



ICAS BULLETIN

Institute for China-America Studies

A Survey of Scholarship on U.S.-China Relations

Twice a month, the ICAS Bulletin updates a global audience on American perspectives regarding the world's most important bilateral relationship. Research papers, journal articles, and other prominent work published in the U.S. are listed here alongside information about events at U.S.-based institutions.

Commentary

On North Korea, America's Biggest Obstacle is Trump, not China

By Will Saetren



In the News

Chinese Air Force Patrol South China Sea

Reported by Xinhua

Xinhua News, November 24

“The PLA air force recently conducted a combat air patrol in the South China Sea, said a military spokesperson on Thursday.”

“A team of various bombers completed the routine patrol, said spokesman Shen Jinke. Chinese bombers also conducted training exercises after passing over the Bashi Channel and Miyako Strait. The H-6K bombers took off from an inland airport in north China.”

“The Chinese air force started regular high seas training in 2015.”

Chinese Delegations Visit Asia to Introduce CPC Party Congress

Reported by Xinhua

China Daily, November 27

“A Chinese delegation introducing the achievements of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) ended its three-nation Asia tour on Sunday, which has taken them to Mongolia, South Korea and Japan.”

“The delegation, headed by He Yiting, executive vice president of the Party School of the CPC Central Committee, met with local political party leaders and held briefing sessions with party officials, friendly groups, major media and think tanks in the three countries to introduce the spirit and significance of the CPC party congress.”

China, U.S. Growth to Drive Higher Global Oil Demand in 2018

Reported by Xinhua

Xinhua News, November 27

“Chinese and U.S. demand for petrochemicals will drive the global demand for oil next year, expert said on Monday at the three-day Gulf Petrochemical and Chemical Association Forum.”

“The growth of oil-related manufacturing like the production of ethane and propane, which are basic materials for plastic, was the main driver for the demand of the ‘black gold.’”

Chinese Border Troops Hold Drills amid Tensions on Korean Peninsula

Sarah Zheng

The South China Morning Post, November 28, 2017

Chinese border troops have staged annual winter combat drills amid ongoing tensions with neighbouring North Korea. “This year’s drills took place after the Chinese foreign ministry on

Friday announced a “temporary” closure of the Sino-North Korean Friendship Bridge in Dandong, Liaoning province for maintenance work.”

The bridge is often referred to as “Pyongyang’s ‘economic lifeline’, across which 80 per cent of bilateral trade flows. While the bridge has ostensibly been closed for repairs, the move sparked speculation that “the two sides are at odds with each other.”

North Korea Fires a Ballistic Missile, in Further Challenge to Trump

Choe Sang-hun

New York Times, November 28

“North Korea fired a ballistic missile on Wednesday morning for the first time in more than two months, defying demands from President Trump to halt its weapon programs and raising the stakes in an increasingly tense standoff with the United States and its allies.”

Donald Trump asks Xi Jinping to Cut off North Korea’s Oil Supply to Stop Nuclear Program

Robert Delaney

South China Morning Post, November 30

“US President Donald Trump asked President Xi Jinping to halt all oil shipments to North Korea to stop its neighbour’s nuclear weapons programme following Pyongyang’s test launch of a ballistic missile experts say could reach the US mainland.”

“Xi had told Trump that denuclearizing the Korean peninsula, maintaining an international nuclear-non-proliferation regime, and preserving peace and stability in Northeast Asia were China’s unswerving goals.”

China Slams Australia’s Foreign Policy White Paper

Charlotte Gao

The Diplomat, December 02

“In its newly published Foreign Policy White Paper, Australia took a strong stance on the South China Sea issue, urging both China and the Philippines to follow the Permanent Court of Arbitration’s July 2016 ruling. In response, both the Chinese defense ministry and Chinese foreign ministry criticized Australia for its ‘irresponsible remarks.’”

Articles and Analysis

With an Irrational Trump in Office, the Nuclear Power of US President Must Be Tamed

Will Saetren

South China Morning Post, November 27

The vast majority of people have shockingly little insight into the unchecked authority of U.S. Presidents to order a nuclear launch. This is particularly disconcerting given President Trump's erratic character and poor knowledge of nuclear weapons policy. The current system is an antiquated holdover from the Cold War where the president has the sole authority to launch Armageddon, at any time, for any reason. It is high time for the American people to take this power away from the American president. No single person should have the power to hold the whole world hostage and end human civilization as we know it.

How Much Will the South China Sea Remain Critical for China-US Relations?

Nong Hong

IPP Review, December 01

During President Trump's recent visit to China, he did not press President Xi Jinping on the South China Sea, which seems to signal that it is no longer a driving issue in China-US relations. However, Mr. Trump's unpredictable personality raises questions about the reliability of that message.

Although recent events in North Korea have overshadowed the disputes in the South China Sea in the international narrative, the problem has not gone away. China and the United States have yet to agree upon effective mechanisms to manage a potential crisis in the region. Although some crisis management mechanisms are currently in place, these are voluntary and non-binding in nature. Given the high likelihood that U.S. surveillance and reconnaissance activities can escalate tensions in the region at any time, strengthening this regime is essential to secure peace and stability.

China and Central Europe: Don't Believe the Hype

Tomáš Valášek

Carnegie Europe, November 28

As Central Europe faces a wave of populism and nationalism, China has increased its investment the region. "China has been blamed for exploiting these divisions, and for trying to break EU consensus on subjects that matter to Beijing. But on closer inspection, the rising power's influence is less than it appears."

"Only China really knows what China wants from its relationship with Central Europe. Beijing would probably welcome the ability to break EU consensus from time to time. But while the attention that the country has lavished on the eastern reaches of Europe has raised eyebrows," there are several reasons for it that have nothing to do with attempts to break EU unity.

Let the Record Show: Negotiations With North Korea Work

Catherine Killough

Lobe Log, November 29, 2017

“President Trump has consistently misrepresented the negotiation record between North Korea and the United States.” But history tells a different story. The 1994 Agreed Framework agreement prevented North Korea from producing plutonium for eight years, but the deal collapsed due to shortcomings and failures on both sides. This deal wasn’t a failure, it was allowed to fall apart. Contrary to Trump’s assertion, the Agreed Framework proves that diplomacy can work, when given a chance.

Past Events, Videos, and Discussions

India-Singapore Security Relations in an Evolving Asia

Event hosted by *Brookings Institute*, November 28

The Singapore Minister for Defence, Dr. Ng Eng Hen, spoke at Brookings India on the unique security relationship between Singapore and India. The Armies and Air Forces of both countries have been training together and a navy exchange agreement is expected to be signed soon. Minister Ng observed that “fundamentally, Singapore believes in India’s pivotal place and role in Asia.”

“Singapore believes that India’s inclusion strengthens the regional security architecture as a stabilizing force within the region. India adds a wider perspective, a more robust balance beyond the US-China strategic rivalry at play.” Minister Ng noted that “We are both maritime nations that sit astride key trade and energy routes that link Europe to Asia... and both countries strongly advocate adherence to international law and norms and the peaceful resolution of disputes.”

Trump, Trade, and the Asia Pacific

Event hosted by the *Cato Institute*, November 29

President Trump used his recent trip to Asia to once again insist on “free, fair, and reciprocal” trade as part of a strategy to reduce bilateral trade deficits. The president also reiterated that multilateral free trade agreements are not an option for his administration, and that in order to maximize U.S. leverage, only bilateral agreements will be considered.

In that light, the Cato Institute organized the discussion and addressed these question: What does it mean for regional trade liberalization as these two differing strategies play out? What should U.S. lawmakers understand about the situation, and how can we best ensure that the enhanced prosperity that often accompanies free trade continues into the future? The video and podcast of the event can be accessed via its website.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: A View from the Ground

Event hosted by the *Wilson Center*, December 01

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a \$62 billion connectivity project envisioned to stretch from the western Chinese city of Kashgar to Pakistan's Arabian Sea port of Gwadar, located near Iran and Persian Gulf shipping lanes. It is a major component of Beijing's broader Belt and Road Initiative.

This event featured these questions: What do Pakistan and China hope to achieve through CPEC? How are CPEC-related funds being spent? Can CPEC transform Pakistan's economy? What economic, political, and social factors might inhibit CPEC's progress? Can Pakistan overcome them, and if so how? How will CPEC impact the broader South Asia region?

Upcoming Events

Winning the Third World: The Sino-American Rivalry

Event hosted by *Center for Strategy and International Security*, December 04

PONI 2017 Winter Conference

Event hosted by the *Center for Strategic & International Studies* on December 05, 2017

China's Impact on Global Development and Conflict: Assessing the "China Model"

Event will be hosted by *United States Institute of Peace* on December 07, 2017

US-China Relations: Perilous Past, Uncertain Present (Third Edition) with Professor Robert Sutter

Event will be hosted by the *Sigur Center of Asian Studies* on December 07, 2017

China Risk and China Opportunity for the U.S.-Japan Alliance

Event will be hosted by the *Carnegie Endowment for international Peace* on December 08, 2017

Commentary

On North Korea, America's Biggest Obstacle is Trump, not China

By Will Saetren

On November 29th, North Korea conducted its 20th missile test of 2017, resetting the clock on U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's [suggestion](#) that if North Korea halted its "nuclear and missile testing for about 60 days, that would be the signal the United States needs to resume direct dialogue with Pyongyang." This was North Korea's first missile test since September 15th.

Last week's launch not only marked a resumption of Pyongyang's testing schedule, it was a leap forward for their nuclear weapons program. Kim Jong-Un put a new Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) on grand display, the Hwasong 15, which appears to be larger and more capable than any ballistic missile Pyongyang has ever tested. Using [conservative estimates](#), experts believe that the new missile gives North Korea the capability to deliver a 1,000 kg payload to any point on the U.S. mainland. Pyongyang almost certainly has the capability to produce warheads that weigh 700 kg, if not considerably less.

This is a dramatic change of the status quo that directly oversteps a redline that Trump established in January, when he [tweeted](#) that he wouldn't allow North Korea to complete the development of their ICBM program.

As with most things, Trump did not take the news particularly well. The American president escalated his war of words with Kim Jong-Un, [calling him](#) "a sick puppy" and vowed to impose "additional major sanctions" on North Korea. Unfortunately, that isn't much of a plan. Successfully applying additional sanctions will require direct intervention from Beijing, as China is by far North Korea's largest remaining trading partner. There is very little reason to expect that will happen.

There is a popular myth in Washington that China will magically fix America's North Korea problem. According to that narrative, China simply needs to step up its game and put more pressure on North Korea to rein in its bad behavior. This myth permeates American politics, and pops up like a jack-in-the-box every time there is a flare up in tensions with North Korea. For the United States, the penultimate goal is to achieve denuclearization of the Korean peninsula by any means necessary. This includes regime change in the North. For the United States, this isn't which isn't just an acceptable outcome, it's the preferred outcome.

This is a nightmare scenario for China. Although Beijing shares the goal of denuclearizing the Korean peninsula, this objective is secondary to maintaining strategic stability in North Korea. From China's perspective, the only thing worse than a nuclear North Korea is a collapse of the Kim regime, and subsequent unification of the peninsula on South Korean terms. If this were to happen, millions of refugees would likely pour across China's southern border, placing enormous financial strains on China's economy and destabilizing its southern provinces.

Perhaps most significantly, it would bring South Korean and American troops to China's doorstep. That is a scenario that Beijing simply cannot allow to pan out.

Applying additional sanctions would make that risk very real. North Korea has already been under heavy UN sanctions for decades, and China fears it is getting close to the breaking point.

Shortly after the latest missile test, Trump [called president](#) Xi Jinping to try to convince him that it was time for China to cut off oil supplies to North Korea. Perhaps the most [blunt assessment](#) came from U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham. "Here's the only option that I can see that would possibly work, is if China basically cut off the energy that North Korea needs to survive or threaten to do so."

This is a pipe dream. Until the United States reconciles its national security interests on North Korea with China's it is a naive ask. China could of course take a page from the Trump playbook and issue an empty threat to cut off the North's oil supply, but that would violate the golden rule of international relations. Never draw a red line that you aren't prepared to enforce.

Given that reality, there is only one option left on the table. Deterrence. It's not a pretty option, but it is the best one we have for managing the crisis and gradually working to eliminate North Korea's nuclear weapons program. For more than 70 years deterrence has been attributed with preventing a nuclear war. There is no reason to believe that the same strategy cannot be applied to North Korea.

Yet the Trump administration insists that deterrence is non-option. Instead, it continues to seek instant gratification pledges to denuclearize the North, by force if necessary. Combined with president Trump's erratic temper and childish insults, this is a recipe for disaster.

The odds of North Korea and the United States stumbling into war have increased dramatically in recent months. Some experts put that figure as high as [50 percent](#), and as U.S. National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster [recently pointed](#) out "it's increasing every day." That is not only deeply disturbing, it is also completely unnecessary.

North Korea has been a de facto nuclear weapons state since it conducted its first nuclear weapons test in 2006. Its goal of developing ICBM capabilities has been apparent for just as long. The only wildcard is the United States. The Trump administration needs to deal with the North Korean regime as it is, not as it wishes it could be. Failure could have catastrophic consequences.



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