Since the partition of the Korean peninsula, the crises between Seoul and Pyongyang have ranked high in the US political agenda. Nonetheless, the profile that the Obama administration has chosen to keep is relatively low. This choice has triggered criticisms, however the posture has brought its own benefits. Moreover, in a difficult economic situation, and in the face of increasing pressures for the curtailing of government expenditure, the ‘low profile’ approach meets the demands of a Congress whose support the White House increasingly needs. The main uncertainty is in the attitude of the PRC. However Beijing, more than any other nation, has a keen interest in keeping East Asia stable. This does not mean that China will become a sort of ‘US cop’ in East Asia. However, some forms of localized cooperation can be envisaged; a cooperation that could strengthen, as China will progress in occupying the international position that its leadership believes the country deserves.

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The recurrent crises between Seoul and Pyongyang have ranked high in the US political agenda since the partition of the Korean peninsula after the end of World War II. On 1 October 1953, a few months after the signing of the Panmunjom armistice, Washington and Seoul entered into a mutual defense treaty. According to article II: “Separately and jointly, by self help and mutual aid, the Parties will maintain and develop appropriate means to deter armed attack and will take suitable measures in consultation and agreement to implement this Treaty and to further its purposes”. Moreover, according to article III: “Each Party recognizes that an armed attack in the Pacific area on either of the Parties in territories now under their respective administrative control, or hereafter recognized by one of the Parties as lawfully brought under the administrative control of the other, would be dangerous to its own peace and safety and declares that it would act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional processes”. Since then, this treaty has been the cornerstone of the relations between the two countries. The uneasy truce agreed at Panmunjom had established a difficult modus vivendi between two states that were following two radically different paths of social, economic and political development, and in the overheated climate of the Cold War, the US administrations were more than ready to display in Korea their resolution to protect ‘the free world’ from any potential Soviet encroachment.

The Cold War did not end this commitment. On the contrary, it widened its scope and made its imperatives more stringent. The collapse of the Soviet Union somehow freed Pyongyang’s hands: at the same time, it made the regional environment increasingly complex: China’s drive toward an increasingly competitive form of ‘communist capitalism’; the final takeoff of the four ‘Asian Tigers’ (among which South Korea plays a prominent role); the social and economic transformations in South-East Asia; the new, more complex relations emerging between the US and Japan during the late 2000s. All these elements on the one

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2 American Foreign Policy 1950-1955, pp. 897-98. The US ratified the treaty with the understanding that ‘neither party is obligated, under Article III of the above Treaty, to come to the aid of the other except in case of an external armed attack against such party; nor shall anything in the present Treaty be construed as requiring the United States to give assistance to Korea except in the event of an armed attack against territory which has been recognized by the United States as lawfully brought under the administrative control of the Republic of Korea’ (Ibid.).


4 E. CHANLET-avery - M.E. MANYIN - W.H. COOPER - I.E. RINEHART, Japan-U.S.
hand fostered radicalization in the North Korean posture, and on the other weakened the traditional pro-US attitude of its local allies. Although the US remained (and will remain, at least in the near future) the main security provider in the Asia/Pacific region, its role as keeper and guarantor of the strategic balance is being increasingly challenged. This state of things opens new windows of opportunity for Pyongyang, whose political elite is constantly engaged in strengthening its position through a mix of self-imposed isolation, brinkmanship, and tight political control in the domestic realm. The nuclear power status pursued since the mid-2000s (the first nuclear test dates back to October 2006) and the efforts to develop up-to-date ballistic capabilities fit into this framework, strengthening the grasp of the North Korean leadership as well as expanding its room for international maneuver. Not surprisingly, an aggressive stance is pivotal in Pyongyang’s foreign posture. The ‘war scare’ fueled by this posture and by the ‘accidents’ of early spring 2013, albeit remarkable in emotional impact terms, was only one recurrence in a long string. For more than sixty years, the two Koreas have lived ‘in the shadow of war’. Several reasons account for this state of things. The rivalry between the two governments was not only a product of the Cold War. Rather, it stemmed from the shared belief of being the sole legitimate representative of the whole country: an ambition that, today, Seoul can support with the strength of its economy and that, in Pyongyang, is the last flag around which to rally national pride. In the military realm, North Korea does not possess the means to launch a nuclear attack against the US, nor does it have the will to attack South Korea or Japan. Pyongyang’s political elite is well aware of the fact that such a choice would only trigger heavy US retaliation. Behind the seemingly irrational behavior of the ‘Great Successor’, Kim Jong-un, lay neither ambitions for regional leadership nor the willingness to provide his country with a front row seat in the Great Powers’ club. Rather, it seems he was aiming to consolidate his domestic power by showing a fierce face. Insofar as Kim’s position depends on his ability to balance the weight of different factions, a

‘muscular’ foreign policy is a good way to secure the support of the armed forces, which in recent months appeared somehow uncertain. This state of things puts Washington in a rather unpleasant position, due to both its medium-to-long-term implications and its impacts within and beyond the region. For a long time, pro-western East and Southeast Asian countries (many of whom are tied to the US by the defense treaties signed during the 1950s) have wholly delegated their external security to Washington (military security especially), and this bond is still very strong today despite the creeping militarization of the region that has accompanied China’s international growth. The visit of Secretary of State John Kerry to South Korea, China and Japan in mid-April 2013 was a clear sign of how – even in the post-Cold War environment – the US still considers itself bound by these pledges. The more recent declarations of the commitment of the US, Japan, South Korea and China to the denuclearization of North Korea seem to go along the same lines. Nonetheless, the profile that the Obama administration has chosen to keep is relatively low. As far as hard security is concerned, the US limited its reaction to Pyongyang’s initiatives to the deployment of strictly defensive resources. In the same way, on the diplomatic side, while the US has reaffirmed its support for the allies and “reiterated that the international community would not accept a nuclear capable North Korea”, it has clearly stated:

8 Beyond the above-mentioned treaty with South Korea, the US signed – among the others – a security treaty with Japan in 1951 (American Foreign Policy 1950-1955, pp. 885-86), integrated in 1954 by a mutual defense assistance agreement (ibid., pp. 2437-41) and replaced by a treaty of mutual cooperation and security in 1960 (http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/163490.pdf). In the same 1951, they also signed a mutual defense treaty with the Philippines (30 August) (American Foreign Policy 1950-1955, pp. 873-75) and one with Australia and New Zealand (ANZUS Treaty, 1 September) (ibid., pp. 878-80). In 1954, the Manila treaty (ibid., pp. 912-15) paved the way to the establishment of a Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO; the organization started operating in 1955 and was dissolved in 1977) including the US, Australia, France, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand and the UK. In the same 1954, the US signed a mutual defense treaty with the Republic of China (ibid., pp. 945-47), terminated on 1 January 1980 and partially replaced by the provision of the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 (http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/STATUTE-93/pdf/STATUTE-93-Pg14.pdf), although the Act does not require the US to intervene militarily in case of attack to or invasion of Taiwan.
that a ‘trustpolitik’ and ‘serious talks’ are the best ways to ‘ease the tensions’ between Seoul and Pyongyang\textsuperscript{10}.

The main reason for this low profile is that Washington positions the North Korean problem in a wider scenario than its regional allies do. Moreover, in the crisis, US interests go far beyond a ‘simple’ ending. In Obama’s eyes, the ‘renewal of the US [global] leadership’ passes, on the one hand, through the definition of a new US role as ‘global peace broker’ and on the other through its self-portrayal as a non-menacing power (and its being perceived as such)\textsuperscript{11}. While the world looks at Pyongyang, US diplomacy can move more easily in other ‘hot spots’. For example, the fact that Iranian nuclear ambitions are no longer in the spotlight does not mean that the situation is frozen. Rather, in the initial months of its second term, the Obama administration has shown a great deal of attention to Iran: attention that found its expression – \textit{inter alia} – in the words of Vice-President Joe Biden at \textit{Wehrkunde 2013} on the need to elaborate a diplomatic solution to the problem. The Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khameni’s boastful rejection of Biden’s openings should not be overestimated. Similarly, the poor results of the talks held in Almaty in early April should not be overestimated either. Breaking the stalemate ranks high among the priorities of the new Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, who will take charge on 3 August 2013. In the same way, the US President is still seeking a success to redeem a mandate that started with the greatest ambitions but has proved rather disappointing so far\textsuperscript{12}.

In this perspective, the White House seems to have found a chance to gain the long-awaited ‘restart’ with its sound management of the Korean dossier. During the April 2013 crisis, Washington bet on its ability to withstand the tensions by giving proof of its moderation: by

\textsuperscript{10} T. BRANIGAN, \textit{John Kerry: North and South Korea tensions can ease with serious talks}, «The Guardian», 12 April 2013.


allowing the young Kim Jong-un to consolidate his domestic position; and by letting the regional powers defuse the crisis, albeit under the aegis of Washington’s protective umbrella. This choice triggered criticisms (some of them strong), especially of the supposedly wrong assumption that Pyongyang was a ‘rational actor’13. However, the posture has brought its own benefits. It has allowed Washington to confirm its ‘impartial’ role; it has strengthened its credibility as a potential mediator in other regional crises; and it has confirmed a shift in Washington’s emphasis from a hard to a soft power, in line with a position that Obama has tried (not always successfully) to impose since the beginning of his first term. These benefits have positively reverberated in the domestic realm also. In a difficult economic situation, and in the face of increasing pressures for the curtailing of government expenditure, the ‘low profile’ approach meets the demands of a Congress whose support the White House increasingly needs, while at the same time supporting the ‘understretching’ politics that in Obama’s era has replaced George W. Bush’s often resented ‘imperial overstretching’14.

This policy of ‘masterly inactivity’ rests on two elements: the overwhelming superiority of the US military establishment and the country’s condition of strategic security. Neither of them is facing real challenges today. The main uncertainty is in the attitude of the People’s Republic of China. Chinese visions of international security are very different from those of the US and – more generally – from those of the other regional actors, while relations between Washington and Beijing are still troublesome. However Beijing, more than any other nation, has a keen interest in keeping East Asia stable. For China, becoming a recognized guarantor of the regional order would be a new apex in its decades-long pursuit of Great Power status. It seems no coincidence that since April 2013, its government has abandoned – at least partially – the ambiguous posture it always is possible to envisage had


toward North Korean ‘misbehavior’\textsuperscript{15}. Keeping up one’s own backyard is the best way to prevent someone else from doing so. This does not, of course, mean that China will become a sort of ‘US cop’ in East Asia from one day to the next. However, some forms of localized cooperation can be envisaged on certain issues and based on a set of shared interests: a cooperation that could strengthen, as China – with increasing self-confidence – will progress in occupying the international position that its leadership believes the country deserves.