

CHINA AND THE TWO HOT SPOTS – NORTH KOREA AND TAIWAN

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Abstract:

This paper examines Chinese foreign policy towards two key issues in East Asia – the North Korea nuclear crisis and the issue of Taiwan. The aims of this paper are two-fold. First, it will examine Chinese foreign policy toward the two hot spots in East Asia: the North Korea nuclear crisis and the Taiwan Strait challenge. Both have repeatedly attracted world attention ever since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. Second, it will provide a conceptual framework to understand Chinese foreign policy behavior, as well as the dynamics of East Asian international relations. In other words, this work will provide a theoretically-guided empirical study of one of the most controversial and topical issues in Asia-Pacific international relations.

The Korean peninsula and the issue of Taiwan have been not only key elements in Chinese foreign policy considerations, but also major concerns of the United States as well as other powers such as Japan and Russia. Historically, both places have been a battlefield between the major powers in the Asia-Pacific. One may cite the Korean War of 1950-1953 and the current North Korea nuclear crisis in the first case, and the Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1954, 1958 and 1996 and the current tension between Beijing and Taipei in the second case. It is clear that we need a better understanding of the historical legacy, policy calculations and the strategic thinking behind Beijing’s foreign policy moves on these two issues. Interesting questions can be raised such as: “Why did Beijing move from a passive position to an active role in bringing the North Korea crisis into six-party talks?” and “Why did Beijing refuse to give up its military option when dealing with Taiwan, considering the risk of military confrontation with the United States?” All of these questions need to be thoroughly researched to provide a better understanding.

In examining empirical data on Chinese foreign policy behavior, this paper also conducts a theoretical analysis to enhance our understanding of Beijing’s behavior. A central characteristic of Chinese foreign policy is what I call “history-embedded power politics”. This model includes three components: First, the importance of historical legacy and identity politics; Second, China’s pursuit of power and the subsequent rise of China since the 1980s; Third, China’s national security concerns and its pragmatic balance-of-power strategy. From these three angles, one can grasp the fundamentals guiding Beijing’s strategic calculations. That is, Chinese foreign policy behavior has been heavily influenced by its historical legacy, while it pursues a strategy that develops its capacity maximally, making it possible for China to safeguard its national security and maintain a balance of power in the region.

The examination inevitably covers other players in the region. Extensive discussions concern the two most important external players in the issue of North Korea and Taiwan: the United States and Japan. How these two countries react to Chinese foreign policy and how they interact with China figure prominently in Beijing's strategic considerations. Other key players such as Russia, ASEAN countries and the EU are also discussed.