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Imposed Strategic Competition: China's Response and Its Position on the North Korean Nuclear Program

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Since the Trump Administration, the US Government has been using strategic competition to define China-US relations. The Chinese Government, however, has refused to accept this definition. As the US proceeds with strategic competition with China, relations between the two countries have gone from bad to worse. This development has broad implications for global security and governance. It has also complicated the Korean nuclear problem much more than previously imagined.

Why does China refuse to accept the term strategic competition as an appropriate term to define China-US relations? What is the US policy of strategic competition in practice? What has been China's response to the US strategic competition? What are the implications of China-US tension for global governance? What is China's position on the North Korea nuclear program against this background? These are the questions this paper is designed to address.

1. Strategic competition: a US-imposed concept and policy

The US unilaterally came up with the concept of strategic competition and China has never accepted it as an appropriate way to define China-US relations. The term strategic competition was first used by George W. Bush Jr. during his presidential campaign. He argued

in a televised interview that President Clinton “made a mistake [in] calling China a strategic partner”. He said that instead China should be viewed as a “strategic competitor” (Lippman 1999, A9). According to Jeffery Bader and Richard Bush III who had been closely followed US China policy at the time, “In the first several months of his presidency, Bush’s national security team signaled a desire to redefine the relationship in more negative terms” (Bader and Bush III 2016, 4). Eventually, however, Bush did not use the term again and relations between the two countries actually improved after the 9.11 terrorist attack against the US (Bader and Bush III 2016, 4).

The US began to use the term again during the Trump Administration in 2017. It reflected both the rapidly growing distrust between the two countries since the latter half of the Obama Administration and the efforts of the offensive realists in the Trump Administration to reject the engagement policy adhered to by the previous administrations since President Nixon. Following the advice of some extreme anti-China advisors, President Trump took an increasingly tough approach toward China, first on trade and then other issues. The Administration’s National Security Strategy published in December 2017 put China as one of the most challenging international threats to the US: “China and Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity. They are determined to make economies less free and less fair, to grow their militaries, and to control information and data to repress their societies and expand their influence” (White House 2017). Commenting on the NSS, President Trump asserted that “This strategy recognizes that, whether we like it or not, we are engaged in a new era of competition.” “We . . . face rival powers, Russia and China, that seek to challenge American influence, values and wealth” (Sevastopulo 2017).

2. Reasons of China's objection to "strategic competition"

China's reaction the Trump Administration's move was prompt and expectedly critical. In a statement released by the Chinese Embassy in Washington, China called on the US Government to abandon the "old thinking". "It is selfish to put your national interest above other countries' interest and the mutual interest of the international community. It will lead the United States to isolationism," the embassy pointed out (CBS/AP December/19/2017). China's objection to the use of strategic competition to define China-US relations has persisted to the present day.

Why does China object to the use of the term strategic competition to define the relationship? To begin with, the understanding of the term competition in English and Chinese is quite different. In English, the term is relatively neutral. It does not mean negative interactions. For example, people compete for excellence such as in sports and in the marketplace. Some in the US have defended using the term in this context.

In Chinese, however, the term competition often carries negative connotations. Competition in Chinese is a combination of two characters: jing (竞) and zheng (争). Jing means compete and zheng means fight over something. Obviously, Jingzheng does not conform to harmony, something Chinese value very much. Having said this, it should be pointed out that the Chinese do compete (jingzheng). However, in contrast to the practice of the west, Chinese are more used to compete under the table rather than in public. They believe competition in public make it impossible to save face and thereby difficult if not impossible for people to coexist and manage their differences. Hence, the ideal situation is he'erbutong (和而不同), that is, harmony with differences. Even when the parties involved have serious differences, they need to give face to each other in public so as to make room for pragmatic management of the conflicts. Once face is lost (撕破脸), disassociation and confrontation that serves nobody's interests will follow. Accordingly, in the Chinese view, it is not helpful to define China-US relations as strategic competition.

Moreover, the Chinese Government objects to using the term competition to define China-US relations also because it does not believe that the term captures the complexity of the relationship. In other words, the relationship between the two countries has many aspects and is very complicated. The two countries share many important interests both at the bilateral level and also at the regional and global levels as well as conflicts and differences. To protect and advance the shared interests, the two countries also need cooperation. Even Secretary Blinken finds it necessary to include both confrontation and cooperation in his attempt to define US China policy. He said in a major policy speech on May 26, 2022, “to the people of China: we’ll compete with confidence; we’ll cooperate wherever we can; we’ll contest where we must.”

Finally, the Chinese Government believes that the US deliberately uses the term to justify its efforts to smear China and undermine China’s development. According to Chinese spokeswoman Mao Ning, China is not afraid of competition. However, China is opposed to use competition to define China-US relations as a whole. China is opposed to the practice of demonizing other countries, limiting the right to development of other countries, and doing so even at the risk of undermining the global supply chain (Beijing Daily February/8/2023).

3. China-US interactions under strategic competition

Despite China’s objection to the term, however, the US proceeded with it both in rhetoric and in practice. At the beginning, China’s response to the US unilateral strategic competition was quite cautious. As Evan Medeiros, former Obama administration National Security Council (NSC) Senior Director for Asia observed in March 2019, “China’s reaction [to President Trump’s overtly hostile China strategy] was far more cautious – and even conciliatory at times – than confrontational. Beijing was primarily focused on limiting downside risk and, to a limited extent, exploring opportunities for upside gains” (Medeiros 2019).

Beijing's initial caution probably had something to do with its belief that it could persuade President Trump to take a more reasonable position on China. After all, in history, when an opposition party candidate came to power, they almost invariably took a harder line on China at the beginning but would return to a more moderate and pragmatic approach a year or two into the term. And Donald Trump is a businessman who believes only in practical interests. If it is about interests, China was confident that it could make necessary concessions to buy peace and stability in its relationship with the US.

China's cautiously optimistic expectation, however, was dashed by Trump's anti-China policy shift. In response to the widespread frustration and anger at his administration's poor response to the pandemic at home, President Trump decided to blame China for American sufferings in the pandemic in order to divert domestic frustration. He publicly branded the COVID-19 virus the "China virus". His administration accused China of politicizing aid to other countries after China dispatched large quantities of much needed medical supplies to countries in need including the US. It even vigorously propagated the story that China created the virus in a Wuhan lab against the prevailing view of the Western intelligence and science communities (The Guardian June/24/2023; Hao et al. 2022). In the meantime, the Administration continued to spread lies and misinformation about China. For example, it claimed that China's Belt and Road Initiative is a debt trap and that China's economic growth has been a result of theft of American technologies and unfair trade practices.

Infuriated by Trump Administration's misinformation and lies, the Chinese government encouraged its diplomats to launch an all-out counter-China bashing campaign. They took every opportunity to fight the accusations — speaking up at press conferences, media interviews, international meetings and in newspaper articles. Some diplomats went out of their way to be tough on the US as well as some other western countries and became known as 'wolf warrior diplomats'. The Chinese official TV station's commentaries specifically named US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Trump's former advisor Steve Bannon as people with evil intent.

By the end of the Trump Administration, the so-called strategic competition between China and the US became a race to the bottom. As a result, relations between the two countries fell sharply, prompting some to claim that the relationship went all the way back to the early 1970s.

When Biden came into office, many hoped that he would reverse some of Trump's policies that even Biden and his people believe are not in the best interests of the US such as tariffs on Chinese imports, closing of the Confucius institutes, and the suspension of China's consulate office in Houston. To the surprise of many, however, the Biden Administration not only bought into the logic of the Trump Administration that engagement policy had failed, but also the argument that China has taken advantage of the US and become a major threat to the US. In its National Security Strategy released on October 27, 2022, the Biden Administration regarded China as "pacing challenge". It asserts that China is the United States' most "consequential strategic competitor for the coming decades" (Aljazeera October/27/2022). This line of thinking has led the Biden Administration to do a number of things that have made the relationship very difficult. Among other things, it called China's efforts to clamp down on terrorist threats in Xinjiang as "genocide". It put more and more Chinese tech companies on the entity list. It pressured China's neighbors to distance themselves from China. It stepped up its support for the pro-independence Taiwan authorities. On top of all this, the Biden Administration tried to rally its allies and other countries in its efforts to contain China.

Against this background, many in China believe that the Biden Administration's China policy is as hostile to China, if not more so, than that of the Trump Administration. Accordingly, they believe that China has to fight back. This appears to be what has happened. China strongly condemned US interference in China's internal affairs. It sanctioned US companies and personnel in retaliation to US sanctions. It refused to endorse US efforts to impose additional sanctions on North Korea after the latter repeatedly tested missiles. It increased efforts to intercept US aircrafts and warships conducting reconnaissance and

military activities close to China's coast. It conducted increasing military exercises in the Taiwan Strait to demonstrate its resolve to defend China's territorial integrity.

The relationship was put on great strains when the then US House speaker Nancy Pelosi decided to visit Taiwan to show her support to the Taiwan authorities. Her visit was the culmination of a string of activities of the US congress on Taiwan. As the speaker of the House, she ranked the second in the presidential line of succession in the US government. Her visit to Taiwan represented another serious change of the US commitment to develop only non-official relations with the Taiwan authorities. Accordingly, Beijing strongly objected to her visit. She went ahead with the visit any way despite China's strong objections. The Chinese Government reacted strongly with large-scale military exercises around Taiwan and cancelation of some military dialogue mechanisms. As a result, the two militaries are operating in China's adjacent areas without effective ways of communication. This increases the chance of accident-led military confrontation between the two countries.

The outbreak of the Russo-Ukraine war further complicated the relationship. Confronted with increasing hostile pressures from the US and the latter's efforts to develop an international united front against China, China felt that it could not afford to lose Russia as a friend. Therefore, although Russia's "special military operations" against Ukraine contradict the principles China have advocated such as respect for territorial integrity and non-use of force to deal with international disputes, China chose not to condemn Russia and decided to take neutral stance between Russia and Ukraine.

The US, however, regarded China's neutrality as tacit endorsement of Russian actions and criticized China for doing so. The US did this despite the fact that in history, the US opted neutrality several times, such as at the beginning of the WWI and the WWII and many other countries including India also opted for neutrality following Russia's military attack against Ukraine. Nevertheless, the US stepped up efforts to put pressures on China. Among other things, it increased its military support to Taiwan with the excuse that China might attack the island just as Russia did against Ukraine. The US Congress passed resolutions and legislations to boost morale in Taiwan.

Confronted with these provocations on China's sovereignty and territorial integrity, many in China concluded that the US is determined to hurt and undermine China no matter what China does. China can only rely on itself to defend its interests, especially on the question of its territorial integrity. Accordingly, China has drastically increased its investment on key technologies that the US has imposed or may impose export restrictions. It has enhanced its relationship with Russia. It has refused to participate in any additional sanctions on North Korea. It has also accelerated efforts to develop more advanced weapons, restructure its military establishment to make it leaner and meaner, and conducted various military exercises to prepare for military takeover of the Taiwan island should its authorities move to de jure independence and thwart military intervention by outside forces.

Some in China are also questioning whether China should stick to its traditional nuclear policy. They argue that, given the fact that the US threat is imminent, maybe it is time for China change its traditional nuclear strategy such as minimum deterrence, no first use, and even nonproliferation. The logic goes like this, if the US does not let us live, then why should China make life of the US comfortable? In the light of this, it may not be a surprise that a recent Pentagon report says that China may increase its nuclear arsenal to 1500 warheads by 2035 (Liebermann 2022).

The US "strategic competition", therefore, has led to rising tension with China with increasing risk of military conflicts.

4. Strategic containment: the nature of the US strategic competition

As discussed in the previous passages, the strategic competition the US has practiced since the Trump Administration does not even mean what it means in English, that is, compete to excel. Instead, it has been a strategy to isolate and contain China. During the Trump Administration, strategic competition was malign in that Trump as he and his people tried

their best to make sure that China would not accomplish anything regardless the cost and ethical considerations.

When Biden first came into office, Secretary of State Blinken's statement on the Administration's policy toward China appeared to be more sophisticated: "Our relationship with China will be competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, adversarial when it must be" (Kelly 2021). However, for various reasons and for the better part of the past two years, the Administration largely focused on confrontation and did little on cooperation. Strategic competition, therefore, has ended up more like strategic containment.

Containment, according to dictionary, means the policy, process, or result of preventing the expansion of a hostile power or ideology (Merriam-Webster n.d.). In retrospect, what the Biden Administration has been doing toward China is just that: portray China as an ideological foe, maintain high tariffs on imports from China, tighten restrictions on high-tech exports to China, expand the entity list of Chinese companies, put pressures on Chinese neighbors to take sides, and stepped up its support to Taiwan through selling more and more weapons to the island and upgrading its official relations with it.

5. Global implications

The deterioration and increasing tension between China and the US have global implications.

Technological and economic decoupling. High-tech decoupling is already well under way. The US does not only restrict its own high-tech companies from doing business with China, but also use its long-arm jurisdiction to make sure that other countries including South Korea not to sell some high-tech products especially high-end computer chips to China. The Biden Administration claims that its high-tech restrictions to China are designed to establish a "small yard with high fences", meaning that the US only denies China the most advanced

technologies to China. In reality, the yard is expanding, and more and more technologies are on the restriction list and more and more Chinese companies are put on the entity list.

In response, China has stepped up its efforts to develop indigenous technologies to cope with the challenge and work with some other countries including Russia to develop alternative technologies. Trade decoupling is also underway, although to a much lesser extent. The multinational corporations do not want to lose the China market. However, to cope with the uncertainties generated by China-US tension, they are also trying to diversify their supplies.

Arms control. Reacting to their respective perceived threat, both China and the US are spending more on defense. China is spending more and more on building up its military capabilities including nuclear capabilities to deter Taiwan from seeking independence and the US from intervening in a possible Taiwan strait crisis. Despite the unprecedented government deficit, the US has also increased its defense spending and put pressures on its allies to do so. The same is true for some other countries. Japan's defense budget for 2023 represents a 26.3% increase from the year before (Xinmin Wanbao December/22/2022). Largely because of the Taiwan problem, for the first time in recent history, China and the US are engaged in an arms race and are running an increasing risk of fighting a war because of a military conflict in the Taiwan Strait.

The international order under threat. As China-US tension increases, countries with various aggrievances have found an opportunity to address them. For instance, North Korea has repeatedly tested missiles, both short range and long-range, betting that it can get away with it because China had no intention to join the US on the imposition of additional sanctions against it. Russia decided to launch the war against Ukraine probably also in part because it was convinced that, given China-US tension, China would at least remain neutral if not taking its side.

Associated with this, the **international nonproliferation regime** is under stress. Tension with China has led to the US decision to sell nuclear powered submarine to Australia in violation of international nonproliferation norms. Increasing number of people in

countries such as Japan and South Korea are demanding to have their own nuclear weapons. American policy people are thinking actively about the possibility of deploying tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea. If that happens, it may have to do the same in Japan.

Global governance under challenge. Frustrated that the World Trade Organization facilitates China's economic growth, the US under Trump undermined the WTO by blocking appointment of new judges to its Appellate Court. For domestic political reasons, the Biden Administration has not done much about it. As a result, the world's only global trade regime is paralyzed. The former Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan led to China's suspension of climate talks with the US, complicating international cooperation to deal with climate change. The heightened tension between China and the US has also hampered many other aspects of international cooperation on global challenges ranging from cyber security to peaceful use of space.

6. Implications for the Korean Peninsula

The rising China-US tension has also made international cooperation on denuclearization of the Korean peninsula more difficult. The Trump Administration was arrogant enough to attempt to resolve the Korean nuclear issue unilaterally through threats and inducement. After military threats and peace overtures, however, it failed disastrously. Following Biden's ascent to power, the Biden Administration attempted to deal with the question together with Japan and South Korea. That has not worked either. Seeing that China and the US cannot work together, North Korea pushed ahead with its missile programs with frequent tests.

Frustrated with the perceived nuclear threat from North Korea and concerned about the US commitment to South Korea's defense, public sentiments in South Korea are tilting toward owning their own nuclear weapons. A recent poll in South Korea shows that over 71% of South Koreans support South Korea to develop its own nuclear weapons and 56% support US deployment of nuclear weapons in South Korea (Pengbai News February/2/2022).

Confronted with this situation, Washington is seriously considering the possibilities. Some extreme hardliners like John Bolden are publicly urging the US Government to deploy tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea.

Such a development in South Korea and the US is likely to cause increasing anxiety and concern in China. Instead of making China more cooperative to thwart North Korea's nuclear ambitions, it is more likely to push China to change its nuclear strategy as discussed in previous passages: abandonment of long-held policies such as no first use, minimum deterrence, and support for nonproliferation of nuclear weapons. After all, the US appears to be determined to intervene militarily in the Taiwan Strait. It is selling nuclear submarines to Australia. If it deploys nuclear weapons in South Korea, that would be another point where China's nuclear strategy is likely to change.

7. Any chance to prevent all this from happening?

Yes, after all, it is people who make history, not history makes people. It is never too late for the US to change its containment policy against China. After all, China and the US are stakeholders in the existing international order. They share interests in peace, stability, and prosperity. They share stake in a rule-based order. And they share aspirations to deal with the various global challenges such as climate change, poverty, cyber security, safety of international sea lanes, and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. They do have differences and conflicts. However, they should not prevent the two countries from finding ways to coexist and work together to defend their shared interests and aspirations.

The US is a superpower and China is becoming one. As superpower, either the US or China can take a free ride of the international system. They have to defend it to defend their respective interests. And given the cost of defending the international system, they need to work with others to share the cost to avoid decline. Under the circumstances, the best strategy for the two countries is to seek ways to manage their conflicts and leverage each other's

resources to defend the international system and deal with various global challenges, rather than squandering their valuable resources at confrontation with each other.

For that to happen, the US needs to show minimum respect for China's territorial integrity and sovereignty over Taiwan. This is the core of the core interests of China. The US needs to reassure China that it is not supporting Taiwan independence not just in rhetoric but also in practice. If the Taiwan problem can be neutralized, China and the US are more likely to find ways to manage their differences and conflicts.

As for other countries including South Korea, China-US confrontation brings only disaster. Their best strategy is to resist taking side between China and the US. At the same time, they should leverage their resources to encourage China and the US to reengage with each other and find a way for peaceful coexistence.

8. Glimpse of hope?

More recently, one sees a flurry of visits by senior American officials to China, such as Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, US Treasury Secretary Jane Yellen and John Kerry, Biden's special envoy on climate change. In addition, there are also meetings between senior Chinese officials with their American counterparts in Washington and other countries. These meetings reflect the interest and efforts on the part of both countries to renew communication and stabilize their relationship. How should one interpret this development? Will it lead to stabilization and even improvement of the relationship?

The two countries decided to reach out to each other not only because they have many shared interests and stakes, but also because their respective domestic politics opens windows for more pragmatic management of the relationship. On the US side, the mid-term election last November led to the Republican control of the House. It means that Biden can no longer get much done through the congress. It also made it easier for Biden to adjust its China policy. Previously, Biden's policy priorities, the tiny lead of the democrats had in

Congress, and the congressional consensus on tough-is-right on China combined made it politically impossible for Biden to show any sign of softness on China if he wants to his bills passed in congress. Now, he cannot pass major bills in congress anyway and he does not need to worry much about losing votes in congress as before. Consequently, now he can afford to take a more pragmatic approach on China. And there are so many things the two countries should discuss if they are to defend their respective interests. Among other things they need to talk to make sure that they do not get into a war over Taiwan. Therefore, one finds Biden and his team reaching out to China despite strong domestic opposition.

On the Chinese side, a window of change also emerged. The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) 20th party congress was held last October, and the party has a new team of leadership. It is time for the new leaders to deliver. One of the pressing challenges is economy. In part because of the covid-restrictions, the downward pressure on the economy is strong and the future prospect for growth is dim. Under the circumstances, the new leadership needs to come up with some strong measures to boost the economy at home. Overseas, it needs to create a peaceful international environment for China's economic development. Given the US capabilities and influence, for that to happen, China needs to stabilize relationship with the US. This explains why China has become more willing to entertain their American counterparts.

As a result, both countries now have an opportunity to reach out to each other and stabilize the relationship.

However, despite their efforts, the chance for the relationship to stabilize remains small, let alone improve. To begin with, the distrust accumulated in recent years is so much that makes it difficult for the two countries to overcome. Both sides are second guessing what the other side wants to do, mostly from a negative perspective. Neither side wants to be taken advantage in dealing with each other. This complicates effective communication and understanding.

In the second place, some institutional obstacles are making it difficult for the two countries to reach out to each other. Sanctions are imposed on individuals who have important positions. Once imposed, these sanctions are difficult to remove. This makes

meetings between these individuals and their counterparts difficult if not impossible. For example, this is the alleged reason that the proposed meeting between China's Defense Minister Li Shangfu and the US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin in Shangri'La dialogue earlier this year did not happen. Once imposed, tariffs too are difficult to remove. On top of this, the legislations on Taiwan passed in Congress that China strongly object to are even more difficult to change even if the administration wants to.

In the third place, despite the aspects of positive development in domestic politics for China-US relations, other aspects of domestic politics still make it difficult for pragmatic management of the relationship. In Washington, to be tough on China is politically correct. Any pragmatic step taken by the Biden Administration is bound to attract accusations of being so soft on China or even colluding with China at the US expense. The much-watched balloon incident earlier this year is a good example. Under domestic pressures, the Biden Administration found it necessary to suspend the carefully planned Secretary of State Blinken's visit to China. In China, to be tough on the US is also applauded. People who advocate pragmatism are often attacked for selling out on China. Under the circumstances, the two governments have to be very cautious in their efforts to stabilize the relationship.

Finally, whatever windows open to pragmatic management of the relationship are likely to be short. The election of leaders of the Taiwan authorities will take place early next January. The primary election of the US presidential race is also going to kick off next January. If the election in Taiwan may acerbate tensions in the Taiwan Strait and China-US relations, the primary election in the US will start a new period in which candidates of both political parties have to vie for toughness on China. Given the limited amount of time China and the US have to stabilize the relationship, there is a limit as to how much they can accomplish within such a short period of time. ■

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