

# The Korean Crises and Sino-American Rivalry

**Benjamin Schreer and Brendan Taylor**

For much of the past two decades, America's approach toward the Asia-Pacific has been seen by many as highly disjointed, the product either of strategic inattention or the push and pull of US domestic politics. Meanwhile, the rise of China has spawned a cottage industry asserting the existence of a carefully calibrated and highly calculated Chinese grand strategy for the Asian century. Rising China, according to this line, may be biding its time and hiding its capabilities, but it is ultimately bent upon displacing American power in Asia.

The two recent crises on the Korean Peninsula triggered by North Korea's sinking of the South Korean Navy corvette *Cheonan* in March 2010 and its shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in November challenge these assumptions. The United States has emerged from these crises as a stronger Asia-Pacific power. Washington has used the military, economic and diplomatic instruments at its disposal in a highly integrated fashion, reinforcing the foundations of its Asia-Pacific strategy in the process. This augurs well for the persistence of US primacy in Asia.

Beijing's responses to the crises, by contrast, show a power struggling to execute its strategy. China has failed to balance its immediate needs with its longer-term objectives. Its capacity to use the various instruments of its growing power in a coherent manner has been limited, suggesting that Beijing may lack the ability to bring together the complex range of variables

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needed to implement an effective, longer-term grand strategy. This, in turn, raises questions over whether China has truly arrived as a great power.

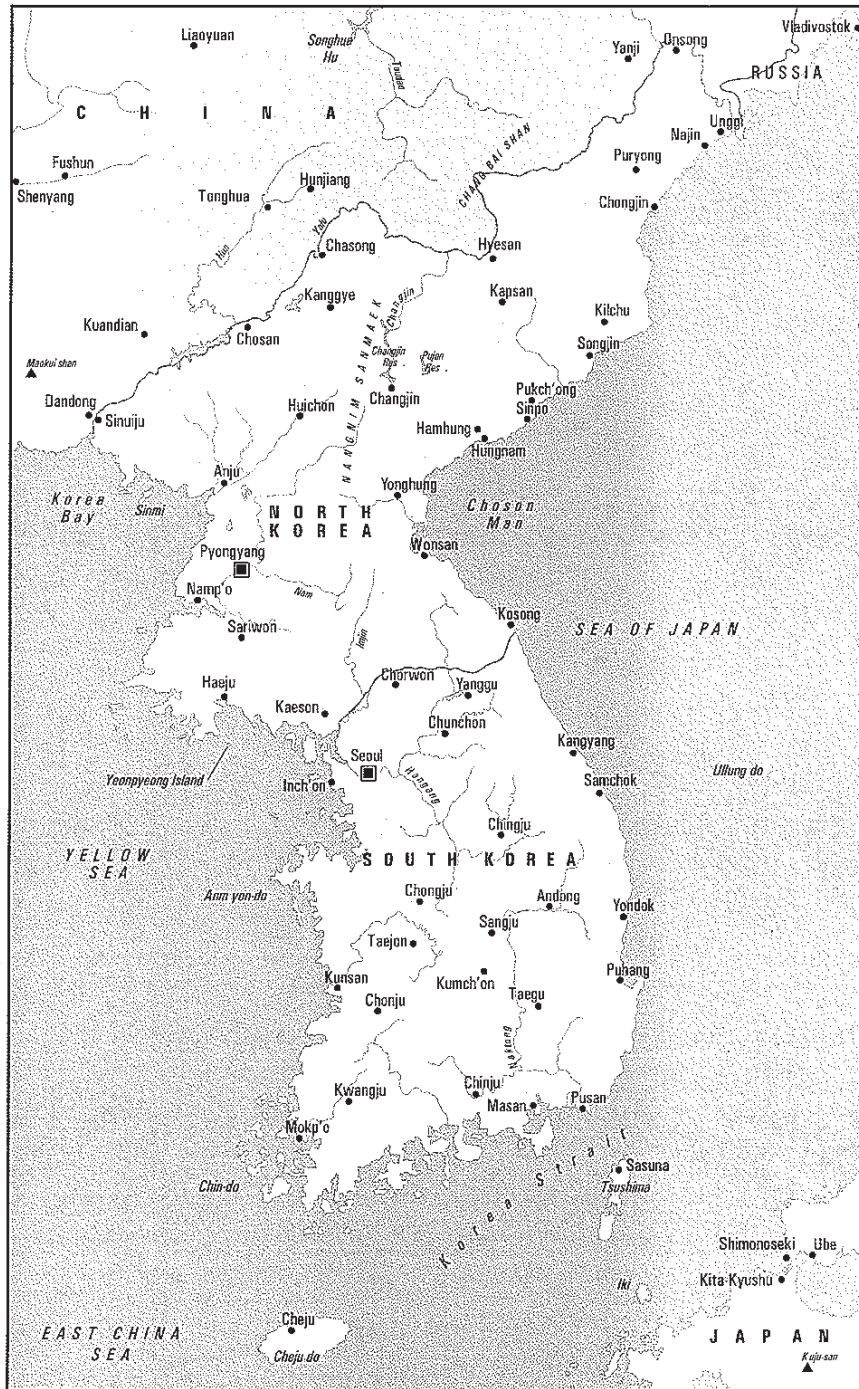
### Uncoordinated China

While China officially describes its grand strategy in terms of 'peaceful development' and aspirations of a 'harmonious world', most observers agree that its ultimate long-term objective is to secure influence in Asia commensurate with its growing power. Yet China's responses to the recent Korean crises have moved it further from that goal.

China's crisis behaviour has opened distance between it and South Korea, which for two decades has been regarded as a significant prize in emerging strategic competition between China and America. Beijing's month-long delay in offering condolences to Seoul over the *Cheonan* sinking and its unwillingness to criticise Pyongyang's provocations in both instances has generated deep public resentment in South Korea.

Chinese diplomacy has been uninspiring and obstructionist. Beijing has called for calm, which has been tantamount to doing nothing. It has urged the international community to contribute more to reducing tensions, yet stymied all efforts to address these crises through the UN Security Council. Its preferred alternative is a re-starting of the Six-Party Talks. Once the centrepiece of China's so-called new diplomatic approach, this mechanism has for years now failed to produce, in Edward Luttwak's terms, 'anything more than hot air'.<sup>1</sup>

The *Cheonan* and Yeongpyeong crises have also emphasised the yawning gap between Chinese and American military power. Washington has responded to these crises by holding large-scale bilateral military exercises with South Korea and Japan. Reflecting its paucity of alliance partners – a further sharp contrast with the United States – China ran its own round of live-fire drills in July 2010. Because of opposition from Beijing, a US–South Korea drill moved from the Yellow Sea to the eastern side of the peninsula the same month. Yet symbols are important in security politics, and the sight in November 2010 of the USS *George Washington* exercising in the Yellow Sea sent a message not only to Pyongyang, but to the Asian region generally about the limits of Chinese military power and influence.



The crises have exposed China's limited capacity to effectively use its growing economic power in the service of grand-strategic objectives. While Washington continues to call upon Beijing to exert economic leverage against North Korea, what these crises reveal is how little sway China really has over Pyongyang. Beijing was caught off guard on both occasions. China appears also to have lost the strategic gains made over the past two decades through closer trade ties with South Korea.

Perhaps most importantly, the *Cheonan* and the Yeongpyeong crises suggest that China may still lack the requisite domestic political foundations to effectively implement a grand strategy. Beijing's impotence is partly the product of its strong historical ties and sense of obligation to North Korea. While this is not to deny the existence of increasing pluralism in Beijing's North Korea policy debate, China's burgeoning foreign-policy bureaucracy still shows a preference for maintaining the status quo. Peking University Professor Zhu Feng has observed that, as a consequence, 'Chinese policy has come to be defined by inertia rather than an accurate evaluation of China's national interests'.<sup>2</sup> Like North Korea, China too has a looming leadership transition that will require placating key domestic constituencies, especially the military, which is generally sympathetic to Pyongyang's predicament. One must also keep in mind that China's leadership remains preoccupied with delivering domestically, which renders grand strategy a second-order issue. The irony is that it is China's Asia-Pacific grand strategy, not America's, that appears to be the product of distraction and the conditioning influence of domestic political constraints.

### **Washington: primacy renewed**

Seen from Washington, the *Cheonan* and Yeonpyeong incidents were major tests for US strategy in the Asia-Pacific. As Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made clear in a speech in October 2010, notwithstanding growing concerns that the 'long legacy of American leadership in the Asia-Pacific is coming to a close', US grand strategy in Asia remains one of primacy based upon pre-eminent political, military and economic power.<sup>3</sup> Seeking to put to bed regional anxieties regarding American disengagement from Asia, Washington's response to the recent Korean crises has been as much about

reassuring US allies about taking on the Chinese challenge to American power.

The Obama administration quickly seized the opportunity presented by these two crises to reinforce the foundations of US primacy in the Asia-Pacific. Identifying China's unwavering support for the North Korean regime and its failure to condemn Pyongyang's aggression as a point of vulnerability for Beijing, Washington rallied its Asia-Pacific allies to demand that China bring its purported leverage to bear against Pyongyang. China's inability or unwillingness to do so, especially during times of severe crisis, reinforced America's political leadership credentials in the eyes of allies and partners. It is worth noting that despite their growing trade relationship with China, US allies such as Australia were vocal in their criticism of Beijing's crisis behaviour.

Displays of US military power during both crises also demonstrated to Asian allies that America possesses an unrivalled capacity to defend them in the face of major external aggression. While America's forward-deployed presence will likely not prevent further acts of North Korean aggression, both Japan and South Korea were reminded of the necessity of their respective US alliances as a deterrent to major war.

Chinese objections to US carrier deployments in the aftermath of North Korea's provocations ironically played into Washington's hands. While American acquiescence to Chinese demands following the *Cheonan* sinking was seen by some commentators as a sign of US weakness, Beijing's assertiveness was ultimately far more damaging because it revealed the true extent of China's disregard for the strategic interests of South Korea (and Japan). When subsequent Chinese protests against US drills following the Yeonpyeong crisis went unheeded, this served only to further expose the limits of Beijing's influence.

Washington's firm military response has likely shaped South Korea's decisions on its future strategic choices between the United States and China. There are clear indications that South Korea will move towards even closer defence relations with the United States, a development many observers

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had deemed unlikely in recent years. These include Seoul's request to delay until 2015 the transfer of US command over South Korean troops during times of war to the Republic of Korea. Through these crises, South Korea has received a stark reminder of the limits of its war-fighting capabilities and of the need to cling to a close alliance relationship with the United States. Echoing South Korean moves to strengthen its alliance with Washington in the aftermath of the crises, Japan also stepped up its defence activities to counter what it perceives to be growing threats from North Korea and China.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, South Korea for the first time took part in a US–Japanese military exercise as an observer. And it will not have escaped China's attention that the United States, Japan and South Korea held a historic trilateral security meeting in Washington following the Yeonpyeong incident.

Finally, Washington used the crises to strengthen the link between the security and economic factors underpinning its strategic design. Washington imposed further sanctions against North Korea in response to the sinking of the *Cheonan*, as much to signal its support for Seoul as to punish Pyongyang. It was also no coincidence that the United States and South Korea negotiated a significant new Free Trade Agreement in the midst of the Yeonpyeong crisis, which reportedly stands a much higher chance of receiving congressional approval than its predecessors.<sup>5</sup>

### The winner

The United States has emerged as the clear winner from the two crises on the Korean Peninsula. Washington has strengthened its leadership position by reducing growing doubts among its Asia-Pacific allies and partners over whether the United States is willing and able to defend its position in the region. It has demonstrated that American primacy in Asia still has a rather strong pulse. Moreover, it has conveyed to China's leaders that attempts to build a grand strategy around the goal of simply evicting the United States from the Pacific is likely to backfire and will only lead to major-power confrontation.

For China, the 2010 Korean crises serve as a reminder that grand strategy is an art, not a science. It is a complex endeavour that involves coherently bringing together a range of variables in a way that appears to have eluded

Beijing. Importantly, China still lacks a convincing regional leadership model to underpin its grand-strategic design. Growing material power alone will not be sufficient to secure Chinese strategic interests.

### Notes

- 1 Edward N. Luttwak, 'Why North Korea Survives', *Wall Street Journal*, 30 November 2010.
- 2 Zhu Feng, 'China's Policy Toward North Korea: A New Twist?', *PacNet*, no. 60, Pacific Forum CSIS, Honolulu, Hawaii, 8 December 2010.
- 3 Hillary Rodham Clinton, 'America's Engagement in the Asia-Pacific', Kahala Hotel, Honolulu, Hawaii, 28 October 2010.
- 4 Martin Fackler, 'Japan to Shift its Military Toward Threats from China', *New York Times*, 13 December 2010.
- 5 Howard Schneider, 'U.S., South Korea Complete Free-trade Deal', *Washington Post*, 3 December 2010.