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## China's multiple role(s) in world politics: Decrypting China's North Korea strategy

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**No 243**

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# China's Multiple Role(s) in World Politics: Decrypting China's North Korea Strategy

## Abstract

This paper starts from the assumption that geostrategic and security interests alone are not sufficient to explain China's foreign policy choices. It argues that ideas about what China's role as an actor in the increasingly globalized international system should be, and about world order in general, deeply impact on China's foreign policymaking process.

Taking the North Korean issue as a case study, this paper postulates that China is currently engaged in a search for a 'new' identity as a global player. China's actor identity is composed of various partly contradictory role conceptions. National roles derived from China's internal system structures and its historical past lead to continuity in Chinese foreign policy, while the 'new' roles resultant from China's rise to global powerdom require an adaptation of its foreign policy principles. In the case of its relationship with North Korea, China's foreign policy is oscillating between the two roles of 'socialist power' – thus being a comrade-in-arms with its socialist neighbour – and 'responsible great power', which leads to China being expected to comply with international norms and thus to condemn North Korea's nuclear provocations and related actions. As a close reading of Chinese publications on China's North Korea strategy shows, the main principles underlying it have not changed. Recent claims that there is a tendency in China's foreign policy towards the abandonment of North Korea lack solid empirical foundations and essentially amount to wishful thinking.

Keywords: China, North Korea, great power, national identity, role theory, socialist power

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# China's Multiple Role(s) in World Politics: Decrypting China's North Korea Strategy

Nele Noesselt

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## 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The new assertive positioning of North Korea under Kim Jong Un represents a major test case for China's new leaders' foreign strategy. Shortly after taking control of state affairs in March 2012, the Xi-Li administration was confronted with the new North Korean leader's announcement of a scheduled space launch – which, as the international community believed it to be a long-range missile test, drew severe criticism. While North Korea's first at-

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tempted launch in April 2012 failed, a second attempt in December 2012 was successful. This was followed by a third North Korean nuclear test in February 2013. In response to the UN's decision to impose sanctions for conducting nuclear testing, as well as to the scheduled joint US–South Korea military exercises in the Asia-Pacific region, North Korea proceeded on its chosen path. In addition, it officially annulled the 1953 Korean War ceasefire agreement and later declared that it was in a state of war with South Korea. It also announced that it would carry out a preventive nuclear strike against US forces.

These provocative actions created unexpected pressure on China's new leaders, who had planned to primarily concentrate on the consolidation of power in the domestic context during their first months in office. Now, however, they had to face rising tensions in the Asian region and the international community's growing expectations that China could be a decisive player in hauling North Korea back into line. Despite this hope perhaps slightly overestimating the 'real' impact and control that China exerts over its nuclear-armed neighbour, it nevertheless imposed intense external pressure on the new Chinese leadership to act.

The unexpected leadership transition in China's immediate neighbourhood after the demise of Kim Jong Il in December 2011 and the subsequent instalment of Kim Jong Un as his successor were accompanied by a close observation of political events on the peninsula by Chinese North Korea specialists and security experts alike. Their main concern was to avoid the destabilization of the North Korean regime as such a turn of events could have a direct spillover effect on the whole region. Furthermore, Chinese think tanks undertook a critical reassessment of China's official North Korea strategy and more or less directly stressed the negative impact that North Korea's rogue behaviour entailed for China's international image and global reputation.

China's support for official sanctions in response to North Korea's latest nuclear provocations has been widely heralded as a new turn in China's foreign strategy and its official distancing from its socialist neighbour. However, this reading of China's foreign policy under the Xi–Li administration lacks, as this paper will argue, solid empirical foundations. A historical look at China–North Korea relations reveals that bilateral interactions between these two socialist systems have never been without tensions and should thus be classified as relations of 'uncertain allies' rather than as 'trusted allies in blood and belief'.<sup>1</sup> In light of this reality, China's backing of the UN resolutions on the North Korea issue should definitely not be seen as indicative of a 'new' Chinese strategy vis-à-vis North Korea.

Taking the North Korean issue as a special case study, this paper argues that China is currently engaged in a search for a new identity as a global player. China's new political elites now have to find a balance between those groups that favour a more assertive engagement in regional and global affairs and those that preach the pursuit of modest and circumspect behaviour. In this vein, this paper postulates that China's actor identity is composed of various partly contradicting role conceptions. These are linked to the party-state's legitimization strategies vis-à-vis domestic players and, at the same time, the international community.

Role conflicts – manifest in the form of seemingly ‘contradictory’ or ‘irrational’ foreign behaviour – mirror the existing discrepancy between China’s particular domestic development strategy (the ‘China model’) and its historical past, on the one hand, and its internationalization and adaptation to the rules and institutions of international politics, on the other. As this paper hypothesizes, national roles derived from China’s internal system structures lead to continuity in Chinese foreign policy, while the ‘new’ roles resultant from China’s rise to global powerdom simultaneously require an adaptation and partial reconfiguration of its foreign policy principles.

This paper brings together three different streams of literature: English-language analyses of current developments in Beijing–Pyongyang relations that focus especially on China’s positioning strategies, recent Chinese publications on North Korea, and texts on China’s North Korea strategy that were published in high-ranking Chinese academic publications between 2011 and 2013. In addition, this article also incorporates selected official statements of the new political leaders, which are seen – at least from the perspective of external observers – as being representative of the China’s official stance on North Korea.

To assess the coexistence of the multiple factors that determine China’s foreign policy in general and its North Korea policy in particular, this paper proceeds in three steps: The first part briefly sketches out some basic assumptions and hypotheses regarding the ideational level of Chinese foreign policy and brings in role theory as a new tool for the analysis of the country’s foreign strategy. The second part applies these frames to the analysis of continuity and change in China–North Korea relations since 2011. The third part concludes with some rather abstract reflections on Chinese perceptions of North Korean socialism and how these views (may) impact on the modelling of China’s strategy vis-à-vis North Korea.

## **2 Analytical Frames: Hybrid Identity and Competing Role Conceptions**

There are multiple ways to analyse Chinese foreign policy. The external/systemic approach regards states as ‘black boxes’ and sees foreign policy as a series of strategic responses to changes in the international system; the domestic/societal approach highlights constraints on the sub-systemic level and the role of (civil) society.<sup>2</sup> Linkage approaches,<sup>3</sup> meanwhile, combine these two dimensions and focus on their causal interrelations.

Moving beyond these rather structural and rational frameworks, national role theory sheds light on the ideational underpinnings of foreign policy behaviour and thus brings in an inside-out perspective. This cognitive dimension of Chinese politics dives beyond the surface of visible and quantifiable political actions and takes a closer look at the motivations and beliefs that guide China’s (foreign) policymaking processes.<sup>4</sup> Research on images of ‘ego’ and the ‘other’ – in other words, the self-images of a nation and those it attributes to other actors – thus helps to identify general bargaining positions and to explain the dynamics of bi- and

multilateral relations that might, from an outside perspective, appear to be irrational behavioural choices.

National role conceptions in foreign policy analysis<sup>5</sup> and international relations studies<sup>6</sup> are conceived of as being directly related to issues of identity and (national) value systems.<sup>7</sup> They determine political decision-making and states' international positioning.<sup>8</sup> For the Chinese case, Wang Hongying introduces a slightly modified typology and differentiates between two general functions of what he calls 'national images': They can be used for the ex post justification of the government's foreign strategy and thus do not directly guide foreign behaviour. Or, by being internalized elements of the leaders' belief system, they can delimit the scope of the government's strategic room for manoeuvre.<sup>9</sup>

Studies on national role conceptions often start from the assumed existence of one unified set of images and values, embedded in national political culture and historical experience, which are taken to determine a nation's international engagement choices. A socio-constructivist understanding of national role conceptions would, however, require paying special attention to the process of image formation and would start from the assumption that these images and roles change over time.<sup>10</sup> National role conceptions can thus be said to include not only long-standing images but also subsets that are limited to a specific time period. Insights into role change and role adaptation are central to the analysis of states' behaviour in times of shifting local and global constellations. Examining Chinese national role conceptions after the Cold War ended, Le Prestre argues that the general role set of the post-reform period did not undergo any fundamental changes; old role concepts remained in place and new roles were integrated as additional subframes.<sup>11</sup> These findings, however, were the outcome of a close examination of the 1990s post-reform period in China, when the country had just started to re-enter the international arena and to pursue international cooperation once again. More than ten years later, one could expect the situation to have changed by now – as China has since risen to new global power status. It is now the world's second-largest economy, the main creditor of the US and a central actor in various recently established policy networks and multilateral frameworks such as the BRICS alliance and the Summer Davos meetings.

This leads to the following key questions: What are the dominant national role conceptions of China in the twenty-first century? Is there only one role in its repertoire, or is there rather a whole set of roles therein? In what ways do these roles influence China's current foreign policy choices?

### **3 Role Sets and Multiple Identities**

Research by Chinese scholars often does not operate with the term 'national role conceptions' but refers instead to the notion of 'images', linking them to the dimension of 'identity'. There are thus two possible ways to assess China's national role conceptions. The first one,



generally to be found in English-language publications, is to summarize China's foreign policy behaviour within certain frameworks that are developed from the perspective of the external observer. The second one is to undertake an in-depth reading of the images and roles discussed by Chinese scholars and to treat them as dominant elements of China's identity as a state actor and key player in international politics. This paper argues that the first approach is useful if one seeks to develop a matrix of role behaviour that is measured by an abstract, unified standard. The second one is more apposite to gaining an understanding of the strategic views, calculations and reflections that underlie China's foreign policy and related decision-making processes. In light of this, the following passages will briefly outline the key ideas forwarded in recent Chinese academic publications on roles, images and identity.

States can have multiple identities that date from different historical stages of development. With regard to China, one can find elements of a civilizational identity (linked to the narrative of a Chinese culture that is several thousand years old) and also concepts of a modern nation-state identity, which dates back to the forced transformation of the Chinese Empire and its integration into the Westphalian system after 1840. Furthermore, a third layer of China's national identity would be its 'socialist' system structure dating back to 1949 – the year communist rule was established over the mainland. Men Honghua even differentiates between five dimensions of China's international role, which coexist and are not mutually exclusive:

- 1) a new type of socialist great power,
- 2) developing great power,
- 3) civilizational great power,
- 4) responsible great power, and
- 5) Asian great power.<sup>12</sup>

Among Chinese epistemic communities (which involves civil research institutes as well as military think tanks), one hotly debated topic is whether China – given the changing constellations in the country's regional and international environments as well as its own rise to global powerdom – will have to develop a new national role conception that is more favourable to its national interests and no longer ascribed by other states.<sup>13</sup> Liu Qiang (2013) sees a major conflict between China's historical role as a developing country and its new identity as a great power. If China seeks to play the latter, it will have to shoulder more responsibilities worldwide. It will also be confronted with growing threat perceptions and fears among the other players in the global system that perceive the country as being a challenger to the existing order. At the same time, however, only if China manages to upgrade its international status can it participate in the normative reconfiguration of the global order.<sup>14</sup>

National role conceptions simultaneously address both domestic and global society. China's international image in the eyes of 'others' is hence, as Men Honghua (2013) correctly explains, an indicator of its international reputation and global status.<sup>15</sup> Nation branding thus

becomes part of the identity formation process,<sup>16</sup> as the legitimacy of the political regime heavily relies on its external recognition and the acceptance of its projected national images (or role conceptions). Global status and reputation decide a state's inclusion in or exclusion from the 'international community'. Images can thus be said, in the realm of international politics, to bear strategic connotations. Among media scholars in China, there is an ongoing debate about how best to create a positive image of China abroad that is favourable to its economic development interests.<sup>17</sup>

In contrast, certain images and national role conceptions – rooted, as noted, in the country's historical past and political culture – are probably actually intended more for domestic consumption. China's national role as a 'socialist' state had been the symbolic anchor during the early years of its foreign politics. Although China underwent a major transformation of its economic system and turned to capitalist market structures after 1978, this socialist dimension of China's national role conception is still omnipresent – it is linked to the one-party system and the political regime type. With its recent claims to be the only socialist great power in the world and to represent a 'new type [of] socialist power', China – and also the new Xi-Li administration – asserts that it is different from the Soviet Union and thereby justifies its chosen path of economic reform without political liberalization. In 2012 several workshops on the reasons behind the decline of socialism and one-party rule in other countries were held in China and had a special focus on the Soviet case. Since 2004 a huge research programme has been underway to redefine socialism in the twenty-first century, in which the reassessment of the history and philosophy of Marxism and the elaboration of 'Chinese' theory contributions are promoted.<sup>18</sup> References to socialism are still ubiquitous in the party-state's official documents and are hence core elements of its self-defined identity.

By portraying itself as a socialist country *sui generis*, China not only distances itself from the well-known circumstances and fate of the now-defunct Soviet Union but also from the development paths of liberal-democratic systems and non-socialist autocracies alike. Officially, China claims to follow a 'Chinese model'<sup>19</sup> of development that integrates the various above-mentioned contradictory role conceptions.

It is striking that one dimension that had been quite apparent in earlier documents and statements prepared by the Chinese side – namely, the reference to China's 're'-emergence to old power status, which was lost due to the defeat by the Western powers during the Opium War – is no longer evident in recent writings on China's international image. This clearly indicates a shift towards a new conception of China's national role – one that is instead focused on the future. Of the aforementioned five dimensions identified by Men Honghua, the one with the most practical relevance is China's self-obligation to act as a 'responsible great power', which represents a counter-image to neo-realist scenarios of a 'China threat'. If China wants to assuage any such negative perceptions harboured by outsiders, it now has to convince others that it will comply with the established rules of the game and become a norm-taker. The related self-image of being a 'responsible power' thus imposes certain constraints on

China's international engagements. This image, as the next part of the paper will argue, often conflicts with the 'socialist' and 'civilizational' dimensions of China's national role conceptions and thus creates 'dissonances' and contradictory orientations in Chinese foreign policy.

Taking into consideration a combination of geostrategic security concerns and ideational factors thus seems the most appropriate way to make sense of China's current foreign policy behaviour. While Lee Hochul argues that the differences in China's behaviour in the first and second North Korean nuclear crisis go back to an identity shift from 'behind-the-scenes player' to 'stage manager', this paper postulates that there is no such shift but rather the coexistence of contradicting role conceptions.

#### 4 China and the Two Koreas: Geostrategic and Economic Dimensions

China maintains a special and symbolic relationship with Korea as the peninsula was once a tributary state to the Chinese Empire (*tianxia*). Korea copied the main features of the Chinese administrative system and absorbed its philosophical underpinnings. It thus represented the *tianxia*'s ideal vassal state.<sup>20</sup> The empire's military thinkers viewed control over the peninsula more than anything from a security perspective: Korea was seen as the Achilles' heel of the Chinese Empire. Chinese rulers thus dispatched their army several times to defend their vassal state against a Japanese invasion and ensure their own security interests.<sup>21</sup> When the (unequal) treaties of the First Sino-Japanese War forced China to recognize the formal independence of Korea, this was a rather traumatic experience for China and one that would increase its feelings of vulnerability.

Bilateral relations between China and North Korea go back to the 1950s, when Kim Il Sung visited Beijing and, in October 1950, China decided to enter the Korean War. A treaty of friendship, cooperation and mutual assistance between China and North Korea was agreed in 1961 and has been renewed several times since – its latest prolongation is valid until 2021.<sup>22</sup> With the official establishment of diplomatic relations with South Korea in 1992, China – which had previously maintained contact exclusively with North Korea – had to rethink its Korea strategy. It did not, however, rewrite its general principles of interaction with the peninsula; rather it only extended its pragmatic and flexible interaction principles with capitalist states to South Korea, while continuing its ideology-rooted cooperative relationship with the North.

Given that economic relations between China and South Korea have witnessed a rapid rate of growth – China became South Korea's largest trading partner in 2004, thereby surpassing the US and Japan, while South Korea is now China's third-largest trading partner and one of its key investors – one might expect Beijing to be inclined to shift its support towards its new trading partner on the southern part of the Korean peninsula. South Korea has obviously made efforts to upgrade its economic and political interactions with China by granting it market economy status during an official state visit by Hu Jintao in 2005 and conducting

negotiations over the establishment of a free-trade agreement with China (and Japan).<sup>23</sup> In May 2012 the South Korean president, Lee Myung-bak, and the Chinese premier, Wen Jiabao, announced the anticipated expansion of their trade volume to USD 300 billion by the year 2015.<sup>24</sup> This was broadly confirmed during the first meeting between the South Korean president and the new Chinese leaders in June 2013. Apart from discussing the possibility of concluding a bilateral free-trade agreement, both sides also agreed to expand their mutual swap agreements.<sup>25</sup>

In 2011 China's trade with North Korea reached USD 5.63 billion, far surpassing the volume of intra-Korea trade – South Korea's exports to North Korea had dropped by 10 per cent to USD 1.71 billion.<sup>26</sup> China is North Korea's sole strategic ally and its most important trading partner. At first glance, however, China's gains from the support it gives to North Korea seem to be extremely limited. In terms of trade benefits, a stable relationship with South Korea is by far and away more important to the party-state. With regard to China's Korea strategy, Beijing's support for a state whose diplomatic provocations have the potential to destabilize the whole region and whose actions directly violate Chinese interests (such as the arrest of Chinese fishermen by North Korean authorities) remains an enigma.

## 5 Change and Continuity

The general decryption of China's North Korea policy basically relies on a rather abstract interpretation of political actions and official rhetoric. So far, there has been no document issued by the Chinese leadership that would directly indicate a reformulation of its relationship with North Korea. The scarcity of reliable information and the opaqueness of Chinese policymaking processes and related intra-party bargaining rounds make it quite difficult to produce a sound interpretation with absolute explanatory value that could serve as a reliable guide for anticipating future policy turns by the party-state's leaders.

One factor, commonly found in recent publications and quoted as being an indicator of the growing distance between China and North Korea, is the relatively long time span between Kim Jong Un's leadership succession and the first official reciprocal state visits between the new North Korean and Chinese political elites. The first meeting between Wang Jiarui, in his capacity as director of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) International Liaison Department, and Kim Jong Un took place in July 2012 – seven months after the completion of the leadership transition in North Korea.<sup>27</sup> In August 2012 North Korea's vice chairman of the National Defence Commission, Jang Song Taek, paid an official state visit to China.<sup>28</sup>

In May 2013, when tensions between Beijing and Pyongyang reached a new high after the detention of Chinese fishermen by North Korea and when Pyongyang displayed a reluctance to re-engage in a dialogue-based solution to the nuclear issue, Vice Marshal Choe Ryong Hae, a member of the Politburo Presidium, travelled to China to meet with Wang Jiarui.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the end of the Korean War in

July 2013, a Chinese delegation led by the Chinese vice president, Li Yuanchao, visited North Korea and directly addressed the recent diplomatic tensions between the two states. So far, this meeting has been the highest level of exchange between China and North Korea since Kim Jong Un was inaugurated as supreme leader. Compared to the number of high-ranking exchanges participated in by Kim Jong Un's father Kim Jong Il, bilateral relations appear to have cooled down.

Nevertheless, the state visit argument as an indicator of partial abandonment is hardly illuminating. Chinese representatives were still the first to meet with the new North Korean leader and the two visits paid by members of North Korea's highest decision-making body to China leave no doubt that Pyongyang is trying to avoid an open split between the two comrade regimes. There might have been various internal reasons – not to mention the regional and international tensions after North Korea's nuclear tests – that caused the postponement of the first official meeting.

Again, one should not forget that the China–North Korea relationship is formally coordinated by the respective parties' international liaison offices, which again illustrates the peculiarity of these bilateral interactions as compared to normal state-to-state relations. Furthermore, the latest changing of the guard in 2012–2013 promoted Zhang Dejiang, who studied economics at Kim Il Sung University in North Korea, to the highest power circles of the Politburo Standing Committee<sup>30</sup> – a step that might be taken as a sign that the new Chinese leadership recognizes the need to have this particular kind of expertise on hand in their highest decision-making bodies.

Another observation made with regard to China's North Korea strategy is the recent changes in terminology use. The expression *siwu jidan* (literally 'unscrupulous and reckless') is now employed in Chinese statements referring to North Korea.<sup>31</sup> But even though the use of such terms to criticize Pyongyang's belligerence reveals China's growing unease, the actions taken by the Xi–Li administration definitely do not indicate a U-turn in China's foreign policy strategy. China's backing of UN Resolution 2094 – unanimously adopted on 7 March 2013 – stands in line with China's earlier position on the nuclear tests of 2006 and 2009.

While China's support for UN sanctions might suggest that it has gone from criticizing the existing structures of the international system to being co-opted into the normative frameworks of this US-centred apparatus, international observers remain highly sceptical about the country's real intentions. Although China's engagement in the Six-Party Talks has widely been acknowledged and welcomed, its positioning on the Cheonan issue and its rather reluctant response to the North Korean shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in 2010 have generated a deep mistrust among China's strategic partners – especially South Korea and the US. The Chinese government was criticized for not officially condemning North Korea after official international investigations 'confirmed' that the sinking of the South Korean corvette had been caused by a North Korean torpedo and that the North Korean army was also responsible for the bombardment of Yeonpyeong.<sup>32</sup> The fact that China hosted an official state visit by

Kim Jong Il in May 2010 without notifying and coordinating its position with South Korea further reduced China's perceived trustworthiness in the eyes of its regional neighbours. When China blocked South Korea's attempts to enact a UN resolution on the Cheonan incident in July 2010, it finally became clear that China would not sacrifice its ideological and historical ties with North Korea for the sake of its flourishing trade relations with Seoul.<sup>33</sup>

To make the puzzle even more complex, apart from symbolically siding with the international community in sanctioning North Korea's nuclear actions, China also reportedly applied bilateral sanction mechanisms. It used its power as North Korea's most important trading partner to push the regime to rejoin the multilateral bargaining rounds of the Six-Party Talks – specifically by reducing its oil supply and using its geostrategic position to deny planes bound for North Korea flyover rights. In addition, China also resorted to financial sanctions. In 2005 the Banco Delta Asia in Macao suspended financial transactions with North Korean banks, thus increasing the pressure on the regime's political elites. After the first nuclear test in 2006, other Chinese banks took similar steps.<sup>34</sup> In 2013 China was also one of the first countries to implement that year's UN sanctions against North Korea. In May 2013 the Bank of China closed the account of North Korea's Foreign Trade Bank, which – according to US sources – funded the nuclear programme.<sup>35</sup>

In 2013, as in the conflicts before, the indirect threat of a nuclear-armed North Korea facilitated the further convergence of the strategic positions of China and the US.<sup>36</sup> A nuclear-armed North Korea, though not believed to pose any direct military threat to China itself, is perceived by Chinese political elites and their advisors to have the potential to undermine regional security and stability and possibly fuel further arms races – not least by justifying China's neighbours' pursuit of nuclear armament. When the US foreign minister, John Kerry, visited China in April 2013, both sides condemned North Korea's aggressive behaviour. At the same time, China's new foreign minister, Wang Yi – a renowned expert on North Korea and China's representative at the Six-Party Talks – reiterated China's demands for the denuclearization of North Korea.<sup>37</sup>

China's new prime minister, Li Keqiang, also warned that causing trouble on the Korean peninsula was like 'throwing stones at one's own feet'<sup>38</sup> and once more stressed the need for a peaceful solution to the conflict. Despite Xi Jinping declaring at the Bo'ao Forum (April 2013) that 'no one should be allowed to throw a region and even the whole world into chaos for selfish gains'<sup>39</sup> (which has widely been heralded as the Chinese taking a tough stance against North Korea), the context of this statement also allows for other conclusions to be reached. For instance, the US might have been indirectly targeted by this formulation. This would be in line with the *Chinese White Paper on the Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces* published in April 2013,<sup>40</sup> which identified US presence in the region as the primary cause of the aggravation of tensions in the Asia-Pacific.

China is still a keen supporter of a multilateral solution to the North Korea issue and was one of the main drivers behind the establishment of the Six-Party Talks that include China,

Japan, the two Koreas, Russia and the US.<sup>41</sup> Despite the failure of these talks, China has continued to push only for the peaceful settlement of the 2013 conflict and has used diplomatic meetings to bilaterally discuss potential solutions with selected participants from the Six-Party Talks. Xi Jinping reportedly addressed the North Korea issue during his visit to California, where he met with US president Barack Obama.<sup>42</sup> This was followed by high-ranking meetings between Chinese diplomats and their Japanese and South Korean counterparts in August 2013.

The recent coordination and exchange of opinions between China and the US, as well as between China and South Korea, are in keeping with China's general North Korea strategy. Yuan Xuezhe and Huang Fengzhi, both affiliated with Jilin University, summarize it as follows: the starting point and ultimate goal is to maintain peace and stability on the peninsula, and the only way to achieve this is through a multilateral dialogue that also involves South Korea and the US.<sup>43</sup>

## 6 Competing narratives

Contemporary analyses on Sino–North Korean relations generally consist of one of three narratives. The first narrative resurfaces from time to time, normally in the immediate aftermath of North Korea's nuclear tests. It expresses the expectation that China will soon abandon its historical-ideological ally due to growing frustration over North Korea's stubbornness and sabre-rattling. The main argument herein goes as follows: China's continuous provision of economic support to North Korea and its efforts to convince the US and other relevant players to rely on diplomatic means to resolve the Korea issue have failed to convince North Korea to give up its nuclear programme. In stark contrast to these aspirations, Pyongyang has in fact repeatedly resorted to actions that could be seen as direct violations of the status quo settlements in the region. On a symbolic level, these actions could cause China to lose face and be seen as an unreliable mediator given its role as one of the main advocates of the Six-Party Talks. China's support for the UN resolutions that came in the wake of each of the nuclear tests in 2006, 2009 and 2013, as well as its more assertive rhetoric vis-à-vis North Korea, are thus interpreted as a sign of a nascent reorientation in China's North Korea strategy.<sup>44</sup> Academic reflections on this strategy differentiate in terms of the possible scenarios and means of recalibrating this complex bilateral relationship – of which abandonment is only one and indeed not even the most likely outcome<sup>45</sup> – whereas newspaper articles generally document the belief that a change will occur in their entente in the very near future.<sup>46</sup>

Recently, this narrative was briefly given credence by the statements of Chinese scholars, who openly argued that the only way for China to avoid further damage to its international reputation and strategic interests would be to cut its former ally loose.<sup>47</sup> Nonetheless, this statement – which resonates perfectly with the hopes and desires of the Western powers –

did not find unanimous backing in academic circles, let alone the party's core decision-making bodies.

A *Global Times* editorial (2013) reacted to this debate by reactivating the old 'buffer zone' narrative and thereby addressing the thinking that is, in retrospect, generally seen to represent one of China's key motivations for entering the Korean War in 1950.<sup>48</sup> This second narrative, though not a novel one, reintroduces the ideological-geostrategic dimension. It generally states that China is not interested in an escalation of the currently tense situation on the Korean peninsula, because the destabilization or even – as a worst-case scenario – the breakdown of the North Korean regime would trigger a massive wave of refugees into China. Moreover, a reunification of the two Koreas based on the proposed South Korean model would result in the loss of a strategic buffer state against the surrounding democracies and see US troops, in their role as the protecting power, based just across the Chinese border.<sup>49</sup>

Within the scope of this narrative, China's foreign strategy towards North Korea has been described as 'navigating between the Scylla and Charybdis of proliferation and instability'<sup>50</sup> – that is, China's approach is interpreted as being primarily motivated by geostrategic concerns and security interests. The scenario of an overt confrontation between China and the US as the strategic supporters of North Korea and South Korea, respectively, has been omnipresent in internal debates between Chinese analysts; it is the determinant of China's commitment to a non-military means of conflict resolution on the peninsula.<sup>51</sup> China has a keen interest in avoiding the outbreak of the Sino-US struggle for hegemony, which is seen as inevitable at the global level. North Korea's provocations have prompted an increase in US military deployments in the area and thus, from a Chinese perspective, have aggravated the current security dilemma in the Asia-Pacific region. The central role Chinese scholars attribute to the US in the North Korea conflict is illustrated by the fact that the first 2012 issue of China's leading international relations journal *Contemporary International Relations* dealt with North Korea's nuclear provocations and primarily reflected upon security constellations in East Asia and the role of external actors.

A third narrative argues that historical, ideological ties between China and North Korea are not as strong as they were in Maoist times and that bilateral relations have evolved from an ethos of 'comrade and ally' into normal state-to-state relations.<sup>52</sup> China will, so the argument goes, have to readjust its foreign policy towards North Korea accordingly without directly steering towards the eventual abandonment of its neighbour. Nonetheless, normal state-to-state interactions are based on mutual benefits and reciprocity. China will thus no longer be obliged to tolerate North Korea's provocative actions but will now have to instead demand respect for its own security interests and the safety of its people in exchange for its continued support of the North Korean regime. This narrative obviously reflects the thoughts of the group of rather reform-minded Chinese intellectuals who would like to see China take on the international role of a responsible great power – one that no longer follows ideological doctrines but is guided instead by the aim of pursuing its own national develop-



ment interests. Despite appearing to be well balanced and convincing, this narrative clearly does not express the official position of China's new leaders, who are striving above all for continuity in Chinese foreign policy. Even though the intensity of ideological ties between Beijing and Pyongyang might have weakened in recent years, the official grouping of both systems under the socialist label is still very much in place.

The ambiguity of China's stance on the North Korea issue clearly indicates a persistent conflict between two layers of its national role conception: On the one hand, China wants to be recognized as a reliable cooperative partner and equal player in world politics. Consequently, it has no interest in being seen as aligned with the group of so-called rogue states. On the other hand, at a more 'ideational' level, China's own identity as a socialist one-party state obviously prevents the country from supporting actions that could trigger the downfall of the North Korean regime. Several Chinese analyses and forecasts of North Korea's possible development trajectories under Kim Jong Un directly postulate that Pyongyang would have to reform the economic system if it wants to survive.<sup>53</sup> The terminology used in these publications – 'reform and opening' (*gaige kaifang*) – should remind the reader of the 3rd plenary session of the 11th Central Committee of the CCP in 1978, which formally marked the reintegration of China into the international economy and its opening up to foreign trade and investment. Jin Canrong, one of China's leading international relations scholars, even suggests that China will actively have to push North Korea to adopt Chinese-style reforms.<sup>54</sup> And although comparative studies on varieties of socialism beyond the Chinese border document the existence of general differences between China and North Korea, reference to their different but common 'socialist' identity is still made when it comes to issues related to symbolic antagonism and conflicts of interests between China and North Korea, on the one hand, and Japan, South Korea and the US, on the other.

## 7 Conclusion

Although geostrategic factors influence Beijing's policy towards North Korea, these alone do not explain why China continues to cooperate with its socialist neighbour despite the latter's actions directly violating China's national core interests. Given that China's economic ties with South Korea are much more lucrative than those with North Korea, material interests are clearly not the main deciding factor here. As this paper has shown, China's twist and turns in its approach to North Korea – manifested in Beijing's oscillation between the rhetorical opposition to and economic support of its neighbour – reveal the persistence of multiple mutually complementary (though occasionally contradictory) national role conceptions.

The above-conducted decryption of national role conceptions provides an insight into the inner dynamics of the political regime's legitimation strategy. By presenting itself as a 'socialist' country, the CCP justifies the persistence of the one-party system and validates China's own distinct development path. Even though the ideological contents associated with the Chi-

nese version of socialism have been modified over time, the official overarching rubric is still in place and thus allows the regime to subsume 'new' ideas under 'old' labels. This 'invented' continuity is a central element of the regime's strategy for staying in power. Given that recent publications by Chinese international relations scholars postulate that Pyongyang will eventually have to follow Beijing's example and thus implement economic reforms in order to survive, the abandonment of North Korea would definitely be the wrong path to follow as this would simultaneously challenge the legitimacy of the Chinese party-state and its theory of socialism. One should also not overlook the meaning and legacy of the Korean War: if China were to give up on North Korea now, all that loss of Chinese life would have been for nothing, which would cause the CCP's past decisions to be called into question, with all that implies.

As the case of North Korea illustrates, any update of China's national role conception – at least as long as the general system structures (i.e. the CCP's one-party rule) remain unchanged – can ultimately only formulate add-ons to the existing sets of national role conceptions. So far, the only one that China has relinquished is that of 'revolutionary socialist power'. This step, however, has not been presented as a deviation from the fundamental axiomatic principles of China's foreign policy. Instead, it has been justified as an amendment to socialism and as a clear distancing from Soviet-style roles and worldviews.

In analogy, any move towards abandoning Pyongyang would first require a classification of North Korea's political system as a degeneration of 'real' Marxism and a dogmatic radicalization of socialism. This would allow Beijing to side more directly with the international community without opening the door to uncontrollable debates in and beyond China on the general legitimacy of socialism and one-party systems as such.

The execution of Jang Song Thaek, who propagated a more liberal economic model, and the recall from China of North Korean entrepreneurs belonging to his faction in December 2013 has contributed to rising uncertainty among Chinese analysts and politicians about Pyongyang's new positioning strategy. Although the purge of Jang Song Thaek could be part of Kim Jong Un's efforts to consolidate his power, it has some symbolic implications for Beijing–Pyongyang relations in that it might also be interpreted as the unilateral cancellation of Chinese-style economic reforms as represented by the joint special economic zones along the China–North Korea border.

The rising distrust of North Korea that is unfolding between elites and counter-elites and being expressed in both Chinese microblog debates and the competing views circulating within the CCP itself make it difficult for the Chinese government to establish a consensus on the exact role that the country should play. Moreover, the demand for recognition as a great power and major player in global affairs has direct implications for the conduct of Chinese politics: if China wants to assume this role, it will certainly have to first win the trust of the international community, which would require a clear dissociation from the group of so-called rogue states. The Chinese government is thus faced with the difficult task of trying to balance domestic and global expectations, as well as old and new role conceptions.

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