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Dealing with North Korea's Nuclear and Missile Programs: A Chinese Perspective

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Abstract: This article addresses some of the key questions regarding China's deliberations on North Korea's nuclear and missile programs: What are China's views of North Korea's nuclear and missile programs? Where do Chinese and American interests converge and diverge? Who holds the key to North Korea's nuclear problem? How feasible is China's proposed "dual suspension" solution to the nuclear stalemate? I argue that the roots of the North Korea problem lie in the unfinished Korean War. The North Korea nuclear issue must be addressed in the broad context of changing conditions of East Asian security and US-China rivalry. Dialogue and diplomacy remain the best mechanism to tackle the North Korea problem. International cooperation to map out a future for the Korean Peninsula that does not harm the interests of major powers, but is also welcomed by the Korean people, is crucial for the final resolution of the North Korea crisis.

Keywords: *East Asian security, the Korean War, China-North Korea relations, US-China relations, international cooperation.*

Introduction

Since North Korea detonated its first nuclear device in 2006, Northeast Asian security has been seriously challenged. In the decade that followed, North Korea significantly improved its nuclear and missile technologies in spite of international sanctions, and by the end of 2017, it had successfully conducted six nuclear tests and launched an intercontinental ballistic missile. Meanwhile, relations between North Korea and both the United States and China deteriorated. However, developments in 2018, particularly reconciliation between North Korea and South Korea, President Donald Trump's softer approach to North Korea, and China's renewed high-level contacts with North Korea, offered a new opportunity for North Korea's denuclearization and improvement of its external relations.

China has more than 750 miles of borders with North Korea. North Korea's nuclear test sites, including the now demolished Punggye-ri site, are very close to Northeast China. Any accident, nuclear or conventional, would have a catastrophic spillover into

China. China is already surrounded by more nuclear powers and nuclear-capable states than any other country in the world. It is not in China's interest to have a nuclearized and intractable North Korea right next door. Since 2003, when China launched the Six-Party Talks, it has worked hard to achieve a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula, but when and how this objective can be reached depends on multilateral cooperation, especially US-China cooperation.

Moving forward, the international community must coordinate efforts and work together to integrate North Korea into the dynamic Asian regional political economy. Most importantly, the United States and China should address the root cause of the problem – the unfinished Korean War – and create conditions for a peaceful resolution of the North Korea nuclear issue.

What Is China's Position?

China's position on the North Korean nuclear issue has been clear and consistent. Broadly speaking, China has three main objectives: peace and stability in Northeast Asia, denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, and peaceful resolution of the North Korea issue through dialogue and negotiation. Chinese foreign ministry officials and senior diplomats have reiterated such objectives on many occasions. For example, in January 2018, Cui Tiankai, China's ambassador to the United States, told *USA Today* that China wanted denuclearization of the entire Korean Peninsula, no armed conflict or chaos on its borders, and for any reunification to happen through diplomacy. He suggested China would respect the choice of the Korean people when it comes to the future of the Korean Peninsula, and it was up to them to adopt an independent foreign policy, even if a unified Korea were aligned with the West – as long as it is peaceful and does not threaten China's national security.¹

Some scholars have observed that China is split by the conflicting interests of the nation and the Communist Party. China's national interest and national security dictate that it must work hard to keep North Korea nuclear-free. Yet the Chinese Communist Party's primary interest is to stay in power, and keeping the Korean status quo helps the Chinese policy of resisting, reducing, and replacing the US power in East Asia.² Due to this inherent conflict, China will continue to walk the tightrope of keeping North Korea safe and alive while working with the United States and others to achieve peaceful denuclearization.

The Six-Party Talks that China led between 2003 and 2009 failed to curb North Korea's nuclear development. Realizing the serious situation on the Korean Peninsula, China has in recent years stepped up its efforts to implement United Nations (UN) sanctions against North Korea and tightened its border with North Korea. Meanwhile,

as a pragmatic step, it has proposed the “dual suspension” plan: North Korea suspends further nuclear and missile tests in exchange for suspension of joint US–South Korea military exercises. On this basis, denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula can be achieved peacefully and gradually. China does not like the crisis situation on the Korean Peninsula because it threatens a nuclear war, political turmoil, a massive refugee problem, and other unpredictable negative consequences right next door.

In addition to the nuclear program, North Korea has also developed biological and chemical weapons. Kim Jong-un’s half-brother Kim Jong-nam was apparently killed by North Korean agents with the use of the nerve agent VX at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport in February 2017. China generally opposes North Korea’s development of lethal weapons, especially nuclear weapons near its border area.

The Chinese debate is inconclusive in terms of whether China should continue to support North Korea or not. For example, Jia Qingguo, a prominent international relations scholar at Peking University, noted in 2017 that the omens of war on the Korean Peninsula loom larger by the day: “When war becomes a real possibility, China must be prepared. And, with this in mind, China must be more willing to consider talks with concerned countries on contingency plans.”³ He suggested, “Beijing may have no better choice than to start talking with Washington and Seoul” on issues such as who should control North Korea’s nuclear weapons arsenal in the wake of North Korea’s collapse, whether the US troops can cross the 38th parallel, and how to deal with the expected North Korean refugees. This is a rare public call by an influential Chinese scholar to boost coordination with the United States and South Korea in preparation for North Korea’s collapse even at the risk of alienating or upsetting North Korea.

Jia’s comments triggered strong responses from Zhu Zhihua, vice chairman of the Zhejiang Association of Contemporary International Studies, who wrote an article calling Jia’s comments nonsense and criticizing his overall stance as being pro-American. Zhu asserts that Jia’s arguments completely depart from the socialist core of China’s diplomacy and seriously harm China’s national interests and image, as well as subverting China’s consistent principles and bottom line regarding the North Korea issue. Zhu used unusually harsh words, attacking Jia personally, and argued that especially in his position as a professor at the highly acclaimed Peking University, Jia should not openly express a view on the North Korean issue that deviates from the Chinese government position, as this would mislead the public opinion and cause trouble for society.⁴

Jia responded with equally rough words, criticizing Zhu for not being objective and being insulting. The Peking University professor claimed that instead of seriously engaging in a discussion on how to deal with the external threat, Zhu prefers to point the gun at his fellow citizens. Furthermore, Jia accuses him of treating scholars as suspects,

a bad habit probably acquired during his prior work at the Public Security Bureau of Zhejiang province.⁵

The Jia-Zhu debate reflects the lack of consensus in China regarding how to deal with North Korea now. However, increasingly, many scholars in China believe that North Korea's nuclear weapons program is a direct threat to China and regards the Kim regime as a liability. Shen Zihua of East China Normal University in Shanghai is one of the scholars highly critical of China's North Korea policy. For example, in one speech, he suggested that China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) will not succeed if conflict breaks out in North Korea, just like the United States will not be able to implement its global strategy if there is chaos in its backyard.⁶

Citing Chairman Mao Zedong's famous saying "who is our friend and who is our enemy, this is the primary question for our revolution," Shen asked North Korea and South Korea, who is our friend and who is our enemy? His answer: South Korea is our possible friend, and North Korea is our latent enemy.⁷ Shen believes the fundamental interests of North Korea and China are different. He is also critical of the People's Republic of China (PRC)-Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) Friendship Treaty, calling it "weird." In his logic, after the PRC-Republic of Korea (ROK) diplomatic ties were established in 1992, the PRC-DPRK alliance was officially over.

On the other hand, as researcher Anny Boc notes, many in China believe that the United States has the sole responsibility for the current crisis on the Korean Peninsula. They are sympathetic to North Korea's security concerns, claiming that the U.S. reluctance to remove its troops from South Korea after the Korean War and its frequent and large scale military exercises with Seoul over the years have left North Korea no other choice but to pursue the development of nuclear weapons. Moreover, they emphasize the official Chinese stance that the United States and South Korea hold the key to solving the North Korean issue and should talk to North Korea directly, as China does not have any decisive influence to do so.⁸ Indeed, China has been supportive of North-South reconciliation and US-DPRK rapprochement since the beginning of 2018, and China even provided air transportation for Kim Jong-un's trip to Singapore for the Trump-Kim meeting in June 2018.

Comrades in Broken Arms?

The Sino-North Korean Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty (中朝友好合作互助条约, 중조우호협력상호원조조약) was signed in Beijing by Kim Il-sung and Zhou Enlai on July 11, 1961. Article 2 of the treaty declares the two nations undertake all necessary measures to oppose any country or coalition of countries that might attack

either nation.

Though some suggest that the treaty remains in effect and is automatically renewed every 20 years, in reality, the status of the treaty is highly ambiguous. In recent memory, no high-ranking Chinese official has mentioned this treaty. Some Chinese scholars privately admit that the 1961 treaty is just a piece of dusty paper.⁹ Other scholars or retired PLA officers have publicly stated that China is not obligated to defend North Korea now. For example, retired Chinese naval colonel Li Jie said, “It is hard to say how China would assist North Korea militarily in case of war, since North Korea is developing nuclear weapons, an act that might have already breached the treaty between the two nations,” noting that the treaty says both nations should safeguard peace and security. If North Korea initiated an attack, China would not be obliged to get involved, said Professor Cai Jian of Fudan University. Antony Wong Dong, a Macau-based military analyst, said that when the treaty was last renewed, China warned North Korea that it must take responsibility for its own behavior. “There won’t be a second Korean war,” claimed Wong. In addition, the *Global Times*, which is published by the official *People’s Daily*, said in an editorial that the best option for North Korea and Kim Jong-un was for the country to give up its nuclear program, and China would protect North Korea if it did. “As soon as North Korea complies with China’s declared advice and suspends nuclear activities... China will actively work to protect the security of a denuclearized North Korean nation and regime,” said the *Global Times*.¹⁰

Indeed, if North Korea is willing to denuclearize, its relations with China will immediately improve, as evidenced by the fact that shortly after President Donald Trump and Chairman Kim Jong-un agreed in early March 2018 to talk about the nuclear issue face-to-face, Kim was welcomed to visit Beijing and met with President Xi Jinping in late March 2018. Though the visit was labelled as “unofficial,” both sides claimed the friendly relationship must be maintained and strengthened. Xi even accepted Kim’s invitation to visit North Korea “at a convenient time.”¹¹ Kim subsequently paid two additional visits to China in May and June 2018. Some people suggested that the Trump-Kim direct meeting may marginalize China’s role in Korean affairs. Kim’s visits to China not only bolstered his bargaining position vis-à-vis Trump, but also essentially returned China to the center stage of East Asian security.

It is clear that Kim initiated rapprochement with South Korea, China, and the United States in 2018 through his New Year’s speech, and Xi promptly grabbed the opportunity to normalize relations with North Korea and reassert China’s influence on the Korean Peninsula. Perhaps the pressures from international sanctions were too much for Kim, or perhaps he really wanted to change policies and turn North Korea into a modern and normal state. For whatever reason, his objective cannot be achieved without China’s support and cooperation. For Xi, President Trump’s threat of a trade war with China

made him rediscover the value of North Korea. Just like the United States often plays the “Taiwan card” at critical junctures of US-China relations, China could play the “North Korea card.” For example, China could choose to either tighten or loosen sanctions on North Korea depending on developments in US-China relations. Unfortunately, both Taiwan and North Korea are likely to fall prey to the fluctuations of US-China relations, and playing the Taiwan and North Korea cards may not be in the long-term interests of the United States and China, respectively.

Sino-DPRK relations greatly improved in 2018. On July 27, 2018, Kim Jong-un visited the cemetery of Chinese soldiers who died during the Korean War. To mark the 65th anniversary of the signing of the armistice, Kim eulogized sacrifices from both China and North Korea during the War and hailed the Sino-DPRK friendly relations as “unprecedentedly special and solid.”¹² In comparison, there were no public official activities in China to commemorate the occasion. Interestingly, South Korean media reported that on the same day a Chinese reconnaissance aircraft entered South Korean Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) that partially overlaps with China’s ADIZ.¹³

The improved Sino-DPRK relations in 2018 were a sharp contrast to previous years, and relations became extremely tense after Kim Jong-il died in 2011. In theory North Korea and China are still “allies”; in practice the relationship is more ambiguous and complex. There are no basic trappings of an alliance. For example, there have been no defense exchanges or joint military exercises between China and North Korea. No North Korea military delegates or students are being trained at China’s National Defense University, which routinely hosts military personnel from dozens of countries from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Cool feelings towards each other could be detected at the societal level. The Chinese generally look down upon North Korea’s recalcitrant policy and feel sympathetic for North Koreans living miserable lives. The North Koreans reportedly despise the Chinese who, in their views, betrayed North Korea in 1992 when Beijing established diplomatic relations with Seoul. Interactions between North Korea and China also significantly decreased in the past decade. For example, Air China, the only international airline that flies between North Korea and the outside world, suspended its regular flights between Beijing and Pyongyang in November 2017. Regular flights were only resumed in mid-June 2018 as the situation on the Korean Peninsula improved.

Radio Free Asia reported that in early 2018, North Koreans organized assemblies and public speeches to condemn China’s participation in the new UN sanctions against their country. The regime is instilling anti-China feelings among the public, blaming China for betraying the nation and causing economic adversity in North Korea. In one such assembly, one high-level official from Songpyong claimed that though Japan is Korea’s enemy for 100 years, China is Korea’s enemy for 1,000 years.¹⁴ Without doubt, China-North Korea relations significantly deteriorated between 2011 and 2017. The relationship between China

and North Korea used to be dubbed as close as “lips and teeth,” but they were more like “comrades in broken arms” during the first few years of Kim Jong-un’s rule.¹⁵

North Korea has been skilled in manipulating relations between big powers since the 1950s. Declassified documents suggest that North Korea played China and the Soviet Union against each other before, during, and after the Korean War. It swung between China and the Soviet Union during much of the Cold War. For post-Cold War North Korea, the biggest blow was undoubtedly the establishment of diplomatic relations between the PRC and the ROK in 1992. Chinese foreign minister Qian Qichen was dispatched to Pyongyang in July 1992 to explain the situation and to soothe North Korean leaders. Kim Il-sung reportedly went berserk and had the shortest of all the meetings he had had with a Chinese delegation.¹⁶ Kim Il-sung would never set foot in China again.

According to a high-ranking North Korean economic official who defected to South Korea in 2014, after Xi Jinping’s July 2014 visit to South Korea and meeting with then-South Korean President Park Geun-hye, Kim Jong-un called Xi a “son of a bitch” at a meeting with senior officials, adding that his father Kim Jong-il warned him to stay independent from China.¹⁷ Deteriorating China-North Korea relationships in recent years indicate that China’s clout over North Korea might have been overrated.

It was reported, but not confirmed, that then-Chinese president Hu Jintao met with Kim Jong-un’s uncle Jang Song-taek in Beijing in August 2012, just months after Kim Jong-il’s death. Jang told Hu he wanted Kim Jong-nam to be the country’s new leader. The meeting was secretly taped by Zhou Yongkang, a standing committee member of the Chinese Communist Party politburo, who allegedly tipped off Kim Jong-un. Months later, Jang was executed for treason. And several years later, Kim Jong-nam was assassinated in Malaysia in 2017. Zhou was sentenced to life in 2015 for bribery, abuse of power, and “leaking state secrets.”¹⁸ North Korea began to distrust the Chinese leadership after learning they had done nothing to prevent what it saw as a move to overthrow its government. Meanwhile, Beijing grew suspicious of Pyongyang for purging Jang, who had previously acted as an intermediary between the two countries.

China is often depicted as a country holding the key to North Korea’s survival. Many people suggest that if China cut off the oil supply to North Korea, the Pyongyang regime would collapse within months. Even if it is true, China is unwilling to completely abandon North Korea not because it supports Pyongyang’s nuclear program, but because it is afraid of the consequences of a failed North Korea. North Korean refugees, for example, would inundate China’s northeast region, creating social, economic, political, and security challenges to China’s border areas.

Despite the deep freeze in the relationship between 2011 and 2017, Sino-DPRK relations seem durable, especially when international situations change and when the

two countries need each other. Interestingly, even before Kim Jong-un's surprise March 2018 visit to China that repaired bilateral relationship to a great extent, Beijing's *Global Times*, in an editorial, asserted that friendly Sino-DPRK relationship should not be disrupted by South Korea, the United States, and Japan. It suggested that North Korea was a country to be respected since it "has high degree of independence and autonomy," which is very rare in Northeast Asia now. The editorial also argued that maintaining friendly relations was in the interest of both countries. For China, North Korea is part of its strategy of good-neighbor diplomacy, and keeping good relations with North Korea will give China "space to turn around" (回旋空间) in Northeast Asian affairs.¹⁹ As tensions between the United States and China increase, the editorial may be reflecting the Chinese government's position, and it is a clear indication that China may wish to play the North Korea card, especially when its relations with the United States worsen.

US and Chinese Interests: Convergence and Divergence

The United States and China may have a common interest in denuclearizing North Korea, but they have different visions for the future, particularly regarding the US troops in Asia after North Korea denuclearizes. Until now, the United States and China have not seriously discussed the roadmap for North Korea's future. Distrust between the United States and China has prevented them from fully cooperating on the issue. What limits US-China cooperation is the divergence of their interests. There are two major differences: the cause or nature of North Korea's nuclear program, and the final solution.

Regarding the cause or nature of North Korea's nuclear program, the Chinese government believes that both North Korea and the United States are partially to blame with their erroneous policies, but the United States believes it is all North Korea's fault. North Korea's *songun* (military first) policy runs against the global trend of focusing on economic development after the Cold War. The more North Korea develops nuclear and missile programs, the more isolated it will be.

It is worth mentioning that the United States did not pursue the so-called cross-recognition policy after Russia and China recognized the Republic of Korea in 1991 and 1992, respectively. The United States and Japan did not follow up by recognizing DPRK in exchange, as tacitly agreed upon. Many in the West believed that North Korea would collapse or implode soon after the Cold War. They did not take the young and untested Kim Jong-un seriously either, when he succeeded his father in 2011. The United States considers North Korea a "rogue state" and has been moving North Korea on and off the US list of "state-sponsors of terrorism." North Korea's insecurity derived from the unfinished Korean War has not been properly acknowledged and addressed by the United States and its allies.

Regarding the final solution to the North Korea problem, China has consistently proposed peaceful means while the United States largely prefers sanctions, with occasional threats to use military force against North Korea. Over the years, the Chinese government has attempted various peaceful means, including the Six-Party Talks and most recently the “dual suspension” proposal. Basically, both the United States and North Korea need to take a step back and change the Cold War-style approach and establish a peace mechanism. However, various US administrations believe that maximum pressure through toughest sanctions, backed by joint US-ROK military drills, will bring North Korea to its knees.

Over the past two decades, the US policy towards North Korea has not been consistent. In 1994 the two countries reached the Agreed Framework for North Korea to terminate its nuclear program in exchange for two light-water nuclear reactors from the United States. It turned out that neither side kept its end of the bargain. During the Bill Clinton administration, the US-North Korea relationship was relatively cordial, with President Clinton himself planning to visit Pyongyang after dispatching his Secretary of State Madeleine Albright there in October 2000. Albright was warmly received by Kim Jong-il in Pyongyang, and the atmosphere in both countries was optimistic. Commenting on Albright’s visit, President Clinton said, “We have some hope of resolving our outstanding differences with North Korea and looking forward to the day when they will truly close the last chapter in the aftermath of the Korean War.”²⁰ The prospect of Clinton’s making such an important foreign visit so late in his presidency to a state the United States had charged with supporting terrorism raised mixed reactions and a heated discussion even within his own administration.²¹ In the end, Clinton did not visit North Korea before he left the White House in January 2001, but he did travel to North Korea at the invitation of Kim Jong-il in August 2009 as a former US president to help secure the release of two American journalists detained by North Korea.

After 9/11, President George W. Bush immediately named North Korea part of the “axis of evil,” together with Iran and Iraq, and the US-North Korea relations froze during the rest of his term. President Barack Obama exercised “strategic patience” towards North Korea, essentially waiting for the North Korean regime to collapse. And the Donald Trump administration has sent out mixed signals—from punishing North Korea with “fire and fury” to abruptly accepting Kim Jong-un’s invitation to meet fact-to-face. It is interesting to ask: Who is more unpredictable, Trump or Kim?

Meanwhile, the Trump administration does not seem to have a consensus regarding its North Korea policy. In January 2018, media reports revealed that Victor Cha’s nomination to be the US ambassador to South Korea was scrapped by the Trump Administration due to Cha’s disagreement with the so-called “bloody nose” strategy favored by some Trump Administration officials. In a *Washington Post* op-ed piece,

Cha outlined his logic against a preventive US military strike that may trigger a nuclear war. He cautioned that Kim Jong-un may remain undeterred by a “bloody nose” while hundreds of thousands of American lives will be in danger. “To be clear: The president would be putting at risk an American population the size of a medium-size US city – Pittsburgh, say, or Cincinnati – on the assumption that a crazy and undeterrable dictator will be rationally cowed by a demonstration of US kinetic power,” asserted Cha, let alone millions of Koreans who may perish in a nuclear war.²² It may never be known what exactly cost Cha his potential job as the US ambassador to Seoul, but it is clear his view is not shared by the Trump Administration.

Coincidentally, Joseph Yun, the US State Department's top diplomat in charge of North Korea policy, suddenly announced his retirement at the end of February 2018. Yun joined the Foreign Service in 1985 and is in his early 60s. Yun's unexpected departure raises questions and adds to uncertainty over President Trump's North Korea policy. The veteran diplomat had a reputation as a proponent of dialogue when it comes to dealing with North Korea. “He was a great advocate for dialogue and for diplomacy, and I think it's unfortunate that his voice will no longer be in the conversation inside the US government,” said Abraham Denmark, a former US deputy assistant secretary of defense for East Asia who worked closely with Yun.²² With voices from moderates such as Yun being shrugged off, it is unclear to what extent the Trump Administration is committed to diplomatic efforts to peacefully solve the North Korea nuclear crisis.

China, on the other hand, generally considers North Korea a distraction from its main foreign policy objective of implementing the Belt and Road Initiative. Foreign Minister Wang Yi repeatedly warned that China would not permit war or chaos on its border. China is apparently preparing for the worst. There was a growing sense of crisis in China in the past few years. Jilin Province is close to North Korea's nuclear test site. The December 6, 2017 edition of the province's Communist Party newspaper, *the Jilin Daily*, ran a full-page feature headlined, “Knowledge about and protection from nuclear weapons.” The piece included various illustrated instructions: close windows and doors if there is no time to evacuate, to reduce radiation exposure; when going out, wear surgical masks and coats; take iodine immediately; and so on. The paper did not say why it carried those guidelines, which are obviously precautions for an emergency on the Korean Peninsula.

The Chinese government also instructed northeastern provinces, including Jilin and Liaoning, to start preparing to open camps that could absorb an expected influx of displaced North Koreans, according to Chinese Communist Party insiders. The sources said multiple planned facilities would have an estimated capacity of up to 500,000 people. Stockpiling of food and tents had apparently begun as of the end of 2017.²³

For a long time, the United States has insisted that North Korea give up its nuclear program before the two countries can talk. The Trump administration showed some flexibility. Former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson suggested in December 2017 that the United States was ready to talk without preconditions. But the White House quickly backtracked, saying US policy towards North Korea remained unchanged. Tillerson was replaced by the CIA director Mike Pompeo in March 2018 right after a Trump-Kim meeting was announced. Pompeo has made several trips to North Korea since then, emerging as a top advocate of engagement with Pyongyang.

In February 2018, during the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics, Vice President Mike Pence was reportedly planning to meet with the North Korean delegation including Kim Jong-un's sister, but North Korea cancelled the meeting at the last minute. Before and during the Olympics, Pence emphasized that there was no daylight between the United States and its allies on the need to isolate North Korea diplomatically and economically until it abandons nuclear and ballistic missile programs.²⁴ Still Pence told journalists on his way back to the United States that the United States and South Korea agreed on terms for further engagement with North Korea – first by the South Koreans and potentially with the United States soon thereafter. The frame for the diplomatic path forward is this: The United States and its allies will not stop imposing steep and escalating costs on North Korea until it takes clear steps toward denuclearization. But the Trump administration is now willing to sit down and talk with the regime while that pressure campaign is ongoing.²⁵ Such shifting and sometime conflicting positions reflect a lack of consensus within the US government on how to deal with North Korea.

China has always encouraged the United States and North Korea to directly talk to each other. In a phone conversation with Trump on March 9, 2018, President Xi Jinping said he appreciated Trump's desire to resolve the North Korea issue politically and hoped all sides could show goodwill to avoid doing anything that might affect or interfere with the improving situation on the Korean Peninsula.²⁶ Though the Chinese government has long argued that the nuclear issue is a problem between the United States and North Korea, when the United States and North Korea were planning to talk directly to each other, some analysts fear that China is being sidelined or marginalized in the process, which may lead to China's decreasing influence over the future of the Korean Peninsula. Other analysts believe that China still plays a crucial role in the denuclearization process. One summit between Trump and Kim would not be enough to break the nuclear stand-off. "The nuclear and missile issues require more protracted talks," said Fudan University professor Wei Zongyou. "In this process, China will be an active supporter and promoter of denuclearization."²⁷ China's assistance has been appreciated by the United States. On many occasions, President Trump has praised China for working together to deal with the North Korea challenge.²⁸

Does China consider North Korea a “buffer zone?” Yes and No. Modern military technology makes a buffer in conflict meaningless since one can easily launch missiles over the buffer zone and hit the target far away. However, the existence of North Korea still serves Chinese interest diplomatically to some extent. China “is the umbilical cord that keeps North Korea alive,” Scott Snyder, a Korea expert at the Council on Foreign Relations, has observed. “But their main interest is in stability on the peninsula. So they’ve got leverage that they can’t use, essentially. Because if they use the leverage, they’re going to generate instability.”²⁹ Such a dilemma has prevented China from taking a more aggressive approach toward denuclearizing North Korea.

Options

After the Trump-Kim meeting in Singapore in June 2018, expectations grew regarding North Korea’s denuclearization. However, no substantive progress has been achieved since then due to US and North Korean differences on the sequencing of steps that must be taken by both sides. There will be no easy or simple solution to the problem. With rising tensions between China and the United States on trade, Taiwan, the South China Sea, and other issues, China is likely to maintain strong relations with North Korea in the near future, which will make denuclearizing North Korea more complex. Some interpret this as China’s support for North Korea, without realizing that for its own security, China basically has to ensure that the North Korean regime will not suddenly collapse. And one should not forget that the North Korea issue is inextricably linked to US-China relations. One way for China or the United States to get out of the tense US-China rivalry is to improve relations with North Korea so as to exert pressure on the other side. In other words, both China and the United States could play the North Korea card to express their dissatisfaction with each other and force the other side to change its policy.

So what can be done about North Korea from China’s perspective? Most importantly, North Korea’s denuclearization must proceed peacefully, and dialogue at the bilateral and multilateral levels must be promoted. Though the Six-Party Talks failed in 2009, as a conflict resolution mechanism, this multilateral framework may still be useful. It may be difficult to bring all the six parties together again, but bilateral and multilateral talks and negotiations between and among members of the group can still take place.

As part of the “dual suspension” approach, the Chinese government has proposed a deal in which North Korea suspends its rapidly advancing nuclear and missile programs in exchange for the United States and South Korea suspending their joint military exercises, as a prelude to negotiations to eventually rid the North of nuclear weapons. The easing of tensions between North Korea and South Korea after the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics could be attributed to this model. North Korea refrained

from conducting any missile or nuclear tests during the Olympics and the United States and South Korea postponed their military drills. During the annual meeting of the National People's Congress in Beijing in March 2018, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi reaffirmed China's position that "suspension for suspension" was the initial step to achieving peace on the Korean Peninsula. He called upon the United States and North Korea to talk to each other directly. Such bilateral negotiations, supported by the international community, would create favorable conditions for denuclearization and peace in the region.³⁰ The June 2018 Singapore meeting between Trump and Kim apparently also followed the logic of "dual suspension."

The United States, China, and all other stakeholders must seriously address the North Korea nuclear issue from the broad context of post-Cold War Asian security and political economy. There is no simple solution, and a package of agreements and frameworks will likely be the outcome of such serious discussions among all players involved. It is unrealistic for the United States to expect North Korea to swiftly denuclearize right after the Trump-Kim meeting.

Kim Jong-un's father Kim Jong-il reportedly told Madeleine Albright when the former US Secretary of State visited Pyongyang in October 2000 that in the 1970s, Deng Xiaoping, the Chinese leader, was able to conclude that China faced no external security threat and could accordingly refocus its resources on economic development. With the appropriate security assurances, Kim said, he would be able to convince his military that the United States was no longer a threat and then be in a similar position to refocus his country's resources.³¹ This can perhaps serve as a starting point: If we want North Korea to give up its nuclear program, can we guarantee its security? Without anything substantive in return, why would we expect North Korea just willingly abandon the nuclear and missile programs? More importantly, what does the international community plan to do to help North Korea integrate into the regional development, such as China's BRI or the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)?

Denuclearization is an objective, not a pre-condition, of peaceful talks. Without security guarantees from the United States or others that North Korea will not be attacked after it gives up nuclear weapons, it might be wishful thinking to expect North Korea to voluntarily denuclearize. A softer approach towards the North that takes its concerns into account has the potential to achieve this ultimate objective. According to former US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, the United States had consulted with China about ways to handle refugees and contain North Korea's nuclear weapons if a conflict breaks out. "[T]he most important thing to us would be securing those nuclear weapons they've already developed and ensuring that...nothing falls into the hands of people we would not want to have it. We've had conversations with the Chinese about how might that be done," he said. The two sides were believed to have discussed these matters during the bilateral security dialogue in Washington in June 2017. That was around the time when Beijing

issued the instructions on the refugee camps. Tillerson also said the US had assured China that, if American forces invade North Korea across the military demarcation line, they will withdraw once certain conditions are met.³² Now that Tillerson is out, it is unclear whether the United States and China have continued such dialogues.

Broadly speaking, there are three approaches to addressing North Korea's nuclear issue: continuation of the sanction-based policy to force North Korea to surrender its nuclear program; military actions to destroy North Korea's nuclear facilities and perhaps the North Korean regime once and for all; and returning to negotiation table and seeking a mutually acceptable solution.

Between 2006 and 2017, the UN Security Council adopted 10 resolutions regarding North Korea, with the latest one unanimously passed in December 2017 banning over 90 percent of the DPRK's foreign trade, limiting its imports of crude oil to under 4 million barrels a year, and shutting down its overseas companies. Meanwhile, the US and its allies have imposed additional, unilateral sanctions while increasing military pressure on the DPRK. Sanctions, backed up by military preparedness, have been the approach preferred by the United States. Such an approach has seriously restricted North Korea's economic activities but failed to stop its nuclear and missile programs.

China has supported UN resolutions to sanction North Korea's defiant behavior, but at the same time has argued that sanctions must be aimed at promoting talks. "Pressure without talks would lead nowhere," commented Fu Ying, a senior Chinese diplomat.³³ In her view, all UN resolutions must be faithfully and completely abided by, in conjunction with specific steps to talk to North Korea.

On the other hand, any military action will have unbearable consequences for all parties, especially the Korean people. As US Secretary of Defense James Mattis put it, the war on the Korean Peninsula will be "catastrophic" and "the worst kind of fighting in most people's lifetimes."³⁴ South Korean President Moon Jae-in has insisted that no US-led war on the Korean Peninsula will be allowed without South Korea's consent. So the only viable option is to return to the negotiation table despite its many shortcomings.

Demanding North Korea to abandon its nuclear program first before negotiations can begin between the United States and North Korea is like putting the cart before the horse. However, the international community, including China, is very adamant: North Korea must denuclearize. Given the situation, China's "dual suspension" proposal is probably the most realistic and pragmatic way to get the ball rolling. Denuclearization will not take place overnight; it will be a phased and long process that may last for years.

Some people in Washington, DC do not support US engagement with North Korea since they believe talking to a rogue regime is to reward its bad behavior. Such a condescending

attitude is not conducive to peaceful resolution to any disputes. Diplomacy is an art of reaching a mutually acceptable solution to a dispute without resorting to war. Negotiators do not have to like each other, but they share the same purpose of finding a solution to a problem through peaceful means. A successful resolution is not guaranteed through negotiations, but as Winston Churchill once said, “meeting jaw to jaw is better than war.”³⁵

Conclusion

A blind spot in the current debate about North Korea is a fundamental question that is barely asked: Why does North Korea want to develop nuclear weapons in the first place? If the international community can create conditions under which North Koreans feel it unnecessary to develop nuclear weapons, then this problem may automatically disappear.

Possessing nuclear weapons does not necessarily make North Korea more dangerous; it's the intention to use them that does. As Kim Jong-un's 2018 New Year's Day message reveals, North Korean leaders are not irrational or suicidal. They are unlikely to use nuclear weapons without provocation.³⁶ With diplomatic, political, and economic incentives, North Korea is more likely to change its nuclear policy and join the international community. Developments in 2018, including Kim Jong-un's active diplomacy and summits with Xi Jinping, Moon Jae-in, and Donald Trump, are encouraging. Kim has also focused his attention on North Korea's economic development through his *byungjin* policy. Major powers should not let this rare opportunity of welcoming North Korea into the international community slip by.

Like many observers in and outside of China, Fu Ying, the veteran Chinese diplomat, called upon the United States to switch its strategy and talk to North Korea directly without pre-conditions. She suggested that the United States and its allies tend to pay more attention to possible restrictions on North Korea than addressing its security concerns in exchange for abandoning its nuclear program.³⁷ President Trump's meeting with Kim Jong-un in June 2018 is a positive step in the right direction. Despite criticisms that the Trump-Kim meeting in Singapore has not produced much substantive progress in denuclearization, the peaceful approach is preferable to conflicts and wars. At the minimum, such meetings help build trust that is severely lacking between the two sides.

Moving forward, North Korea's legitimate security concerns must be addressed. If the international community can integrate North Korea into the international system, North Korea will not have the intention to use those weapons. The United States and China, as the two leading players in the region, have yet to move beyond the Korean War and draw up a future for the Korean Peninsula acceptable to the Korean people. Without coordinated efforts by regional powers, denuclearization of North Korea will be

wishful thinking. Continued US-China cooperation is crucial. As former Asian affairs senior director on the National Security Council Jeffrey Bader remarked before the 2018 Trump-Kim meeting in Singapore, the United States must consult with allies and partners regarding North Korea, and Chinese president Xi Jinping needs to be consulted early and often.³⁸

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