

THIS WEEK IN ASIA



TOPIC NORTH KOREA

WHAT WOULD CHINA DO IF NORTH KOREA AND THE UNITED STATES GO TO WAR?

Singapore's ambassador at large Bilahari Kausikan gives his views on the North Korean nuclear crisis, the rise of China and the potential for conflict between Beijing and New Delhi

BY BILAHARI KAUSIKAN

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This is an edited excerpt of an interview with Singapore's ambassador at large, Bilahari Kausikan, by the international affairs magazine Global Brief. Bilahari served as the permanent secretary of the Lion City's foreign ministry from 2010 to 2013. He has held various senior positions in the ministry, including as the city state's permanent representative in the United Nations and ambassador to Russia. The original article can be found [here](http://globalbrief.ca/blog/2017/09/05/on-north-korea-china-and-asia-pacific-futures/). (<http://globalbrief.ca/blog/2017/09/05/on-north-korea-china-and-asia-pacific-futures/>)

ON NORTH KOREA

Question: How should we understand China's position on the North Korean crisis?

Bilahari: First of all, we should understand China's bottom line position on [North Korea](http://www.scmp.com/topics/north-korea) (<http://www.scmp.com/topics/north-korea>). The Chinese and the North Koreans have never loved each other, and mutual distrust has grown under [Kim Jong-un](http://www.scmp.com/topics/kim-jong-un) (<http://www.scmp.com/topics/kim-jong-un>), whose aggressive pursuit of an intercontinental ballistic missile capable of delivering a nuclear weapon to the continental US has diminished Chinese security – for example, through the deployment of the Terminal High-Altitude Air Defence (THAAD) system in South Korea.

Still, North Korea poses a dilemma to which Beijing has no solution. Although Beijing has economic leverage over North Korea, it cannot deploy that leverage to the extent that there is a risk the regime in Pyongyang will collapse.

WATCH: US versus North Korea: Beijing residents have their say



But to stop North Korea's nuclear weapon and missile programmes (<http://www.scmp.com/northkoreanuclear>) will certainly require pressures of that magnitude. Pyongyang considers its nuclear weapon and missile programmes to be existential in nature – vital and irreplaceable requirements of regime survival.

Since what is at stake for Pyongyang is regime survival, no sub-existential pressures will dissuade North Korea from pursuing such programmes – that is, every other cost that could be imposed by China or anyone else is necessarily a lesser cost.

How can the Chinese Communist Party (<http://www.scmp.com/topics/chinas-communist-party>) (CCP), at a time when it is already feeling internally insecure for a variety of reasons (including because of the cadre shake-up caused by Xi Jinping (<http://www.scmp.com/topics/xi-jinping>)'s anti-corruption campaign), be complicit in the regime change of a fellow Leninist state?

There are, after all, only five Leninist states left in the world – China, North Korea, Vietnam, Cuba and Laos. If the CCP is seen to be complicit in the destruction of a fellow Leninist state, that could – and indeed probably will – give the Chinese people very bad ideas about their own system.



Diplomats at an emergency UN Security Council meeting raise their hands as they vote yes to impose restrictions on exports of crude oil and petroleum products to North Korea. Photo: Kyodo

For the CCP, that is just too great a risk. The most vital of all Beijing's core interests is the preservation of CCP rule. Measured against that interest, all other risks and interests are of a second order. So while the Chinese may go along with UN Security Council sanctions and signal their displeasure to Pyongyang in other ways, what the Chinese will do on North Korea will always fall short of American expectations, and short of what it will take to stop Pyongyang's nuclear weapon and missile programmes. This is a reality that the American [government] only recently and reluctantly has come to recognise, even if I do not think that most Americans have entirely accepted it yet.

Question: What will China do if North Korea attacks the U.S.?

Nothing. Or nothing much. Some Chinese media – notably the *Global Times* – said, after Kim Jong-un had threatened to bracket Guam with missiles, that if North Korea started a war with the US, it was on its own. The Chinese know that a war with the US would jeopardise the most core of their core interests – namely, the preservation of CCP rule – because such a war cannot have a favourable outcome for China.

Question: What will China do if the U.S. attacks North Korea?

For the same reason – the preservation of CCP rule – China must respond in some way if the US attacks North Korea. Beijing cannot stand idly by while the US effects regime change in a fellow Leninist state. The legitimacy of CCP rule is at stake.

That is why Maoist China, although infinitely weaker than contemporary China, had to respond during the Korean War and send signals to the US that it had no choice but to do so. Unfortunately, those signals were not heeded.

At the same time, I think the Chinese will limit their response, as they will not want to get into a full-fledged fight with the US – a fight they know they cannot win.

WATCH: Trump counters North Korea threat with 'fire and fury'



The Chinese will therefore do what they can, short of risking regime change in Pyongyang, to stave off such an American action.

The Trump administration's approach to North Korea and its actions in other theatres, such as bombing Syria while President Trump dined with Xi Jinping, have done much to restore the credibility of American power. Indeed, President Trump has a valid point when he says that unpredictability is an asset. The US under Obama was far too predictable.

[Bilahari Kausikan interview in full](#) →

Question: Is there an 'exit' to the Korean crisis? What is it?

There is no 'exit' if by that we mean denuclearisation. That is a pipe-dream. It is too late to stop North Korea from eventually getting the capabilities that it seeks. It can be delayed, but it will eventually get what it wants. So the only way to deal with North Korea is how you have dealt with all nuclear weapon states: through deterrence.

The North Korean leadership may be very brutal, but it is not mad. Pyongyang is rational and therefore can be deterred. Since its goal is regime survival, once it has the capability that it believes it needs to ensure regime survival, there is no reason for it to risk its own survival.

Of course, a peace treaty with North Korea would allow deterrence to be maintained at a lower level of tension. This is an idea worth pursuing seriously in tandem with maintaining deterrence through a show of overwhelming force. If I have understood statements by President Trump and US Secretary of State Tillerson correctly, this is something to which the US administration is open.



Chinese President Xi Jinping and other senior leaders – Li Keqiang, Zhang Dejiang, Yu Zhengsheng, Liu Yunshan, Wang Qishan and Zhang Gaoli – attend a reception to celebrate the 90th founding anniversary of the People's Liberation Army. Photo: Xinhua

ON CHINA'S FUTURE

Question: What are the key economic and general governance challenges for China over the next three years?

The key issue confronting China is how to take economic reforms to the next stage, while maintaining central CCP control. Everything else is only a matter of detail.

Question: How would you describe the mentality of today's Chinese strategic elites or leaders, as compared with Western or Russian strategic elites? What about the mentality of the next generation of Chinese strategic elites?

Comparisons are always invidious, so let me just speak about China. The current Chinese leadership is both very confident and somewhat insecure – confidence and insecurity being two sides of a single coin and the consequence of justifiable pride in what China has achieved, as well as an acute awareness of China's internal and external vulnerabilities. This makes China's leaders ambitious but prudent – which in turn makes for stability.

My fear about the next generation, however, is that they will begin to believe their own propaganda about China's rise meaning America's inevitable decline. And it is when you believe your own propaganda that miscalculations occur.

It is simply not true that America is on a trajectory of absolute decline. The changes in the distribution of global power are relative, not absolute. And while the US will never be as pre-eminent as before, American society remains highly resilient and creative. Of course, if we judge the US only by what happens in Washington, DC, we might be forgiven for overstating or oversimplifying the country's decline. But while American politics are now somewhat dysfunctional, the most important things in the US quite often take place outside of the political capital: in the 50 states, in research laboratories, in universities and in corporations. Indeed, all those who have underestimated American creativity and resilience in the past have come to regret it.

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Having said this, it would also be a mistake to underestimate Chinese creativity, or Indian or Japanese or European creativity, or indeed Russian stamina and political will. It would be a mistake, too, to see this as just a simple binary, zero-sum situation between the US and China, where one country's gain is necessarily the other country's loss. The situation may not be quite multipolar – if by that we imply a rough parity between the various poles. It will instead be far messier for some time still, where it will be difficult for any pole – whether the US or China or any other country – to act unilaterally. This is a situation akin to what Ian Bremmer has called a “G-Zero world”.

For the last 200 years or so, the basic issue confronting the non-Western world was how to adapt to a Western-dominated international order. That order is now being changed by the very success of some non-Western states – China being the most notable, but by no means the only example: Meiji Japan led the way, only to be joined subsequently by the so-called Asian Tigers and India, in adapting to the Western order. By adapting to this order, these countries changed it. But what will replace the Western order is as yet unclear. I doubt that it will be an ‘Asian order’ – whatever that may mean. Meanwhile, the interregnum may be very long indeed. There may never be any clear replacement of the Western order. We shall see.



A Chinese soldier next to an Indian soldier at the Nathu La border crossing in India's northeastern Sikkim state. Photo: AFP

ON CHINA'S TIES WITH THE WORLD

Question: Do you foresee possible conflict between China and India in the coming year or two?

No, I do not. There may be skirmishes, but both have too much to lose. The priorities of both countries are internal, and both China and India are mature civilisations – well able to manage such tensions and minor conflicts.

Question: What does China think of the present political situation in the U. S.?

My guess is that the Chinese are as baffled and concerned as everyone else. They may be a little gleeful to have some of the flaws of Western democracy exposed, but this is little more than a quite understandable and superficial *Schadenfreude*.

More essentially, while they project confidence, the Chinese are as worried as anyone else about the possible consequences for China in the event that the present US-led world order should fall apart.

When Xi Jinping stood up at Davos in January 2017 and delivered an eloquent defence of globalisation, it was actually a defence of the US-led order (for which 'globalisation' is a shorthand term) and an implicit admission that there is no real alternative to this American-led order. After all, China has been among the greatest beneficiaries of globalisation and the post-cold war US-led order. It follows that China would be among the biggest losers if that order should crumble or the world should become protectionist. And the stakes are arguably higher for China than for the rest of us, as the legitimacy of CCP rule rests on growth, and China's continued growth depends on the world remaining open.

WATCH: What happened to the 'bromance' between Xi Jinping and Donald Trump?



China cannot replace the US as the leader of the current world order for the simple reason that in order to lead an open order, you must yourself be open. Xi Jinping's **Belt and Road initiative** (<http://www.scmp.com/topics/belt-and-road-initiative>) is a bold and ambitious vision. But it is not a substitute for the current order because it plainly rests on the foundation of the current order. Can the initiative succeed if the world turns protectionist? Can it succeed if China gets into a trade war with the US?

Thus far, the CCP under Xi Jinping has opted for more central control rather than more economic openness or more room for the market to operate in key sectors. Here, too, China is in a dilemma. Beijing knows that the next stage of Chinese growth depends on giving the market a greater role in key sectors of the economy in order to make it more competitive. At the same time, the CCP wants to maintain tight central control. Can this circle be squared? No one knows. But we should all hope that the CCP succeeds, as I see no practical alternative to CCP rule for China. All the alternatives are worse.

