

**China Law & Policy Interview with Jenny Town, Assistant Direct of the U.S.-Korea Institute (John Hopkins SAIS)
March 26, 2017**

Transcript of March 26, 2017 Interview

This is *China Law & Policy* and welcome to our podcast. Since January, the situation on the Korean peninsula has become increasingly tense with North Korea [test firing missiles](#), using toxic nerve agents [to assassinate](#) Kim Jong-un's half brother, and [announcing](#) that it has the capability for its missiles to reach the West Coast of the United States. Meanwhile, the Trump administration has responded to North Korea equally bellicose and frightening with threats noting that [no options](#) are off the table in dealing with North Korea including possibly preemptive strike.

[00:37] Are we on a collision course for nuclear war, and what role does China play in all of this? To answer those questions and more is noted North Korea expert [Jenny Town](#). Ms. Town is the Assistant Director of the [U.S.-Korea Institute](#) at John Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies and is the managing editor and producer of 38 North, a web journal and vital resource on all things North Korea.

[01:04] **CL&P:** *Thank you for joining us today, Ms. Town. Before we get into the current situation on the Korean peninsula, I wanted to give our listeners a little bit more background on North Korea. In the western press, North Korea is often portrayed as a hermit impoverished kingdom run by a dictatorial mad man, but is that perception true? Is that how we should view North Korea?*

[01:29] **JT:** Thank you. It's great to be here. I'm happy to be a part of this podcast. I think you're asking all the right questions. The problem is that the more we treat North Korea as a caricature and we don't take it seriously, the harder the problem becomes in the long run. A few years ago my colleague and I, we did write [an article](#) that talked about these myths about North Korea. It's not a hermit kingdom. I think at some point we're more isolated from it than it is from the rest of the world. There certainly are restrictions on information access and travel and movement, but there is a lot of contact with the outside world. There's a lot of trade that goes on. There's a lot of businesses, a lot of tourism. There's a lot of NGO workers and diplomats, and so they do have access to the outside world. Not the same level that other countries have, but it's not completely isolated.

[02:33] The idea that Kim Jong-un is a mad man is also a dangerous characterization because he's actually very calculating. The North Korean regime, even when Kim Jong-il was there, people liked to make fun of his sort of eccentricities. But when it came to state security, the decisions that he made were very rational. Sometimes miscalculated, but he's the ultimate realist. They're a country that perceives to have many enemies, and in the process will make decision on how to protect itself and how to protect the regime.

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[03:15] **CL&P:** *So in essence, we should see their movements as something that is rational if your goal is to protect the current regime?*

[03:24] **JT:** Yes, and we should take them seriously for what they're doing because discounting them is not serving anyone's good.

[03:35] **CL&P:** *Agreed. Recently there seems to be a lot of bellicose activity from North Korea. In the middle of February it test fired a medium long range ballistic missile, and then it used, I guess, what's known as an illegal nerve agent to assassinate Kim Jong-un's half brother at an airport in Malaysia. Then two weeks ago, it announced a successful test of a high thrust rocket engine. Then this week they had two failed missile attempts.*

[04:08] *Why are we seeing such activity, so much activity that seems warlike in the past month or two? Why now? What's going on?*

[04:18] **JT:** Well, some of this is a little bit expected. This is a time when the U.S. and ROK [South Korea] are running their joint military exercises in South Korea. Over the past year, especially the last year and this year, the nature of those exercises has expanded. It's become more belligerent and it's also included such things as decapitation drills and strategic over flights. These kinds of things always spark some kind of response and a strong response from North Korea because again, they do see it as more than just business as usual; but as a more provocative, more aggressive signaling to North Korea. Over the past couple of months, though, we've really seen an acceleration of testing and demonstration of capabilities over the past year.

[05:15] At the end of the Obama administration, when it was clear that the nature of U.S.-DPRK [North Korea] relations was not going to change under the Obama administration, we saw a lot of demonstrations. In the past, there might have been missile tests, but they [North Korea] didn't send out pictures of it, for instance. They didn't send out pictures of Kim Jong-un celebrating different successes. I think now they're clearly trying to prove capacity to the outside world. I think it was actually though very quiet from elections until inauguration and for a short time after inauguration as they [North Korea] were trying to figure out what to expect from America and if there was room for changing the nature of our relationship.

[06:12] **CL&P:** *Just to go back, when you were talking about the exercises that the U.S. and South Korea are doing, you're saying because those have become stronger and more belligerent, North Korea is taking it more serious?*

[06:29] **JT:** Yes. The exercises have been going on for decades and part of the function of the exercise is also signaling as to how the nature of the relationship with North Korea. There are times when they're much more kind of routine standard operations and drills, but over the past couple of years, they've been adding drills and expanding it. And on top of that, the messaging coming out to the media about the [U.S.-ROK] drills and to the public about the drills has really

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emphasized certain things like decapitation strikes and strikes on Pyongyang and things like that. So it's really become a much more antagonistic venture.

[07:23] **CL&P:** *Then [what about] the recent U.S. response to North Korea's actions the past couple months, especially with the new administration. So Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, when he was visiting South Korea this past month, announced that the U.S. policy of what he called strategic patience has ended. I guess can you first explain a little bit more what this policy of strategic patience is or was?*

[07:51] **JT:** Sure. So [strategic patience](#) was the Obama policy. Basically it was a supposedly principled approach that negotiations were only under certain conditions, and that in the meantime it was kind of doubling down on pressure on the regime to change it's strategic calculus using such tactics as mostly sanctions. And then also trying to bolster defenses in the region, so in South Korea and Japan as well. But it was largely dependent on this whole intimidation, kind of pressure and intimidation factor to try and get North Korea to change its mind about how it wants to move forward.

[08:41] **CL&P:** *Under strategic patience, I assume that the policy, whether or not it was a failure, was put in place to try to limit North Korea's ability to develop its nuclear weaponry. Was it successful with that at all?*

[08:59] **JT:** Absolutely not. It was a complete failure. If the goal of strategic patience really was to deter North Korea from developing its weapons programs, its WMD programs, it's a complete failure because they have completely accelerated their programs during the Obama administration. In 2013, for instance, they restarted their five megawatt reactor to help produce more plutonium for nuclear weapons. In 2010, they had revealed that they had a uranium enrichment program, and in 2013, we saw that the main facility that they had shown to U.S. inspectors before had doubled in size. The centrifuge hall has doubled in size, potentially doubling its capacity to create weapons-grade uranium or highly enriched uranium.

[10:00] We've seen several demonstrations of tests. Last year alone, we had two nuclear tests and over 20 missile tests. During the Obama administration, there's been four nuclear tests. So, if the goal of strategic patience was to deter North Korea from moving forward and making the cost of nuclear weapons programs and WMD programs so untenable that it had to come back to the table, then of course it completely failed.

[10:35] **CL&P:** *So then they're not going to come back to the table?*

10:38] **JT:** Well, I wouldn't draw that conclusion that they're not going to come back to the table. What I'm saying is that the policy is not compelling the right response.

[10:54] **CL&P:** *In terms of all this development, I mean I guess this goes back to the first question, and your answer to the first question about not perceiving North Korea as this shut in*

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country, where do they get the ability to develop this technology? How do they have the knowledge to develop this technology for nuclear weapons?

[11:19] **JT:** They've been working on this program for a very long time, for decades. They have scientists in country. We know there has been cooperation with other states. They've gotten information from Pakistan and Syria and Russia in the past. There's definitely plenty of people that they've worked with over the years to get to a point where some of it's indigenous, some of it's reverse engineering of designs that they've gotten from other countries. They're a very resourceful people, and I would go back to again your first question and tying this all together, too. I think the underlying premise of strategic patience was this idea that Kim Jong-un would never be able to consolidate power under a third generation of the Kim family and that all we had to do was wait them out, and that eventually the state would collapse and then we could deal with someone else. That's just simply not the case.

[12:24] **CL&P:** *No, it doesn't look that way. I guess since the Obama administration's policy of strategic patience allowed North Korea to develop its weapon technology, and it had all these tests and it's really advanced, just to put it in more perspective, where exactly is North Korea as a likely nuclear threat? What can it do right now to its neighbors in Asia, and is it really true that they could potentially in very near future have something hit at the West Coast of the United States?*

[12:55] **JT:** We did a [series of reports](#) last year that was a technical assessment of North Korea's nuclear and missile programs. And based on what we know or what we estimate to be their capacity to make fissile materials or to produce fissile material for nuclear weapons, we estimate the baseline for their nuclear weapons arsenal to be somewhere between 12 to 15 nuclear weapons. They would have enough material to be able to make at least 12 to 15 nuclear weapons now. Given the capacity that they have to produce more - their five megawatt plutonium reactor, their uranium enrichment facility - we did projections that with the worst conditions for North Korea, making it most difficult for them for instance, that even by 2020 they could double the size of their arsenal.

[13:57] By 2020 under mid-range with a little better conditions and getting their experimental light water reactor partially militarized as well, so they'd have more fissile materials, they would be able to produce maybe 50 nuclear weapons by 2020. Under the best conditions for them, if they have ample procurement, international procurement, and they have everything running in tip-top shape, at the high end we estimated they would have the potential to make about 100 nuclear weapons by 2020.

[14:33] We see them really now in those ranges under those conditions that are laid out in the report. They're somewhere on that mid to high range track. Then you add in the ballistic missile programs, and the fear is always for the how soon are they going to get an ICBM, an intercontinental ballistic missile. With the new engines that they tested last year and this year, [engines] that would be suitable for missiles and not rockets, space rockets, we're talking that

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once they have an operational capacity, that they would be able actually to hit the East Coast of the United States, not just the West Coast. What we see that is probably given the designs that we've seen in the prototypes that they've displayed to us, we would suggest somewhere around 2020, somewhere in that range. Some estimates have that a little bit earlier. It really just depends.

[15:36] But the reality is that they don't need ICBMs to be a strategic threat because our strategic partners and strategic alliance partners are in Asia, so it's South Korea and Japan. They definitely have missiles that can reach South Korea and Japan already. The big question is whether or not they have miniaturization capabilities. A lot of experts do believe they have the capability even if they haven't been able to demonstrate it. Given the number of partners that they've worked with and the programs that those partners have as well and how long that they've been working on it. We do believe they do have the capability. It's a huge threat, and it's a growing threat the longer it takes to be able to have a real strategic dialogue with them.

[16:29] **CL&P:** *I guess in that regard, I mean when Tillerson was over there this past month, he stated that he was going to leave all options on the table. What exactly do you think he meant by that, and is this harsher stance? I mean it sounds like it's a harsher stance than strategic patience. Is it good or bad for peace on the Korean peninsula?*

[16:51] **JT:** I think it's a little bit out of context. I think that the reality is Tillerson is not a seasoned diplomat, and so when he says certain things, he says certain things in ways that a seasoned diplomat wouldn't. The reality is right now the [U.S.] government is going through a policy review. And as part of the policy review of course, they're reviewing all options, including military options, including negotiations, and so they haven't necessarily come out with their policy yet. So part of what he was saying is that yes, all options are still on the table, but that doesn't necessarily mean that that's exactly what we're going to be doing in the future.

[17:41] The [U.S.] government is expected to be done with their policy review in the next couple of weeks, especially before the visit by Xi Jinping to be able to have some level of strategic discussion with Xi Jinping. But, you know, it isn't helpful for him to have said it either, again without those qualifiers, because it does come across more aggressive and more belligerent at a time when tensions are already very high. This kind of talk is very dangerous especially if that isn't the direction which we end up going because it already put the thought out there, and it's already sort of antagonizing the situation more than it needs to be.

[18:28] **CL&P:** *I think that's true, because I think of lot of the press already have interpreted that statement as also equating it with preemptive strike. How serious of a possibility do you think right now in diplomatic circles down in D.C. people are talking about preemptive strike against North Korea?*

[18:50] **JT:** I would say people are talking about it, and they're talking about it a lot. But most of the discussion about that's happening right now is why it's a really, really bad idea because all of the things that could go wrong in the process. Here's the problem. It's not even preemptive

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strikes. It's not like we're watching them load up an ICBM that we know is coming to the U.S. which would give us the right to defend ourselves from an attack. That's what preemptive means.

[19:28] What people are talking about now is more preventive strikes or surgical strikes. So basically preventing them from having the technology by trying to disrupt their systems; preventive strikes on say missile bases or missile arsenals, things like that. But, I think there's a huge miscalculation if people think that North Korea wouldn't retaliate. If the U.S. were to do something, North Korea is almost guaranteed to have some kind of response. The response might not even be directly on the U.S., but again our allies in the region. It makes it very dangerous. It's a very dangerous proposition, one that could easily escalate into war.

[20:27] **CL&P:** *You had mentioned the new Trump administration figuring out a more precise North Korea policy before Xi Jinping comes to visit Trump, and I think that's interesting. Because in President Trump's Tweet a couple weeks ago about the North Korean situation, in addition to saying that they were behaving badly, he also brought up China, and stating that China has done little to help. I guess just to start us off if you can explain a little bit more what exactly is China's current relationship with North Korea.*

[21:06] **JT:** China's current relationship with North Korea is not very good either, especially compared to past years. Under Kim Jong-il, China had a good understanding of North Korea and had a relationship with Kim Jong-il and could signal to him when he's gone too far. They had a personal relationship with him and knew how he would react to certain things. Since Kim Jong-un has come to power, Kim Jong-un does not have a relationship with Xi Jinping. He hasn't been to Beijing. They don't know what to expect from him. They don't know him. Everything that anyone is doing that's trying to send signals to North Korea, we don't exactly know how he will react.

[22:02] We knew how Kim Jong-il would react because Kim Jong-il had been there for 20 years. He had been apprenticed under Kim Il-sung for 16 years before that. Kim Jong-un only came to the scene a year before his father died. We never got to know him as the successor before he took over, and now that he's in power there's a lot of times where people say he's unpredictable. Well, of course he's unpredictable to us because we don't know him and we don't have a relationship with him. And we don't know how he's going to react. Too many people assume that he will react like Kim Jung-il did, but he's proven he's not his father.

[22:47] The question is now when are people finally going to take the time to accept that notion - he's not his father - and try and build a relationship with him. To try and get to know him and better understand how he's thinking and how he's going to react to things.

[23:05] **CL&P:** *I mean I guess also in that regards with Kin Jong-un taking over leadership and the relationship with China, it's been mentioned a number of times that he hasn't visited Beijing. Also, my understanding, correct me if I'm wrong, is that the execution of his uncle. His uncle was close to Beijing, and then also the half brother was protected by Beijing.*

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Are any of these things being done to sever even further the relationship with Beijing or to prove something to Beijing, or do we just not know?

[23:46] **JT:** It clearly has had a damaging effect on an already frustrated Beijing. I think that there's a lot of problems with the way that people think about China's influence on North Korea, and I think they really over estimate that influence. Again, under Kim Jong-il, I think it might have had a little bit more credence just because, again, they had a legacy of working together. With Kim Jong-un, it's a much different relationship. It's one of those things where Beijing does not want North Korea to have nuclear weapons either. But it's hard to imagine a scenario where they [China] have this secret formula where if they just did certain things, North Korea would fall in line and that they just choose not to do it.

[24:35] I think this is how a lot of Americans think about China policy towards North Korea. In the meantime, I think China has done a lot to try and address the issue, but has limitations on the influence that they have. They say this to us all the time. It's not like China has a China-North Korea joint army like the U.S. and South Korea does. They don't have a presence in North Korea. They can certainly send messages and send signals, but even the fact that back in 2015. Was that it? No, in 2016, even when Wu Dawei had [gone to Pyongyang](#) to talk to the North Koreans about settling things down. The fact that they announced that they were going to do another SLV launch on the day that he landed, I think shows a lot about how Kim Jong-un thinks about Beijing right now.

[25:41] And I think a lot of it is the relationship has been damaged as Kim Jong-un is trying to show he can't be pushed around. I think some of this antagonism with China is maybe also somewhat triggered by all this U.S. talk of 'if we just push China enough, China will take care of this problem.' I think it puts the Chinese in a very awkward position, but the Chinese always come back to us and say 'hey look we're doing what we can, but the U.S. should be doing more, too.' And the doing more part has to do with direct bi-lateral diplomacy as well. So without that factor, all we're doing is kind of skirting around the issue and just putting more pressure on an already boiling pot.

[26:34] **CL&P:** *I guess in that regards, with the situation today in the relationship between China and North Korea now, then how instrumental is China in easing the tensions on the Korean peninsula?*

[26:50] **JT:** I think China definitely plays a big role, but it doesn't play the only role. It's not something where if we just use China enough that China can scold North Korea and North Korea's going to come to the table. The other problem too is that even if China - and here's always sort of these clash of tensions - is that China's national interest is to prevent instability in the region because instability is good for no one. The U.S., part of strategic patience, they're kind of hoping that North Korea will collapse and that if we put enough pressure on the situation, we can get the regime to change which is sort of the path of most resistance and the most danger.

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[27:42] I think there is a certain degree to where China also recognizes that the more pressure it puts by cutting off, . . . Implementing sanctions is one thing, but a lot of people think 'well if China just cuts off North Korea and all trade and all oil and all goods, that North Korea again will just bend over, and will come running back and beg for forgiveness kind of thing,' but I think the problem is that that scenario is very unlikely. Even if China does that, North Korea's more likely to be more belligerent. Belligerent could be belligerent towards China as well, so you never know. We talk about this a lot these days: be careful what you wish for. Getting China to cut off North Korea could go one way in a positive way. It could go really bad as well.

[28:46] **CL&P:** *When Xi Jinping meets with President Trump, what do you think he'll be asking the U.S. to do with North Korea? What do you think his request will be?*

[28:57] **JT:** I'm almost positive he's going to tell the U.S. that negotiations have to be part of any new policy. For instance if you look at the U.N. Security Council resolutions, when the U.S. talks about the U.N. SPR [2270](#) or [1718](#) or [2048](#), all the different resolutions now, they always talk about the sanctions resolution. In the last round, in the 2270 resolutions for instance, in those negotiations, I think people came away thinking 'wow China really agreed to some tougher measures.' We're kind of impressed that China agreed to these tougher measures definitely sending signals to Pyongyang that they were unhappy with Pyongyang's behavior.

[29:55] When the Chinese talk about 2270, they talk about resolution 2270, not the 2270 sanctions. The big difference is that in that resolution, there's also a mandate for negotiations. So when the Chinese talk about these things, and in response to pressure or criticism that they're not doing enough, they always come back with 'but you're not fulfilling your end of the portion either.'

[30:32] **CL&P:** *So basically the 2270 called for not just sanctions, but also going back to the table, and that hasn't happened?*

[30:40] **JT:** Right.

[30:43] **CL&P:** *Okay. So what they're looking for, Beijing, is reverting back to the six party talks?*

[30:49] **JT:** Not necessarily. But at least getting some level of negotiations going and some level of engagement going because we're not going to break this cycle of provocation and response until there's some kind of diplomatic offer.

[31:11] **CL&P:** *In terms of getting negotiations going again, do you think that's even possible given the current regime in North Korea and what's been happening and also the language that's been being used by the Trump administration, even if Tillerson misspoke. Do you see that given the tensions between the U.S. and North Korea right now, negotiations are a possibility?*

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[31:36] **JT:** I think if it was up to the North Koreans, yes negotiations are possible. If it's up to the Trump administration, I have increasing skepticism that we're going to get anywhere. This is going back to your question of when Tillerson said strategic patience is over, we all look at the things that he talks about after that. Those are really just tenets of strategic patience. So again without negotiation you're still just doubling down on the same tactic and hoping for a different result. Even if you're making them harder-edged, it's still not a new tactic. Again, if it's been ineffective now for eight years, what makes you think just pushing a little harder is going to help?

[32:26] **CL&P:** *I know the new administration's still getting together their policy team. Do they have anybody in the administration that specializes in North Korea to advise them on some of these issues?*

[32:40] **JT:** Well, in the State Department, there is a U.S. representative for North Korea policy, [Joe Yun](#), Ambassador Yun. But it's unclear to us who else is working on these issues at this moment because there still hasn't been an effort to staff up the State Department or senior leadership in the DOD [Department of Defense]. There's still a lot of questions even here in D.C. that we just don't have answers for.

[33:12] **CL&P:** *If you had the opportunity to advise the current administration, assuming that it's goal is to avoid war on the Korean peninsula, what would your advice be?*

[33:24] **JT:** My advice has been pretty consistent. The fact that yes, you can double down on sanctions and bolster defenses, but without the diplomatic track, the situation is going to get worse. The longer it takes to try and actually try to have talks about talks and see what's even possible any more, the higher the stakes are going to be in the process and the more leverage that North Korea builds over time as it continues to grow its strategic arsenal. So if we really want to make a difference, then create a different relationship and one that serves our national interest, they're going to need to have some kind of diplomatic track and need to be able to shoulder the criticism that's going to come along with that from all the skeptics.

[34:24] **CL&P:** *The criticisms within the United States?*

[34:29] **JT:** Yes. There's always the arguments of 'well we've tried negotiations before, but they didn't work,' or 'North Korea always cheats.' Well just because we tried it before, does that mean ... Diplomacy is not a one-off, and it's not a linear path, and national security is not a linear path. If you don't have at least talks about talks to figure out what's even possible within the negotiating framework, you're losing the battle. You're limiting yourself as to what you can do. But these days there's so much criticism because we've gotten so far off track. Whichever president decides that the situation's gotten dire enough where we need to suck it up whether we like it or not and try some level of diplomacy, it's going to come with criticism, and they need to be able to deal with that.

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[35:33] **CL&P:** *I guess if you're leaving all options on the table, why would you take diplomacy off the table?*

[35:39] **JT:** Right.

[35:42] **CL&P:** *We talked about China, and we talked about the United States. I guess Japan and South Korea, I mean I would assume their interest is for more negotiations, or .../*

[35:59] **JT:** Not necessarily. You have a pretty hard-line government in Japan these days. They want to build up more missile defenses. They've even talked about missile interception and they sort of take the lead from the U.S. as far as that goes. With South Korea, it's different. South Korea, it's hard to tell what they will do next because it really will be dependent on who the next president is. Their policy could change drastically towards North Korea. It could be at odds with what the U.S. decides to do as well. Then that is going to really put pressure on the U.S.-Korea alliance.

[36:45] **CL&P:** *Well, this is a very interesting interview. It doesn't sound like there's any solution any time soon. I want to thank you again for spending time talking to China Law & Policy. Hopefully, people will listen to this interview, and conflict can be avoided.*

[37:04] **JT:** I hope so, too. Thanks for having me.

[37:07] **CL&P:** *Thank you.*

[37:08] **JT:** Sure