government expected that cooperation would be the key aspect of US-China relations. While acknowledging China as a strategic partner, the US expected China to take a more active role in preserving the existing international order. With this in mind Obama adopted an attitude of compromise toward China on many issues, including upgrading the

US-China “Strategic Dialogue” to the “Strategic and Economic Dialogue,” toning down criticism of China’s human rights problems, and giving China priority over Japan.

However by late 2009 there were indications that this approach was not working. In the wake of the financial crisis, the formerly cautious China grew bolder, more dogmatic, and less cooperative. It began to take a more overtly uncooperative and imperious attitude on major international issues. During Obama’s visit to Beijing in November and at the Copenhagen climate summit in December, he received belittling treatment from the Chinese. Meetings between US presidents and the Dalai Lama and US arms sales to Taiwan are always flashpoints for conflict between the two countries. But in early 2010 in response to US moves on these two issues China reacted with unusual vehemence. China also had a confrontation with the search engine Google over issues pertaining to internet freedom. Furthermore China adopted an uncompromising attitude on the issue of managing the yuan’s exchange rate, emphasizing that in matters of investment and trade China would hold to its own standards. China also opposed the US positions on the Cheonan incident and Iran sanctions, and additional conflicts are likely to emerge in the future. Most decisively, since March China has taken the new position that it considers the South China Sea among its “core national interests.” Formerly, China only used this term only in reference to Tibet, Xinjian, and Taiwan. In July US Secretary of State Clinton expressed the need for regional countries to cooperate to resolve the South China Sea issue, declaring the peaceful resolution of that issue as part of the US’ “national interest.” In reaction, China performed a series of large-scale military drills in September and August. To be sure, these maneuvers were also intended as an answer to the US-ROK joint military exercises planned in response to the Cheonan sinking incident. Meanwhile, the China-US rivalry in Southeast Asia is heating up. Amid new efforts by the Obama administration to increase its involvement in Southeast Asia, it has recently boosted its military cooperation with Vietnam and Indonesia.

But it is not only the US that is feeling disappointment with China. Compared to the mid-2000s, the general feeling about China’s rise has changed considerably, and not only in the US. During the worldwide anti-American trend of the mid-2000s, discussion about China was influenced by its ‘smile diplomacy,’ its integration into the existing world order, and its friendlier relations with other countries including South Korea, Australia, Japan, and the countries of Southeast Asia. By comparison, since the latter part of 2009, a general wariness about China has arisen due to its unsophisticated foreign policy and posture. This has taken the following forms. Due to China’s increasingly dogmatic foreign policy, concerned countries have become more wary about its rising military budget and armed forces. China has taken a stance contrary to the US and Europe on the issues of climate change and Iran. And as the Cheonan incident has shown, China is much less cooperative on matters



pertaining to North Korea than it is on the Iran issue. This has resulted in the strengthening of the US-ROK and US-Japan alliances. China's designation of the South China Sea as part of its "core national interests" is likely to lead to confrontations with many countries. The South China Sea comprises one-third of global seaborne trade and over half of Northeast Asia's energy imports; the interests of many countries including South Korea and Japan are tied up in it. Further, there are numerous territorial disputes in this sea, involving Vietnam, Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia. This will undoubtedly increase wariness about China among these Southeast Asian countries. To make matters worse, China has engaged in a rivalry with India. This involves territorial disputes, rivalry for naval supremacy in the Indian Ocean, and competition for influence over Myanmar, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Most notably, in 2010 China offered nuclear energy assistance to Pakistan. India, Brazil, and the EU are likely to support the US position on the reevaluation of the yuan.

These foreign policy moves by China and the changing situation have prompted the Obama administration to rethink its China policy. If 2009 was characterized by cooperation, from now on US policy will acknowledge an unavoidable degree of strategic rivalry, even as both sides continue to cooperate on economic matters. I.e., the US will pursue a policy of trying to manage and contain the new more confident, more dogmatic, and less cooperative China, and it will resolutely pursue its own interests even if that means causing consternation for China. This new basis for US policy can already be seen in its approach to the South China Sea and Cheonan sinking issues.

2. A comparison of US–DPRK conflict in the periods 2003–2006 versus 2010

With the US-DPRK and inter-Korean negotiations in 2009 producing little progress, after the Cheonan attack in March 2010 the US and South Korea both began to pursue confrontational measures against the DPRK. North Korea is likely to adopt a more confrontational posture in response.

The confrontational phase that has begun this year shows many key differences with the 2003-2006 phase of US-DPRK confrontation. I have already explained about the change in the US-China relationship from cooperation to rivalry. In this section I will briefly describe the main characteristics of the 2003-2006 confrontation, and compare them with the current period, with emphasis on the positions of the major actors involved.



Relations among the 4 major countries involved in the North Korea issue - South and North Korea, the US, and China - have undergone various changes over the years. It is impossible to cover all these changes in detail here. I will only say that in the period from 2003 up to 2009, when it came to dealing with issues related to North Korea, the US and China generally maintained a cooperative relationship. In the early period of the Bush administration, which took office in 2001, China was considered a “strategic rival,” but this attitude was quickly reversed to one of cooperation. Because of the need to focus on the issues of the Middle East and terrorism, the US reduced its strategic involvement in East Asia and sought greater cooperation with China. In the midst of the US-DPRK confrontation which had been intensifying since 2001, in 2003 the US proposed that China host multilateral talks on the North Korean nuclear issue. However the US, focused as it was on the Middle East, lacked both the will and the desire to enact forceful measures against North Korea moreover, it was in disagreement with its South Korean ally, and its interests did not align with those of China. In a word, the US was alone in pursuing a hard-line policy, while North Korea had direct and indirect support from both China and South Korea and could at least take on the attitude of an innocent bystander. Ultimately this confrontation ended in a US retreat. The first North Korean nuclear test in October 2006 was a turning point. In 2007 North Korea was able to hold joint talks with the US as it had wanted, and those talks produced results that appeared more favorable to the North Korean side than to the US. However, this state of affairs was challenged in 2008 due to changes in inter-Korean and US-DPRK relations. In response North Korea took on a new posture in 2009, pursuing a series of confrontational measures including a 2nd nuclear test. North Korea’s actual position is as follows. From now on denuclearization is not an item for negotiation. Instead, the main agenda for North Korea is to gain recognition as a nuclear power and to establish new relationships with concerned countries, including South Korea and the US, which are more amenable to the continued existence of the current DPRK government.

In comparison with the 2003-2006 period of confrontation, the current US-DPRK confrontation beginning in 2010 is distinguished by the following characteristics.

First, there is a difference in the strength of US resolve. The Bush administration had focused its will and hopes on the Middle East conflict, and was keen to avoid friction with China. Thus, while pursuing a hard-line policy against North Korea, the US relied on China and South Korea to apply an effective amount of pressure. However the responses of China and South Korea to this endeavor were lukewarm. By comparison Obama has the cooperation of South Korea and is able to directly pressure North Korea, even while risking a degree of displeasure from China. Of course Obama still faces serious problems in Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan, where there does not appear to be much



progress. However, from the outset the Obama administration has considered East Asia as the core strategic region of the 21st Century and has promoted increasing US involvement in this region while decreasing involvement in the Middle East. Thus the US is trying to maintain the process it has pushed for, leaving China to manage North Korea as it has in the past, and maintaining strategic patience for the moment. As explained above, from 2010 onward the US-China rivalry has been growing more intense.

Second, there is a change in international goodwill toward both the US and North Korean positions. As is well known, support for Bush's hard-line policies was generally low. Even South Korea and Japan indicated that they thought such policies dangerous. The current administration does not face such problems. Even if such concerns still exist they are considerably fainter. In contrast to the 2003-2006 period, now there is general acknowledgement that a large portion of the responsibility for the breakdown of the talks lies with North Korea. North Korea is now taking the position that it will not abandon its nuclear weapons and therefore it wants to be recognized as a nuclear power, but the international reaction to this position has been distinctly unreceptive. Moreover, even before the newly inaugurated Obama administration had time to re-evaluate and establish its North Korea policy, they performed a second nuclear test and other provocative measures. In the US, these actions led most moderate conservatives and those in favor of direct talks to change their minds. In South Korea, the 1st nuclear test in 2006 caused public opinion to swing to the conservative side and helped conservatives to triumph in the presidential election of 2007. On top of that, the 2nd nuclear test and the Cheonan incident further aggravated South Korean public opinion about the North.

Third, North Korea's vulnerability has increased. Compared to now, the North Korea of 2003-2006 was considerably more stable. Kim Jong Il was healthy, and the economy was stable thanks to large-scale aid from South Korea. Further, North Korea was able to make use of the discord between the US and South Korea. In 2010 inter-Korean relations have gone from bad to worse, and there are no signs of fissures in the tight US-ROK relationship. On top of that, Kim Jong Il's health is not what it once was, and a succession process is in the midst of being implemented. Foreign aid has been stalled since 2008, and the currency reform of November 2009 has led to intense popular resentment.

Fourth, China's position has changed. In 2003-2006, China had little to lose and was in an easy situation. With respect to North Korea issues, China played its role of keeping the US in check, while the US played its role of keeping North Korea in check, and everyone was happy. China could use its important role in controlling North Korea as a negotiating card to extract concessions from



the US. China also enhanced its relations with South Korea. By contrast in 2010 China's position is extremely complicated. It cannot submit to North Korea's demand to be recognized as a nuclear power, and like the US it is skeptical about the possibility of disarming it. Yet China must still attempt to achieve this unlikely goal through the 6-Party Talks, which no one has been pleased with. China does not approve of the current North Korea policy of the ROK government, but it is even less happy about North Korea's military provocations against the South. In situations like the Cheonan incident, China must refrain from publicly acknowledging the perpetrator even when it knows exactly who was responsible. Furthermore it must suffer public criticism and loss of face in making such denials. And North Korea's nuclear weapons and military provocations endanger China's own security situation by aggravating military competition in East Asia. In short, China is forced to make a choice in which neither option is very appealing and both require accepting some kind of loss. If it chooses to support North Korea, it will have to take actions it does not like, and it will be internally weakened and suffer damage as explained above. If the US-China rivalry is magnified, China may be forced to further support North Korea whether it wants to or not. In that case, the burden China will have to take on due to North Korea's internal uncertainty, as well as the damage to its relations with neighboring countries, will only increase. In any case, China is not yet ready to cast off North Korea, as the costs and benefits are still too uncertain. Further, if China abandons North Korea, it will lose the trust of other precarious or rogue states such as Pakistan, Iran, Sudan, and Myanmar. This would be a heavy blow to China's foreign policy.

3. Conclusion

There are many key differences between the phase of confrontation in 2003-2006 and the one which has begun in 2010. The fundamental spirit of US-China relations has changed from cooperation to rivalry. When we consider such factors as the strength of US resolve in regard to North Korea, international support for the respective strategic positions of the US and North Korea, North Korea's level of vulnerability, and the current situation of China, we can see that North Korea's position is strategically somewhat disadvantageous. However North Korea's strength is in its eternal state of desperation. Its government is in a fight for survival. Therefore, in adverse circumstances it is prepared to take whatever steps necessary to avoid defeat. South Korea and the US must wisely and cautiously make use of their strategic advantages in the present situation, deploying both pressure and conciliatory measures. More than anything, South Korea and the US must prevent the intensification of provocations from North Korea, which is emboldened by the ability to publicly threaten to use its



nuclear weapons. If China, in the midst of its rivalry with the US, chooses to more directly countenance North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons, then it must struggle to avoid a situation in which it is forced to benignly overlook even bolder military actions by North Korea against the South. Amidst the US-China rivalry, China and North Korea may focus their strategy on the tactic of alienating South Korea from the US through an intensive combination of threats and conciliatory gestures. Finally, South Korea must protect itself against the various uncertainties that are an intrinsic part of current international politics. This includes potential changes to the state of US finances in the event of a recurrence of the global financial crisis.

