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Cooperation, Conflict and Underlying Distrust:  
U.S. – China Relations and the Korean Peninsula

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Interviewee

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Summary

Is the U.S.–China relationship characterized as one of mutually beneficial cooperation or tempered by discord? Andrew Nathan, Professor of Political Science at Columbia University, argues that while the two sides are cooperative in many aspects, their relationship is punctuated by a deep sense of mistrust between the two powers. However, Dr. Nathan dismisses prospects of power transition by pointing out the closing gap between the U.S. and Chinese capabilities is not as rapid as it was thought to be, and that the security balance remains unlikely to change anytime soon. With respect to the U.S. rebalance strategy, Dr. Nathan views it as a symbolic expression to remind Asia and China in particular of the continued existence of U.S. strategic interests in the region. For countries like North Korea, China may offer an alternative towards modern statehood where the regime can achieve economic development while maintaining control over its people. However, Dr. Nathan points out that it will be difficult for Pyongyang to follow Beijing's footsteps as long as the regime remains unwelcomed by the international community. Dr. Nathan argues that the most pressing challenge for China can be found in the fluid domestic conditions spanning from the Uyghur and Tibetan issues to Hong Kong and Taiwan. According to Dr. Nathan, external connections of minority groups, intellectuals and the civil society make Chinese foreign policy more guarded and defensive against the perceived threat against the regime.

In relation to South Korean allegiances, Dr. Nathan stresses the importance of balancing its economic partnership with China and its military alliance with the U.S. while asserting its position as an influential middle power. He also points to the security threat presented by North Korea as a core reason for robust military ties with the U.S., and argues that maintaining such partnership would be in the best interests of South Korea even after unification. Regarding the U.S. THAAD missile defense, Dr. Nathan believes that the South Korea should evaluate whether such a system will prove effective and add value to its security, and that it should also consider what message it hopes to convey to both the U.S. and China in making its decision.

*“The relationship is intensely two-sided with important areas of cooperation as well as important areas of conflict, and is overlain by a very deep mistrust on both sides. The Chinese see everything that the Americans do as an attempt to protect or even expand American power [...] The Americans generally tend to see everything that the Chinese do as a kind of long term strategy to push back at American interests.”*

## **The Current State of U.S.–China Relations**

- *Areas of cooperation and conflict coexists between U.S. and China amid mutual distrust.*
- *U.S.-China power transition is a premature thought given no foreseeable change in the security balance.*
- The relationship between U.S. and China today is intensely two-sided with important areas of cooperation as well as areas of conflict. It is overlain by a very deep mistrust on both sides where China sees everything that the U.S. do as an attempt to undermine Chinese interests while the U.S. tend to see everything China does as a kind of long term strategy to push back American interests.
- The cooperative side of the U.S.-China relations not only include robust economic ties and student exchange programs, but also the ability to manage areas of potential conflict such as Taiwan and North Korea. They also cooperate in the Iran nuclear talks as well as other global issues, including climate change.
- Potential areas of conflict between the U.S. and China can be found in their differing strategic interests throughout the Asia-Pacific. The Chinese consider the U.S.-led alliance system as a security threat given that it surrounds China. For the U.S., security cooperation with its key allies such as Japan, South Korea, Australia and the Philippines, and partner countries such as Vietnam, Burma, and India are crucial to maintain its influence throughout the region.
- It is too early to discuss the notion of power transition between the U.S. and China since China will not be able to overtake U.S. power in any foreseeable future. Recent trends suggest that the relative decline of U.S. capabilities as well as the increase in Chinese capabilities will be protracted and the security balance between the two countries are unlikely to change anytime soon.
- The objective of the U.S. rebalance is not to change the status quo in Asia, but to send a signal that the U.S. continues to hold vital interests in Asia and retains the capability to protect such interests. In this sense, the rebalance is more of a symbolic expression, and the U.S. has retained and will likely continue to retain a robust military presence in Asia.

## **The Chinese Model of 'Modern State' and International Relations**

- *Sustaining an authoritarian regime on top of a growing middle class seems implausible, but may be what the Chinese leadership envisions.*
- *North Korea cannot succeed with Chinese style reform as long as it is not welcomed by the world.*
- China is an authoritarian system sitting on top of a modern economy and a big middle class. It continues to further institutionalize their system by making it more responsive and accessible to the public while maintaining strong control. The West would view this as a contradiction, but this seems to be the vision for the Chinese leadership.
- China is a country with a lot of complexity in large parts of its territory, and those groups all have foreign policy implications. Intellectuals and the civil society are also connected to the outside world in a way that makes the Chinese leadership feel their domestic political system is under attack. Such perception contributes to China's external policies to be guarded and defensive.

- It will be difficult for North Korea to adopt the Chinese model as long as the regime remains unwelcomed by the international community. Last year, the UN COI report found North Korea's Kim dynasty to be held accountable for crimes against humanity. Such findings will prevent the U.S. to strike any strategic bargain as it once did with the Chinese during the 1970s.

### **U.S.–China Relations and the Korean Peninsula**

- *South Korea needs to balance, not tilt, between U.S. and China.*
- *The deployment of the U.S. THAAD system in South Korea is a decision that South Koreans need to make.*
- As a major middle power, South Korea needs to balance its position between the U.S. and China by managing Chinese influence and ensuring its alliance with the U.S. This stance would likely continue even after unification.
- The question over the U.S. THAAD system requires both technical and political considerations. Technically, South Korea needs to evaluate whether this system will add value to its defense capabilities. Politically, South Korea needs to decide what signals it is sending out to the U.S. and China.
- As China puts more public pressure over South Korea, there is more incentive for Seoul to push back by insisting on its autonomous policy-making position. The South Korean government should be able to tell both U.S. and China that its decision will be based on the principles of national sovereignty.

## **Transcript of the Interview (abridged):**

### **The Current State of U.S.–China Relations**

**Question:** How would you assess today's U.S.–China relations? Do you see more friction or more cooperation?

**Nathan:** U.S.-China relations have many important areas of cooperation. There is a very robust economic relationship, there is a robust relationship of educational exchange, there is a kind of quasi-cooperation over the Taiwan issue in which both sides are managing that issue in a way that hasn't led to overt conflict, there is the American need for help from China in handling the Korea issue, there is the Iran issue, and there is the issue of the environment. So there are many areas where there is cooperation. It doesn't mean that interests are identical, but there is significant cooperation.

At the same time, there are some important conflicts of interests. I would say that the most important and troubling conflicts of interest revolve around the sense on the part of the Chinese that the United States is threatening their security by being too forward deployed in Asia. That is to say that the U.S. has an alliance system with Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Thailand and Australia that surrounds China, while outside the alliance system the United States is pursuing close relations of different kinds, military and political, with other countries such as Vietnam, Burma, and India. The U.S. also has its own forces deployed right in the neighborhood of China, namely our base in Guam, our forces deployed in Korea and Japan, as well as active naval and air operations in the South China Sea and the East China Sea.

I think that the relationship is intensely two-sided with important areas of cooperation as well as important areas of conflict, and is overlain by a very deep mistrust on both sides. The Chinese see everything that the Americans do as an attempt to protect or even expand American power in a way that is not fair, and not in the interests of China. And the Americans generally tend to see everything that the Chinese do as a kind of long term strategy to push back at American interests. The interests of both sides are, I would say, "legitimate" in the sense that they are real interests; China has an authentic security interest in having more influence in its periphery. The United States has an authentic security interest in protecting its existing security position in the region, and so the aspect of mistrust and friction is very real.

**Q:** In regard to power transition theory, what is your take on the notion of peaceful power transition between China and the U.S.?

**Nathan:** I really think it is way premature to speak of anything like a power transition, because I am not one of the people that thinks the power of the United States is really declining. Our economy is coming back, people in Washington fight over the defense budget – which remains extremely large and is probably not going to go down anymore because I think there is a consensus in Washington that the defense budget should not be cut anymore, and parts of it should be restored. The U.S. is gradually pulling out of Iraq and Afghanistan, which frees up money. But even if the U.S. were declining, it wouldn't disappear from the face of the earth. The decline would be quite protracted.

In the meantime, China's GDP is growing, but the rate of growth is slowing down. [...] The Chinese military machine, which is untested in combat since the time that China invaded Vietnam and lost [...] is definitely growing. It's big, but

– I don't want to minimize the risk of a clash with China-I would say that the Japanese navy could defeat the Chinese navy. The Japanese navy is very sophisticated and well trained, and has excellent morale, not to mention the U.S.–Japan alliance. So I think that any power transition is like science fiction. There is definitely a shift because China has a lot of money, so that means that the ratio of American power to Chinese power is not as overwhelming as it once was. But that is not the same thing as a power transition in my opinion.

All U.S. allies in Asia or Europe have to continuously evaluate the reliability of the American commitment to their defense in terms both of objective American power, whether the U.S. has the capability to fulfill its defense commitment, as well as in terms of American political will, which is certainly always questionable. It is therefore appropriate for allies and quasi-allies such as India and Vietnam to assess those factors (capability and will). What I am saying is that in my opinion the U.S. capability is not declining radically, and that the Chinese capability is increasing, but not in a way that will overtake American power in any foreseeable future.

**Q: How would U.S.–China relations evolve in the post-U.S. rebalance period? Are we already in that period?**

**Nathan:** I think you can't say "after the rebalance", because the rebalance was a symbolic statement. What was there before was a robust American presence in the region, and what is there afterwards is a robust American presence in the region. The foreseeable future [...] is not one that will see a dramatic change. China will, we hope, continue to grow because that is a good thing for China and the global economy. And as it grows I would expect the Chinese to continue to pursue their security interests, which will create some incidents in the South China Sea or East China Sea.

But I don't see a war breaking out. I don't see Korea tilting toward China and breaking the U.S. alliance or weakening the U.S. alliance. Of course, that will be decided here in Korea. My prediction would be that the Koreans will continue to place great value on the U.S. alliance, and I think that is true in Japan. There are many moving parts – what will happen in China? That political system is susceptible to change. Will nationalism continue to rise in Japan? Will North Korea remain stable? All of these factors, which are exogenous to the U.S.–China relationship itself, may change the environment and may serve the interests of China or serve those of the United States.

## **The Chinese Model of 'Modern State' and International Relations**

**Q: What is the most distinctive feature of China's rise? Can China offer a different model of economic and socio-political development for other countries such as North Korea?**

**Nathan:** I would say that the Chinese model is an authoritarian system sitting on top of a very modern economy and a big middle class of three-hundred or so million people [...]. This is something we haven't seen before in history. I think where they are heading with that in my mind [...] is that they want to further institutionalize the system, make it more and more responsive and accessible to the public without letting go of the reins of control, without allowing an independent press, without allowing civil society that's independent, and without losing control. In the West, we would say that this is a contradiction and is impossible. But I don't think the Chinese leadership considers that to be impossible, I think that is their vision.

Now could any of this work for North Korea? I'm doubtful that it could. I think North Korea faces a number of different conditions. One of them is that when Deng Xiaoping embarked on this path he was welcomed by the West, and it was something that the United States and the rest of the West wanted. They did not consider Deng Xiaoping to be someone that had committed crimes against humanity. Deng Xiaoping had a very good image - even Mao had a good image, although he had committed many crimes. At the time when Nixon visited China, Mao was very popular and no attention was paid to the human rights crimes that he had committed. But the Kim dynasty has been branded by the UN Commission of Inquiry as having committed crimes against humanity. I think it is very difficult for the West to strike a Nixon-Mao strategic bargain with the Kim dynasty.

**Q: What is China's most important challenge today? How does it affect foreign policy decisions and strategy?**

**Nathan:** Until now I've spoken about the good side of the Chinese model, but I think it has a lot of vulnerabilities to it. Some of those are with the ethnic groups; the Uyghur in Xinjiang and the Tibetans, as well as [...] the semi-autonomous area of Hong Kong and the fact that they don't have control over Taiwan, and even at a lesser scale of threat to them, the Korean residents in the Yanbian border area. China is a country with a lot of domestic complexity in large parts of its territory, and those groups all have foreign policy implications; the Uyghur have a diaspora in Kazakhstan, Turkey, Germany, the United States, and the Tibetans have a diaspora in India and get some support from the Indian government. Taiwan is supported by the United States, Hong Kong is supported by international public opinion, [...] and in the Chosun-jok area of Yanbian there are a lot of South Korean and other foreign people visiting there and engaging in missionary work. So China's internal politics have foreign policy implications.

In Shanghai, Tianjin, Chengdu, Wuhan, and so on, the intellectuals and the civil society are connected to the outside world in a way that makes the Chinese leadership feel that they are under attack from the outside world and that their domestic political system is under attack. So they are very sensitive to the idea of color revolution. They have an idea that I think is rather exaggerated, that the outside world has people that are trying to overthrow them, and who present a threat to their survival as a regime.

## **U.S.–China Relations and the Korean Peninsula**

**Q: How should middle power countries such as South Korea position itself between the U.S. and China? What security implications would it entail?**

**Nathan:** The interests of Korea will never be 100% identical with the interests of China. It doesn't mean the Chinese are bad, but Koreans have their own interests. South Korea has its own trade interests, diplomatic interests, and a different value system from China; There are a lot of Christians in Korea, Koreans respect the Dalai Lama, and there are economic ties with Taiwan. It's natural that the Chinese will want to influence Korea in their direction, and because Korea is a major middle power, you're going to want autonomy. The answer therefore is obviously balance between China and the United States.

But does that balance require an adjustment in the U.S. – ROK defense arrangement? Well, you have the North Korea factor right now so I think it's very difficult to give up the U.S. alliance in the face of the North Korean threat. After unification, that may be a trickier question [...] but my prediction will be that future Korean statesmen will want to retain the alliance with the United States as a way of balancing against Chinese influence, but perhaps it would be possible to diminish/change the deployment of American troops. You might not need the hair trigger troops that you have or the amount of deployed troops that you have.

**Q: Given the currently ongoing issue on whether South Korea ought to acquire U.S. THAAD systems amid China's explicit warning, what would you suggest as the most feasible outcome?**

**Nathan:** I think an issue like this has two tracks. The first is the technical track, that the South Korean defense experts will have to evaluate [...]. Does the THAAD really work? Does it provide a value added for the defense of South Korea from a threat that actually exists? In other words, do you believe that there is a North Korean missile threat? Do you believe that THAAD would be an effective defense? Does it have a value added in defense terms? If it does, that weights on the side of using it, and that may weight quite heavily because you really need that defense. If it doesn't really work or if you don't believe that the North Koreans pose a threat to South Korea, then that consideration is much less important.

There is also a symbolic or political consideration here which has to do with what signal do you send to the United States and what signal do you send to the Chinese. We will have to see how the two sides play it. I noticed that the Chinese side has perhaps overplayed their hand a bit which is something they've been doing lately in their relations with some of the Southeast Asian countries, along the lines of "I'm a big power and you have to do what I say". That creates an incentive for South Korea to send a message back to China saying "you know what, we're a sovereign country and we're actually a pretty big power ourselves". You are essentially calibrating the relationship between Seoul and Beijing as you respond to their rhetoric and to their deportment.

So from a symbolic point of view I think the Chinese may have pushed South Korea to push back, and on the U.S. side so far I think it's been handled a bit more skillfully where the U.S. is saying "you're a sovereign country, we're recommending this but it's up to you". I think it is dangerous for South Korea to send a signal to any great power that "we're afraid of you" and "we don't want to offend you". So South Korea has to continue to insist on its autonomous policy-making position because that is always the struggle for South Korea – to protect its autonomy.

It's very important [...] for the U.S. to handle its relations with its allies in a way that doesn't create a counter-reaction. If any U.S. official fails to consult the South Korean side adequately or fails to show respect for South Korean sovereignty, that would be a big mistake, and we should expect push back. ■

## About the Interviewee

### Andrew J. Nathan

Andrew J. Nathan is Class of 1919 Professor of Political Science at Columbia University, and is engaged in long-term research and writing on Chinese foreign policy and on sources of political legitimacy in Asia. Nathan is chair of the steering committee of the Center for the Study of Human Rights and chair of the Morningside Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Columbia. He has co-authored several books on China including *Peking Politics, 1918-1923*; *Chinese Democracy*; *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, *Human Rights in Contemporary China*, and *Crisis*; *The Great Wall and the Empty Fortress: China's Search for Security*. Nathan's articles have appeared in *World Politics*, *The China Quarterly*, *The Asian Wall Street Journal*, and the *International Herald Tribune*, among others.