

THE KOREA NUCLEAR CRISIS AND THE CHANGING SINO-DPRK RELATIONSHIP

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When the DPRK conducted its first nuclear test on October 9, 2006, the second Korea nuclear crisis reached a climax, but almost everybody still believed in that North Korea was just playing a political card. After it conducted a second nuclear test on May 25, 2009, most people changed their thoughts and concluded that the Six Party Talks which aimed to solve the crisis are a total failure. This article analyzes the reasons and purposes for the DPRK's nuclear tests, considers the origin and development of the Six Party Talks, and concludes that the talks, while frustrating to various parties, have not been a total failure since they were moving in the right direction. The article examines the changing Sino-DPRK relationship and concludes that China should develop a long-term strategy toward the Korean peninsula and change its diplomatic policy toward the DPRK.

Key words: Sino-DPRK relations, nuclear weapons, six-party talks, East Asian security

Introduction

The still unfolding Korean nuclear crisis broke out in 2002 and reached a peak on October 9, 2006, when the Democratic

People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) conducted its first nuclear test. Primarily through initiatives in the Six Party Talks, tensions eased over the next three years, but on April 5, 2009, the DPRK launched another long-range missile. When the international community condemned this action, the DPRK retreated from the Six Party Talks and restarted its frozen nuclear facilities. On May 25, it conducted a second nuclear test. The Korean nuclear crisis again peaked, now on the international stage. What purposes underlie these actions of the DPRK, which in the short run has increased tensions? Whatever the political and economic consequences for Pyongyang, the most important goal for the international community is to focus on how to cope with the nuclear crisis. This article is mainly concerned with the reasons underlying the actions of the DPRK and how the nuclear test particularly affects Sino-DPRK relations.

The Korean Nuclear Crisis

Factors Underlying the Development of Weapons by North Korea

People continue to wonder why the DPRK carried out the nuclear test in defiance of opposition by the international community. In my view, there are two important factors that must be taken into account. One is an objective factor and the other is subjective. The objective factor is that an isolated DPRK is compelled to make a best effort to strengthen its military capacity to deal with the threat of hostile external forces. The subjective factor is that the DPRK wants to maintain internal stability to maintain the regime.

First of all, the objective factor that spurs North Korea to launch missiles and conduct nuclear weapons tests is to protect its national security and to deal with the longstanding hostile policy of the United States. Since the Korean peninsula is the only place where the cold war remains as an unbroken military confrontation, the current Korean nuclear issue can be seen as a continuation of the cold war.

There is a long history of military confrontation between the United States and North Korea. As early as 1950-1953, the United States repeatedly threatened to use nuclear weapons against Pyongyang. After the war, the two sides signed an armistice agreement instead of a peace treaty. The United States not only stationed a large number of troops on the Korean peninsula; it also provided a nuclear umbrella for South Korea by deploying several kinds of nuclear weapons there from 1958 to 1992. This nuclear threat from the United States stimulated Pyongyang to set up its own nuclear program during the 1960s. After the cold war, and the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the normalization of Sino-ROK relations, the “north triangle alliances” (i.e., those between China and the DPRK and between the Soviet Union and the DPRK) disappeared. However, the “south triangle alliance” between the United States, South Korea, and Japan was strengthened. Consequently, North Korea’s security environment actually became more threatening.

When George W. Bush took office, he pursued a worldwide policy of unilateralism and adopted a tough policy of containment regarding North Korea—although this tough policy of nonengagement subsided during his second term. The hostile policy toward North Korea that the United States consistently pursued for decades posed a serious threat to North Korea’s security and forced Pyongyang to enhance its military power, especially through developing missiles and a nuclear deterrence capability. North Korea repeatedly said that it is precisely because of the U.S. threat of war and the imposition of sanctions that Kim Jong Il was compelled to launch missiles and conduct the nuclear tests.

Secondly, the launching of missiles and the conducting of nuclear tests is a product of North Korea’s subjective needs, in that Kim wants to strengthen his domestic political and social control in order to maintain the stability of his regime.

As a result of long-term international sanctions, domestic natural disasters, and the rigidity of the Korean economy, North Korea’s economic base is very fragile. Although the North Korean leader believes that moderate economic reform is necessary,

he is aware that economic reform and expanded contact with the outside world could challenge his domestic political legitimacy and the foundation of his rule. This is an outcome that the leaders of North Korea have been unwilling to face. Consequently, implementing military-first politics, launching missiles, and conducting nuclear tests have been seen as the most effective means to consolidate and secure Kim's political power—especially since nuclear weapons are regarded as a symbol of national strength and scientific and technological prowess, and have broad popular appeal.

There were also some problems with Kim Jong Il's health in 2008, problems that have caused the international community great concern regarding the stability of the regime. On April 9, 2009, North Korea held a plenary meeting of the 12th Supreme People's Assembly, and Kim Jong Il was reelected chairman of North Korea's National Defense Commission. It is not difficult to see why North Korea chose to launch a missile on April 5, just a few days before convening the assembly. The launch's success boosted national morale, raised the prestige of the ruling party, enhanced the stability of the regime, and assured that Kim would be reelected. While a successful political ploy, it leaves unanswered the international purpose of the missile launching and the subsequent nuclear test. Does Pyongyang really want to become a nuclear-weapon state?

The Purposes of North Korea

It was long believed that North Korea's claim to have developed nuclear weapons was a bluff, a goal that it had neither the desire nor the ability to realize, and that it was playing a nuclear card in the diplomatic game. After North Korea did demonstrate significant progress in nuclear-weapon development, and the United States labeled it as part of the "axis of evil" just before invading Iraq, Pyongyang came to be believe that its development of nuclear weapons was aimed to discourage a conventional military invasion. Now we can see clearly that neither explanation is accurate.

The unfolding of the North Korean nuclear crisis over the past decade makes it clear that possessing nuclear weapons was a strategic decision of North Korea and gestures to abandon its nuclear program or denuclearization were just tactics. North Korea wants to become a nuclear power for reasons of nationalism and self-defense, not because of the adverse international environment. North Korea had to make full use of the so-called “nuclear card” tactically in order to achieve its main objectives—regime security, recognition of its sovereignty, and a nonaggression pact with the United States—in order to end the hostile U.S. policy and obtain reliable security guarantees from Washington.

Launching missiles and testing nuclear weapons mainly serve as tactics for implementing a policy of brinkmanship aimed at gaining concessions from the United States at the negotiating table. After Barack Obama took office, however, the United States made positive policy statements on Iran and Cuba, but ignored North Korea. Pyongyang considers this slight “Bush’s policy without Bush” and therefore once again has resorted to its trump cards: launching a “satellite,” retreating from the Six Party Talks and resuming operation of its nuclear facilities, all in an effort to force the United States to make a strategic decision in its favor.

The two nuclear tests conducted by the DPRK reveal that North Korea’s true aim is to develop a powerful weapon in order to contain the surrounding big nations and to work to transform its strategic relations with them. It is highly unlikely that North Korea will surrender its nuclear weapons because of the number of international benefits they provide.

The first benefit is to deter a potential adversary from invading or threatening Pyongyang’s core interests. North Korea’s aim in having nuclear weapons in the face of external pressures is to protect its own national security. For Pyongyang, the possession of nuclear weapons and the deterrence they provide seems to be more reliable than giving up their development and exchanging them for uncertain or empty security assurances.

The second benefit is that the nuclear weapons also restore the strategic balance with South Korea—even if only psychologi-

cally. Since 1948, when the North and South officially separated, there has existed an acute struggle over the true custodian of "Korea" and of the Korean peninsula. The balance of comprehensive national strength began to tip in the early 1970s, and widened dramatically with the South's economic growth that has made it thirty times greater than the North. Frustrating to the North is that there is no conceivable reversal possible in the near future. North Korean leaders see mastering nuclear weapons as the only possible measure to dispel the fear of failure in this competition and, possibly, even providing the capacity to unify the Korean peninsula through force.

The third benefit is that nuclear weapons will help avoid the massive expenditures required for conventional weaponry and permit these resources to be used for economic development. Though in the initial stages of nuclear development a significant outlay is necessary, North Korea has made this investment and now has the potential to reap economic benefits by reducing its military budget.

In addition to these benefits, North Korea's bold move to develop nuclear weapons also actually makes war on the Korean peninsula less likely. North Korean leaders have always been fearful of their security, and these fears were exacerbated by the American invasion of Iraq. Pyongyang believes that if Saddam Hussein had had nuclear weapons at his disposal, the United States would not have dared to attack and topple his regime. Though North Korea has sufficient artillery and short-range missiles to cause massive casualties to the combined forces in South Korea, nuclear weapons constitute an additional deterrent, aimed at making the United States take North Korea more seriously. The balance of troops between North Korea and the United States as well as the destructive power of nuclear weapons simply makes it difficult for the United States to consider military action against North Korea.

For these reasons, North Korea has obscured its real intentions and has deluded all the concerned countries into believing that it could be persuaded to give up its nuclear program during the past years of negotiations. In this way, North Korea has

bought itself more than a decade, safely passing unscathed through the period of tense security relations, and has successfully stepped over the nuclear threshold. And for the same reasons, North Korea will not likely abandon its nuclear weapons. How, then, does one cope with this nuclear crisis?

Coping with the Korea Nuclear Crisis

The Six Party Talks: The Historical Context

How to solve the peace and security problem on the Korean peninsula and in Northeast Asia has been a priority concern for all countries in the region. Over the past several years, extensive diplomatic efforts have been made, with the Six Party Talks being the most notable achievement. The Six Party Talks have provided a unique multilateral venue for resolving the Korean nuclear crisis and for laying the foundation for establishing a long-term regional security framework.

During the cold war, a large-scale hot war took place on the Korean peninsula. After the cold war, the peninsula remains the only place where a cold-war confrontation persists. The United States and Japan have not normalized relations with the DPRK, and in terms of international law the DPRK is still at war. Both sides deploy substantial military power along the demilitarized zone (DMZ). After the alliance among North Korea, China, and the Soviet Union disappeared, the DPRK began to speed up its nuclear research and development, leading immediately to a "nuclear crisis." This nuclear threat, one posed by nuclear armament, intensified the security dilemma of Northeast Asia, making the Korean peninsula issue the key problem of peace and security in the region. Since the cold war ended the countries in the region have made serious efforts to establish a peace and security mechanism, and the Six Party Talks are best seen as simply the most recent effort.

An inventory of previous proposals is useful. When President Richard M. Nixon began to pull back U.S. forces from Asia in the

mid-1970s, he put forward a proposal in the United Nations to hold four-party talks involving China, the DPRK, South Korea, and the United States. Also in the 1970s, South Korea's President Kim Dae Jung proposed a six-party framework, which included China, the United States, the Soviet Union, and South Korea. In June 1979, President Jimmy Carter suggested holding three-party talks between the United States, South Korea, and the DPRK. In 1988, South Korean President Roh Tae Woo put forward a proposal in the General Assembly of the UN to hold a peace consultation conference that included the United States, China, the DPRK, Japan, and South Korea—a 4+2 plan to sign a peace agreement to replace the Korean armistice.

When the first Korean nuclear crisis broke out, President Bill Clinton suggested holding four-party talks in Geneva to include the United States, China, the DPRK, and South Korea. There were two objectives of these talks: one was to ease the intensity of conflict on the Korean peninsula and the other was to establish a peace mechanism. Although these meetings never materialized, merely proposing four-party talks to establish a peace and security mechanism in Northeast Asia was significant. Japan and Russia were dissatisfied with this proposal because they were excluded and after the DPRK launched a long-range missile in 1998, Japanese Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo strongly suggested holding six-party talks that included Japan and Russia. Previously, in 1995, Russian President Vladimir Putin asserted that he also wanted to hold six-party talks during a visit to South Korea.

In October 2002, when the second Korean nuclear crisis took place, George W. Bush insisted on multilateral, not bilateral, negotiations and took a rigid, uncompromising position. This severely challenged China's diplomatic strategy, one that aims to create a peaceful environment for domestic economic construction. For China, solving the Korean nuclear crisis through peaceful conversation, maintaining the peace and stability of the Korean peninsula, and realizing a nuclear-free Korean peninsula were keys to creating an international environment conducive to domestic economic growth. China undertook a number of diplomatic efforts to bring together the United States and the DPRK,

and these led to Three Party Talks in Beijing in April 2003. Then, in August 2003, the countries convened in Beijing to hold the Six Party Talks involving China, the United States, Russia, Japan, the DPRK, and South Korea.

These talks, the result of protracted diplomatic initiatives, not only provided a diplomatic platform for resolving the Korean nuclear crisis, but also promoted the establishment of a security mechanism in Northeast Asia.

From Three Party to Six Party Talks

A brief review of these diplomatic initiatives that involved China in a central way is instructive. After the United States accused the DPRK of engaging in a secret highly enriched uranium (HEU) program in October 2002, Pyongyang demanded that this issue be resolved bilaterally with Washington. But the United States refused to deal directly with Pyongyang and insisted on broadening the field of players. The Bush administration did not want to repeat the "failure" of the Clinton administration's Agreed Framework.

In February 2003, when U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell was en route to Seoul to attend the inauguration of President Roh Moo Hyun, he stopped in Beijing and suggested that China was well positioned to organize and host multilateral talks involving the United States, China, Japan, and North and South Korea. The Chinese did not respond directly to his suggestion, but former foreign minister and vice premier Qian Qichen revised the offer, proposing three-party talks instead.

Because the United States did not want to negotiate with the DPRK directly, China served as the intermediary between the DPRK and the United States. China brought the two countries together in Beijing in April 2003 for an initial round of talks to resolve the emerging second nuclear crisis. This meeting failed because the DPRK's head of delegation still insisted on bilateral talks with the United States and the United States delegation refused.

Almost immediately after the failure of the April session,

the Chinese began to resurrect the idea of three-party talks, but this time, the United States insisted that any future rounds should include South Korea, Japan, and Russia. In late July 2003, Chinese Vice Minister Dai Bingguo suggested another round of three-party talks to Secretary Powell, and as a compromise the United States agreed, on the condition that the talks would be followed immediately by a full six-party round of talks.

Consequently, in late August 2003, the first round of Six Party Talks was held in Beijing. The U.S. and DPRK delegations met briefly for approximately thirty minutes prior to the plenary session, but no agreement on a joint statement was reached. Instead, Wang Yi issued a “chairman’s statement”:

The major result coming out of the talks is that all parties share a consensus with the following main points: All parties are willing to work for peaceful settlement of the nuclear issue on the Korean peninsula through dialogue, and safeguard peace and stability and bring about lasting peace on the Peninsula. All parties maintain that while a nuclear-free peninsula should be realized, the DPRK’s security concerns and other areas should be considered and solved. All parties agree, in principle, to explore and decide on an overall plan for solving the nuclear issue in stages and through synchronous or parallel implementation in a just and reasonable manner. All parties agree that in the process of peace talks, any action and word that may escalate or intensify the situation should be avoided. All parties agree that dialogue should continue to establish trust, reduce differences, and broaden common ground. All parties agree that the Six Party Talks should continue, and the date and venue for the next round of talks should be decided through diplomatic channels as soon as possible.

When Wang Yi was asked by reporters in Manila a few days later what he thought the biggest obstacle to achieving the next round of Beijing talks was, he replied frankly, “The American policy toward the DPRK—this is the main problem we are facing.”

From February 25 to 28, 2004, the second round of Six Party Talks was held in Beijing. But because there was no joint agreement, Beijing once again issued a chairman’s statement:

The parties agreed that the second round of the Six Party Talks had launched the discussion on substantive issues, which was beneficial and positive, and that the attitudes of all parties were serious in the discussion. While differences remained, the parties enhanced their understanding of each other's position through the talks. The parties expressed their commitment to a nuclear-weapon-free Korean peninsula, and to resolving the nuclear issue peacefully through dialogue in a spirit of mutual respect and consultation on an equal basis, so as to maintain peace and stability on the Korean peninsula and in the region at large. The parties expressed their willingness to coexist peacefully. They agreed to take coordinated steps to address the nuclear issue and the related concerns. The parties agreed to continue the process of the talks and agreed in principle to hold the third round of the Six Party Talks in Beijing no later than the end of the second quarter of 2004. They agreed to set up a working group in preparation for the plenary session. The terms of reference of the working group will be established through diplomatic channels.

After the end of the second round of the Six Party Talks, the United States and Russia expressed their dissatisfaction regarding the inconclusive negotiations. In fact, the Russian head of delegation said, "If the negotiation process is stalled, a number of countries could take certain measures against North Korea, for example, a blockade, which could further exacerbate the political and even military atmosphere on the Korean peninsula." The United States also said that if Pyongyang did not acknowledge its HEU program and made a "commitment to the complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantling (CVID) of its program," all options would still be on the table—a not-so-subtle threat that military action was possible.

In response, Wang Yi explained that all parties should make concerted efforts in three areas. First, they should carefully study key standpoints of substantial issues and solutions proposed during the talks, from which they could note the positive areas for discussion. Second, a working group should be formed as soon as possible to prepare for the third round of talks. Third, the parties should maintain a peaceful environment for the process of talks and avoid words or actions that might intensify

differences or provoke other parties. These remarks criticized the United States and Russia indirectly.

If the third round of the Six Party Talks had followed the pattern of the previous two sessions, many observers believed it would have ended the multilateral process. But a number of factors intervened to change matters. Bilateral talks between the two Koreas had made some progress; Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro made a second trip to Pyongyang; China made public comments about the need for additional U.S. flexibility in dealing with North Korea; and the Bush administration faced policy criticism and problems in the Middle East. These considerations led the United States to make its first concrete proposal during a June 2004 meeting, elaborating the steps needed to resolve the nuclear crisis. Although the DPRK rejected this offer, it too set forth a proposal for ending the stalemate. Though the third round talks did not produce any meaningful achievements, compared with the former two rounds of talks, it had made progress in that both the United States and the DPRK had made proposals.

The Six Party Talks as an Avenue for Establishing a Regional Security Mechanism

At first the Six Party Talks aimed to resolve the nuclear crisis, but in the wake of the end of the third round, there was hope that it might also be transformed into a framework for addressing broader security issues in the region. Whereas the first three rounds of talks focused simply on the nuclear issue, during the fourth round not only did the subject of discussion broaden but it ended with a joint statement.

The talks lasted from July 26 to August 7, and from September 13 to 19, 2005, at the conclusion of which the participants jointly and individually issued statements of agreement and commitment. "The Six Parties unanimously reaffirm that the goal of the Six Party Talks is the verifiable denuclearization of the Korean peninsula in a peaceful manner," and that "the DPRK [is] committed to abandoning all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear

programs and returning, at an early date, to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards." In return, the United States affirmed that "it has no nuclear weapons on the Korean peninsula and has no intention to attack or invade the DPRK with nuclear or conventional weapons." The Republic of Korea (ROK) "reaffirmed its commitment not to receive or deploy nuclear weapons in accordance with the 1992 Joint Declaration of the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, and stated that there were no nuclear weapons within its territory." The DPRK stated that it had the right to peaceful uses of nuclear energy.

The other parties expressed their respect and agreed to discuss, at an appropriate time, the subject of the provision of light water reactors to the DPRK. "The Six Parties committed to promoting economic cooperation in the fields of energy, trade, and investment, bilaterally and/or multilaterally. China, Japan, the ROK, Russia, and the United States stated their willingness to provide energy assistance to the DPRK, and the ROK reaffirmed its proposal of July 12, 2005 concerning the provision of 2 million kilowatts of electric power to the DPRK."

Although most of these commitments were included in the 1994 Framework Agreement between the United States and the DPRK, the Joint Statement went beyond the Framework Agreement in several aspects.

- The DPRK and the United States undertook to respect each other's sovereignty, exist peacefully together, and take steps to normalize their relations subject to their respective bilateral policies.
- The DPRK and Japan undertook to take steps to normalize their relations in accordance with the Pyongyang Declaration, on the basis of a settlement of the unfortunate past and other outstanding issues.
- The Six Parties committed to joint efforts for lasting peace and stability in Northeast Asia. The directly related parties agreed to negotiate a permanent peace regime on the Korean peninsula at an appropriate separate forum. The Six Parties agreed to explore ways and means for promoting security cooperation in Northeast Asia.

By explicitly articulating these three points the Joint Statement strove not only to resolve the nuclear crisis, but also to establish a security mechanism in Northeast Asia. However, the potential of this Joint Statement was severely damaged by the successful nuclear test by North Korea in late October 2006 that outraged the United States and led to United Nations resolutions condemning Pyongyang. Nevertheless, the third session of the fifth round of Six Party Talks was held in Beijing in February 2007 and agreement was reached on "Initial Actions for the Implementation of the Joint Statement."

This statement said that the parties had held serious and productive discussions on the actions each party would take in the initial stage for the implementation of the Joint Statement. All the parties again reaffirmed their common goal of achieving early denuclearization of the Korean peninsula in a peaceful manner and agreed to "take coordinated steps to implement the Joint Statement in a phased manner in line with the principle of 'action for action.'" These steps included shutting down and sealing the Yongbyon nuclear facility in the North, removing the DPRK from the list of "state sponsors of terrorism," normalizing U.S.-DPRK and Japan-DPRK relations, promoting cooperation on energy and economic relations, and creating a Northeast Asia Peace and Security mechanism. To achieve these goals, five working groups were established.

The sixth round of Six Party Talks, held in Beijing in July 2007, reaffirmed these goals and the short-term diplomatic steps needed to achieve them. Most important of all was the commitment to create a security mechanism for Northeast Asia that could coordinate, within a multilateral venue, the long-term strategies necessary for peace in the region.

Although almost all other regions have regional security and cooperation mechanisms, there is none in Northeast Asia, a region with a history of colonization and almost continuous conflict. This lack of a security mechanism is a major stumbling block to regional security, and the creation of the working group to this end in the February 2007 meeting of the Six Party Talks was a historic step. However, this promising initiative was quick-

ly undermined by Pyongyang; North Korea refused to abandon its nuclear program in late 2007, launched its “satellite” on April 5, 2009, and conducted a second nuclear test on May 25, 2009. These actions provoked a strongly negative international reaction and seriously undermined the Six Party Talks. The other participants in the talks now had to deal with a nuclear North Korea.

Some Options for the International Community

Now that North Korea has conducted a second nuclear test, the concerned nations must respond with some countermeasures.

There are a number of options for addressing this issue. One possibility is a peaceful solution based on negotiations. This would involve the return of North Korea to the Six Party Talks to reach agreement through negotiations. In this scenario, North Korea would give up its nuclear weapons program for sufficient compensation, assuming the compensation is acceptable to the international community. The denuclearization of the Korean peninsula would be realized through a process whereby the nuclear weapons, facilities, and materials would be transported outside North Korea and destroyed. This solution, because it would be based on dialogue and mediation, entails the lowest costs and risks, and is an open process that would curtail any secret deals.

A second possible solution is based on the use of force. Under this scenario, the six-party process would end and the UN Security Council would pass a resolution to intensify sanctions against North Korea. In enforcing the resolution, the United States and/or a multinational force would launch military strikes in North Korea, toppling its existing regime and gaining control of its nuclear facilities, which would then be transported abroad to be destroyed.

There are at least two possibilities if a bilateral solution is reached by the United States and North Korea. One would entail U.S. subversion of the economic situation in the DPRK to bring about a denuclearized Korean peninsula without triggering

excessive turmoil or casualties. Another would involve a compromise between North Korea and the United States that entails American tolerance of a nuclear DPRK with compromises and multidimensional political and economic safeguards that would discourage proliferation.

From China's perspective, a peacefully negotiated solution to the North Korea nuclear issue is the optimal choice, whereas the worst outcome of the North Korea nuclear issue would be option four, essentially a secret American-North Korea deal. Now that the Six Party Talks seem stalemated, how should China respond?

China's Policy toward the DPRK

Continuity of China's Interests

The Korean peninsula is located in the Northeast Asian hub where the mainland and the sea powers meet with each other. This special location gives the peninsula particular strategic significance in international politics. It has had special importance for China's security during the past few centuries, especially after the Ming dynasty moved its capital to Beijing. Accordingly, the most distinctive characteristic of China's policy toward the Korean peninsula is consistency. The Ming used its army to help Korea against Japan; the Qing government sent troops to the Korean peninsula to fight against Japan in 1894; Chiang Kai-shek supported the Republic of Korea's independence movement; and the newly founded People's Republic of China was deeply involved in the Korean War. Geopolitical reasons made these choices inevitable.

Today North Korea serves as a strategic buffer zone for China. With a shared border of 1,400 kilometers, North Korea acts as a guard post for China, keeping at bay the tens of thousands of U.S. troops stationed in South Korea. This allows China to reduce its military deployment in Northeast China and to focus more directly on the issue of Taiwanese independence. To a certain extent, North Korea shares the security threat posed by

the U.S. military forces in South Korea and Japan. So the cooperation and assistance between China and North Korea is, at a minimum, mutual. There is an argument that China has helped North Korea without getting anything in return. This is not fully accurate. There is no altruism in international relations. In fact, by providing aid to North Korea, China is in essence helping itself. As someone once said, "for no more than a few billion dollars a year, China has been provided with more than fifty years of peace."

China's current interests on the Korean peninsula are to support political and economic stability, and to assure it is denuclearized.

China's grand diplomatic strategy determines its interests and policies toward Korea. In keeping with the principle that foreign policy should serve domestic affairs, China has been pursuing diplomatic policies over the past thirty years aimed at creating a peaceful and benign international political environment to facilitate domestic economic reforms. China's concerns and attention go not only to European countries, the United States, and other major powers, but also to its neighbors. Clearly, peace and security in China's surrounding region are directly related to its ability to undertake domestic economic construction and development. Accordingly, our first concern on the Korean peninsula is to avoid war and to maintain stability and peace. That is why China has always resolutely opposed the resolution of the Korean nuclear crisis by force.

All of the consequences of war in the Korean peninsula would negatively impact China. Any military strike would disrupt regional stability and risk escalation into a comprehensive Korean war. Moreover, with the 1961 Sino-Korean Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance still in effect, a new war in Korea would force China to make difficult choices.

Since China has very deep economic ties with South Korea, Japan, and the United States, the outbreak of war would seriously imperil the prospects of China's economic development. War is likely to lead to the collapse of the North Korea regime, which would not only have tremendous economic and security conse-

quences for China, but would also lead to the rapid reunification of the Korean peninsula, adding uncertainty to the future of the region. Finally, war would cause a serious refugee problem as more North Koreans joined the tens of thousands already residing illegally in China.

China does not want North Korea to become a nuclear power for three reasons. First, a nuclear North Korea may actually increase the instability and the possibility of war in the region. Second, North Korea's development of nuclear weapons would undermine the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty system, and could lead to a regional arms competition and nuclear proliferation as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan would have the capacity to go nuclear—to the detriment of China's interests. Third, China has played a central and dual diplomatic role as the host of the Six Party Talks while allied to North Korea and serving as its longtime aid donor. As a consequence, China's bilateral relations with the United States, the DPRK, and South Korea have been severely tested by Pyongyang's "brinkmanship" tied to its nuclear ambitions.

In light of the fluidity of the situation, China's policy has had to display real flexibility.

Policy Flexibility toward North Korea

China's relations with North Korea have been consistent and highly prioritized, but as the international context has changed, so too have China's interests, demanding a more flexible policy. On issues relating to the Korean peninsula, China has an array of difficult tradeoffs. In particular, its Korea policy centrally involves bilateral relations with the United States, relations that have grown in scope and magnified issues of conflict as well as cooperation between the two nations. North Korea has exploited this situation with its brinkmanship diplomacy, but China remains steadfastly committed to the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula.

When North Korea launched missiles in July 2006, China withstood pressure from the international community and even

threatened to use its veto power in the Security Council to protect North Korea. However, when the DPRK conducted a nuclear test in October 2006, China issued a strongly worded condemnation ahead of other countries and then supported the UN sanctions resolution. North Korea's nuclear test crossed China's strategic bottom line—the denuclearization of the peninsula. North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons will harm the long-term interests of China. Once a country has nuclear weapons, it rarely gives them up and the addition of a nuclear power to Northeast Asia is a more direct and permanent threat to China. Because China and North Korea are close neighbors, a nuclear Pyongyang will always constitute a constraint on, or even a threat to, China's core national interests, while the possibility of a nuclear conflict between Washington and North Korea is quite remote.

Moreover, once North Korea really does possess nuclear weapons, a nuclear arms race in Northeast Asia and nuclear proliferation is almost inevitable. Japan and South Korea will likely follow North Korea. Japan in particular has already been clamoring to become a "normal country" and has the technology, money, and materials to manufacture nuclear weapons. Once Japan and South Korea have nuclear weapons, China will become the only country in the world surrounded by nations possessing nuclear arsenals, seriously threatening its national security.

China knows where its core interests lie, and when actors threaten its interests, it should say "no" loudly. That is the flexibility of China's North Korea policy.

Boundaries of Sino-DPRK Relations

China's diplomatic strategy followed a course of traditional bilateralism through the 1990s, but with the dramatic improvement of its national strength over the past decades, that strategy has become more multilateral. China increasingly sees itself as a stakeholder in the global political economy and considers the anxieties and challenges of the international community from a global, as well as regional, perspective. How China defines its

own national interests, and how it acts in an increasingly interdependent international community and pursues national interests, is becoming increasingly important to the world. In this context, the North Korean nuclear crisis has been a challenging and instructive experience.

As a global power, China not only must fulfill its responsibilities in the international arena, but must also recognize and protect its core national interests. In the North Korea nuclear crisis, to be a responsible big power and to protect its core national interests requires a high degree of consistency. In fact, the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula is in accord with the interests of nearly all countries.

The interests of China and the United States on the Korean peninsula are not always the same, but there is some common ground—including denuclearization. In pursuing the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, the policy of the United States is shaped by its extensive interests and commitments in East Asia. Although Japan is an ally of the United States, the United States does not want Japan to possess nuclear weapons. At the outset, China believed that the North Korean nuclear crisis was a problem basically caused by the United States, and China did not want to be involved. However, as the crisis unfolded and intensified, Beijing could no longer act as a bystander. Instead, China worked to promote peaceful talks and took the initiative to adopt effective measures to resolve the issue while simultaneously criticizing the United States and condemning North Korea's extreme risk-taking behavior. This required effective measures for China to protect its core national/regional interests while pursuing its global obligations. This fully reflects the combination of the principles of consistency and flexibility inherent in China's foreign policy.

For decades, China and North Korea were linked by a "blood-bound alliance," but the Sino-North Korea relationship has been sharply weakened ever since China established diplomatic relations with South Korea in 1992 without North Korea's agreement. Around the time of Kim Il Sung's death, exchanges between Pyongyang and Beijing's top officials decreased, and the two

nations soon lost their special relationship. It was transformed into nothing more than a bond of friendship. After China voted for the UN Security Council's sanctions resolution on North Korea's first nuclear test, bilateral relations worsened. China now appears uninterested in sustaining article II of the treaty it signed with North Korea in 1961. The treaty assures mutual military assistance in case of aggression by a third party against either party. An attack launched by North Korea on South Korea or the United States, regardless of whether North Korea has nuclear weapons, would not fall within the scope of mutual assistance required under the China-North Korea treaty. However, China will still maintain a "strategic partnership" with North Korea due to several common interests. Even though North Korea has conducted nuclear tests it is still a security partner—albeit a difficult one—of China. China needs North Korea, and North Korea understands this.

Conclusion

In the short term, a North Korea with nuclear weapons would not pose a direct threat to China because China has not threatened North Korea. Yet it is reasonable to ask what the long-term impact of a nuclear weapons-capable North Korea will have on China and the region. In the long term, to deal with the North Korea nuclear issue, China should develop a long-term strategy. This strategy should build on its own international status as well as its core national interests.

First, China's core interests on the Korean peninsula are to maintain peace and stability, and bring about the denuclearization of the area. Consequently, North Korea's extreme risk-taking policy cannot be tolerated or accommodated. Second, from historical experience and practical developments, the unification of the Korean peninsula is inevitable. China must pay close attention to whether South Korea or the DPRK will reunify the Korean peninsula and in what way unification will be achieved. Third, from a long-term point of view, the North Korean nuclear

issue is not a conflict between North Korea and the United States, but centers on China's world strategy and the U.S. Asia-Pacific strategy. Therefore, Sino-DPRK relations should be subordinate to Sino-American relations, and China should pay close attention to keep the balance between Sino-DPRK relations and Sino-American relations. Fourth, in the long run, China will become a global power and be a responsible member of the international community. It should subordinate its responsibilities and obligations to North Korea to those of the international community.

Provided it thinks about these questions seriously, China can work out a foreign policy with the stability, continuity, and flexibility necessary to defend its national interests.