

China's changing approaches towards the Korean Peninsula in the late 20th and early 21st century



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Abstract

There has been clear shifts in Chinese relations with North Korea and South Korea in recent decades. This is evident as China has started to support United Nations sanctions against North Korea for its nuclear weapons proliferation. Similarly, China and South Korea relations has been changing for the better since normalization of relations between the two East Asian nations. Such developments include the increased economic and trade relations between China and South Korea. From a historical perspective, China has supported North Korea in its struggles against South Korea but recent developments indicates that China has shifted its stance. This thesis sees to examine why these changes have taken place. It uses audience cost theory to examine China's domestic environment, regional security complex theory to analyze the region of Northeast Asia to find explanations for these shifts, and lastly power transition theory to better understand why China behaves as it does based on the recent power shifts in the international system.

This thesis seeks to complement the current literature on Chinese relations with North Korea and South Korea by taking a new approach of examining the behavior from three different perspectives simultaneously. These being domestic, regional and international factors for why these shifts in behavior from China have taken place in recent decades. Each of the three dimensions is given equal amount of attention, and is attributed their own data and relevant international relations theory within this thesis. As China's change in stance is not based on a single factor, but rather overall developments, the analysis of this thesis takes this approach. The importance lies in taking into account all the possible factors for shifts in behavior, as this will produce the most conclusive results at the end. It is with this in mind, that this thesis deems it imperative to take into account domestic, regional and international factors all at the same time.

This thesis finds that audience cost theory, regional security complex theory and power transition theory all contribute to the understanding of why Chinese behavior towards North Korea and South Korea has changed in recent decades. But finds that there are some limitations with audience cost theory and powers transition theory's usability on Chinese behavior. It is concluded that Chinese behavior towards North Korea, has become more tough, due to China taking a more moderate stance on North Korea's behavior as China aims for regional peace and stability while emphasizing its good neighbor policy. For China's behavior towards South Korea, it is mainly seen as supporting the developing relations between the two, while also pushing its international agenda of increasing its influence abroad. Overall, China's

shift in behavior towards the Korean peninsula is to manage its perceptions abroad, while it continues to pursue its goals of influence on not only the regional level, but also in global affairs.

Keywords: China-North Korea relations, China-South Korea relations, securitization, audience costs regional security complexes, power transitions

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Introduction

Alliances and rivalries undoubtedly play a crucial role in international relations because are considered to be integral part of both traditional and modern statecraft. During the Chinese civil war in the early to mid-20th century when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was fighting against the Kuomintang (KMT) the CCP was being supported by the North Korean government in its battle against the nationalists. The North Korean government provided aid by transportation of materials and sending up to thousands of soldiers in support of the CCP (Chen, 1994, pp. 108-109). North Korea had, at that time, shown itself as an ally to the CCP which could especially provide aid in strategical areas such as Northeast China, which is near to the border of North Korea. Therefore, some scholars conclude that after the end of the Chinese civil war, there was a very clear alliance between the victorious Chinese Communist Party, and North Korea (Chen, 1994). Not much later in history, the Korean war broke out in 1950. At that time, North Korea was the party that was faced against a threat. A threat that would solidify the alliance it had established with the People's Republic of China (PRC). Furthermore, the PRC's participation in the Korean War in support of North Korea, also caused it to be an enemy South Korea. Although after the military stalemate following the Korean war, the PRC and South Korea did not engage in direct confrontation with each other, but due to the close relations between the PRC and North Korea, and the obvious competition and rivalry between the two Koreas resulted in China-South Korea relations not to develop significantly in the following decades of the Cold War.

However, in a more contemporary time the relationships between China and North Korea, and China and South Korea seem to have shifted into somewhat more complex manners than as portrayed in the past. At a first glance, such developments can come off as confusing. For example, two countries which are in an alliance are usually expected to help each other militarily or diplomatically (Dwivedi, 2012a, p. 224). Despite this assumption, United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1718 was adopted unanimously on October 14, 2006 as a result North Korea's claims that it had done nuclear tests a couple of days prior to this resolution. Unanimous support for this resolution obviously also means that it was supported by China (and Russia). UNSC Resolution 1718 included provisions stating that North Korea must not conduct further testing of nuclear capacity or launching of ballistic missiles. It also included economic and commercial sanctions such as banning members of the UN from exporting their luxury goods to North Korea (United Nations Security Council [UNSC], 2006). By supporting Resolution 1718, China officially took a stance that would hamper North Korea, which at that time was considered an ally.

These sanctions would weaken North Korea not only militarily, but also economically. China's response seems at first as a conundrum, especially when one considered the previous statement about alliances in international relations and how these are expected to support each other. As a result, academics point to this event as key to showing strains in China-North Korean relations (Albert, 2019, para. 3). However, such developments in international relations are not completely out of the picture as similar strains in relations take place even among close allies. Another clear example is the strained relationship between the United States and United Kingdom in the summer of 2019. British ambassador to the US, Kim Darroch, was forced to resign in July 2019 due to being denounced by US President Donald Trump over a leaked diplomatic cable (Rachman, 2019). Another great example of allies coming at odds with each other is during the Suez Crisis where it was again the US and UK who faced a strain in relations. It is clear that such deterioration of relations is not completely uncommon. However, what they do have in common is that they all get the attention of a experts and scholars within the field of international relations and therefore are worth investigating and examining further, to better understand the underlying developments. It is under this assumption, that this thesis finds the shift in Chinese behavior towards North Korea and South Korea worthy of further research.

As previously mentioned, the relationship between China and South Korea prior to the late 1980s was almost non-existent at least on the official level. Furthermore, South Korea and the People's Republic of China did not establish formal diplomatic relations until 1992, essentially making South Korea the last Asian nation to establish formal diplomatic ties with the PRC (with the exception of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste). However, despite this late establishment of official diplomatic relations between China and South Korea, the relationship between the two East-Asians nations have boomed since 1992 in multiple aspects.

Politically, Korean President Park Geun-Hye was the first South Korean president to visit China before Japan following a new election. Additionally, Park and Chinese President Xi confirmed that they would make joint efforts to denuclearization and stabilizing of the Korean peninsula (Choe, 2013, para. 3), a significant joint statement considering its coming from North Korea's archrival and its largest ally. Furthermore, scholars such as Zhiqun Zhu (2016) also argue that President Park's engagement with Chinese leaders prior to meeting US President Obama in 2014 shows political closeness between China and South Korea in the 21st century (p. 581).

Economically, China and South Korean trade relations has also increased exponentially since the establishment of diplomatic relations. In 1992, trade between China and South Korea was a mere \$6 billion (Zhu, 2016, p. 580). Since then, this number has skyrocketed and South Korea's trade with China in 2019 has surpassed its trade with the US and Japan combined (Korean International Trade Association [KITA], 2020). China-South Korean trade has undoubtedly been one of the key elements in which relations between the two nations has grown closer to each other. As a testament to the close economic relations, China and South Korea engaged in talks of the establishment of a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in 2012 and after several years of talks an agreement was signed by the two countries (Wang, 2014). The FTA went into force in December 2015.

Lastly, there is the strengthening of ties related to culture and exchange of people between China and South Korea. In less than 20 years of diplomatic relations, the two countries had established more than 120 pairs of sister cities and every week over 830 flights and 100,000 people traveled between the two countries as of 2010 (Chinese Foreign Ministry, 2010, para. 3). In addition, the number of foreign students in China in 2018 was close to 500,000, more than 10 % of these students were from South Korea, making it the country with the largest number of students in China by far (Textor, 2020). The people-to-people exchange is a yet another significant element which shows the boom in relations between China and South Korea. As China and North Korea's relationship in recent years does not represent much of which their traditional alliance was built upon and the fact that China and South Korea seems to have grown significantly closer over the last few decades, this thesis proposes the following research question for further investigation:

Why has China's attitude towards the Korean Peninsula changed in the late 20th and early 21st century?

This research question is based on the evidence shown above that there have indeed been significant changes in China's relationships with both North and South Korea over the past several decades. As this formulation emphasizes, it seeks to obtain a deeper understanding of why China has changed its attitude and approach towards both Koreas. Therefore, this thesis will seek to investigate this with three main factors in mind. Firstly, there is the Chinese domestic factor, which will be examined to see how and why China's domestic environment impacts these changes and shifts in behavior. For this aspect, the

theory of audience costs will be utilized. Secondly, this research question will be approached from a regional perspective as well, to explore the regional developments and its impacts on China's change of stance. For this approach, Regional security complex theory is considered relevant. Lastly, this research question will be considered from a global perspective, considering which factors of global affairs influence these new approaches. This last consideration encapsulates the whole world, whereas the second focuses primarily within the region Northeast Asia. For the international perspective, this thesis seeks to utilize power transition theory.

To answer this research question in detail this thesis will take the following structure. The next chapter of this thesis will be an overview of the current literature on China-South Korea and China-North Korea relations to illuminate how the research within this thesis can complement and further past research within this field. The following chapter 3 will contain a description of the research design and explanations of why South Korea and North Korea were chosen as case studies for examining Chinese foreign policy approaches. Within this chapter there will also be a detailed explanation of why the specific theories were chosen for this approach. Lastly, within this section there will be an overview of the sources used for analysis and which limitations there are in regard to this study. Chapter 4 of this thesis will provide detailed summaries of the theories of audience cost theory, regional security complex theory and power transition theory, which aspects of these theories will be used in this thesis and lastly they will be put into the perspective of the above research question. The limitations and criticisms over these theories will also be considered. Chapter 5 will be an in-depth analysis of why Chinese approaches to South Korea and North Korea have started to shift over the past several decades. This analysis will be done based on the empirical data outlined in the methodology section and a discussion of the findings will sum up the analysis. Lastly, this thesis will summarize its findings in an overall conclusion and will directly answer the research question in a short and concise manner.

Literature review

The purpose of this chapter is to present the previous literature regarding Chinese policy towards North Korea and South Korea. Firstly, it serves the purpose of presenting the already previous works that has been put forward and investigate by scholars of international relations. Secondly, this chapter will illustrate that a gap in the current literature exists especially in terms of explaining through analysis the changing behaviors of China towards North Korea and South Korea. It is from this gap, that the research

question of this thesis originates from. It gives this thesis the role of a complementary work to the already vast literature on the Korean peninsula issues.

Firstly, the current literature of China's policies towards North Korea will be summarized. Then the behaviors toward South Korea will follow afterwards. It is obviously beyond the scope of this thesis to touch upon every piece of existing literature, so the purpose will simply be to give a short overview of what scholarly work already exists.

There has been paid significant scholarly attention to China's behavior towards North Korea from a purely economic perspective. Through the work of Lee and Hong (2015) it was investigated why economic exchanges between China and North Korea had been identified as growing, despite international sanctions against North Korea (p. 173). As mentioned, such studies focus solely on the economic aspects of China's behavior towards North Korea and the general development of relations between the two. Such studies generate interesting conclusions yet does not serve similar purpose as this thesis. Lee and Hong (2015) concludes that China's decision to continuously develop economic relations with North Korea despite also sanctioning it through UN resolutions comes from its desire to obtain natural resources, transport infrastructure and foreign markets for its goods, while also creating an economic dependency concern for North Korea (pp. 197-198). While such studies provide valuable economic insights into the situation between China and North Korea. It raises questions on why China does choose to impose sanctions on North Korea if it also wants to engage with North Korea economically. This thesis can serve as an extension of such studies and bring the analysis to another level by attempting to answer such new questions.

Other works within the field examine China's relationship with North Korea, purely from an alliance perspective. Dwivedi (2012b) analyzes China's relationship with North Korea from an alliance perspective and concludes that while North Korea relies on China for basic survival and China's behavior to punish but not isolate North Korea is that it benefits China to remain allies with North Korea (p. 90). Such studies provide valuable insights into why China acts as it does towards North Korea. However, it is also limiting in some other respects. Dwivedi (2012b) emphasizes the relevance of Stephen M. Walt's balance-of-threat theory to examine the relationship between China and North Korea (p. 76). While the findings and conclusions are valid it should be noted that from a purely theoretical perspective, it suggests additional research to be done within this field. Balance-of-threat theory is a clear modification or development to the typical balance-of-power theory which is often discussed within the field of

international relations. Both balance-of-threat and balance-of-power theories are deeply embedded as parts of the realist school of international relations theories. Therefore, the works of scholars such as Dwivedi's works can be easily expanded, by adding additional theoretical frameworks to the analysis, to develop a more diverse field of research. Therefore, this thesis seeks to make use of multiple theories as previously stated to expand on the previous literature which are not so theoretically diverse.

While many studies focus on the overall developments of China and North Korea relations, there are only a limited number which focus on the issues between China and North Korea. The work of Nanto and Manyin (2011) emphasize China's behaviors towards North Korea based on the influence it has over North Korea, as North Korea is deeply reliant on China for survival, and China's role in the six-party talks which aimed at finding a peaceful resolution to the security issues as a result of the development of North Korea's nuclear weapons program (p. 407). The role of the six-party talks is somewhat irrelevant today as there has been no new meetings since 2009 and it is safe to say that these negotiations are dead at this point. In this regard, the current literature could use some reevaluation and further investigation based on the developments which have taken place since the end of the six-party talks. However, studies such as these also emphasize that Chinese behavior in changing its stance towards the two Koreas is not based on single purposes strategies. Nanto and Manyin (2011) delve into multiple aspects of explanations of why China's behavior towards North Korea began to shift in recent decades by highlighting security, economic and ideology as some of the major factors to examine (p. 408-414). It is the purpose of this thesis, to build on such studies by examining the research question from multiple angles while also utilizing more recent data on this issue to compliment this field of research.

In terms of Chinese policy towards South Korea, there is also a significant number of current literatures on this subject. However, the sheer amount of literature appears to be significantly smaller than the literature which focus on China's relations with North Korea. Choo (2013) sees China's developing relations with South Korea as a clear extension of the 'normalization' of Chinese development (p. 423). As China began opening its economy and reforming it began to look more and more similar to other nations. It is from these developments, that scholars such as Choo identify that Chinese diplomatic efforts also needed to change. However, Choo (2013) argues that incidents such as confrontation between Chinese and Koreans at the 2008 Beijing Olympics torch relay in Seoul and the sinking of the South Korean Cheonan vessel (this case study will be utilized later in this thesis) are some of the barriers which exist for further deepening of relations between China and South Korea (pp. 425-

426). While Choo's study does examine China's behavior as an example of its readiness to take a more leading role in global governance, this thesis deems that such investigations deserve further research. The purpose of this thesis is to examine why China has shifted in behavior towards South Korea, while the study of Choo is more of an evaluation of what China has already done. This thesis therefore seeks to investigate Chinese behavior more deeply, to uncover its intentions, through the use of a variety of relevant theories of international relations.

For overall relations between China and South Korea, there also exist current literature in this regard. The work of Chung (2007) examines the development of relations between China and South Korea from a historical perspective and argues that a shared history of suffering from Japanese colonialism and imperialism during the early 20th as being one key factor in explaining why China has been willing to engage South Korea in friendly relations despite being enemies as a result of the Korean war (pp. 12-13). It is interesting, that despite the Korean War being more recent in history than Japanese colonial rule, South Koreans tend to carry more negative sentiments towards Japan than towards China. However, such research puzzles may seem more relevant for the field of history rather than international relations. Chung seems to ask a question of how good relations between China and South Korea are possible in the first place, while this thesis rather seeks to investigate why China is interested in developing relations with South Korea. It is the purpose of this thesis, from an international relations perspective, to investigate why China behaves as it does. This is primarily because such questions can illuminate the intentions of one country's foreign policy goals. Chung (2007) does briefly touch on China's rise (pp. 92-107) but mostly focuses on the implications of China's rise for South Korea. This thesis therefore seeks to further investigate China's developing relations with South Korea from the perspective of China and its goals.

In recent years, studies of China-South Korea relations have mostly focused on the disputes between the two following the deployment of THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) (This will be explained further in the analysis of this paper), and not on overall developing relations in general. Such scholarly work purely emphasizes the relationship between China, South Korea and the US while excluding other key actors. Such studies conclude that China's engagement with South Korea over issues such as THAAD can be seen as pressure to infringe on South Korea's sovereign rights and reinforce that while developing relations between China and South Korea is within the goal of Chinese foreign policy, pressure from China hinders such developments (Snyder & Byun, 2015, p. 96). This thesis seeks to expand on such analyses, through the inclusion of theories and data which does not limit the research to

Chinese relations with South Korea in the scope of US involvement in the region. Therefore this thesis will seek to analyze the situation from domestic, regional and international perspectives simultaneously, to illuminate a more thorough investigation of Chinese behavior. Detailed studies such as these provided by Snyder and Byun are however of great use for analysis on specific issues, but they may not be completely accurate in terms of generalization. However, Snyder and Byun (2015) does an excellent job of giving an overview of China-South Korea relations, although within a limited period of 4 months, highlighting every single piece of development taken place between China and South Korea (pp. 97-100). These are incredibly valuable, as they not only record significant events that take place in the past, but also provide an overview of events for new scholars within the field, making it simple to achieve an understanding of what has taken place.

Some literature also exist which focus on China's view on the potential unification of the Korean Peninsula. Yi (2002) argues that China's increasing developing relations with South Korea signal a shift of post-cold war Chinese foreign policy from a Washington-Moscow-Beijing triangle focus to a more regional approach (p. 315). Yi (2002) also argues that China's responsibility as a country that is ready to play a constructive role in international affairs is one of three major needs for China's foreign policy and security policy and the most difficult to achieve (p. 320). The author of this thesis agrees with these points and arguments. The purpose of this thesis is to build upon the studies such as these and contribute with new data and analysis to verify these findings and give them more credibility (or falsify these conclusions if that would be the case). The author of this thesis argues that there are great insights which can be gathered by analyzing China's behavior towards both Koreas at the same time, rather than picking one over the other. Such analyses can contribute to better understandings of China behavior from not only a regional perspective, but also a global one. It is in this manner, that this thesis identifies a gap in the contemporary literature which it aims to investigate further in detail.

It is clear, that much research on Chinese relations with North Korea already exist, however this thesis seeks to complement these studies in several ways. Firstly, by utilizing audience cost theory, regional security complex theory and power transition theory, to analyze more real and contemporary situations to substantiate such theories. Secondly, to shift the focus as some literature focus on the implications for both sides of Chinese relations with North Korea and South Korea. This is not meant to devalue such studies, as they provide crucial insights. The purpose of this thesis is simply to focus only on China, so that much attention can be given to understand Chinese interests. Lastly, many studies focus primarily

on China's relations with North Korea or China's relations with South Korea, while going into detail with one but usually leaving out the other. For this thesis, the purpose is to give equal attention to China's behavior to both Koreas and to analyze the situations simultaneously to create a better understanding of why China has shifted its stances towards the two in recent decades.

Methodology

This chapter of the thesis will go into detail with how the specific problem formulation in question will be answered. Firstly, this chapter will explain the research design/method which will be employed to answer the research question stated in the introduction chapter. Secondly, this chapter will have a section explaining the reasoning for choosing the Korean peninsula as a case selection for studying China international relations and foreign policy. Thirdly, there will be brief explanations for why the three theories of audience cost theory, regional security complex theory, and power transition theory were selected for this thesis' research question. Next, there will be a section highlighting the list of data chosen for the analysis of this thesis. Lastly, this chapter will feature a discussion of the limitations of carrying out this research.

Research Design

The approach of this thesis will be taken from an international relations perspective as it seeks to investigate why The People's Republic of China seems to have changed its approach in how it deals with other nations such as North Korea and South Korea as is evidenced in the introduction of this thesis. Therefore, the three theories selected as analysis tools all have their origins within the international relations framework of academic research. These theories will be further described later in this thesis. This thesis will first and foremost make use of primary literature to establish a significant foundation of data to utilize. This primary literature will for instance be white papers and other forms of official statements by the Chinese government which have been published on governmental websites. Further primarily literature will be quantitative data which can illuminate why the Chinese government appears to have changed stances in recent decades. An example of such data would be data showing domestic audience expectations of the Chinese government regarding these issues. Primary literature coming directly from Chinese official channels is particularly important as these directly illuminate the approaches of the Chinese government. In this regard, Chinese official state media can also be considered primary literature as these are regarded as reflecting official policies and state programs in their releases

(Britannica, 2017a; Britannica, 2017b). This thesis will therefore utilize as much primary literature as possible.

There will also be significant use of secondary literature within this thesis to complement the primary literature. Although the importance of primary literature is significant, important secondary sources should not be excluded. Secondary literature can contribute to the interpretations of China's behavior in international relations and the contributions of other authors can illustrate the multiple ways and factors which influence the behaviors of the Chinese government. Secondary sources include academic articles and books by other scholars, media publications, reviews and translations provided by non-original authors. Secondary sources must be assessed critically as these are probable to contain hidden bias, in contrast to primary sources where the bias is often more explicit. Secondary sources are also important to include because they can provide multiple different interpretations of different actions (whereas if only primary sources were utilized, the interpretations and arguments risk becoming uniform, homogenous, and undiversified). The purpose of the secondary literature within this thesis is to complement the primary literature in a way that deepens the analysis and find diverse answers to the posed research question.

Within this thesis, both qualitative and quantitative data will be utilized. The qualitative data includes those documents such as official documents by government entities (white papers, etc.), news media sources, academic works, essentially encapsulating all the data which are not based on numbers. The qualitative data is essential as these often go into detail with the topics at hand and can be analyzed to understand why the Chinese government acts as it does, based on what is stated and other interpretations provided by secondary literature. Furthermore, these qualitative data can more explicitly detail the positions of the Chinese government in relation to the issues and its stance on the Korean peninsula and the two Koreas in general and how it addresses the issues within the region. The quantitative data are also useful as it can provide statistical data for populations and other large numbers or groups of people, as is seen will be important with the use of domestic audience theory. In addition, qualitative data such as statistics showing economic developments between China and the two Koreas can further illustrate why China behaves as it does. Without a doubt, economic relations and trade relations play a more significant role in international relations than in the past due to the enormous developments of the global supply chain and the changes it has seen over the last 100 years.

The scope of analysis within this thesis will be limited to Chinese behavior towards North Korea and South Korea in the late 20th century and early 21st century. Firstly, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to

analyze all Chinese relations with North Korea and South Korea. Secondly, the analysis would be stretched thin if examined over a period of many decades as relations do not always remain consistent over large periods of time. Lastly, it was identified within the introduction of this thesis that a certain period where noticeable changes occur can be identified by historical events and development of relations. It is with these considerations in mind that the late 20th and early 21st century has been selected for further examination within this thesis.

Case Selection

In terms of the narrowing down of the research question, this study first finds that there are noticeable changes in Chinese foreign policy and behaviors in international relations. Then, it is evident that there are significant changes in China's approach toward the Korean peninsula. However, this thesis does not ignore the fact that this is the only region or countries which see shifts in relations with China. The Korean peninsula is merely chosen as the overall case study of Chinese foreign policy and international relations as evidence of changes are quite significant and clear within this area. Furthermore, within the field of international relations, there have been put much attention to the Korean peninsula as this area is considered to hold great significance in terms of geopolitics not only in the past but also in contemporary international relations and journalism focusing on international affairs (Lho, 1988; Sedhain, 2015). The author of this thesis recognizes the significance of the Korean peninsula and therefore has chosen this region particularly to be examined in terms of Chinese international relations and foreign affairs.

The purpose of this thesis is to answer why these shifts and changes take place, yet this approach seems yet to be too broad and unclear. Therefore, a systematic division of different possible causes for these changes need to be further outlined to not only structure the analysis, but also to narrow down the scope. This thesis suggests a three dimensional approach to this issue and suggests that analyzing these changes from three different aspects will narrow down the issue significantly, yet also ensure that sufficient ground is covered, so that little to no factors are left out which could explain why China has changed its stances in recent decades. The first aspect, and therefore the first part of the case analysis will investigate China domestic issues and policies and seek to illuminate if and how China's domestic environment affect its stance on the two Koreas. The second part of the case study will focus on the regional affairs of Northeast Asia and specifically the area surrounding the Korean Peninsula to explain how these affect Chinese policies. The final part of the case study will seek to consider the analysis from a more international and global perspective, meaning that what goes on with China globally and on a

more grander scale will be considered in how these affairs can affect China's changing approach to the Korean Peninsula. Each aspect will only be examined in the parts which show relevance towards the Korean peninsula or one of the two Koreas. The selection of these three areas serves the purpose of giving the analysis a particular focus, but additionally it seeks to ensure that all important factors are considered. For example, if the analysis only focused on the regional and international affairs, a significant criticism would be that these are not the only conditions for change in China's approach to the two Koreas, giving the analysis less significance as a result. After these three aspects have been examined and analyzed in-depth there will be a discussion to bind the analysis more closely together and to discuss and evaluate the findings. This discussion will consider how these three aspects interplay with each other and why each has their own relevance.

Theory Selection

This section will provide brief explanations of why each of the three theories of audience cost theory, regional security complex theory and power transition theory was chosen as tools for the analysis of this thesis. Previously mentioned, the analysis had been decided to be split into three major sections for further investigation, each section focusing on domestic, regional, and international affairs respectively. As a result, the three theories have been selected so that they each fit one part of the particular analysis section, that being audience cost theory covers the domestic affairs analysis, regional security complex theory covers the regional affairs section, and lastly the theory of power transitions is used for the analysis of the international perspective. In the below paragraphs there will be arguments for why each individual theory was selected for its part over other international relations theories. The research question for this thesis suggests that there could be a certain variety of answers and does not insinuate that the factors influencing China's stance towards the Korean Peninsula are found somewhere specific. Therefore, there must be great variety in the data that is chosen to be analyzed, in this case domestic, regional and international data are all included so as to not neglect potential important data which could affect the conclusions. As a result, the three theories have been selected so that they each fit their own data used for analysis. A common mistake made in the past by students of international relations when writing large research projects is that the theory selection does not properly fit the data selection. To counteract this, the three theories within this thesis was selected carefully to each cover their own section of data so that the analysis becomes substantial in each of its three sections.

Audience cost theory has been chosen as the theory to analyze why domestic factors influence Chinese leadership's decisions regarding the Korean Peninsula. As this thesis identifies three categories of factors (domestic, regional, and international) it also results in the data which will be analyzed to be categorized into similar categories. It is imperative to select specific theories which are suitable for the data selected. For the domestic part of the analysis (and the domestic data) audience cost theory was selected due to its emphasis on domestic audiences' reactions to state leaders' actions when dealing with international issues and disputes. The core assumptions of the theory will be explained later in this thesis. Audience cost theory was chosen because it emphasizes that when state leaders choose to escalate and then back down or by threatening, they bear the risk of facing criticism domestically. This theory can therefore provide insight into why the Chinese government has changed its stances towards North Korea and South Korea in recent decades, based on what its public expects and how it evaluates Chinese leadership behavior in international affairs.

Regional security complex theory has been chosen as the specific theory to examine which regional factors influence China's decisions in becoming more open and integrated with South Korea and more confrontational with North Korea. Regional security complex theory was selected based on its emphasis on security issues and the fact that scholars within the Copenhagen School has emphasized that issues of security concerns are more intense within what they refer to as regional security complexes. The core assumptions of the theory will be presented in the following chapter of this thesis. The theory was chosen to examine the regional factors which influence China's decisions as Buzan and Wæver (2003) developed this theory with the intention of giving attention to the regionalist perspectives (p. 6). Furthermore, regional security complex theory is seen as wider than others such as neorealist formulations (although neorealism is incorporated within the theory) as it includes examinations of structural perspectives (and regionalist ones) (Buzan and Wæver, 2003, p. 6). Essentially, regional security complex theory appears to be sufficient for focusing on regional aspects of security issues, which in turn have the potential to affect Chinese leader's behavior.

Power transitions theory has been selected as the theory to analyze which factors within the international system affect China's decisions in linking its economy and future with South Korea and why it seeks to be more strict with North Korean rogue nation-like behavior. Power transition theory was chosen based on its focus on great powers, such as China, which have the potential to challenge a sole superpower, such as the US. This theoretical framework will help provide an image of the international

issues that China deal with as it continues to rise. In the past, power transition theory has been used to analyze and understand the development of wars in the international system. The theory does not however claim that wars are inevitable when these power transitions take place, this will be further explained in the following chapter. The US and China is currently engaged in trade war, suggesting that power transition's assumptions about the international system are correct. Power transition theory can provide explanations of why China has changed its approach in recent decades based on its overall foreign policy goals and moves both in the past and in the future.

Data selection

This thesis will seek to use primary sources for its analysis to the extent this is possible. These primary sources will be white papers which are made available through official Chinese channels such as the governmental websites belonging to the State Council of the People's Republic of China. Primary sources will also include publications by official Chinese state media, such as Xinhua and People's Daily. Essentially, this thesis will use primary sources to the extent that these are publicly available. However, there are several limitations in terms of accessing the necessary data due to these not always being made publicly available and language barriers. To counteract such limitations, a significant number of secondary literatures will supplement the primary literature.

The secondary literature will be comprised of research papers found in relevant academic journals such as but not limited to *International Area Studies Review*, *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* and *North Korean Review*, in addition to relevant think tanks and other relevant scholarly work. The secondary literature serves several purposes. Firstly, they can support the analysis within this thesis, as these frequently make use of relevant theories to understand the ongoing situations. Secondly, the secondary literature is generally valuable in the sense that they provide insights from experts within the field. Lastly, this thesis lacks the opportunity in some regards to create its own data due to limitations which will be described in the following section of this chapter. Therefore, the secondary literature's data can instead be utilized to counteract such limitations. Overall, the primary and secondary will complement each other. The thesis seeks to use primary literature where these are available, while when this is not the case, it will instead look towards the vast number of secondary literature available.

For the theoretical framework within this thesis, the traditional works of the founding fathers of each theory will be utilized. As theories develop over time, modern and contemporary studies will used in

unison with the traditional works to put forward each theory individually, their relevance and how it will be utilized within this thesis.

Limitations

As with most research studies there will be certain limitations of what results and answer can be found. Firstly, this thesis seeks to investigate why China has changed its stance towards South Korea and North Korea in recent decades, in other words it seeks to find some clear signs, actions or factors which contribute to these changes. However, it is not always so obvious how decisions are made by the Chinese government and which entities can and do affect the decision-making processes. For example, scholars such as Gao Yongqiang and Tian Zhilong (2006) find that Chinese firms' approaches to influence government decision-making vary much from how western businesses influence their politicians. In China, firms may influence politicians through guanxi-based lobbying, money or quasi-money giving or by generally being respected by the Chinese government, whereas in contrast western firms can influence politicians through lobbying and campaign donations (p. 75-77). The Chinese approaches to influence government decision-making such as through guanxi networks (Guanxi (关系) is a remnant from Confucian doctrine and can be described as a personal connection between two people in which one person is able to ask the other for a favor or service, it is related to one's standing with another) which are often not very clear and transparent. In other words, it is often difficult to see which guanxi networks exists and who takes advantage of these to influence others in the Chinese political and business world. However, in the western world, such as the US, businesses influence over politicians is often more clear and transparent (although criticisms are that these activities are not transparent enough) because campaign donations, lobbying data can be found online on websites and companies are legally required to submit lobbying disclosure forms to the US Senate (Duffy, 2014, para. 6). Although lobbying in the west still receive much criticism as being unethical, it still is a very systematic and somewhat transparent way to see which businesses influence government decisions through monetary payments. The point is simply that, in China, it may not always be very clear who and how non-politicians such as businesses influence decision-making processes due to cultural difference between China and the west. As a result, it may not be possible to fully identify every factor in detail which influence China's changing stance to the Korean peninsula, however this thesis will take its focus on those factors that can be seen more clearly,

such as which actions are perceptions are being explicitly shown by government entities and other relevant actors, and the applying the theories to understand these.

Another way that important factors could accidentally be left out of this thesis' data would be the fact that some data may not be available in English language. As the focus of this study is to examine Chinese government actions there will be some limitation as some data will be released in Chinese and official translations may not always be available. To counteract this limitation, this thesis seeks to supplement the primary data, some of which may only be available in Chinese, with a substantial amount of secondary data such as translations by non-official but reputable sources, secondary works such as scholarly works examining policy-making decisions in detail etc. In addition, as China has integrated itself significantly with the rest of the world since the opening up and reform of the late 1970s it has also taken significant efforts in the 21st century to modernize and make its decision-making processes more openly available to an international audience. Such efforts include the release of many white papers by the Chinese government (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2020) and the fact that many of the Chinese state media is available in a variety of global languages, including English. This thesis seeks to utilize this data to their fullest extent to create a more substantial analysis based on the most reliable data available in English.

Other limitations would be in terms of the lack of possibilities to collect firsthand data. When one conducts academic research, it is imperative to examine the possibilities of generating firsthand data for one's analysis. However, a significant barrier to generating own firsthand data is the lack of access to Chinese decision-making entities within a limited timeframe. Furthermore, As the production of this thesis is being completed in the spring of 2020, there will be some limitations in terms of data collection due to the Covid-19 (or colloquially known as the Coronavirus) global pandemic. Social distancing and work from home orders are one of the most prevalent solutions to combat the Covid-19 pandemic, but this even further limits the possibility of generating firsthand data as it would not be possible or responsible to conduct personal interviews or to arrange meetings for discussing decision-making efforts. To counteract these limitations of data, this thesis will instead make use of the already preexisting data which is provided by not only Chinese official governmental sources but also the works done by other academics within relevant fields. The purpose of using already existing data is to create new interpretations to obtain a better understanding on why China has changed its approach in how it deals with North Korea and South Korea in recent decades.

Theories

The theories which has been chosen for this thesis are audience cost theory, regional security complex theory and power transition theory. The purpose of this chapter of the thesis is to introduce these three theories separately and outline their assumptions based on the authors' previous works and additional works by other notably scholars. The core elements of each theory will be illuminated and there will be explanations as to how each theory is relevant for this thesis. For a more detailed explanation of how and why these theories were chosen in the first place, the author refers back to the methodology chapter's section on choice of theories previously mentioned in this thesis. At the end of this chapter there will be a brief section which discuss the limitations of these theories.

Audience Cost Theory

Audience Cost Theory was first coined by political scientist and international relations scholar James D. Fearon in 1994. Fearon's other works focus on the issues of civil wars, international bargaining, and War's inefficiency puzzle (one of the key research questions which contributed to the launch of rational choice theory in international relations). Due to Fearon's contributions to the field of international relations he was in 2012 referred to as one of the most influential scholars within the discipline of the past 20 years by other international relations scholars (Malinak, Peterson & Tierney, 2012, p. 48). Furthermore, constructivist scholars such as Marc Lynch identify Fearon as the leading rationalist scholar of international relations theory and Fearon is credited with contributing to bridging the divides between constructivist and rationalist approaches within international relations through his works (Lynch, 2005, para. 2). Fearon's footprint within the field of international relations is obvious and this thesis therefore argues to utilize his theory of Audience Costs to examine the domestic factors which influence China's shifting approaches to the two Koreas.

International crises (such as the Korean conflict or Korean nuclear issues) are at the center of audience cost theory. Fearon (1994) models the core assumptions of audience cost theory as follows:

I model an international crisis as a political "war of attrition." The formalization is motivated by an empirical claim, namely that crises are public events carried out in front of domestic political audiences and that this fact is crucial to understanding why they occur and how they unfold. I characterize crises as political attrition contests with two defining features. First, at each moment a state can choose to attack, back down, or escalate the crisis further. Second, if a state backs down, its

leaders suffer *audience costs* that increase as the crisis escalates. These costs arise from the action of domestic audiences concerned with whether the leadership is successful or unsuccessful as foreign policy (p. 557).

In other words, a political leader who backs down, after already escalating, when facing international crises will inevitably be penalized by his or her domestic constituency when backing down becomes obvious. As a result, the ability of said leader to conduct responsible foreign policy is put into question. Fearon (1994) further argues for his theory that states in disputes face a dilemma in the fact that they have strong incentives to figure out if there are agreements all states would prefer over the use of force, but that states also are incentivized to misrepresent their own goals (p. 578). International crises (such as the nuclear issues of the Korean Peninsula) are therefore a result of this dilemma as the actions taking by states during these times are risky and provocative because less-public diplomacy may not allow them to reveal what their own preferences are concerning international interests or how to learn the preferences of other states (Fearon, 1994, p. 578).

Modern scholars of international relations have attempted to further the works of Fearon by further categorizing different types of audience costs. Kertzer and Brutger (2016) argue for the categorization of two different types of audience costs. First, they find that audiences can punish leaders who back down after escalating, in other words being inconsistent, and refer to this type of audience cost as traditional audience costs (the same type of costs that was defined by Fearon). Second, they argue for another type of audience cost called a belligerence cost, which refers to audience costs suffered by leaders who threaten to use force in the first place (p. 234). Whether or not one considers Fearon's early definitions or the more expanded definitions put forward by later scholars some essences of audience cost theory remain clear. Firstly, actions by leaders in foreign affairs face reactions by audiences and these reactions must undoubtedly be considered before any decisions are made. Secondly, audience cost generation is useful for assessing leaders' competence as decision makers. The historical norms in international relations seems to point towards domestic political audiences punishing a leader who concedes after having escalated more than a leader who conceded at outright at the beginning (Fearon, 1994, p. 581)

Audience cost theory have in the past been used to examine crises such as the Cuban missile crisis. For this crisis, Fearon (1994) argues that if the Kennedy administration consulted Khrushchev on how he would react to an American blockade or attacks on missile sites in Cuba, there would be two major

problems with this approach. Firstly, if Kennedy did ask, the answers given would be more or less useless due to Khrushchev's incentives to misrepresent himself. Secondly, by asking directly Kennedy would also tip his own hand by signaling what he would do (p. 578). This is where the dilemma and audience cost theory come into place, as states cannot simply act on information, they are given due to trust issues and incentives to misrepresent by other states (as these usually want a better deal). Engaging in a war have high costs and risks which incentivizes states to settle for nonmilitary agreements, but due to misrepresentation and lack of information these are not always easy to find. Therefore, states first become locked in a game of attacking, backing down, or escalating the situation further. Audience costs refers to audience reactions to these actions.

Experimental research about the truth of audience costs has been put forward by scholars such as Tomz (2007) who find that:

The research, based on a set of experiments embedded in public opinion surveys, shows that audience costs exist across a wide range of conditions and increase with the level of escalation. The adverse reaction to empty commitments is evident throughout the population, and especially among politically active citizens who have the greatest potential to shape government policy. Finally, preliminary evidence suggests that audience costs arise from concerns about the international reputation of the country and its leaders. (p. 836)

At this point it should be clear that audience costs are, or at least should be, a concern for state leaders and that such a theory can be useful to studying why certain countries act as they do in international relations. As the case study in this thesis focuses on why China has become more friendly with South Korea and more likely to support sanctions against its traditional of North Korea audience cost theory can be considered useful for this approach. Firstly, in the Korean conflict in general, the Chinese government could face audience costs by backing down on sanctioning North Korea for its nuclear weapon experimentation and not following along with other states, based on domestic audience expectations. Secondly, as the economies of China and South Korea has become more close over the years, the Chinese government could also face concerns from its business sector and other relevant domestic audience groups if it engaged South Korea with hostility (in order to support North Korea). Lastly, Chinese leadership also face scrutiny based on how it relates to other states, this could suggest

that the general public of China no longer considers North Korea a significant ally (or an ally at all) and therefore Chinese leadership adjusts its attitude based on domestic audience opinions. The use of audience cost theory will be used to analyze how the domestic audiences in China potentially affect Chinese leadership decisions in regard to the Korean peninsula.

Regional Security Complex Theory

Regional Security Complex Theory (sometimes abbreviated to RSCT) is a theory of international relations developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver. During the majority of the 20th century, some scholars argue that there was a scholarly consensus regarding the understanding of security, and this limited the scope of security to only military security (Sheehan, 2010, p. 148). The work by scholars such as Buzan and Wæver (the so-called Copenhagen School, an academic thought of security studies within international relations) emphasize a shift away from the traditional security studies as these works focus more on the non-military aspects of security. However, this does not mean that military is irrelevant for security, it very much remains so, just not the only aspect which is considered. This development of security studies emphasizes that security be examined as a social construct. As a result, regional security complex theory is generally considered a social constructivist approach, however the Copenhagen School carries roots that lie within the realist tradition as well. Williams (2003) argues that the Copenhagen School's central concept of securitization shows engagement with *realpolitik* which was developed during the 1920s and 1930s by Carl Schmitt (which later became crucial background for the postwar realist thinkers such as Hans Morgenthau) (p. 512). In Buzan and Wæver's (2003) own identification of regional complex security theory they state the following:

RSCT uses a blend of materialist and constructivist approaches. On the materialist side it uses ideas of bounded territoriality and distribution of power that are close to those in neorealism. Its emphasis on the regional level is compatible with, and we think complementary to, neorealism's structural scheme, but it contradicts the tendency of most neorealist analysis to concentrate heavily on the global level structure. On the constructivist side, RSCT builds on the securitisation theory set out in our previous works (...) which focus on the political processes by which security issues get constituted. It thus breaks from neorealism by treating the distribution of power and the patterns of amity and enmity as essentially independent variables. (p. 4)

Nevertheless, there are no clear distinction of how to identify regional complex security theory, as it is evidential that it relates somewhat to realist strands yet also shows uses in better explaining the actions taken by states which is common in constructivist thought. The theory remains useful regardless as it need not be strictly identified as one over the other to be relevant.

The core assumptions of regional complex security theory revolve around the assumption that international security should be examined from a regional perspective and that relations between important actors (such as states) exhibit patterns which are regular in nature and geographically clustered. In essence, the regional security, in contrast to national and global security, refers to the level where states (or other actors) link together in a close manner so that their securities cannot be considered separate from each other (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p. 43). The regional level of security can be seen as the extremes of both national and global security interplay, and this is generally where most of the action occurs. Such assumption was already developed in the 1980s when the initial description of a security complex was put forward as: “a group of states whose primary security concerns link together sufficiently closely their national securities cannot reasonably be considered apart from one another” (Buzan, 1983, p. 106). The definition was reformulated a decade later to deemphasize a state-centric and military-political focus: “a set of units whose major processes of securitisation, desecuritisation, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analysed or resolved apart from one another” (Buzan, Wæver & Wilde 1998, p. 201). This new definition keeps the same basic conceptions yet allows for the inclusion of different sets of actors and several sectors of security concerns.

Perhaps one way to make the definition of a regional security complex simpler would be to look at an example of one. There are multiple examples of these regional security complexes which have been identified in the post-cold war period. Due to limitation of space this theory section will identify just one such regional security complex cluster. The region which will be discussed is that of Northeast Asia as this is the most relevant region for the analysis in this thesis. Other regional security complexes, in the post-cold war era, include but are not limited to Europe (or sometimes referred to as EU-Europe), post-Soviet, North American, South American and central African regional security complexes. (Buzan and Wæver, 2003). The post-cold war era the Korean issue remained unresolved as the Korean peninsula was still split into North and South. Japan chose to remain in a partnership with the US although concerns of military confrontation disappeared. The post-cold war period has given more freedom of action of China

within the region, who at that time was experiencing rapid economic development. Buzan and Wæver (2003) argue that as China was given more weight within the region, the ending of the Cold War opened the way for an external transformation in Northeast Asia in terms of the regional security architecture (p. 144). As Buzan and Wæver (2003) developed their theory, they noted that no country in Asia had the standing to take up the role of an Asian regional leader and that Asian nations still were dependent on the United States (p. 179). The reality is much different in a contemporary time as China has significantly increased its influence within the region over the last decades as well as less engagement by the US can be seen. With current developments in mind, it seems that China is well on its way to take the responsibility as the regional leader in Asia. The role of the US as shifting from a protector in Asia to a balancer will be developed further with the use of power transition theory later.

Within this thesis, the regional security complex theory is relevant as it can contribute to the explanation of why China behaves as it does, based on the regional security complex cluster it belongs to. This theory emphasizes that is useful for considering issues such as securitization. Buzan and Wæver (2003) argue that the degree of security interdependence is more intense between the actors which are within the same such regional security complex and less intense between an actor inside the complex and another actor who is not (p. 4). This theoretical framework finds its uses in terms of the security issues within the Northeast Asian complex which potentially affect China's decision-making processes. The Korean nuclear issue and the potential of the situation between North Korea and South Korea deteriorating is one such security issue within this region. As both Koreas and China all belong to the same cluster (whether one defines the cluster as simply being northeast Asia or one also including southeast Asia is somewhat irrelevant as all three countries would fit into both of the definitions), there are clear security concerns for everyone within the region. If the situation on the Korean peninsula were to escalate into a new direct conflict it would pose certain risks and uncertainties to neighboring countries such as China. The theory of regional security complexes will therefore be utilized to examine why China has shown a change in stance towards North Korea and South Korea respectively within the last decades based on purely regional issues.

Power Transition Theory

Abramo Fimo Kenneth Organski was an American political scientist who is considered the founder of Power transition theory. As with the development of most international relations theories power transition theory is somewhat related to the classic theoretical framework of realism. Kugler and

Organski (1989) argue that power transition theory is different from realist as it rejects core realist assumptions about world politics (p. 172). These will be presented later in the following paragraphs. Others argue that lines between realism and power transition theory are more blurred as they both emphasize the focus on the origins of war yet acknowledges the contrasting assumptions between realism and power transition theory (Unoki, 2016, p. 16). Additional contemporary perceptions of power transition theory by scholars are that power transition theory is categorized as ‘hard core’ realism (J. Zeuthen, personal communication, January 2, 2020). The author of this thesis acknowledges the different arguments put forward by scholars. It is clear that power transition theory in some ways relate to realism (both in relation to similarities of foci and that it contrasts realism in other ways) and as with most theoretical approaches within international relations, it is impossible to escape discussions on how they relate to realism, which is undoubtedly the most prominent theory within the field. As previously discussed, regional security complex theory was also considered to be influenced heavily by neorealist assumptions, meaning that these discussions of theoretical connections are bound to happen with most theories. It is clear that power transition theory has maintained a somewhat strong connection with the realist perspectives due to both approaches considering power as critical variable for the international order. Nevertheless, the following paragraphs should provide arguments for why power transition theory is relevant for this thesis.

One of the core assumptions of power transition theory is that the international system is dynamic and therefore changes with state power and growth (these growth rates are considered imbalanced due to factors such as population, economic productivity, ability of the state etc.). The period following the end of the cold war was commonly referred to as the unipolar moment in which the United States remained the sole superpower. According to Keith Dowding (2011) a challenger to a superpower occurs when the smaller nation’s economy grows to at least 80 % of the size of the dominant one (p. 527). It should be noted that this theory was traditionally developed to explain why nations go to war with each other. Dowding (2011) argues that power transitions still happen in modern times they just do not lead to armed conflicts as frequently as they did in previous centuries (p. 527). There are several factors which could explain the reduce in armed conflicts such as the prevalence of international organizations, deeply integrated economic relations and global trade etc. Nevertheless, it is still clear that the question of power transitions is still relevant for the 21st century.

One way in which power transitions theory differentiates itself from realism is how it perceives the world system. As realism insists that the world system is anarchic, power transition theorists such as Kugler and Organski (1989) argue that the international system is hierarchically organized and that different actors accept their position in the international order (p. 172). Essentially, for one nation to sufficiently challenge another more dominant nation it needs to grow in power first. Organski (1968) presented in his original work that this is exactly what happened in the nineteenth century when the US and Germany began to see rapid growth and developments (the US eventually surpassed France and England and became later a superpower, Germany managed to surpass France and become somewhat an equal to England and therefore did not achieve the same superpower status as the US) (p. 356). The evidence clearly is in favor for the fact that power transitions do take place, but nations are not always successful in becoming the new dominant power.

Another key assumption for power transition theory is that it perceives the rules which govern domestic political systems and international political systems as being fundamentally similar. It is argued that nations in the international system, like political groups in domestic systems, is in constant competition over scarce resources in the international order (Kugler & Organski, 1989, p. 172). This assumption was traditionally not considered within the field of international relations. This is mainly due to the fact that while domestic political systems are dominated by domestic laws the international system does not have its own international laws to follow. Yet, scholars such as Organski argue that despite the lack of international law, the behavior between actors are still similar with domestic political systems.

Lastly, Kugler and Organski (1972) argued that international competition is driven by potential net gains which could be achieved from conflict or cooperation (pp. 172-173). This is a stark contrast to the realist balance of power theory (as argued by significant theorists such as Morgenthau) which insist that power maximization is the ultimate goal for states. Organski (1968) finds evidence that peaceful competition can take place when the different actors involved agreed that the net gains from conflict were inferior compared to the net benefits (p. 361-362). Historical evidence can reinforce this point by examining the power transfer of England to the United States in 20th century. There would be no benefit for England to confront the US when it was obvious that the US was surpassing England. The United States increase in power did not come at the expense of England (rather at the expense of native Americans, Mexico and Spain) so there was no reason for England to engage in an armed conflict with the US because the gains from a conflict would be inferior.

As power transition theory seeks to examine the transition between a dominant power (today this would be the United States) and an emerging power (China in the late 20th and early 21st century) it can be significant for use within this thesis. This thesis will seek to analyze why China behaves like it does towards the Korean peninsula based on power transition theory's assumption of a hierarchical international system. The unipolar United States is without a doubt under significant pressure from other emerging powers today. This is apparent as the United States engaged China in a trade war in 2018 (Swanson, 2018). As suggested by power transition theorists above, war is a common result of power transitions taking place in the international system. Although the trade war between the United States and China is not an armed one (this would contain huge risks and costs for both sides) it still illuminates actions of deterrence by the US to resist and contain China's rise. Based on these notions, power transition theory can be useful to explaining why China has changed its approach to North Korea and South Korea in recent decades as a result of the ongoing power transition taking place in the international system and how actors perceive a transition of power taking place.

Limitation of theories

Audience cost theory has faced several criticisms both in general and towards its use for nondemocratic countries. One criticism of audience cost theory is that it is simply not a useful way to analyze as some scholars argue that state leaders can avoid being punished by domestic audiences by pointing to new information, managing elite criticism or by making concessions in private (Kertzer & Brutger, 2016, p. 246). Further criticisms emphasize that the use of audience cost theory is more reliable in experimental settings rather than historical cases (Kertzer & Brutger, 2016, p. 246). These limitations and criticisms will be taken into consideration during the analysis. To somewhat counteract these limitations the author of this thesis would like to emphasize that the analysis of the domestic audience will only be one of three parts of the analysis of this thesis. Therefore, the results and conclusions of this thesis will not only rely on audience cost theory and data, but on two other theories and data as well. It is the intention that by expanding the scope and data that a more uniform picture can be created to the best extent to understand why the Chinese approach to the Korean peninsula as shifted over several decades.

Another core limitation of audience cost theory is that it in international relations conventionally is considered more useful in evaluating democratic countries rather than those which are nondemocratic (Kurizaki & Whang, 2015, p. 949). To counteract this limitation, it is important to emphasize that most scholars does not completely discredit the use of audience cost theory for nondemocratic countries

(Kurizaki & Whang, 2015, p. 949). Furthermore, others such as Brown and Marcum (2011) find that nondemocratic leaders are more accountable due to monitoring and sanctioning advantages of smaller coalitions relative to larger coalitions (coalitions refer to elite insiders in nondemocratic countries). These analyses are based on Cuban missile crisis (a favored case study for audience cost theorists) (p. 168). The limitations of audience cost theory will be kept in mind but there are still clear arguments which support its usability within this thesis.

One limitation of Regional Security Complex Theory is that the theory was formulated more than a decade ago. The regional security complexes which was formulated initially by scholars obviously look somewhat different today due to changes both domestically and internationally. One example is Buzan and Wæver's (2003) argument that at the time of theory formulation, neither Japan, China nor India were likely to acquire Asian leadership (p. 179). However, today China seems to be headed in this direction of taking up a leadership role in Asia once again. Obviously, it is difficult for scholars to project how the future will look like in terms of regions and the security concerns that exist within them. It was however correctly predicted by Buzan and Wæver (2003) that leadership by an Asian nation would become a reality as a result of potential US Neo-isolationism (p. 179). This is exactly what is taking place in contemporary time as the US has been withdrawing from many of its global engagements under Trump leadership.

Another criticism of Copenhagen School in general comes from scholar Bill McSweeney. Firstly, McSweeney (1996) points out contradictions within the Copenhagen School works such as the suggestions of deconstructionist agendas which he argues comes at odds with much of the other work which is firmly objectivist (realist) in nature (p. 82). McSweeney also point out limitations in how the Copenhagen school attempts to define security through a social definition (meaning that security is based not on material facts such as size of armies and nuclear arsenals, but rather on how actors interpret the material facts). McSweeney's (1996) argument is that the Copenhagen School's concept of society (related to societal security) is too unclear and that the complexity of societies as well as the forming of identities are ignored with their past works (p. 83). These criticisms will all be taken into consideration when performing the analysis later within this thesis.

One prominent criticism of power transition theory, particularly in its usage to examine the rise of China, is political scientist Steve Chan. S. Chan (2007) argued in 2007 that evidence did not support any claim that China would overtake the United States as a contender for international primacy (p. 121). S.

Chan is correct that in 2007, the conditions of the weaker state's (China) economy being within 80 % of the dominant state's (US) economy were not met. In 2007, the Chinese GDP was only about 25 % of United States GDP, however in 2018 China's GDP was 66 % of the US's (World Bank, 2020). S. Chan's criticism and skepticism seems somewhat outdated today. The author of this thesis argues that the criteria today for power transition to happen is more likely than a decade ago, making the theory somewhat relevant for this thesis. It should also be noted that the 80 % cut off is not a strict measurement for when power transitions will start to take place, it is merely an estimate. That is to say that power transitions still can be evident before the weaker state's economy reaches 80 % of the dominant one's.

S. Chan (2007) also disagree with power transition theory as he argues that it is not the rising 'latecomer' (China) that usually initiates conflict but it is rather the declining hegemon which in its anxiety launch systemic wars (p. 122). S. Chan is essentially correct in this assumption as is evident with the US launched trade war with China. However, when Organski and Kugler (1980) presented the criteria for power transitions they based those on historical evidence showing that it was usually the weaker state which was the aggressor when power transitions take place (p. 19). The emphasis by Organski's definitions and criteria should be on 'usually'. China has long stressed the emphasis that the world should consider China's rise as peaceful since the Hu Jintao administration (Guo, 2006, p. 228). These criticisms and limitations will be taken into consideration but there is still clear evidence today, most notably from the US-China trade war, that the current development in the international system is moving towards a period of power transition from the United States to China. Whether this transition will be successful remains to be seen.

Analysis

The Analysis chapter of this thesis will be divided into four major section. The first three parts will examine why China has changed its stance towards North Korea and South Korea in recent decades from domestic, regional and international perspectives. Each of these three sections are supported with their own data and respective theory to construct the analysis. The final section of the analysis chapter will be a summarizing and concluding discussion of the findings in the first three sections. The discussion seeks to review which factors appear to be the most significant or if they all share similar significance in shaping Chinese leadership's approach towards the Korean peninsula.

Domestic audience costs' influence on Chinese behavior towards North Korea and South Korea
This section of the analysis will examine how potential domestic audience costs influence Chinese leadership behavior towards North Korea and South Korea, respectively. The purpose of this analysis is to illuminate the domestic factor which may have influenced the change in attitude by China in general over recent decades in regard to the Korean peninsula and the two Koreas.

Firstly, this thesis will examine how domestic audiences view North Korea and how this influences overall behavior. As previously mentioned, it is not currently viable to produce firsthand data, so this thesis will utilize the data of others for analysis. A study by the Director of the China Research Center for The Korea Times, Sunny Seong-hyon Lee, focuses on Chinese scholars' perceptions of North Korea through interviews. Lee (2013) finds that about half of Chinese scholars believe the relationship between China and North Korea to be one categorized as 'dubious friends' (The Chinese phrase: '半信半疑的朋友' is frequently used to describe this relationship), 25 percent of scholars said that China and North Korea simply need each other for strategic purposes, while four percent of scholars considered the two countries to be friends and 13 percent described them as allies (pp. 61-62). Such studies show that China and North Korea are generally not considered friends or even allies in the eyes of most domestic Chinese scholars. From the perspective of audience costs, if the Chinese leadership were to back down on their sanctions of North Korea, it would cause some dissonance with the perceptions of Chinese scholars. Similar evidence can be found in the works of Zhu (2016) who states that through the interviews of two dozens of Chinese scholars and diplomats, none of them would consider North Korea as an ally of China (p. 590). As a result, there is quite clear evidence showing that Chinese domestic perceptions of the relationship between China and North Korea is not one of strong friendship or even alliance, yet merely strategic in nature. If Chinese leadership were to back down in punishing North Korea for its behavior in nuclear proliferation and threats to peace, it would result in Chinese leadership facing pressure from domestic audiences.

In addition, studies have been carried out focusing on Chinese netizens' perceptions of North Korea in recent decades. The importance and significance of netizens in China have been examined widely (Zhou, 2011) and it can therefore be considered a worthy domestic audience group. One such study was carried out by scholars from Lingnan University in Hong Kong by Che-po Chan and Brian Bridges. Chan and Bridges (2018) identify four types of Chinese netizens based on a political spectrum and describe the four types as 1) radical left, 2) moderate left, 3) moderate right, and 4) radical right (p. 21). This study

focuses on netizens reactions and perceptions of North Korea based on Chinese behavior overall to North Korea. From audience cost theory's perspective, Chinese leadership faces a loss from netizens based on its attitude towards North Korea not being tough enough. The radical leftist Chinese netizens have denounced Chinese authorities for carrying out an appeasement policy towards North Korea (Chan & Bridges, 2018, p. 30). Essentially, China's official stance of pushing for a peaceful and stable Korean peninsula faces criticism from the particular group of netizens. This group of netizens being the radical leftists, it is not surprising they would hold this stance, as these would not be satisfied with punishing a fellow socialist state and letting others demonize. These radical leftist netizens often hold positions that are considered Maoist (Chan & Bridges, 2018). However, there is a common overall theme within the other three Chinese netizen groups on their stances towards North Korea. The moderate leftists, moderate rightists and radical rightists Chinese netizen groups all agree that North Korea needs reform and opening up (though they differ on how this should take place in particular), and therefore denuclearize itself for these policies to come to fruition (Chan & Bridges, 2018, pp. 29-31). Essentially, these three Chinese netizen groups all show some support for China's stance on being more tough and encouraging change within North Korea. Therefore, if China were to suddenly back down and support a strong nuclear North Korea, Chinese leadership would face significant criticism and backlash from most netizens online (with the exceptions of the radical leftists). This provides support for the theory that domestic audience costs play a role in determining Chinese behavior towards North Korea.

The above evidence is perhaps not very convincing by itself. Therefore, this thesis will now provide a real case of how Chinese leadership backing down can have consequences with its domestic audience. In 2010, a South Korean warship known as Cheonan sank off the country's west coast near Baengnyuon Island in the Yellow Sea and at least 46 people were killed (BBC, 2015). After the sinking an investigation was started which included experts from the US, Australia, the UK and Sweden and it concluded that the sinking was caused by a torpedo from a North Korean submarine (Min, 2010). Within South Korea, there were some expectations that China would support South Korea on this issue and condemn North Korea, but that was not the case (Lee, 2013, p. 58). For the purpose of analysis in this thesis, China's reluctance to support South Korea (as expected) is considered an aspect of backing down in an international conflict. When Chinese scholars were asked in interviews, how they would grade China's approach to North Korea on Chinese efforts for regional stability, more than 25 percent of scholars argued that China should receive a failing grade on this manner and another 35 percent stated

that China barely would receive a passing grade and that it should do more in its efforts (Lee, 2013, p. 61). In conclusion, when there are clear examples of China backing down in international crises revolving the Korean issue, it resonates with its domestic audience negatively. The question is then, if Chinese leadership face domestic audience costs by not supporting South Korea, why does it choose this path? From its core assumptions, audience costs do indeed draw political constraint. But it should not only be considered a constraint for any political leader. Ramadhani (2019) argues that there are strategies to remedy the situation when leaders face domestic audience costs such as providing trade-offs, reasoning (for backing down or inconsistent foreign policies) and censoring and framing (p. 46). Assertiveness by Chinese leaders is the key solution here, but it requires the Chinese authorities to ensure stable domestic audience support. As proven by the data within this analysis, this has not yet been achieved for China's approach to North Korea, which is why China's approach to North Korea is more tough recently than in the past. These findings will be discussed in detail later in this analysis chapter.

Regarding China's approach to South Korea, there are several ways in which domestic audience costs can be utilized to understand why China has taken the specific measure which it has done in recent decades. A first example is China's harsh negative reaction to the deployment of the THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) system in South Korea. In short, THAAD is a mobile US anti-ballistic missile system which was deployed in South Korea in 2017 (Maizland, 2017). Firstly, by China reacting negatively it does not show improving relations with South Korea, as suggested by the research question of this thesis. As with most developing relations between two countries, there are periods of ups and downs, where this is one of the hot issues between China and South Korea over a period generally improving relations. Secondly, audience cost theory can provide a framework for understanding why the Chinese government reacted as it did, based on elite domestic audience group opinions, although it reacted negatively. Swaine (2017) finds that an overwhelming majority of Chinese experts and commentators strongly opposed the deployment of THAAD in South Korea and also find that:

Most Chinese believe that while *perhaps* providing some limited defense for South Korea against North Korean ballistic missiles THAAD is primary intended to serve the much larger purpose of weakening China's deterrent while contributing to a global anti-missile system that threatens both Beijing and Moscow. (p. 1)

Chinese leadership decision to condemn the deployment is relevant for several reasons. Firstly, it supports the domestic audience cost theory. If Beijing were caught backing down on this issue, it would face domestic costs from audience groups as it is evident that Chinese domestic audience groups did not believe the THAAD deployment to be justified. Secondly, it shows the overall picture of developing relations between China and South Korea. While there is understanding towards South Korea for wanting to be safe from North Korean missiles by the Chinese domestic audiences, it should not use these security concerns to undermine China, which in turn does not directly threaten South Korea. Lastly, this hiccup in relations between China and South Korea does not indicate that relations between the two were not developing positively within this period. In 2016, while agreeing on differences on THAAD, South Korean president Park and Chinese President Xi reaffirmed that both countries were aiming to strengthen their strategic communication and partnership (Song, 2016, para. 1). In short, domestic audience played a role in this conflict, as China could not back down on this issue and had to escalate by condemning the deployment. It may have put a damper on developing relations between China and South Korea, but as will be presented below, the overall relations between China and South Korea resemble that of supporting positive developing relations between the two in recent decades.

Chinese domestic audiences also consider security as a significant issue when evaluating Chinese leaderships approach to the Korean peninsula. Through the research of Yue, Ren and Wang (2016) it is found that the Chinese public are willing to express frustration towards Chinese leadership when it is unable to break the deadlock on security stabilization within the Korean peninsula (p. 56). Chinese domestic audience groups expect Chinese leadership to be clear in its approach. Firstly, it should encourage North Korea to move towards a softer approach to its concerns and problems. Essentially, the argument is that domestic audiences expect Chinese leadership to be harsher on North Korea, as was found earlier in this thesis. Secondly, Chinese domestic audience see that China should encourage positive development of relations with South Korea. These groups expect that this can counteract the previous close alliance of the US and South Korea, and in turn can encourage South Korea to adapt a more neutral position in regard to China and the US. As such, Chinese leadership would suffer domestic audience costs if it does not aim for development of relations with South Korea when there are no major issues between the two Asian countries. These costs would destabilize domestic audience groups perceptions of Chinese leadership to conduct responsible foreign policies with South Korea.

Lastly, this section of the thesis will now examine how Chinese domestic audiences perceive Korean unification and why this influence Chinese leadership behavior. In general, predictions of Korean unification almost always perceive it as being under South Korean leadership, the same assumption will be used within this analysis. Lee (2013) finds that the two major conditions for Korean unification for Chinese scholars are either 1) unification by South Korea, but it being neutral between the US and China (43 percent) or 2) unification by South Korea, but without American troops on the Korean Peninsula (26 percent) (p. 59). Worth noting, is that very few Chinese scholars cited unification by South Korea which would be pro-China as their primary condition (5 percent) (Lee, 2013, p. 59). Therefore, it is clear that within domestic audience groups, that there is some desire for Korean unification, but the conditions are that the US should be less present and involved Chinese leadership therefore need to navigate the waters and work towards such goals. In fact, as later analysis within this thesis will show, Chinese authorities may have more reasons for achieving this than simply circumventing domestic audience costs. The conditions for Korean unification have obviously not been met at this time, but the desire is there from both Chinese domestic audiences and leadership. Chinese leadership there must participate in the efforts for Korean unification (yet it cannot do this alone) to ensure regional stability. However, the PRC as is reflected through domestic audiences seeks to achieve this in a way it does not conflict with its own national interests. It is shown that Chinese leadership is willing to some degree suffer domestic audience costs to keep its own goals for Korean unification in the future and regional stability in mind, yet it is in general not suffering these costs, as it overall pursues positive relations with South Korea and as it becomes more tough on punishing North Korea.

[The Northeast Asian Regional Security Complex and its importance for China](#)

As previously pointed out, China, North Korea and South Korea all belong to the same regional security complex cluster which is Northeast Asia. Therefore, it can provide valuable insights to examining the question of why China has shifted its approach in recent decades towards the two Koreas from the perspective of this regional cluster. As previously described in the theory section of this thesis, regional security complex clusters are defined by the patterns of security behavior interaction between multiple actors. In this case, the actors are China, North Korea, and South Korea. Furthermore, as the interactions between members of the same regional security complex cluster is high and that these clusters are

geographical in nature, it is a valid reason to examine the behavior of China from a regional perspective, based on this Northeast Asian security complex cluster.

There is a clear reason for why China is heavily involved in the Northeast Asian regional security complex, which is the fact that it belongs to this cluster itself. However, the focus of this analysis is not to examine why China is as deeply involved in Korean issues (sufficient scholarly work already exists on this topic) but rather to ask why China behaves like it does.

China's involvement with North Korea can be examined based on the stakes it holds in North Korea's future. China has in the past endorsed sanctions against North Korea and is likely to do so in the future if it were to carry out further long-range missile tests, nuclear explosions or initiate military conflicts with other regional actors (South Korea being the most obvious one) (Meyskens, 2019, p. 515). The reason why it is obvious that China is willing to do so is not so odd considering the core assumptions of regional security complex theory. China's actions to sanction North Korea are motivated by the highly regional character of the situation. As with Buzan and Wæver's arguments, China is primarily concerned with problems in its immediate neighborhood, when it comes to the issue of security. China is deeply concerned with an escalation of the Korean conflict for multiple reasons. Firstly, it has important stakes in South Korea which would be damaged if North Korea were to attack. Secondly, China shares a border with North Korea. If war were to break out on the Korean peninsula again, and if North Korea were to lose, it would potentially create a lot of spillover issues into China. Thirdly, a war on the Korean peninsula would at this point drag South Korean allies such as the US further into region, which in turn makes the situation overall more unclear for China. Lastly, it can also be argued that a stable Korean peninsula fits with Chinese global foreign policy strategies. These will be discussed further in detail in the next section of this analysis.

There are several ways in which to analyze the regional security issues revolving around the Korean peninsula. Sørensen (2013) argues that security multilateralism must be based on a regional approach and supports the study of security patterns within Northeast Asia as she argues that this region is relatively autonomous as the bilateral security relations between the Northeast Asian states are generated primarily internally in Northeast Asia by a combination of material, geographical, historical and political factors (p. 3). From these arguments, there is general support for Buzan and Wæver's theory that Northeast Asia as its own regional security complex can be studied from an analytical approach. Sørensen (2013) also argues that the US is embedded into the Northeast Asian complex but due to not being a

geographically located within the region it faces some opportunities and challenges (p. 3). It is evident that the regional nature of the important actors strengthens the theoretical framework of regional security complex theory. The states within Northeast Asia are so intertwined with each other as they share borders, diasporas, history, culture etc.. The stakes are obviously high for all the states involved in the Northeast Asia complex. For China, the risks of a worsening situation on the Korean peninsula has already been highlighted in previous paragraphs. But as it appears, there are also concerns for China if North Korea were to suddenly be absorbed by South Korea, however there are no signs of this happening in the near future. Under current circumstances, if the Korean peninsula were to be unified under South Korean leadership, China would find itself isolated in Northeast Asia regional security complex against Korea, Japan and the US. Sørensen (2013) argues that the stakes for the other nations in Northeast Asia (and the US) are also high due to uncertainties of how to engage a 'rising' China (pp. 18-19). China can be seen as changing its approach to reassure South Korea (and Japan) that it is willing to engage in friendly relations to counteract these uncertainties. Currently, there is no solution available in the short term to the Korean issues that would be suitable for all actors involved. At the current stage, China does not want another military conflict to break out. It does also not want Korea unified under South Korean leadership under current circumstances as it would mean isolating itself within the security complex, in which the US (China's primary rival) is still involved. The status quo is therefore currently the best situation for China, which is why it takes actions to keep North Korea in check, but not completely undermine it, while also pursuing developing relations with South Korea for a more sustainable solution in the long-term.

Furthermore, the concerns of an escalating situation regarding the Korean peninsula can also be seen as a creating more risks for China based on its own proclamations. According to Chinese white papers on national defense in the new era it sees the security situation in the region as being generally stable, but it is concerned with US strengthening of its military alliances within the region as well as deployment of military inventions (THAAD) and sees these as undermining the regional strategic balance and strategic security interests of not only China but also other regional countries. (The State Council Information Office, 2019, p. 3). There is a clear signal that Chinese leadership sees further engagement by a hard power approach by the US into the region as causing destabilization. Despite describing the overall region as stable and points out signs of progress, China still argues that the overall Korean peninsula issues face uncertainty (The State Council Information Office, 2019, p. 3). This supports the

previous argument that Chinese leadership supports the status quo at this point, but also emphasizes that the slow and gradual progress it is aiming towards is within its long-term national interests. As it stands, there appears to be great understanding within the Chinese elite that continued US involvement within the regional security complex is evident. History proves this point as both the George W. Bush and Obama administrations showed great interest in the Asian region (Ford, 2017, para. 4). It is therefore clear, that if China were to swiftly push for unconditional support for one of the two Koreas, it would escalate the situation in a way that would undermine its own national interests under the current regional circumstances. This argument is supported by Yoon (2019) who states that with the rise of China and decline of the US, that China's best option is to engage with South Korea to strengthen its pro-China situation there (para. 9). This explains why China has more deeply started to integrate itself with South Korea in recent decades through the different measures presented previously. This is further echoed by China's own view that it has played a more constructive role in the settlements of the Korean peninsula (The State Council Information Office, 2019, p. 30). Whether China's initiatives have been effective is another discussion, what is clear however is that there are clear signs of Chinese efforts to engage with South Korea and keep North Korea in check works towards its long-term goals of regional stability within the regional security complex.

China's actions and behaviors within the Northeast Asia regional security complex based on the notion of its rise is a matter that have been widely considered. Bae and Moon (2005) argued that further engagement with the Northeast Asia region by the US, to counteract the 'China threat' (China's rise), could transform the geo-political landscape in Northeast Asia in the direction of a new bipolarity between China and the US (pp. 19-20). China's actions can be interpreted in a manner which attempts to counteract such a development. China is without a doubt the strongest power, which is geographically based within the region, both militarily and economically. If China and the US were to come at direct odds with each other within the region it would profoundly impact the region's security complex in a negative way.

Furthermore, what makes the Northeast Asian regional security complex somewhat unique is the presence of North Korea. Regime survival (as a result of domestic economic, energy and food crises) is one of the key goals for North Korea, a concern which other national actors do not face so direly within the region. North Korea has therefore built up its weapons of mass destruction to sustain the regime (Bae & Moon, 2005, pp. 20-21). If North Korea were to one day start falling apart, it could encourage actors

such as the US, South Korea to seize the opportunity and take advantage of the situation. Nevertheless, it is within China's interest, currently, to maintain North Korea under its current leadership, as a potential collapse would create a serious strategic backlash on peace and security within the Northeast Asia complex. Drastic change on the Korean peninsula would currently put China in a predicament. Further development of North Korean nuclear weapons could spark a potential nuclear arms race within the race. Japan and South Korea as of this writing do not possess their own nuclear weapons as they are protected under the US nuclear umbrella, but they may likely pursue their own nuclear weapons programs, if the US were to completely abandon the region (Lee, 2017; Bosack, 2019). China's position to not directly support any significant change at this point is due to the regional nature of the situation. As seen, the level of interaction by China with other actors within the Korean peninsula is relatively high (compared with all actors on a global scale), supporting the theory of regional security complexes. It is evident, that China's international security behavior is sufficiently regional in character. China's security concerns are primarily found in its immediate surroundings, which is that of the Northeast Asia regional security complex.

Lastly, China's behavior on the regional level can be analyzed based on the assumptions that other actors are concerned with its rise. Buzan (2012) argues that geopolitical reconstruction of Asia is taking the form a regional Asian supercomplex, meaning that Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia and South Asia all would belong within the same regional security complex (p. 342). The evidence is mainly twofold, that China's involvement in the conflict between India and Pakistan is one factor, and the fact that other non-Northeast Asian nations such as India grow concerned (together with Japan) regarding China's rise is another factor (Buzan, 2012, pp. 341-342). China's behavior can be seen as a response to these uncertainties. Firstly, by not fully supporting North Korean nuclear proliferation and aggression, China proves a point that it strives towards regional peace and stability, rather than seeking to be the regional hegemon. Secondly, China's efforts to strengthen its relations with non-traditional allies such as South Korea is reassurance that it does not seek to be threatening. Buzan (2012) reaches a similar conclusion by stating: "Ironically, the biggest challenge China could put to the US is being nicer to its Asian neighbors" (p. 342). China's economic interdependence with other countries such as South Korea within the complex is significant constraint on letting political disputes get out of hand. So, if China were to escalate a conflict on the Korean peninsula, this would obviously threaten South Korea's economy, which in recent decades China has been linking itself closer to. In short, China's efforts promote regional peace,

which in turn supports the argument that its rise is peaceful, this ultimately serves the purpose of counteracting the fears of other actors within the regional security complex, which may be concerned about balancing out a potential threatening China.

[China's behavior towards the Korean peninsula within the scope of power transitions.](#)

This section of the thesis will take the analysis to a more international and global level, whereas domestic and regional factors have been studied previously. This section takes its theoretical standpoint from that of power transition theory. Obviously, the current challenger in this situation would be China and the hegemon it is challenging is the US. However, the focus of this analysis is not to shift the study towards US and China power issues, such studies already exist in great variety. Rather, the purpose of studying Chinese behavior towards the Korean peninsula from the perspective of power transition theory can bring the analysis to a more international perspective. It is clear, that although the US is not geographically situated within Asia that it is still a major stakeholder in the Korean issue, due to its high level of involvement in the past. This analysis seeks to investigate why China behaves as it does towards North Korea and South Korea, considering its overall global foreign policy goals. Power transition theory can explain why China behaves as it does, as it becomes stronger and more influential internationally. State behavior will be analyzed based on the assumptions that a transition of power is currently taking place.

Firstly, it is imperative to look at the conditions for power transition and if these are present given the current situation. Kim and Gates (2015) argued that Organski himself predicted the rise of China and they argue that there are two fundamental observations for a power transition taking place: “The first is that a country’s power stems from internal development (...) The second fundamental for power transition theory is that the international system is decisively shaped by the dominant nation, the hegemon” (p. 220). Firstly, China’s development comes from the international transformations, reforms and opening up and economic shifts in late 20th century. Secondly, the second is also true, as the US obviously has held a significant influence in the international system, as it helped establish international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) as well as its active roles in other parts of the world such as Asia, the Middle East and South America.

Furthermore, there are also clear signs of the US taking measures to counteract a power transition taking place. The trade war between the US and China have been previously mentioned within this thesis

and this section will therefore use another example. In April 2020, in the midst of the global Covid-19 pandemic, it came to light that a US republic memo had been strategically created by The National Republican Senatorial Committee which advised Republican candidates to address concerns of the Covid-19 by aggressively attacking China (Isenstadt, 2020, para. 1). These arguments suggest a somewhat new cold war mentality between China and the US. Chinese behavior can be analyzed on how it seeks to establish stability on the Korean peninsula, as growing concerns of its rising power. As power transition theory suggests, stability is based on asymmetric possessions of nuclear capabilities. This essentially means, as China seeks to take a leading role in Asia it has to reassure that nuclear proliferation does not escalate within the region as stability is best maintained if it possesses asymmetric nuclear capabilities vis-à-vis its regional neighbors. Firstly, it takes a somewhat strong stance to encourage North Korea not to pursue nuclear proliferation, because this would encourage South Korea and Japan to also pursue their own nuclear weapons (if the US factor were to disappear in the future). This in turn would lead to instability, as nuclear capabilities would be closer to be more symmetric. Secondly, by engaging and pursuing developing relations with South Korea, can minimize concerns of the ‘China threat’ which again would secure its role as the dominant power.

Further, China’s behavior towards the Korean nuclear issues can be examined from the perspective of an overall strategy in response to US behavior based on the notions of power transition theory. Kang and Kugler (2015) argue that US behavior in the Korean peninsula is to increase Chinese dissatisfaction with the status quo (p. 287). Power transition theory suggests that if the challenging power (China) becomes dissatisfied with the status quo, it is more likely to adopt risky policies and approaches. As was found earlier when discussing the regional aspects of Chinese behavior towards the Korean peninsula, China is relatively satisfied with the status quo in the short term, as any major development does not stand to benefit China at this point. Therefore, US behavior (such as the establishment of THAAD) can be seen as way to make China displeased with the current situation and push it into making mistakes through its behavior. China is seen as attempting to stabilize the overall situation by engaging with South Korea and promoting friendly relations, as well as making attempts at keeping North Korea from escalating the situation.

In addition, the situation can be examined further based on notions of deterrence strategies. The US decision to establish THAAD missile systems in South Korea is a clear example of a deterrence strategy against North Korea (Chinese experts and leaders also widely claim that such deployment is a deterrence

against China). Kang and Kugler (2015) argues that the establishment of systems such as THAAD by the US stabilizes the region and provides insurance for US allies in the short term, but that in the long-term, such systems cannot ensure safety (p. 289). This can explain why China is more interested in the long-term aspects of the situation on the Korean peninsula, as the costs of a short-term challenge to the status quo would heavily outweigh the gains. China's engagement with South Korea is interpreted as assuring its regional partner, the economic partnership between China and South Korea is significant as proven earlier in this thesis, of security and to deter and defend potential against rogue nations such as North Korea. China's desire to cooperate with South Korea may be risky, but it is far safer mover than moving towards a new Cold War approach in the long-term.

China's desire to not directly challenge the US can show support for the power transition theory while also contribute to the ongoing explanations of its behavior towards North Korea and South Korea. Lemke and Tammen (2003) discuss the potential outcomes of a rising China in the 21st century as follows:

Should China surpass the United States as the world's most powerful state while having no substantial demands for change to the international system's organizing principles, power transition theory postulates that catastrophic war likely will be averted. In this case, China will emerge as a "satisfied" preeminent power, much as did the United States when the mantle of international leadership passed from the British. In contrast, should China challenge the United States in the mid twenty-first century, holding deep-seated grievances against the West, its culture, and its imposed international rules and norms, then the probability of war rises dramatically. Thus we see that power transition theory, at its heart, attacks the central issue of world politics—great power stability (p. 270).

Once more there is clear reasons for China's behavior to emphasize the desire to maintaining the status quo and some of the international system's principles. Firstly, there is China's efforts to punish and deter North Korea for its nuclear proliferation efforts, which is one example of China upholding international principles. Secondly, the establishment of close relations with South Korea and deepening of economic interdependence between China and South Korea. As South Korea, established its FTA with the US in the early 21st century, it showed that this was to be the norm for future economic relations. China then followed suit and established its own FTA with South Korea about a decade later. This is yet another sign of China seeking to uphold the principles of the international systems economic developments.

Lastly, there is a clear relation between China's efforts and its concern for regional instability. Without a doubt, an escalation of the Korean nuclear issues and the probability of war, as Lemke and Tammen suggest, on the Korean peninsula would arguably be more damaging to China than it would be to the US. US territory was mostly insulated from the effects of the World War 1 and 2, while major parts of Europe and Asia suffered heavily from the wars. A new war on the Korean peninsula would face the uncertainties of spillover into the Chinese mainland. Additionally, the nuclear capabilities of several great powers also cause more uncertainties. As a result, China behavior can be seen as a move towards emphasizing a future of stability rather than one aiming at an uncertain war.

It is worth to examine China's harder stance towards North Korea from the perspective of which strategic calculations has been made in this regard. Firstly, it is noted earlier than on example of China being more tough on North Korea is through the UN sanctions which China has supported. However, it should be noted that such sanctions focus primarily on missile and defense programs, and they do not destabilize the already weak North Korean economy (International Crisis Group, 2009). It appears, that such measures, is more of a middle road, that seeks to both be hard on North Korea, but also not completely isolated it from its traditional ally. A high-level Chinese diplomat was quoted as saying: "Our mindset has changed, but the length of our border has not." (International Crisis Group, 2009). From such perspectives, it can be regarded that China is being more strategic in its way of handling the issues on the Korean peninsula. This became more clear a decade after these sanctions, as North Korea reached out to China in 2018 to prevent complete isolation if North Korea were to find itself at odds with South Korea backed by the US (HKEJ Editorial, 2018, para. 10-11). China has been willing to accept North Korea's invitation for maintaining relations because it can play into China's strategic plans. As the trade war between the US and China escalates, China can utilize its influence over North Korea, as a bargaining chip to gain significant leverage over the US. As it appears, China is willing to play both sides of being hard on North Korea, while not completely isolating it, as a part of the overall chess game of the power transition struggles with the US.

China also sends a clear message, that although it supports sanctions against North Korea, it does not believe denuclearization of the peninsula to be the only factor to the establishment of peace and stability in the region. Cui Zhiying, the director of Tongji University's Korean Peninsula Research Center in Shanghai, stated that while China strictly abides by international sanctions on North Korea, it also insists that economic development of North Korea is another significant factor to preserve peace and stability

on the peninsula (Li & Deng, 2019, para. 26). China's commitment is shown by delaying an opening of a bridge to North Korea by several years due to UN sanctions (Li & Deng, 2019, para. 23). China's desire to pursue and support the economic development of North Korea is a way of emphasizing a long-term strategy. Economic development is a gradual process, China itself experienced this over the last couple of decades, and as long as there is no viable option for China in the short term, it chooses a hedging strategy of both abiding to international sanctions while also supporting the development of North Korea. In addition, it supports the hypothesis of China gradually increasing its power and influence within the region, but not challenging the status quo of nuclear non-proliferation. This was echoed by Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying who stated that:

The political settlement process of the Peninsula issues is at a critical stage. We hope all relevant parties can cherish the hard-won de-escalation, work for denuclearization on the peninsula and achieve lasting peace on the Peninsula and in the region (Xinhua, 2019b, para. 13).

Such efforts show that China intends to persuade other actors that it has no substantial demands to change or dismantle the current international system, to deter future conflicts as its power rises and other actors grow worrisome of China's intentions. From a discourse level, this is also evident as China groups itself with other nations such as Britain, France, and Germany in its condemning of North Korea (Xinhua, 2019b, para. 11-13) which further emphasizes China's intention to position itself as having equal international desires for the international system as prominent western countries.

For China's efforts to build up closer relations, it can be seen as an extension to promote its over global strategies. In late 2019, South Korean president Moon stated that close dialogue and cooperation with China was an important factor in maintaining peace and security on the Korean peninsula in addition to promoting economic development and further stated that South Korea was willing to converge its own development strategies with China's Belt and Road Initiative (Xinhua, 2019a, para. 3-4). The Belt and Road Initiative is China's global development strategy pursued under Xi Jinping. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi echoed Moon's words and said that China wanted to expand its bilateral cooperation with South Korea and said that China's development strategies were compatible with South Korea's (Xinhua, 2019a, para. 8-9). Overall, it shows that the cold relations between China and South Korea following the issues around THAAD had begun to turn warmer. Additionally, China's efforts to closely

engage with South Korea is a way to harmonize their respective strategies towards North Korea. Both countries strive for denuclearization for North Korea. China's improving relations is seen in a light that it is ensuring South Korea that it does not need to choose between security with its ally, the US, and improving relations with its powerful neighbor China. It is clear, that the barrier for China to engage and develop relations with South Korea is the US, and for South Korea the barrier is North Korea. If China, were able to establish amity with South Korea, it could lead South Korea to break away from its US alliance. Such efforts would create a significant and dominant alliance with China at the front, coming out of Northeast Asia.

Discussion

The three-dimensional analysis of why China has changed its stance towards North Korea and South Korea over the last few decades has now been executed. Based on the evidence and through empirical analysis of the data using the theories of audience costs, regional security complexes and power transition several factors have been identified as influencing China's attitude. The purpose of this discussion will be to objectively evaluate such findings and bring to light if any factors prove to be more convincing than others. The discussion will critically assess the findings for three major reasons. Firstly, it serves to illuminate to which extent these findings are believable or not. The author of this thesis does believe these findings to be of relevance, but nevertheless they deserve to be reevaluated as it is not evident based on previous analysis which factors are more convincing than others, or if that is even the case. Secondly, this discussion also serves to discuss the usability of the three selected theories for this thesis. As previously pointed out, no theory is perfect, and they all have some limitations and criticisms of their validity. The discussion serves to intertwine theory more closely with the analysis. Lastly, this discussion section will show the skills of critical thinking and assessment from the authors perspective.

For audience cost theory, the analysis showed that Chinese leadership behavior followed the expectation of domestic audiences in handling of the issues on the Korean peninsula to some extent. But when there were incidents of Beijing backing down on taking a hard stance on North Korea it showed clear divergence from domestic views. As a result, the analysis of the data found that many Chinese scholars evaluated China's handling of North Korea with a low or even failing grade. Despite these audience costs, Chinese behavior did not seem to be affected as it continued to later support North Korea when China opposed the deployment of THAAD. As a result, it supports the common criticism of

audience cost theory, that it does not always apply as well to non-democratic countries as it does to democratic countries. This is supported by other scholars who also find evidence that audience costs in China are relatively muted and malleable but do exist (Weiss & Dafoe, 2019, p. 964). This is suggesting that it is not potential audience costs that alone guide China's tough stance on North Korea, although they exist and may play a minor role. Furthermore, evidence showed that Chinese domestic audience did not consider North Korea as a friend or ally of China, but it is unclear if the respondents believe this from their own opinion, or if they are simply commenting on the current situation. While the answer is probably both, it still shows some limitation of the use of audience cost theory within this thesis.

On the other hand, audience cost theory shows a clear sign that Chinese domestic audiences believe in the development of closer relations with South Korea. Chinese domestic audiences give more attention to China's developing relations with South Korea than maintaining a good relationship with North Korea. This can be supported since Chinese elite groups had more travel experience to South Korea than North Korea (Lee, 2013, p. 55). Again, this at least shows that Chinese leadership behavior is in harmony with domestic audience expectations, but it does not directly prove the theory that audience costs dictate foreign policy behavior. As a counterargument, it should be noted that leaders often choose to face audience costs, although it could have been avoided. It often comes down to a calculation of audience costs and how the leadership can counteract and remedy these costs when it chooses a path that is not desirable from domestic audiences' perspective. Chinese behavior will be ultimately dictated by its national interests (Lee, 2011, para. 3). The author of this thesis suggests not to completely disregard the importance of audience costs, as there is evidence that they to some extent do play a role in the behavior of China towards North Korea and South Korea. However, the importance of national interests outweighs that of potential audience costs, meaning that it comes down to how Beijing decides to calculate its national interests, audience costs and how it can actively minimize and mitigate these. Audience costs are therefore somewhat important, but they are clearly not the only factor which influence Chinese behavior towards the Korean peninsula.

The analysis through regional security complex theory provided valuable insights to why China behaves as it does towards the Korean Peninsula. China's decision to take a more tough stance on North Korea comes from its wishes that North Korea behaves as a good neighbor. As suggested by the theory, interaction between regional neighbors is high, which is seen to be true for China's behavior towards both North Korea and South Korea, as it the current country which has established the most stable

relations with both Koreas. Whenever North Korea stirs trouble by its missile tests and nuclear developments, it creates uncertainty for other actors within the region, and it is regarded as causing trouble for China as well. A troublesome North Korea is directly counteracting China's good neighbor policy approach, so it forces China to take measures to punish and prevent these behaviors. But it is also not of China's desire to isolate North Korea, as this would not only reduce its influence over North Korea, but also invoke fears for North Korean leadership if it were to lose its closest ally. Beijing hopes that North Korea would tone down its eagerness to fight with the US and instead focus on economic development internally (Meyskens, 2019, p. 515). Simply put, China became more tough on North Korea, because North Korea is not a top policy priority for China and North Korea's behavior is a distraction for China's larger strategies. The overall strategy for China is to currently increase its influence abroad, such as through the Belt and Road Initiative and further development of relations with other countries such as South Korea. This also plays into China's good neighbor policy, as North Korea is not the only neighbor. China already holds enough influence over North Korea, so it simply needs to keep North Korea in check.

Regional security complex theory has provided valuable insights, as the Northeast Asian regional security complex are seen to show distinct and stable patterns of behaviors of security interactions between the different actors. Above, this was exemplified with North Korea. China's further engagement with South Korea shows that the North Korean security complex is an embedded smaller system in a larger global political one. China's engagement with both Koreas simultaneously illustrates the security dynamics that are at play within the regional security complex. China's desire to pursue closer relations with South Korea is also displayed in its desire to push for developing economic and trade relations (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2005). There appears to be overlaps of why China behaves as it does, when considering it from both regional and international perspectives. The two cannot be separated directly from each other, but from the regional perspective, regional security complex theory showed that Chinese behavior changed as the global great power interests which dominated the Cold War disappeared. Security issues are particularly regional in nature in recent decades, as shown by this analysis. As such, Chinese approaches to both North Korea and South Korea shifted to reflect these developments, which in turn shows significance of the current theoretical framework. China's rise, while analyzed from a regional security complex perspective shows the social force of uncertainty about what China will become and what role it will take in the future with its new power. Whereas the analysis of

power transition theory focusses more on the material forces at place, the regional security complex theory emphasizes a social, hence giving significance and room for both theories for analysis within this thesis.

The analysis with the use of power transition theory, gives room to examine and discuss Chinese behavior from a more global and international perspective. Chinese behavior can be seen as a new way of thinking for Chinese leadership to build a new and positive image of China, showing the rest of the world that it is both credible and reliable as a responsible stakeholder in the international system. The cornerstone of Chinese foreign policy is the adoption of a peaceful development doctrine, often also referred to as China's peaceful rise, which stresses the rhetoric of the Chinese government seeking to subvert the external perceptions of China as a potential 'threat' to the interests of other major global powers (Cabras, 2011). It is clear, that as the conditions for a power transition start to appear, it creates uncertainty and desire for the different actors to start taking action. The US launched trade war is just one example of such deterrence behaviors. For China, its behavior emphasizes that it does not seek to disrupt the international hierarchical system through means of force, but that it rather seeks a peaceful approach. Economic projections suggest at times that China would overtake the US at some point in the 21st century. This points towards China's goal being that of a peaceful transition and its attempt to establish such perceptions abroad.

However, one major issue with the power transition theory for this project is that it shifts the focus away from Chinese behavior towards North Korea and South Korea. It is obvious, that when discussing power transitions between two major powers in the post-cold war period the US and China are the main actors in this regard. Nevertheless, there are two significant arguments for why power transition theory is still feasible within this thesis. Firstly, and perhaps the most important point, is that the Korean peninsula is an arena in which this power transition takes place. Both China and the US are significant stakeholders in this region and play a role in the current conflicts. China's behavior towards North Korea and South Korea is examined as one stage of the overall power transition struggle taking place. This leads into the second point which is that power transition theory suggests different actors perceive that a power transition is taking place. It is shown through the analysis that this is the case for both China and the US, likely also by other actors within the region. China's behavior towards North Korea by punishing it through UN sanctions, help manifest these perceptions abroad that the future China seeks is a peaceful one. Simultaneously, the developing of deeper with relations with South Korea further strengthen these

goals, while also pursuing the good neighbor policy. In short, power transitions theory should be given significance, as it deals with Chinese behavior towards the Korean peninsula based on its attempts to influence its perceptions abroad.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to investigate China's apparent shift in behavior towards North Korea and South Korea in recent decades from an international relations perspective. To explore this research question, this thesis first identified three aspects which it deemed worthy for further analysis and these were: domestic, regional, and international. To study each aspect equally in depth, relevant theories from the field of international relations were selected based on their relevance for the individual aspects and the data available. Audience cost theory was selected to examine if and how potential domestic audiences within China influence the leaderships behavior towards North Korea and South Korea. Regional security complex theory was chosen as it suggests that international security should be examined from a regional perspective as the levels of security interaction is significantly higher between members belonging to the same regional security complexes than between members of different regional security complexes. China's behavior towards the two Koreas was analyzed based on its belonging and role within the Northeast Asia regional security complex. Lastly, power transition theory was chosen as the theoretical framework to analyze Chinese behavior from the perspective of a potential power transition taking place, in the sense that China is often presumed to be on the path to overtake the US in a hierarchical international system. Moreover, it was used to examine how different actors perceive an actual transition of power taking place based on China's recent shift in foreign policy towards the Korean Peninsula.

The analysis of the domestic factors focusing on potential audience costs reveals that many Chinese domestic audience groups does not perceive North Korea as a friend or even ally of China. China's decision to take a tough approach by supporting sanctions can be seen as Chinese leadership behaving based on the expectations of its domestic audience groups. And when China is perceived as backing down, these groups evaluate the leadership negatively. It is, however, not completely evident that the domestic audiences completely control Chinese behavior towards North Korea, as this would be impossible to prove. But it is reasonable to assume that they do play a role, together with other regional and international factors. Domestic audience cost theory also illustrated that Chinese domestic audiences desire good developing relations with South Korea, as the economies and futures of both countries are

being more closely linked with each other. But this theory does not provide all the answers as to why China behaves as it does. There are even situations in which China does not behave accordingly with domestic audience expectations and thus suffer audience costs. For these reasons, domestic audience costs theory cannot explain the behavior of Chinese leadership towards North Korea and South Korea by itself and it therefore requires the addition of the regional and international perspectives.

From a regional perspective, China chooses to support sanctions against North Korea, because concerns of security and instability is highly regional in nature as support by the theoretical framework of regional security complex theory. Because of the regional issues and problems that an aggressive North Korea would create for China, China's behavior to sanction North Korea and keep it in line is based on its desire for regional security and stability. China desires to keep North Korea in check, as it serves as a buffer in the region. If North Korea were to provoke international intervention and in turn lose a war and its sovereignty, China would find itself isolated in the Northeast Asian cluster, against states who are still relatively pro-US, such as South Korea and Japan. It benefits China to keep North Korea around as it can influence North Korea significantly due to North Korea's high level of dependence on China. For China, maintaining the status quo of North Korea's survival, while encouraging it to domestic policy reforms, is therefore within its interests, as it would severely isolated otherwise. Meanwhile, it seeks to engage in closer relations with South Korea to increase its favorable perceptions there. As security concerns for China is highly regional in nature, it seeks to develop relations with South Korea as it is a close neighbor and the economic development between the two has been increasing exponentially in recent decades. China's positive attitude towards South Korea also emphasizes its good neighbor policy and its desire to not appear threatening, especially towards its neighbors.

As is evident, the conditions for power transition appear to be more apparent than in the past and Chinese behavior can be explained from this perspective. China's shift towards punishing North Korea, is analyzed as a way to deter nuclear proliferation overall in the region. Power transition theory suggests, that as the power level of two global powers, US and China in the 21st century, becomes more equal to each other it creates uncertainties international. This is clear seen as the US decided to deter China's rise by engaging it in a trade war in 2018. Therefore, China's behavior towards North Korea and South Korea is seen as an extension of these developments and China seeks to influence its perceptions abroad that it is not an unsatisfied challenger of the status quo. Furthermore, China's approach to further good relations with South Korea is seen to alleviate concerns of a potential 'China threat' because of its rise. It is found,

that the best option for China to increase its influence abroad and undermine the US, is to be more friendly with those nations that are allied to the US, which is what it attempts to do by developing relations with South Korea. A conflict between the US and China taking place on the Korean peninsula, would not be desirable for China, as it is essentially its own backyard. From an international perspective, China's shift in behavior towards the Korean peninsula is primarily strategic in nature. It already holds significant influence over North Korea, and therefore desires to keep it in line so the region remains stable. Meanwhile, China pursues developing relations with other nations, such as South Korea, because its influence there is not as powerful as over North Korea.

The three parts of the analysis all highlight important points explaining China's shift in behavior towards North Korea and South Korea. It is hardly possible to see one area being the sole influencer over Chinese decision making. China's behavior is therefore perceived as an extension of its overall national interests. It is within China's interests to keep North Korea from escalating the situation on the Korean peninsula and to develop further relations with South Korea due to domestic expectations, while also ensuring regional stability and strengthening its influence abroad while also displaying a reassuring message to other nations. The cold war period was dominated by ideological conflicts, but China's behaviors shows it is more interested in strategic goals and economic interests and ideology has somewhat been sidelined in recent decades as a factor for foreign policy. China's desire is to become more influential in the international system and to project an image of itself as a responsible great power abroad. Therefore, it seeks to take efforts to stabilize the Korean peninsula and the region as it supports its long-term goals. Because in the short-term there is no desirable solution for China with the current state of North Korea and its still young relations with South Korea. The long-term goals are to increase its influence first, China's grand strategy of the Belt and Road Initiative is just one example of this and its behavior to keep North Korea in line and develop closer relations with South Korea is yet another example of this.

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