YJIA Podcast
The North Korean Challenge
An Interview with Mira Rapp-Hooper and Dingding Chen
By Rebecca TeKolste

The United States and North Korea have been closer to active war over the last year that at any time in recent memory. The unpredictable tweets of U.S. President Donald Trump and retorts of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un have both caused alarm and generated hours of cable news drama. This interview focuses on the interests and incentives facing both sides, as well as China. While U.S. policy seeks elimination of all North Korean nuclear weapons, China prioritizes stability on the Korean peninsula, even if that means allowing North Korea’s continued nuclear build-up.¹ Dr. Mira Rapp-Hooper and Dr. Dingding Chen spoke to YJIA Multimedia Editor Rebecca TeKolste about this issue.

YJIA: Why hasn’t some kind of negotiation with the authorities in North Korea happened already?

Dingding Chen: A successful negotiation would at least require several factors. First of all, you need willingness on the part of those sides to actually sit down and then negotiate on these issues. Currently, I don’t think North Korea is actually quite willing to sit down because they believe they can make very quick developments, and that it would change the whole calculation by other sides so they would actually gain a better deal when they actually wanted to negotiate with the United States and other powers. They try to gain some advantages before they really seriously think about the negotiations. That’s one changing variable.

Each country has its own different motivations and thinking in domestic politics, so it’s very hard for [the] three actors to sit down and negotiate a very successful plan. The Iran Deal can be theoretically a good example but given what technologies North Korea now possesses, I don’t think that they’re very interested in giving up their current nuclear program.

There’s also a collective action problem, as we all know; China and the United States do not necessarily see eye-to-eye on this issue, they have different domestic preferences, different domestic politics calculations, and North Korea has been smartly exploring these differences between China and [the] United States to gain some breathing room for its nuclear program.

¹ Despite the prevailing tension, at time of printing, President Trump was scheduled to meet Kim Jon Un in-person by May, 2018 in what would be a first for a sitting U.S. president.
YJIA: What are the priorities of the current Chinese policy towards North Korea?

DC: First off, the Chinese government wants to see stability on the Korean Peninsula. That’s the number one priority because China understands it’s very important for China’s own domestic development. The second priority for the Chinese government is nonproliferation but North Korea pretty much now possesses operational nuclear weapons, and that’s probably very difficult to achieve in the short run, but [they] still think theoretically it is possible to through some nice combination of carrots and sticks.

YJIA: [We often hear] how hard it is to know anything at all about the internal workings of the North Korean regime. What do we know?

Mira Rapp-Hooper: The United States has long had an intelligence problem with the inner workings of the North Korean regime. China has generally had more privileged information because of the nature of the relationship but part of the way that Kim Jong Un (as opposed to his father and grandfather before him) has consolidated power is to execute anyone who he considers to be an enemy of his regime.

I think number one: regime survival. Nuclear weapons are a great way to try to ensure regime survival for many states. Kim Jong Un is a young guy, he’s thirty-three years old, and he plans to die in his bed at a ripe old age.

Objective number two is what we have heard from past attempts to negotiate with North Korea: that North Korea would like to be accepted as a nuclear state. There is an objective to have the United States, China, other powers in the region recognize this capability as a real threat, and something that confers power on North Korea.

It may seem sort of ridiculous to conceive of but North Korea as far as we know would very much like to end up in a place like Pakistan. A country who was censured for having developed nuclear weapons has been allowed to sort of go about its business, provide for its security in whatever way it desires and also pursue growth in its economy as a result.

We do believe that Kim Jong Un would also like to perhaps come to a negotiating table for the purposes of having legitimacy conferred on him in that way. We also know that perhaps a tertiary goal is that he would like to undermine U.S. alliances in the region because he feels that they threaten his survival.
I think we’ve seen him actually do a pretty deft job at that in these last few months as he has been engaging in this war of words with Donald Trump. He has exploited the fact that Trump and President Moon [Jae-in], the new president South Korea, do not have great relations with one another. He has threatened Japan in a way that makes it obvious that the United States is not going to be able to defend Japan against every scenario.

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When he tests missiles that overfly Japan he’s demonstrating to Tokyo that the United States cannot save you from everything. By developing an I.C.B.M. he is trying to accomplish something that the Soviet Union accomplished during the Cold War, which is a phenomenon that strategists like to call decoupling.

It’s a situation where because an adversary can hold the United States at risk; they raise for us the costs of intervening in a conflict on behalf of an ally. Before North Korea had an I.C.B.M. we could enter a war on South Korea or Japan’s behalf without worrying that we would face retaliation against our own homeland under the threat of an I.C.B.M. The U.S. military and civilian decision makers necessarily have to pause, to think is it worth intervening in this conflict, and might the United States of America become victim of a nuclear attack if we do?

The I.C.B.M. itself is a strategy for trying to put a wedge into America’s alliances to try to guarantee this broader goal of survival that Kim Jong Un is so interested in.

*DC:* Usually when people talk about the reunification between the North and the South people would think of South Korea dominating North Korea, but from the North Korean perspective they are actually in a quite good position to achieve reunification under the leadership of North Korea, and presumably the young leader Kim Jong Un.

First of all, they would guarantee a regime survival with the development of nuclear weapons and, in a second on stage they would achieve international recognition or legitimacy [from] major powers including the United States, Russia, and China.
Finally, they would achieve reunification because they see themselves as a middle power or even a major power in Asia.

**YJIA:** In that scenario, where North Korea makes the first military move, what is the threshold for that happening and do you think that there would be a scenario in which South Korea or the United States were to make the first move?

**MRH:** North Korea has, since the end of the Korean War, engaged in a number of relatively lower level provocations. They have not escalated in ways that would provoke a full scale conventional conflict.

We generally think of a conflict starting if North Korea started it either using the artillery it has on the D.M.Z. [Korean Demilitarized Zone] against Seoul or threatening or trying to hold at risk a U.S. ally, perhaps threatening them with nuclear weapons. In the case that a conflict broke out at North Korea’s initiation, I think there’s really no doubt that the United States would be involved on South Korea’s behalf.

This would be a conflict on a scale so horrific that we have not seen it since World War II. That is what engenders my belief that ultimately no leader is likely to make an affirmative decision to seek this conflict, and I believe that that’s true of North Korea too.

We also have to think about the potential that there could be some kind of accident or inadvertent escalation between North Korea and the United States that would occur if perhaps this war of words continues, and then there is some kind of clash between aircraft or skirmish along the D.M.Z. where there is an accidental exchange of military force that spirals into something bigger.

In the case of North Korea, that is exacerbated on all sides by the fact that we are not in communication with each other and we know relatively little about one another.

The North Koreans have almost nothing to rely on in U.S. foreign policy besides the statements that are coming out of our high-level government officials – and we’re in the same position. We are looking at official statements that come out of North Korea, we’re looking at the words of Kim Jong Un and we are interpreting that as the sole determinant of policy, and they’re doing the same for us.

He is in a position of what we in the strategic community like to call ‘use it or lose it.’ He does not get to use his nuclear weapons second; he can only use them first meaning because there are relatively few and because if we the United States have
the opportunity to take them out in a military conflict, there is a decent chance we
could do significant damage to that complex.

**YJIA:** How likely is it that the U.S. would be able to take out every single nuclear
weapon in a first strike?

**MRH:** Extraordinarily unlikely. There is very little chance that the U.S. intelligence
community knows where all several dozen of them are located. Many of North
Korea’s missiles are now mobile, which means that they may not all be stored in
the same place, they could be moved around from day to day and if North Korea
anticipates any kind of attack they can be moved around quite quickly. Then the
additional consideration of course is that even if somehow the United States were
to be able to completely take out all the nuclear weapons, there’s still the possibility
of significant conventional retaliation, with 10,000 artillery tubes arrayed along the
D.M.Z. Even if the United States was able to put a significant dent in this nuclear
program, it would have to worry about the hundreds of thousands of lives that were
held at risk at the end of those artillery tubes even when that operation was done.

**YJIA:** What is the best policy option on the table for the United States and for Chi-
na in this regard?

**MRH:** I think any realistic U.S. or Chinese strategy starts with an acknowledgment
that we are not taking these nuclear weapons away. I do not know an observer of
North Korea who believes that Kim Jong Un is going to give up his nuclear weap-
on. The United States can formulate objectives and strategies to try to limit the poten-
tial scope of his reach and ensure that the region remains relatively safe and stable
in the face of that capability. To my mind, that includes a strategy that number one
relies on containment, meaning preventing Kim Jong Un from exporting nuclear
weapons, nuclear or missile technologies to other bad actors.

We know that North Korea has already shared nuclear technology with Syria, so
this is not a theoretical question of will they do it, but it is when they will try to do
it again, and otherwise trying to keep our arms around the military reach of this
regime. Containment also continues to include sanctions so that the North Koreans
are limited in the amount of cash, and other aspects of their economy they are able
to devote to their military programs.

Number two is deterrence, which means continued reliance on alliances, on mil-
itary presence in the region, on missile defense, and also on statements on really
clear careful public statements in the United States and in China that signal to Kim
Jong Un what will happen if he takes bad actions, but also signal to him that his
future is not in jeopardy if he does not take those bad actions.

Carefully formulated threats that also come with escape routes are an essential com-
ponent of deterrence. The final aspect is that eventually, I do think we will all be
back at a negotiating table talking about some form of arms control.

I don’t think we have a reason to believe that Kim Jong Un is willing to agree to limits right now because he’s still developing and perfecting those capabilities, but eventually what we would seek from him is something to the effect of tapping the numbers of nuclear warheads he’s allowed to possess, capping the types of nuclear weapons he’s allowed to possess, and preventing him from developing uranium weapons.

In the United States, we often treat containment and deterrence as though they’re sort of unsavory fallback options but it’s worth noting that containment and deterrence was the way we dealt with the Soviet Union for the entire Cold War. They take a lot of strategic thought to implement a lot of diplomatic and political and military energy to implement and these are strategies that we have used for handling adversaries for a long time.

Deterrence has prevailed in the Korean Peninsula since 1953, and in all likelihood it will continue to do so. ■

*This conversation has been condensed and edited for clarity.*
ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEES

Mira Rapp-Hooper is a Senior Research Scholar in Law at Yale Law School, as well as a Senior Fellow at Yale’s Paul Tsai China Center. She studies and writes on US-China relations and national security issues in Asia. Dr. Rapp-Hooper was formerly a Senior Fellow with the Asia-Pacific Security Program at the Center for a New American Security (CNAS), a Fellow with the CSIS Asia Program, and the Director of the CSIS Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative. She was also a Stanton Nuclear Security Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. Dr. Rapp-Hooper’s academic writings have appeared in Political Science Quarterly, Security Studies, and Survival. Her policy writings have appeared in The National Interest, Foreign Affairs, and The Washington Quarterly, and her analysis has been featured in The New York Times, The Washington Post, and on NPR, MSNBC, and the BBC. Dr. Rapp-Hooper was the Asia Policy Coordinator for the 2016 Hillary Clinton presidential campaign. She is a David Rockefeller Fellow of the Trilateral Commission, an associate editor with the International Security Studies Forum, and a senior editor at War on the Rocks. She holds a B.A. in history from Stanford University and an M.A., M.Phil., and Ph.D. in political science from Columbia University.

Dingding Chen is Professor of International Relations at Jinan University, Guangzhou, China and Non-Resident Fellow at the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi) Berlin, Germany. He is also the Founding Director of 海国图智研究院 (Intellisia Institute), a newly established independent think tank focusing on international affairs in China. His research interests include: Chinese foreign policy, Asian security, Chinese politics, and human rights.