



## **Korea and the Return of China's Tributary States**

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### **Executive Summary**

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\* China has resolved to consolidate a regional system in North East Asia based on the economic integration of the two Koreas and possibly Japan into the eastern reaches of the New Silk Road, as well as a new security system based on the Chinese partnership, if not alliance, with Russia. Both Koreas have already delved into this new regional order and the huge macro-economic benefits from the integrated transportation arteries therein.

\* As is the case with other facets of the Chinese ascent to becoming the global Hegemon, and the quintessence of the new Thirty Years War that will make it possible, China is reviving and adapting heritage-based modalities in order to attain future objectives - the system of tributary states. North Korea is the clearest case of China's evolving tributary-style relations.

\* Regarding Korea, Xi Jinping's new policy is "a two-track strategy" the objective of which is to separate the DPRK-RoK negotiations for creating a regime of peace on the Korean Peninsula from the US-DPRK negotiations about denuclearization.

### **About ISPSW**

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## Analysis

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*Today the competition depends on having the greatest power. ... He who has great power will be paid tribute by others, he who has less power will pay tribute to others; therefore, the wise ruler cultivates power.*

- Han Fei (280-233 BC)

China has resolved to consolidate a regional system in North East Asia based on the economic integration of the two Koreas and possibly Japan into the eastern reaches of the New Silk Road, as well as a new security system based on the Chinese partnership, if not alliance, with Russia. Both Koreas have already delved into this new regional order and the huge macro-economic benefits from the integrated transportation arteries therein. A major objective of Beijing is to rely on the new regional posture in order to enhance China's global ascent while banishing the US.

As is the case with other facets of the Chinese ascent to becoming the global Hegemon, and the quintessence of the new Thirty Years War (2018-2049) that will make it possible, China is reviving and adapting heritage-based modalities in order to attain future objectives.

Beijing increasingly emphasizes the growing importance of adjacent areas, and especially the Korean Peninsula, to China's global strategic posture. There is urgent imperative to project and consolidate long-term influence over these regions, as well as challenge the US presence and encroachment as need be. A 7 January Editorial in the *Global Times* stressed the recent evolution in the Chinese policy toward the adjacent areas. "China's periphery is gradually being stabilized. Beijing has developed more stable and sophisticated measures to handle relations with its neighboring countries. It will be increasingly difficult for the US to find any Asian country that would stand by Washington to fight against Beijing. Playing the game alone means more risk for the US. China has been keeping a low profile facing China-US disputes, but it shouldn't be taken for granted that Beijing is incapable of counterstriking fiercely."

Indeed, the evolving Chinese policy vis-a-vis North Korea, as well as the tightening relations between South and North Korea and the involvement of both Russia and, ultimately, Japan - all point to the restoration of the traditional order of things and the heritage-based ways of doing things. "The uniting powers of Northeast Asia may be a counterweight to the might of the United States of America," observed Anthony Rowley in the 6 January issue of the *South China Morning Post*. "Northeast Asia has long been denied its economic potential by being in a state of diplomatic deep freeze." He anticipated that "new alliances among Northeast Asian powers will begin to take shape in 2019. This trilateral alliance will comprise Japan and China, plus South and North Korea. Their growing closeness will make it impossible for giant neighbours to ignore their joint potential. The embryonic Northeast Asian economic bloc will inevitably draw other Asian nations into its orbit." The initial rapprochement on the Korean Peninsula already points in this direction. "Seoul and Pyongyang have taken tentative steps to link their rail systems to form a trans-peninsula network between the two Koreas with China and the Eurasian continent."

The 11 January Editorial in the *China Daily* articulated Beijing's expectations for the Korean Peninsula. Ultimately, the Korean Peninsula "should break out of vicious cycle of talks and tensions" engendered by the



US. On the other hand, the ongoing improvement of inter-Korean relations, as supported by China, gives great hope for the future. "Stability on the Peninsula has made all parties full of expectations for future peace and no one is willing to go back to the tensions of the past. This is an important factor in judging the current situation on the Peninsula. The year 2019 is crucial for the Peninsula's stability and peace. ... All parties need to consolidate the achievements and move forward to secure new breakthroughs."

Although there are positive developments, Beijing is apprehensive about the possibility of reversal or stalling of the current trend. "The détente on the Peninsula hasn't come easily and should be cherished by all sides. They should make joint efforts to promote peace on the Peninsula." The key to success lies with the states of Northeast Asia who "should give primacy to the interests of the people on the Peninsula and in the surrounding areas. ... If all parties can help move the situation in a positive direction, the Peninsula is very likely to rid itself of the past cycle and usher in a new era of stability." This means, according to the PRC, the banishment of the US as the force sustaining the enmity and war lingering since the end of the Korean War.

Beijing has great confidence in Pyongyang's commitment to the new China-dominated regional order. "North Korea pledged to find new ways of socialist economic development in 2019. Since the Workers' Party of Korea declared the new strategic line last year, the country has made many achievements. This year Pyongyang would still concentrate all efforts on development. It needs to create a favorable external environment for domestic economic development. In this context, China-North Korea cooperation is of particular importance. China is one of North Korea's important trading partners. China's economic development has benefitted other neighboring countries. North Korea should be no exception. And North Korea's development is also conducive to the Chinese economy. It will help increase the economic vitality of Northeast China. Mutual exchanges and cooperation in economic development between China and North Korea will provide a guarantee for continuing stability on the Peninsula."

Beijing is convinced that Seoul agrees with the imperative to focus on inter-Korean relations. Indeed, argues Pan Mengqi in the 8 January issue of the *China Daily*, the Korean Peninsula already advances toward peace because this is in the best vested interest of the local states. "Ultimately, the ROK wants to see a high-speed rail line linking Seoul and Pyongyang, the DPRK capital, and extending north to Sinuiju, an important trade hub on the Chinese border." Such a development "is possible after a year in which relations on the Korean Peninsula changed dramatically." However, the crucial role of China cannot be ignored. "While detente spread rapidly across the Demilitarized Zone and the Pacific Ocean," Pan Mengqi stresses, China's guidance and influence are "widely believed to have played an indispensable role in laying the groundwork for regional peace."

The primary source of Beijing's apprehension, Pan Mengqi explained, is Washington's reaction to these regional developments. "While Pyongyang and Seoul have been striving to form a closer relationship, DPRK-US relations have witnessed on-again, off-again twists since the Sentosa summit, casting a shadow on the prospects for peace on the peninsula this year." The main reason is not the dynamics on the Korean Peninsula. The Sino-US disagreements are so profound and systemic, explained Professor Su Hao of the China Foreign Affairs University in Beijing in a 5 January interview with the Seoul newspaper *Hankyoreh*, that they dominate every aspect of the bilateral relations. Hence, "Beijing is worried that the US will look up the Korean Peninsula as a platform for a strategy of curbing China." Even though the US and the PRC have common interests in Korea - the overall Sino-US enmity will dominate Washington's policy. "The US views China as leverage over North Korea, while China shares the US' goals in terms of North Korea's denuclearization. But China has also



expressed fears that US' unilateral approach presents a stumbling block and that Washington is approaching its Korean Peninsula policy within a framework of reining in China's influence." Professor Su Hao worries about the potential impact of the US policy. "A rare current of peace has emerged on the [Korean] peninsula, but the progress in inter-Korean relations could end up halted up if things proceed according to the US' aims of maintaining strategic and military influence in Northeast Asia."

Seoul is cognizant of Beijing's approach. Writing in the 9 January issue of the *Hankyoreh*, Park Min-Hee observed that "Xi [Jinping] appears poised to reassert influence on Korean Peninsula affairs... To begin with, his aim may have been to confirm Beijing's influence on the Korean Peninsula ahead of the North Korea-US summit. China has worked to consolidate its influence by creating a 'rule' whereby North Korea only proceeds with major decisions - including those concerning summits with the US - after first receiving Beijing's confirmation." Seoul accepts that these arrangements cannot be ignored or bypassed. "China has been reaffirming its influence on the Korean Peninsula while dismissing the possibility of China being 'bypassed,' as they're concerned that the US might bring North Korea on board while curbing China at the North Korea-US summit," Kim Heung-Kyu, the Director of the Ajou University China Policy Institute, explained.

Around the turn of 2019, Beijing formulated a Korean policy aimed to both further the regional interests of the PRC while minimizing the adverse effects of the US policy. The crux of the Chinese policy is to separate between the inter-Korean normalization in and around the Korean Peninsula where China will dominate, and the denuclearization of North Korea that the US would continue to focus on with China retaining a major role. Regarding the denuclearization issue, Beijing embraced the long-held position of Pyongyang conditioning progress on the gradual lifting of US and international sanctions. Chinese senior officials defined Xi Jinping's new policy as "a two-track strategy" the objective of which is "separating the negotiations for creating a regime of peace on the Korean Peninsula from the US-North Korean negotiations about denuclearization and normalization of relations."

Pan Mengqi elaborated on the new policy in his 8 January *China Daily* article. "Aiming to foster a peaceful environment on the peninsula, China put forward a series of solutions including a 'dual-track approach' and a 'suspension-for-suspension' proposal. The dual-track approach aims to promote parallel progress in denuclearization of the peninsula and the establishment of a mechanism for peace in a synchronized and reciprocal manner, ultimately achieving both goals together. The latter proposal, which calls for the suspension of nuclear and missile activities by the DPRK and the suspension of large-scale military exercises by the US and ROK, seeks to bring the two Koreas back to the negotiating table."

For the Chinese policy to work, it is imperative for Xi Jinping's Beijing to dominate the entire process. As well, Kim Jong-Un's Pyongyang must be committed to realizing the Chinese policy. This requires close coordination between the PRC and the DPRK. Although Xi Jinping hailed "the joint efforts of China, the DPRK and relevant parties" in furthering the peaceful resolution of the crisis on the Korean Peninsula - he left no doubt as to the prominence of the PRC. To attain this, explained An Baijie and Mo Jingxi in an 11 January article in the *China Daily*, Beijing established a regime of "frequent consultations" with Pyongyang in which the latter has been appraised of the former's positions and guidelines. Kim Jong-Un's frequent summits with Xi Jinping are an integral part of this arrangement.

The 9 January Editorial of the *China Daily* asserted the point. "Considering the traditional closeness between [the PRC and the DPRK], there is nothing unusual if the two parties compare notes and coordinate positions on matters of common concern." Ruan Zongze, the Vice-President of the China Institute of International Studies,



concurred that “the frequent China-DPRK high-level exchanges are of great importance to bilateral ties as well as regional stability.” Ruan Zongze is optimistic regarding “the development of the Korean Peninsula situation given that the second Kim-Trump meeting is being prepared, and both the DPRK and the ROK have lots of motives to improve relations.”

Ultimately, Chinese senior officials emphasize, Kim Jong-Un is cognizant that there is no substitute to the Chinese patronage. “What Pyongyang lacks most is confidence in its national security,” they stress, “and only Beijing can provide the credible anti-US defense umbrella that Pyongyang really trusts.”

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The first indications of the dual-track approach were introduced in Kim Jong-Un’s New Year’s Address. The framework of negotiations with the US is not the sole path to the future of the Korean Peninsula and the region, he explained. He alluded to the possibility of separating between the US venue that is far from being irreversible and the irreversible reconciliation on the Korean Peninsula.

Throughout his speech, Kim Jong-Un stressed the crucial importance of the new era of relations between the North and the South and reiterated that the historic opportunity for rapprochement must not be permitted to collapse. First, the two Koreas should complete the new era of peacemaking. “North and south, as they agreed, should take practical measures proactively to remove military hostility on the whole of the Korean peninsula, including the ground, airspace and sea, as a follow-up to its ending in the areas of confrontation.”

Concurrently, Kim Jong-Un emphasized in great length, the two Koreas must quickly seize the historic opportunity to jointly and markedly enhance all social and economic venues of cooperation irrespective of the international sanctions and pressure. “When north and south join hands firmly and rely on the united strength of the fellow countrymen, no external sanctions and pressure, challenges and trials will be able to hinder us in our efforts to open a broad avenue to national prosperity. We will never tolerate the interference and intervention of outside forces who stand in the way of national reconciliation, unity and reunification with the design to subordinate inter-Korean relations to their tastes and interests. North and south should not pass up the favourable atmosphere of today when all the nationals’ interest in and aspiration for reunification are growing unprecedentedly, but actively try to find a peaceful reunification plan based on nationwide agreement and direct sincere efforts to this end. All the fellow countrymen in north, south and abroad should further accelerate in high spirits the nationwide advance for implementing the north-south declarations, and thus glorify this year as a historic one when another radical change is brought about in the development of inter-Korean relations and implementation of the cause of national reunification.”

Kim Jong-Un then highlighted the imperative to decouple the inter-Korean progress from the progress in the negotiations with the United States. He warned that “if the United States does not keep the promise it made in the eyes of the world, and out of miscalculation of our people’s patience, it attempts to unilaterally enforce something upon us and persists in imposing sanctions and pressure against our Republic, we may be compelled to find a new way for defending the sovereignty of the country and the supreme interests of the state and for achieving peace and stability of the Korean peninsula.”

Official Seoul got the message, and internalized the Chinese interest in Kim Jong-Un’s approach. Writing for the 3 January issue of the *South China Morning Post*, Dr. Lee Seong-Hyon, the Director of the Center for Chinese Studies at the Sejong Institute in Seoul, explained that Beijing focused on Kim Jong-Un’s assertion that he “needs to produce economic results and sees diplomacy as a way of getting them, with or without US



cooperation." In Seoul, the main newspapers also emphasized the focus on inter-Korean rapprochement. "Kim Jong-Un alludes to expanding inter-Korean exchange and cooperation in New Year's address," noted Noh Ji-Won in one of the first analyses of the Address published in the 2 January issue of the *Hankyoreh*. Ultimately, Seoul noted other areas of common interest with both Pyongyang and Beijing, but not necessarily Washington. For example, writing in the 14 January issue of *Hankyoreh*, Kim Ji-Eun emphasized Kim Jong-Un's "declaration in his New Year's address that he would also actively 'promote multiparty negotiations for replacing the current ceasefire on the Korean Peninsula with a peace mechanism' with 'the signatories of the armistice agreement.' China was one of the countries that signed the armistice agreement on July 27, 1953."

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On 7 January, Kim Jong-Un led a large delegation of senior officials for a summit in Beijing. Both Xinhua and KCNA reported that Kim Jong-Un arrived "at the invitation of Xi Jinping". The key discussions took place on 8-9 January. The summit would prove crucial to the further refinement of the Chinese East Asia policy and the role of North Korea therein. The most important aspect of the Beijing Summit was the clear demonstration of the evolving relationship between the PRC and the DPRK, and, more important, Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-Un.

January 8 is the birthday of Kim Jong-Un. Hence, he had to celebrate his birthday in Beijing rather than in the Korean tradition of a family gathering. It is very significant that Kim Jong-Un accepted the summit dates set by Xi Jinping unconditionally. Official Beijing understood the significance of Pyongyang's consent. On the night of 8 January, Xi Jinping and his wife Peng Liyuan organized a lavish banquet for Kim Jong-Un and his wife Ri Sol-Ju in order to celebrate his birthday. Only a few Chinese and North Korean senior officials attended the banquet in order to give the impression of a personal event.

Both Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-Un toasted each other and their countries during the Banquet. Intriguingly, Kim Jong-Un used the intimate and closed setting in order to demonstrate his knowledge and understanding of Xi Jinping's real objectives. On 10 January, the *Rodong Sinmun* published a lengthy official summing up of Kim Jong-Un's visit to Beijing. This is the only description - in either Chinese or North Korean media - of what happened in the Banquet. In his main toast to Xi Jinping, Kim Jong-Un "sincerely wished the fraternal Chinese people endless success in the long journey for attaining the 'Two Century Goals' and realizing the dream of China, i.e. great prosperity of the Chinese nation, united close around the CPC with Xi Jinping as the core this year marking the 70th anniversary of the birth of new China." The "Two Century Goals" is a rarely used term of the Communist Party of China (CPC) that denotes both the irreversible eradication of the legacy of the Century of Humiliation (1839-1949) and the attainment of the sacred goals of the Hundred Years Marathon (1949-2049). Realizing "the Dream of China" is Xi Jinping's euphemism for the ascent of China to becoming a global Hegemon. It is therefore, highly significant, that not only was Kim Jong-Un cognizant of these Chinese terms and objectives, but that he raised them in his main toast.

The coverage of the summit in the Chinese media included glimpses of Kim Jong-Un's reverence of Xi Jinping as an elder senior and a wise guide. Wan-Jun Yun noted in the 11 January issue of the Seoul *Dong-A Ilbo* that on several occasions Kim Jong-Un thanked Xi Jinping profusely for finding time for the summit despite his busy schedule. Chinese media reported that Kim Jong-Un told Xi Jinping that the main outcome of the summit would be the elevating of bilateral relations to a new and higher level. This, Kim Jong-Un attributed to the "guan hui" of Xi Jinping. "Guan hui" is the honorific term used to denote the care and considerations a senior person takes toward his juniors.



Similarly, Wan-Jun Yun wrote, Chinese TV showed footage of “Kim Jong-Un nodding and taking notes as Chinese President Xi Jinping was speaking as if to associate the scenes with a student taking note of what his teacher is saying.” Chinese coverage of the meetings between Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-Un also conveyed a sense of Kim “reporting his plans for the expected summit with US President Donald Trump and taking instruction from the Chinese leader.” Xinhua reported that Xi Jinping informed Kim Jong-Un that he - Xi - was willing to work with him in order to “make sound efforts to guide the future development of the China-DPRK relationship”.

All of these images accurately reflected the transformation of the bilateral relationship as led by Kim Jong-Un. The DPRK is moving deeper into the PRC's orbit of influence. Kim Jong-Un “is bringing it even closer,” observed Xuan Loc Doan in the 13 January issue of the *Asia Times*. “Xinhua's accounts of Kim's China trips,” he elaborated, “gave the impression that Kim's North Korea is simply a tributary state that is paying homage to the Middle Kingdom.” And this is exactly how Xi Jinping's Forbidden City defines the evolving bilateral relationship not only with North Korea but also with South Korea and, ultimately, Japan.

Indeed, the Chinese and North Korean coverage and analysis of the summit stresses the marked improvement of bilateral relations and the ensuing changing of the regional posture. “The two leaders communicated deeply and candidly on jointly studying and steering the Korean Peninsula's political situations and denuclearization process,” explained the KCNA. Xinhua reported that Xi Jinping observed that Beijing and Pyongyang had “displayed the resolute determination to jointly advance the political settlement of the Korean Peninsula issue.” Xi Jinping added, according to another Xinhua bulletin, that China “wants to play an active and constructive role in realizing the peace and stability of the peninsula, its denuclearization and the long-term stability of the region.” According to the KCNA, Kim Jong-Un readily acknowledged the unique role of China in the Korean Peninsula. “The Korean peninsula situation has been easing since last year, and China's important role in this process is obvious to all,” Kim Jong-Un said, and “the DPRK side highly and sincerely appreciates the Chinese efforts.” Both the KCNA and Xinhua reported that Xi Jinping accepted Kim Jong-Un's invitation to visit the DPRK sometime in 2019.

Taken together, Kim Ji-Eun wrote in the *Hankyoreh*, the Chinese and North Korean coverage of the summit indicates that Kim Jong-Un and Xi Jinping decided on a comprehensive, Chinese-dominated approach to resolving the crisis on the Korean Peninsula and East Asia as a whole. “During their fourth summit, North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un and Chinese President Xi Jinping appear to have adopted a two-track strategy of separating the negotiations for creating a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula from the North Korea-US negotiations about denuclearization and normalizing relations,” Kim Ji-Eun concluded. Thus, the Chinese and North Korean coverage of the summit and its outcome clearly attests to the high priority given to regional dynamics.

Indeed, the Chinese official statement about the summit, issued by Xinhua on 10 January, emphasized the bilateral and regional issues. “In a cordial and friendly atmosphere, the two leaders had an in-depth exchange of views on China-DPRK relations and issues of common concern, and reached important consensus. The two sides agreed to make joint efforts to push for continuous new development of China-DPRK relations in the new era, constantly advance the political settlement process of the Korean Peninsula issue, bring more benefits to people of the two countries, and make positive contribution to peace, stability, prosperity and development of the region and the world.”



Similarly, the North Korean official summing up of the summit, as published by the *Rodong Sinmun* on 10 January, emphasized the bilateral and regional issues addressed in Beijing. “Kim Jong-Un said that his visit would also offer an occasion in strikingly demonstrating to the world the invariability and invincibility of the DPRK-China friendship.” The *Rodong Sinmun* further stressed the unique post-summit role of Beijing and Pyongyang in shaping the regional posture. “Both sides had in-depth exchanges of views on international and regional matters of mutual concern. Both sides highly appreciated that the top leaders of the two countries brought about and promoted beneficial development of the situation on the Korean peninsula through close communications, open-hearted exchanges of views and tuning, thereby defending mutual interests. They unanimously agreed on continuously preserving the stand for final and peaceful settlement of the nuclear issue on the Korean peninsula to meet the interests of the international community and all sides around the peninsula by properly managing the situation on the peninsula that has entered an important and vital time.”

The Forbidden City considers the primary outcome of the summit to be the charting of a new path for the Korean Peninsula and East Asia - a policy dominated by the PRC. Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-Un, An Baijie and Mo Jingxi wrote on 11 January in the *China Daily*, “reached important consensus” during the summit. “Analysts said that the DPRK leader’s frequent visits to China showed that the bilateral ties, based on the common interests of both countries, are being enhanced continuously. The two sides agreed to make joint efforts to push for development of China-DPRK relations in the new era, advance the political settlement process of the Korean Peninsula issue, bring more benefits to people of both sides and contribute to the peace, stability, prosperity and development of the region and the world.”

An Baijie and Mo Jingxi described the exchange between Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-Il where the unique role and influence of China were highlighted. “Kim said the Korean Peninsula situation has been easing since last year, and China’s important role in the process is obvious to all.” Special attention was paid to Pyongyang’s resolve to shift the national attention to economic development now that the threat of war with South Korea receded. “Xi said China firmly supports the DPRK in implementing the country’s new strategic line and focusing on developing its economy and improving its people’s well-being. Kim said the DPRK considers China’s development experience most valuable and hopes for more trips to China for study and exchanges.”

Also on 11 January, an Editorial in the *Global Times* stressed the impact the summit would have on future developments. “The close high-level contacts between the two countries mean that China-North Korea relations are not only moving along the original path, but have begun to upgrade.” Beijing is expecting major developments. “The year 2019 is crucial for the Peninsula’s stability and peace. Kim’s latest visit to China has created a favorable atmosphere and conditions for continued improvement of the situation on the Peninsula. All parties need to consolidate the achievements and move forward to secure new breakthroughs.”

The Editorial emphasizes that the focus should be on improving the overall situation on the Korean Peninsula - that is, the rapprochement between the North and the South. “The détente on the Peninsula hasn’t come easily and should be cherished by all sides. They should make joint efforts to promote peace on the Peninsula.” Beijing continues to endorse Pyongyang’s position that denuclearization should be reciprocal and involve the US forces as well. “In spite of their self-interest, all parties have common interests and a common desire to promote denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula.” Ultimately, the policies to be adopted “should give primacy to the interests of the people on the Peninsula and in the surrounding areas.” In a veiled reference to the US, the Editorial warns that “Any party that puts its own interests first may damage the outcome. In the past, the Peninsula had been locked in a cycle of negotiations and tensions. Whether it can





break out of the cycle depends on all parties. If all parties can help move the situation in a positive direction, the Peninsula is very likely to rid itself of the past cycle and usher in a new era of stability.”

In contrast, China is emerging as the influential power committed to the well-being of North Korea and the region. “This year Pyongyang would still concentrate all efforts on development. It needs to create a favorable external environment for domestic economic development. In this context, China-North Korea cooperation is of particular importance. China is one of North Korea’s important trading partners. China’s economic development has benefitted other neighboring countries. North Korea should be no exception. And North Korea’s development is also conducive to the Chinese economy. It will help increase the economic vitality of Northeast China. Mutual exchanges and cooperation in economic development between China and North Korea will provide a guarantee for continuing stability on the Peninsula.”

Chinese experts also emphasized the centrality of China to North Korea. They see improvement possible only in the context of addressing Pyongyang’s concerns and meeting its expectations. Ruan Zongze, the Executive Vice-President of the China Institute of International Studies, explained that “Kim’s visit to China shows his resolve and determination to fulfill what he pledged in his New Year’s address, in particular building peace in the Korean Peninsula and seeking the country’s economic development.” Zheng Jiyong, the Director of the Center for Korean Studies at Fudan University in Shanghai, added that “Kim wants to gain from Chinese experiences on economic development and improving the livelihood of ordinary people.”

Meanwhile, the issue of the negotiations with the US over the denuclearization of the DPRK received only scant attention. Chinese media, senior officials and experts focused on the crucial role of the PRC in facilitating the US-DPRK negotiations.

On 10 January, Yonhap published a collection of brief comments exchanged concerning the denuclearization. “The DPRK will continue sticking to the stance of denuclearization and resolving the Korean Peninsula issue through dialogue and consultation, and make efforts for the second summit between DPRK and US leaders to achieve results that will be welcomed by the international community,” Kim Jong-Un assured Xi Jinping. Beijing expects Washington to break the stalemate. “China hopes that the DPRK and the United States will meet each other halfway,” Xi Jinping replied. “China stands ready to work with the DPRK and relevant parties to play a positive and constructive role in maintaining peace and stability and realizing denuclearization on the peninsula.” Again, Beijing is endorsing the position of Pyongyang.

On 8 January, the Editorial in the *Global Times* articulated the Forbidden City’s perception of the role of China in support of North Korea. “It is hoped that the US and South Korea can accurately understand the constructive significance of amicable China-North Korea ties to push ahead with denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. What Pyongyang lacks most is confidence in its national security. A close China-North Korea relationship is its largest source of a sense of security from the international community. It is almost impossible to promote denuclearization peacefully without China’s support and encouragement. Backing up denuclearization is China’s long-standing and firm stance, which touches upon China’s core interests. Beijing will never sacrifice its national interests for short-term geopolitical needs.” That said, Beijing is not going to do the heavy lifting for Washington. Nor is Beijing going to cover for Washington’s failings. “Washington should shoulder its own responsibility for denuclearization. It is Washington’s duty, not Beijing’s. Pyongyang harbors doubts over whether Washington is trustworthy, and the Trump administration needs action rather than words to eliminate those doubts.”



Chinese experts agree about the centrality of China to the denuclearization process, particularly given the US policies. "At a time that the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula is at a crucial stage, communications between the leaders of China and the DPRK are critically important for the future development of the situation on the peninsula," Ruan Zongze argued. "With North Korea and the US in a deadlock, China's role will be extremely important," Zheng Jiyong concurred. "The reason North Korea can take the daring step toward denuclearization and engagement with the US is mainly because of its trust in China," explained Professor Wang Sheng, an expert on Korean affairs at Jilin University. South Korean experts concur. "By showing off the cooperative relationship between North Korea and China, Chairman Kim is signaling to the US that, if the US doesn't guarantee the regime's security or ease sanctions, China has its back," warned Professor Yang Moo-Jin of the University of North Korean Studies in Seoul.

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Throughout, unfolding developments in Northeast Asia confirmed the veracity of the Chinese regional strategy - the restoration of a tributary-style system of relationships between the PRC and the DPRK, the drawing together of the DPRK and the RoK, the drawing of Japan into the Chinese (and Russian) orbit, and the concurrent alienation of the US.

Seoul is cognizant of the crucial role of Beijing in harnessing Pyongyang and guaranteeing stable joint economic development on the Peninsula. "China may actually be a more competitive partner for North Korea's economic development than South Korea," Park Yong-Maan, the Korea Chamber of Commerce & Industry Chairman, told the *Korea JoongAng Daily* of 17 January. "China has the potential to be an even stronger partner for North Korea's economic development than South Korea." Therefore, it is imperative for Seoul to promote trilateral models for cooperation, and common development projects must get priority. Professor Lee Choon-Bok of the Nankai University's Zhou Enlai School of Government anticipates Pyongyang to also focus on trilateral relations and "designate areas near the Chinese borders as economic zones" in the near future. "We [South Korea] need to develop a cooperation model between South and North Korea and China," he urged.

Meanwhile, Seoul and Pyongyang continued to expand and intensify their joint programs despite Washington's pressure and criticism. North Korea made it a major policy theme. On 12 and 14 January, the *Uriminzokkiri* published several articles on joint cooperation and unification. "Active efforts should be made to expand and advance North-South cooperation and exchanges in all aspects," the *Uriminzokkiri* wrote. "It is none other than our people who will benefit from cooperation and exchanges between North and South Korea." The 24 January Editorial of the *Rodong Sinmun* identified inter-Korean cooperation as a major task for the coming year. The Editorial urged that "all Koreans in the north, the south and abroad should bring about a radical turn in the movement for national reunification this year on a basis of such successes. ... Inter-Korean cooperation and exchanges should be expanded and developed in an all-round way so that national reconciliation and unity can be consolidated and all the fellow countrymen can practically benefit from improved north-south relations."

Official Seoul concurs. Dr. Chung-in Moon, President Moon Jae-In's special advisor for unification, diplomacy and national security affairs, is the main driving force behind the giving inter-Korean joint projects and cooperation priority over the US-led denuclearization negotiations. "There are no viable options except engagement in dealing with North Korea," he stated on 12 February. Indeed, high- and mid-level joint consultations on common projects have become routine. They take place both in Panmunjom and at the inter-



Korean liaison office in Kaesong. But Seoul is going way beyond this to sustain Pyongyang. South Korea was implicated in sanctions violations, mainly the shipment of petroleum products to North Korea, in order to keep the local economy improving and growing.

There is tangible progress in discussing specific joint projects, especially transportation, that make sense only because they cross into China and Russia. In early 2019, the RoK and the DPRK discussed not only the frequently mentioned pipelines, roads and railroads with cross-border connections, but now also the use of at least three DPRK seaports by the RoK. Both countries also discuss in detail joint industrial projects and parks. This progress is proving of great importance for Seoul. With trade disputes with the US mounting, and with the West European markets increasingly fragile, South Korea is focusing its exports on China, South East Asia, Russia and India - all of whom are best reached via railways. Hence, the new patterns of exports via land-lines are considered the most promising in the long-term - and these could be attained only via North Korea.

Seoul is also reaching out to Moscow in order to quickly implement trilateral programs involving Pyongyang. On 13 February, the two countries "inked an action plan on a wide range of areas in the latest move to boost bilateral cooperation," Yonhap reported. This is a major step in the implementation of the "nine bridges" long-term joint strategy first introduced by Moon Jae-In to Vladimir Putin back in 2017. "The nine bridges ... are key areas of cooperation between the two countries, including shipbuilding, natural gas, railways, electricity, agriculture, Arctic shipping routes and fisheries." Significantly, the incorporation of North Korea plays a major role in the strategy. "The action plan also includes a proposal for joint research among South and North Korea and Russia for economic cooperation on railways, natural gas and electricity," Yonhap explained. "South Korea has long talked about linking its rail network to Russia's Siberian rail system via North Korea, which would cut shipping times and logistics costs for its Europe-bound exports."

Meanwhile, the Trump Administration's rush to frame the US ongoing interaction with the DPRK in terms of bilateral negotiations over denuclearization is becoming increasingly irrelevant to the emerging Chinese-dominated regional order. Washington cannot ignore the prominence of Beijing, but is convinced the PRC can be manipulated into actively supporting US policies. Indeed, the US is putting pressure on the PRC to deliver the DPRK (while ignoring all other facets of Sino-US relations - from trade to security and territorial integrity). As well, Washington is pressuring Seoul to subjugate the normalization with the RoK to the US-DPRK dynamics even as the bilateral conflicts over trade imbalance and the cost of maintaining the USFK in place are brewing and escalating.

In mid-February, there emerged initial signs that the Trump Administration was beginning to face reality. On 16 February, Yonhap published the text of Trump Tweets suggesting recognition of the realities and geography of Northeast Asia. Yonhap reported that Trump said he was "in no rush to denuclearize North Korea," but that he wanted North Korea "to refrain from testing its nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles." Trump Tweeted that "I'm in no rush for speed. We just don't want testing." At the same time, there is no change regarding the maintaining of the sanctions' regime even though South Korean senior officials suggested that the US might agree to reciprocity. "The sanctions, as you know, remain," Trump Tweeted. Most revealing was Trump's Tweet about the future of North Korea that acknowledge the geographical realities. Trump Tweeted that "we think that North Korea and Chairman Kim have a tremendous potential as an economic force, economic power. Their location between South Korea and then Russia and China, right smack in the middle, is phenomenal. And we think they have a great chance for tremendous economic prosperity in the future."

Hence, any attempt, by the US or other outsiders, to break the regional dynamics is doomed to failure. This



includes the Trump Administration's intent to capitalize on the forthcoming second Trump-Kim Summit in Hanoi in order to convince Kim Jong-Un to rely on the Vietnamese model of development where US and West European influence is strong rather than continue emulating the Chinese model. This gambit will fail not only because of the strong and unbreakable relations between China and North Korea - but also because, at the end, Vietnam is a neighboring and thus a tributary state that knows its own place in the regional dynamics.

Writing in the 10 February issue of the *Global Times*, Yang Sheng analyzed the potential impact of the US-DPRK relations on the PRC. He considered the US selection of Hanoi to be of significance. "Choosing Hanoi for the venue of the second US-North Korea summit shows that the US hopes North Korea will choose the path of Vietnam, which has embraced economic globalization," Yang Sheng wrote. "Yet China does not need to worry about Pyongyang's wisdom on decision making." There exist the regional geo-strategic and geo-economic realities that Washington will not be able to alter.

"Currently, due to strategic needs on certain geopolitical issues related to China, ties between the US and Vietnam are strengthening, so Washington might want to deliver a message to Pyongyang that 'If you become a rival to China in region, then you can receive more friendship from the US.' The US also wants to hint to China that the US has leverage on the issue of the Korean Peninsula," explained Zheng Jiyong, the Director of the Center for Korean Studies at Fudan University in Shanghai. "China does not need to be worried because North Korea is not Vietnam," he added. "If North Korea and the US become closer, this path would fit exactly with China's political intentions." Zheng Jiyong concluded that "China just needs to keep contributing and assisting with the exchanges between North Korea and the US, as well as with South Korea, and it doesn't need to worry about North Korea's wisdom. Pyongyang has a clear understanding of where the bottom line is." And so does Vietnam.

In itself, the creation and maintenance of tributary-like system around the PRC will be a major instrument in containing the US and expediting the ascent of China. Writing in the 18 February issue of the *South China Morning Post*, Zhou Bo of the PLA Academy of Military Science stressed that it is important for China "not to see the US as an enemy even if China itself is treated as a competitor. This is not 'love thy enemy'. A less confident US is now paranoid that China wants to drive it out of the Indo-Pacific, but as long as China continues to rise peacefully and live in amity with its neighbours, the US can hardly turn such an arch-rival into a bitter enemy, and the international community would not have to take sides." Thus, accommodating the US in relation to North Korea and Vietnam is but a matter of expediency - short term flexibility in order to attain long-term goals.

Thus, while the Trump Administration is focusing on the unfolding breakthroughs and summits, all other key players, starting with the Chinese and the Koreans, look at the unfolding drama in the context of their millennia of relations and interactions. As the outsiders - that is, Trump's Washington - try harder and harder to dictate their scheme of things - all the regional players rush to adopt contemporary policies that are rooted in the heritage of millennia of regional dynamics. Ultimately, this return to the regional civilizational heritage will determine the outcome of the still unfolding drama in and around the Korean Peninsula.

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Beijing continues to give priority to heritage-driven regional dynamics in Northeast Asia. While the Chinese grand strategy is focused on the multi-faceted and increasingly belligerent relations with the US as a whole challenge - the near-term solution is to be found in the resurrection of the heritage-based tributary-style



relations with China's smaller neighbors to the east and to the south - the buffers along the shores of the Pacific and Indian Oceans. (The history and legacy of the Chinese relations with Russia and Central Asia also dominate the contemporary grand strategy - but they are different.) Beijing is increasingly apprehensive about incidents and clashes along the periphery of China - starting with the Korean Peninsula that is the most explosive point of friction with the US. The Forbidden City still hopes to win the new Thirty Years War without resorting to the use of force.

Beijing is convinced that US-initiated provocations and crises in the immediate vicinity of China constitute the greatest threats to the ascent of China. Writing in the 12 January issue of the *South China Morning Post*, Zhou Bo warns about the global ramifications of this Sino-US friction. "What is the greatest challenge we face in the 21st century? It is not China's rise but America's decline. ... Even those most critical of China have to admit its rise in the past 40 years has been peaceful, but could America's decline, if inevitable, be equally peaceful?" Beijing's objective is to realize the ascent of China without conflicts. "For China, the challenge is how to continue rising peacefully when the US sees it as a top strategic competitor." Chinese military build-up is imperative but not sufficient to prevent conflict with the US. "A stronger China would only be more resolute in fighting off a provocation on its doorstep." Another major instrument will be the creation of China-dominated buffer keeping the US forces at arm's length from China. A tributary-style system will deliver this buffer.

In his 18 February follow-up article for the *South China Morning Post*, Zhou Bo elaborated on these dynamics in the context of the historic ascent of China to becoming a global Hegemon. Only Chinese military build-up and improving strategic posture can deter the US from actively impeding by force the ascent of China. "A full-blown war between the two nuclear powers is next to impossible. And the closing gap between the two militaries will further reduce the likelihood of conflict." Docile buffer areas - the tributary-style states - will replace the need for China to strike out in order to keep the US and other foes at bay. "As long as China continues to build up its military strength but exercises restraint in the use of force, it might create a miracle in human history - that is, a rising power finally catches up with an existing power without firing a shot."

It is in sticking to the historic legacy of China, Zhou Bo concludes, that modern-day China will be able to win the new Thirty Years War and realize its historic ascent to becoming a global Hegemon. "If disorder reflects a loss of direction, then one of China's greatest strengths is its sense of direction, that is, clearly mapped plans for the short, medium and long term, coupled with the concerted efforts of the entire Chinese population working in the same direction. So far, none of the plans have gone unfulfilled, with quite a few realised well in advance. This gives Chinese people confidence for the future: to eliminate poverty and turn the country into a well-off society by 2020; become modernised by 2035 and realise the 'great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation' by 2049 when the People's Republic celebrates its centenary. As long as China does not make a strategic mistake, no external force can reverse its course. China's strategic opportunities, now as in the past, are in its own hands."

Xi Jinping's Forbidden City are adamant on not letting this control of China's destiny slip from their tight hands. Striving to successfully completing the Hundred Years Marathon comes 2049, Xi Jinping bases the crux of his polity on the legacy of the Warring States period (from the 5th Century till 221 BC) as manifested in the ancient military treatise *Simafa* (Methods of the Minister of War). The *Simafa* was authored at the turn of the 5th Century BC by Tian Rangju - a brilliant general of the state of Qi who was also known as Sima Rangju (Rangju, Minister of War). Tian Rangju urged that China must neither relax in the face of potential external military threat from a great power, nor neglect the acquisition of superior military force even if there is no



immediate threat to China. He wrote in the *Simafa*: "Even though a state may be vast, those who love warfare will inevitably perish. Even though calm may prevail under Heaven, those who forget warfare will certainly be endangered." And so does Xi Jinping guide and lead China of the 21th Century.

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**Remarks:** Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

### About the Author of this Issue

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Yossef Bodansky has been the Director of Research at the International Strategic Studies Association [ISSA], as well as a Senior Editor for the *Defense & Foreign Affairs* group of publications, since 1983. He was the Director of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare at the U.S. House of Representatives between 1988 and 2004, and stayed on as a special adviser to Congress till January 2009. In the mid-1980s, he acted as a senior consultant for the U.S. Department of Defense and the Department of State.

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Mr Bodansky is a Director at the Prague Society for International Cooperation, and serves on the Board of the Global Panel Foundation and several other institutions worldwide.



*Yossef Bodansky*