

Why Does China Claim that North Korea's Provocations are "Legitimate Security Concerns"?

THE ASAN INSTITUTE
for POLICY STUDIES
CHOI Kang
President
2023.08.25.

Criticizing China's Claim that North Korea's Provocations are "Legitimate Security Concerns."

As August 24 marked the 31st anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between South Korea and China, we need to think about whether China is South Korea's "strategic partner."

During a United Nations Security Council meeting held on July 13 on the North Korea's test launch of intercontinental ballistic missile, the Chinese Ambassador to the United Nations, Zhang Jun, argued that the denuclearization of North Korea is possible when North Korea's "legitimate security concerns" are properly addressed. Ambassador Zhang's "putting the cart before the horse" statement that the cause of North Korea's provocations lies with the hostile policies of external powers, including the United States, assumes that North Korea is a 'rational' actor. China's claim is that the robber (North Korea) is threatening us because it is us who made his life miserable, therefore we should understand his actions. Along the same vein, we should accept North Korea's demands because our self-defense will only provoke him.

The international community's position on the North Korea's nuclear problem is different from China's claim. After North Korea conducted an intercontinental ballistic missile test in 2006, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1695, which urged the international community to impose sanctions on North Korea; the subsequent 10 resolutions that have been adopted to address North Korea's nuclear and missile provocations condemn its actions and include sanctions measures. On August 10, the First Preparatory Committee Meeting for the 11th Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) was held in Vienna, Austria. At this meeting, 74 countries, including the Republic of Korea, France, the United States, the

United Kingdom, Germany, Japan, and Switzerland adopted a joint statement stating that “We condemn the continued escalatory actions taken by the DPRK through a record number of unlawful ballistic missile launches ... threatening the safety and sovereignty of neighbouring countries, and undermining regional and international peace and security.”

Whenever there is a military provocation by North Korea, China, instead of persuading North Korea to stop the provocation, urged South Korea to exercise patience and self-restraint. Furthermore, China criticized and pressured South Korea for taking minimum self-defense measures. In 2017, when the decision was made to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile system to safeguard South Korea against North Korea's nuclear and missile threats, China responded with economic and cultural retaliatory measures such as boycotting South Korean products and banning South Korean TV dramas and music.

China argues that ROK-U.S. joint military exercises provoke North Korea and pose threats to the regime's security. However, despite the suspension of major joint military exercises until mid-2022 following President Trump's announcement after the Trump-Kim summit in Singapore in June 2018, North Korea persisted in developing nuclear weapons and missiles. Throughout 2022, North Korea conducted a record-breaking total of 40 missile tests, launching 65 missiles. China, along with Russia, has consistently blocked the discussion on North Korean provocations at the United Nations Security Council.

China has been insisting on “parallel progress” and “dual suspension” policies as a solution to North Korea's denuclearization. While “dual suspension” indicates the suspension of both the ROK-U.S. joint military exercises and North Korea's nuclear and missile activities, Pyongyang clearly violated this arrangement, but China has not criticized North Korea for it. Since the primary goal of ROK-U.S. joint military exercises is to deter and defend against North Korean aggression, the need for such exercises will be reduced if North Korea reduces its threats to South Korea.

The Armistice Agreement of July 1953 was intended to create a framework for armistice by specifying the “cessation of hostilities and of all acts of armed force,” but North Korea has violated the Armistice Agreement over 420,000

times since its entry into force to the present, and also carried out a number of serious provocations that could have escalated into a war. North Korea's provocations have included the 1968 Blue House raid by 31 armed North Korean infiltrators; the seizure of the US Navy intelligence gathering vessel, USS *Pueblo*, in international waters; the infiltration by over 120 armed North Korean commandos in Uljin-Samcheok who massacred dozens of civilians; the 1976 Panmunjom Axe Murder incident that claimed the lives of two UN-affiliated U.S. officers while overseeing tree-trimming operations in the southern sector of the Joint Security Area (JSA); the 1996 Gangneung submarine infiltration incident, during which 26 North Korean special operation forces infiltrated the Gangneung area and killed 18 South Korean military personnel, police officers, and civilians; the 2010 sinking of the ROKS *Cheonan* corvette in a North Korean torpedo attack, leading to the deaths of 46 South Korean sailors; and the 2010 shelling of Yeonpyeong Island resulting in four fatalities. China's acknowledgment of North Korea's responsibility in these incidents has been exceedingly rare. China instead advocated "exercising restraint" by both sides.

China's "parallel progress" aims to pursue the denuclearization and the establishment of a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula at the same time, yet for a peace regime to be realized, the Armistice framework must first be upheld. China's adoption of a "bothsides-ism" stance in response to North Korea's overt provocations that directly threaten the armistice is the denial of historical facts.

China does not seem to want to ease "legitimate security concerns" of North Korea, but to use North Korea's argument to induce the withdrawal of USFK and to unify the Korean peninsula under the communist flag in aiding North Korea. Consequently, securing a upper-hand position in the US-China competition. If China ignores South Korea's 'legitimate security concerns' while solely focusing on its own interest, China will be giving up its responsibilities and stature as a permanent member of UN Security Council and it will be difficult to expect a development of Korea-China relations based on mutual respect.

* The view expressed herein was published on August 23 in *The Chosun Ilbo* and does not necessarily reflect the views of The Asan Institute for Policy Studies.