The Changing North Korean Security Paradigm: Regional Alliance Structures and Approaches to Engagement

An Interview with Victor Cha and David Kang

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An ever more antagonistic and unpredictable North Korea under Kim Jong-un’s leadership serves as a reminder that the intractable North Korea problem is as alarming today as a decade ago. In this interview with the Journal, Victor Cha of Georgetown University and David Kang of the University of Southern California revisit their North Korea debate, exploring approaches to engagement in a much changed environment and—perhaps more importantly—revealing their new research approach vis-à-vis the impossible state.

Journal: Since your last debate, both the United States and North Korea experienced a leadership transition, North Korea increased its nuclear capabilities and continued to conduct nuclear tests, and engagement regarding denuclearization remained unsuccessful. How have events over the last decade validated and/or challenged your engagement strategy arguments from 2005?

Cha: I think the bottom line of both of our arguments back in 2005 still holds, which is that—regardless of how bad North Korean behavior is—there needs to be some line of communication or form of engagement. The so-called “package” that was offered in 2005—and even before that in 1994—is essentially the same. If North Korea gives up their weapons, then they receive economic benefits, energy, political normalization, peace treaties, and so forth. So, the extent to which that remains the quid pro quo for the nuclear weapons is part of any engagement strategy. Where David and I might differ is in terms of how one should sequence. For example, should the peace treaty occur in advance of any sort of real denuclearization on their part, or not? But I still think that, in general, we can try sanctions and all sorts of tactics, but there must be an element of engagement attached to these strategies.
Kang: There is this phrase, “don’t buy that same horse twice,” but Victor is right. If there is going to be a negotiated settlement or agreement, it is going to be nukes for normalization. Both sides agree that the issue is nukes for normalization, which is the sad part. We don’t have a disagreement about what the issue is and how to solve it—we agreed in 1994 and again from 2005 to 2007. We do not need to have a North Korea agreement. We can wait until North Korea collapses or we can just wait forever, but if there is an agreement, then it is very clear that it will be nukes for normalization. So, I still agree with that basic, core assessment. I think that the real disagreement is over how you stay focused on the issue at hand. One of the issues about the leadership change is that both countries are focused on a lot of other issues right now, so the will and ability to consistently focus on solving the North Korea issue is harder to sustain simply because of other priorities that have come about.

Journal: In your previous interview, you argued that the North Korean state can continue indefinitely as a result of these sorts of forces. Do you think that assessment remains relevant today?

Cha: Yes, I do. Just look at what is going on today—we have Paris, ISIS, and Syria, as well as Russia and Ukraine. I think if the United States puts their mind to an issue and labels it a top priority, then they can make progress on it and maybe even solve it. That is what it really requires. But North Korea has never risen to that level, and so, for that reason, it always ends up being put on the backburner. In the meantime, North Korea continues to develop new capabilities. One of North Korea’s strategic advantages has always been that it has not been a strategic priority of the United States, and that continues to be the problem.

Journal: And what about China? Where do you see Beijing fitting into this, particularly given the leadership changes that we have seen in both China and North Korea since your last debate?

Kang: There are theories that China has changed its fundamental strategy towards North Korea, but I am skeptical regarding whether that is actually the case. I think it is clear that China is much more frustrated with North Korea, but have they decided to stop essentially engaging North Korea and allowing continued trade and support for the regime? I do not see a whole lot of evidence to support that. There is a lot more rhetoric, and China is far more likely to visit South Korea than North Korea, but they have not fundamentally changed their strategy on North Korea. And, in a way, that complicates U.S. strategy. Let me put this another way: all the countries in the region know how to play the current game, which is stalemate. Whether it is China, South Korea, North Korea, or the United States, everyone looks good in terms of domestic politics and is able to say “I’m being tough.” And nobody really knows what is going to happen if someone topples North Korea. It is not clear what is going to happen. So, I think all countries are very cautious about changing the status quo. And especially, as Victor said, when it is not a priority, it is very hard to explore how you might move forward in that situation.
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Interview

Cha: I think Chinese officials and academics have clearly been granted license to say all the bad things that they want about North Korea—that has been the primary change in terms of the rhetoric. We have clearly seen, on the diplomacy side, no high-level visits and no major gifts that we know of. Even significant birthdays and dates such as the recent seventieth anniversary of North Korea’s ruling party in October, China has not given any big gifts, which is also new. But whether that translates to a strategic break in the relationship…I think everybody is still skeptical of that.

I think everybody agrees that China will now “diss” North Korea in public, not grant them large economic assistance packages, and fail to give them face in public summits. But I do not think anybody really believes that China will cut off the North. I do not think people believe that even Xi Jinping is ready to do that. But, that has not stopped the South Koreans from trying very hard to engage with China—even to the point of creating some discomfort here in Washington for being too friendly with the Chinese—because the South Koreans have this hope of moving the needle on China. But we do not know how successful these efforts will be until the next North Korean nuclear or missile test when the South Koreans have heightened expectations of what China should do. If China fails to meet South Korea’s new expectations, then we will see the China–North Korea–South Korea relationship for what it really is.

Journal: Dr. Kang, would you agree with this assessment?

Kang: I cannot see any scenario under which the United States is just watching as South Korea and China join hands in the Koreas. There will always be room for the United States. And to go back to the question of the fundamental U.S. strategy, waiting can be a strategy. It is not a particularly active strategy, but the question comes down to, “Do you have the resources?” Does the United States have the resources and the time to make it a strategy when it is unclear whether it will work? I was more optimistic in the 1990s because you could see a path by which it might work—you could see that both sides actually sort of believed it or were willing to be convinced. By now, I think both sides are far more skeptical of each other. I mean, it has been twenty years, so of course they are more skeptical. Here in Washington, I am not sure I could advocate too much. I mean, I still think we should engage North Korea, and we should try and trade with them as much as possible, because that is the American way—making money, right? But as for a major, fundamental shift, I do not see how I could advocate that being the sure path. I still think it is ultimately a long-term path, but nobody now thinks we can really move the needle that much, to use Victor’s phrase.

Journal: Let’s shift our focus to Kim Jong-un for a moment. Kim disappeared in September 2014, touching off a storm of international speculation regarding the stability of the North Korean political order. Although the leader reappeared, this event revitalized conversations about what might occur if the Kim regime collapsed. What did this event reveal about how the international community is planning for a potential change in North Korean politics?
Cha: I do not think anybody is really prepared for major regime change. I think the United States and South Korea may have talked about it at sort of a planning level. But, whether governments are actually prepared for some major political discontinuity in North Korea, I do not think anybody is really prepared for that. We do not have much insight into the Chinese and what sort of preparations they have undertaken, but I cannot imagine that they have done a lot. The problem is that governments are not very good at dealing with these sorts of hypotheticals, unless they are head-to-head war scenarios. For example, the U.S. military has for decades trained for a hypothetical in Taiwan Straits and so has the Chinese military. But something like this, where there is—

Kang: It is not clear what is going on.

Cha: Right, where it is not an all-out military conflict, but is sparked by a political event. How do you prepare for an event that could go to either extreme of a broad spectrum? The only way would be communication among the parties, and there is not a lot of talking going on. There are conversations between the United States and South Korea, but there really aren’t conversations between the United States, South Korea, and China, and so I do not think people are prepared at all.

Journal: Dr. Kang, do you agree?

Kang: Sure, but I will make two other points. First, Kim Jong-un’s disappearance shows that North Korea is the gift that keeps on giving, because when anything weird happens we go into a frenzy. So thank you, North Korea. But, more than that, the debate is whether North Korea is stable or not. I tend to come down on the view that North Korea is relatively stable. I mean, Kim has been around for four years now. If the regime was going to be unstable, I tend to think it would have been earlier, rather than by now when Kim has had a chance to fire this guy and realize he trusts that guy. I see the most recent political actions in Pyongyang—such as the recent political purges—as a sign of Kim weeding out the enemies. But, we all debate whether the regime will survive or not. We all hope they would collapse peacefully, but yes, I agree that we are not prepared at all.

Victor and I were working on a new book that discusses planning, in which we do two things, because we do not have a plan—nobody has a real plan. First of all, we tried to change the focus away from the German example for Korea and widen it to a much broader universe. The case of Germany is often used as an example for Korea, but it is not actually a good example. There was no bitter civil war between East and West Germany, and the two have much more similar economies than North and South Korea. So, we looked at a wide range of countries that experienced bitter ethnic or civil war strife and what was done to rebuild afterwards. Essentially, we tried to provide more cases of knitting countries together after they undergo real severe problems. For example, former Yugoslavia and South Africa provide an example for transitional justice and human rights. Aside from human rights and transitional justice, there are issues related to refugees, internal migration flows, reforming the economy and education system.
And that is barely the beginning; in order to really help North Korea adjust afterwards, one would have to address the environment and many other issues that nobody has even begun to really think about managing or resolving.

Cha: Yes, I think we have not continued to debate “Nuclear North Korea” because I think there is a lot more overlap in terms of our viewpoints today than there was in the 1990s.

Kang: Right, there is a lot more agreement compared to fifteen or twenty years ago.

Cha: I think in the 1990s many believed that with a fledgling nuclear program one might be able to negotiate it away from the North Koreans, but now I do not think people feel that way at all. So I think where our discussion on the topic has moved, (as David has said), has been away from North Korea and toward unification. We did the debate on engagement strategies because we felt like there was no place where you could get the so-called “hawk and dove” perspectives on how to deal with North Korea.

We have now moved on to addressing the fact that there is actually not a lot out there on unification, including what unification means and what it would take to accomplish. We did a three-year project together on unification, and this will be our next co-authored book with Columbia University Press. So, as David said, we have moved more in the direction of seeking experts’ best lessons learned on issues like transitional justice, containing health pandemics, and other related problems that are likely to emerge with the collapse of North Korea.

Journal: We look forward to seeing it. Let us now shift our focus to the demographics within the peninsula itself. Do South Korea’s younger and older generations view the North Korea threat differently? Does the younger demographic see a larger role for U.S.-ROK cooperation in managing the North Korea threat, or have you seen a shift over time?

Kang: I will jump in with this one because I think this is portrayed wrong. Essentially, people are asking the wrong question. I am going to try and run a different survey, actually, in Korea. The question others are asking the younger children—individuals currently in their twenties—is “Do you want unification? Do you want to pay ten percent of your salary forever?” Of course they all say no! So, overwhelmingly, the younger you are, then the less you want unification. But that is the wrong question, and it is the wrong question because it will never be asked. In other words, the question will never be, “South Korea, do you want unification?” Instead, the question will be this: “If North Korea collapses, who gets it?” And the answers are a) China; b) Japan; c) Russia; or d) South Korea. I guarantee you that is the real question—and the question we should be asking now. In answer to this question, South Koreans are going to say “…We’ll take it.” It does no good to say, “Do you want unification?” because the bottom line is that South Koreans do not want to let Japan or China take the North. Ultimately—I think fundamentally—South Koreans all think the North is Korea.
Cha: Yes, I think that makes sense.

Journal: Thank you for taking the time to speak with us today. Are there any last thoughts that you would like to add?

Cha: I think it is important to relay that while we are talking about what has happened with regard to North Korea policy since our last debate, we have actually moved on in terms of our research to the subject of unification. There is so little good work done on this in English outside of government circles. Our task is to produce a work that will have scholarly purchase, as well as important practical information for policymakers when it comes to unification. That was what Nuclear North Korea was about. And we hope to do the same with this book.

Kang: Right, we are really trying to move the debate forward so we can help make some positive contributions. In particular, no matter how it happens, unification will be difficult, and both South Korea and the United States have done relatively little planning. We hope that this new project will be able to contribute towards thinking about how to envision a unified Korea, and hopefully how to make it happen.

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