Predictable uncertainty: China’s rise and U.S.–Korea security dilemmas

An insight into how China’s military modernisation spells out critical implications on the future of U.S.–Korea alliance in East Asia.
relationships in the region. In this context, one of the key questions is how China’s rise will affect the future of the US–Republic of Korea (ROK) alliance.

To begin with, Chinese authorities have become increasingly attentive and responsive to critical security developments on the Korean Peninsula over the last decade. Indeed, China’s geopolitical and economic rise, coupled with its integration in the global community, has given its diplomacy more leverage in managing tensions and crises on the Korean Peninsula. Since 2003, Beijing has been more proactive in mitigating the North Korean ‘hybrid’ security conundrum. It has provided a vital economic lifeline to North Korea, inherently preventing its economic collapse, while quietly exerting moderate pressure on Pyongyang to return to the stalled Six Party Talks and resolving North Korea’s nuclear issue through multilateral coordination. In doing so, Beijing has aimed to mitigate tensions between the two Koreas, as well as risks and costs associated with potential confrontations, spillovers or crises that may require both US and Chinese intervention.

A more compelling view is that Beijing is trying to avert a North Korean collapse to prevent the Korean reunification, which would likely undermine China’s leverage in international and regional relations and lead to the loss of the strategic buffer zone provided by North Korea for the past 60 years. The modalities of Beijing’s growing influence, interests and involvement in Korean security issues amplify strategic dilemmas for the US–ROK alliance by increasingly constraining the alliance’s policy options and freedom of action. This can be seen in the aftermath of North Korea’s covert and unprovoked sinking of the Cheonan on 26 March 2010, which China reluctantly scrutinised. Beijing showed an assertive stance toward US–ROK responses — particularly vis-à-vis the joint naval exercises off the west coast of South Korea involving the George Washington Aircraft Carrier Battle Group, which China ‘resolutely opposed’.

At the same time, defence planners in both US and South Korea have been closely observing the People Liberation Army’s (PLA) military modernisation drive, its sharper power projection capabilities and long-term aspirations. Over the past decade, the PLA has accelerated its ‘mechanisation and informationisation’ drive — a comprehensive defence transformation process that includes revamping military doctrines, organisational force structures and operational concepts, while developing and integrating selected advanced weapons systems, platforms and technologies.

While many analysts tend to systematically downplay assessments of China’s military capabilities, in the long term, it is likely that China’s military modernisation and strategic priorities will tabulate ‘diversified missions’ that include capabilities for securing access lines to energy resources and regional anti-access/area-denial capabilities. As Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and President Obama’s principal military advisor recently noted, ‘China is shifting its military focus from a land-centric focus to an air- and maritime-focused capability.’ In other words, one could argue that China’s naval and air forces will be increasingly visible in the region.

Meanwhile, the US has been also transforming its regional force posture, operational concepts, and weapons procurement and deployment. Throughout the last decade, the US military has aimed to move beyond its Cold War static posture towards a more mobile, lighter and agile force posture — having ‘strategic flexibility’ to meet new roles and missions. With regard to the Korean Peninsula, this implies that the nature, size and configuration of US forces deployed in Korea are increasingly conceptualised in more regional or even global terms rather than addressing traditional static peninsular defence.

Accordingly, as a response to growing Chinese military capabilities and presence in the region, both the US and South Korea may adopt ‘stealth benchmarking’ strategies in their respective defence planning strategies in order to deny, de-limit or even contain China’s expanding geopolitical ambitions. Stealth benchmarking implies adopting a portfolio of ‘capability domains’ or competencies that may mitigate a potential adversary’s military capabilities and freedom of action. For South Korea, this means not only the need to maintain its collective security mechanism with the US and a robust force posture to meet traditional defence and deterrence needs vis-à-vis North Korea; it also means the need to address, at the same time, emerging security issues that have a strong Chinese imprint, including regional resource competition and the protection of energy access lines.

South Korea has already embarked on an ambitious military modernisation trajectory, with key emphasis on the procurement of advanced weapon technologies and systems: multi-role fighter aircraft, multi-role helicopters, state-of-the-art conventional submarines, destroyer experimental vessels, precision-strike assets, early warning systems and an array of advanced command, control and communications systems.

Depending on the evolving security dynamics on the Korean Peninsula, modalities in the US–ROK defence management, and the transparency of China’s strategic capabilities and intentions, security uncertainties linked to China’s rise may offset the prevailing and in most cases, optimistic linear projections of Asia’s rise. While there are a number of economic incentives such as surging trade that may provide potent centripetal forces in future US–ROK–China relations, China’s growing power projection capabilities, if sustained, are likely to have a significant impact on regional security perceptions, and may shape the future defence planning trajectory of the US–ROK alliance.

In order to mitigate security uncertainties, tensions and risks, it is imperative to enhance communication channels and cooperative dialogue between China, the US and South Korea in order to build the mutual understanding of core interests and mechanisms for defusing potential crises. For starters, this would entail the need to better understand the modalities and country-specific responses to potential North Korean non-linear contingencies and scenarios, ranging from escalation to implosion.

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