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**THE KOREAN PENINSULA IN CHINA'S GRAND
STRATEGY:
CHINA'S ROLE IN DEALING WITH NORTH KOREA'S
NUCLEAR QUANDARY**

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S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies

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ABSTRACT

The unprecedented rise of China raises difficult challenges of double-edged nature to both China and its neighbours in Northeast Asia. The nuclear program of North Korea is an outstanding example. The reform and open policy China has adopted since the late 80s mandated the Beijing government to adopt a policy of active engagement with its former adversaries, straining its ties with the former allies like North Korea. Pyongyang's persistent efforts for a nuclear option may represent a hedging strategy against the changing security environment, but for China, it creates multiple predicaments including the management of its relations with the US, Japan and South Korea. The proactive role China has been playing in the process of the multi-lateral negotiation for a peaceful resolution of the nuclear quandary, particularly the Six-Party Talks, is an interesting case with important lessons to learn. This working paper argues that China's increasingly active role in the multi-lateral efforts to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue has proceeded in tandem with its grand strategy of engaging in regional and global governance as a responsible stakeholder. Also, by examining the problems China confronted in the process, the paper intends to demonstrate the limitations in China's role to promote stable security environment in the region.

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years in the late 90s. During his ambassadorial tenure in Beijing he witnessed such historic events as the death of Deng Xiaoping and the return of Hong Kong to China. He also successfully negotiated for the defection of a high ranking North Korean official, Hwang Jangyop, to Seoul via Beijing and Manila, an extremely delicate issue involving China and two Koreas.

Academically, he is interested in international politics of East Asia, inter-Korean relations, Chinese domestic and foreign policies, domestic and foreign policies of North and South Korea, and regionalism in Northeast Asia. While teaching at Seoul National University, he served as the director of its Center for International Studies and as the president of the Korean Association for Socialist System. Also, he was a senior member of the Presidential Commission on the 21st Century, a blue-ribbon government committee to chart the vision for the 21st century for Republic of Korea, and advisors to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Unification, and Ministry of National Defense.

He has published articles in *International Journal of Korean Studies* (International Association of Korean Studies, Washington, D.C.), *Korea and World Affairs* (Institute of Peace and Unification of Korea, Seoul), *Journal of Northeast Asian Studies* (George Washington University), Center for Korea Studies, University of California, Berkeley (monograph series on North Korean studies), and Keck Center for International and Strategic Studies at Claremont McKenna College (monograph series in international and area studies). He taught at Yale, American University, George Washington University, Claremont McKenna College (Freeman visiting professor), Ajou University (distinguished professor), and the Graduate School of International Studies, Seoul National University. He earned academic degrees from Seoul National University (BA in international Relations) and Yale University (Ph.D. in political science).

THE KOREAN PENINSULA IN CHINA'S GRAND STRATEGY: CHINA'S ROLE IN DEALING WITH NORTH KOREA'S NUCLEAR QUANDARY

(1) INTRODUCTION

The strategic dynamics between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) are unique. The bond once touted as that of teeth and lips, one cemented in blood of the 1950 vintage of the Korean War, no longer exists. The Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance signed in 1961 is still valid, but much of the comradeship that went into the treaty has evaporated. Also, the ideological fabrics that bound the two together have eroded beyond recognition. China vigorously pursuing the reform and open policy has embraced the outside world as a respectable and responsible power while North Korea has gone a very different way guided by the Juche ideology and the military first policy, a prescription for international isolation and economic decay. Indeed, North Korea is an outstanding example of a failing state whereas China represents a rare case of successful transformation from a Marxist-Leninist state to a developmental authoritarian system. But despite all these changes and contrasts, still the two countries maintain a close relationship. This relationship refuses easy characterization. It is not a typical client-patron relationship, as the client seems to defy the patron in a frequency and manner that is hard to find in other relations. And the patron continues to support the client even though the latter's behaviours expose the former to considerable strategic risks and political predicaments.

For China, among the manifold risks and predicaments North Korea typifies, the nuclear issue may be the most troublesome. The confrontational posture North Korea has exhibited in rejecting the repeated demands by the international community for transparency of its nuclear programme has turned into a considerable strategic burden on China. China is apprehensive that Pyongyang's tactics might lead to an irreparable rupture of peace and stability in the Korean peninsula. The predicaments are not limited to Pyongyang's obtaining a WMD capability. The concern with potential transfer of the North's WMD capability and technology to the other states and non-

state terrorist groups could put China in serious conflict with countries like the U.S. Also, China is disturbed by the prospect that North Korea's becoming a nuclear weapons state might induce a regional nuclear arms race involving Japan, South Korea, and possibly Taiwan.¹ This may be a worst-case scenario. But beyond the near-term feasibility of this scenario, North Korea's nuclear ambition undeniably presents a daunting challenge to China's grand strategy the core concept of which is to reassure the extant major powers of the world including the U.S. of the peaceful intentions and benefits of its unprecedented rise. How to handle this challenge may serve as a test of China's diplomatic dexterity.

This article intends to show that China's involvement in the bi-lateral and multi-lateral efforts to resolve North Korea's nuclear problem has proceeded in congruence with its strategy of peaceful development (*heping fazhan*) and good neighbourly policy (*mulin youhao zhengce*). Also, by analysing the hurdles and challenges China has confronted in tackling Pyongyang's nuclear quandary, this paper hopes to demonstrate the limits and potentials of China's role in maintaining and promoting peace and stability in the Korean peninsula and beyond. This will have considerable implications for assessing the strategic dynamics China's rise has created in the region.²

The paper will proceed in the following way. First, it will describe China's relations with the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) since its diplomatic normalization with the ROK. The purpose of this section will be to examine the impacts of the PRC-ROK normalization on the PRC-DPRK relations and on China's engagement with the DPRK in resolving the nuclear problem.

¹ After the May 2009 nuclear test by North Korea, many newspapers in South Korea carried articles on the possible nuclear arms race in Northeast Asia. Many argued that South Korea should consider a non-military nuclear reprocessing capability. See *Weekly Chosun*, 12 January, 2010. Also, a former senior official, Oh Wonchul, recently testified that he was in charge of a secret nuclear weapons development programme during the Park Chung Hee administration in the 1970s. See *Monthly Chosun*, September 2009. On the Taiwanese case, Kalyan Kemburi, "A Taiwanese nuclear revival", *The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, March/April 2009. On Japan, see Llewelyn Hughes, "Why Japan Will Not Go Nuclear (Yet): International and Domestic Constraints on the Nuclearization of Japan", *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (Spring 2007), 67–96. The author stresses that despite the negative public opinions "the door to independent nuclearization remains ajar", p. 69.

² Some of the observations noted here reflect my own experiences when I worked in the Kim Young Sam administration of the ROK during 1993–98, first as Senior Secretary for National Security and Foreign Policy and later as the ROK Ambassador to the PRC.

I will argue that the repercussions of the Sino-ROK normalization were more serious than Beijing expected and that this, along with other factors, imposed considerable restraints on its attempts to play a constructive role with respect to the DPRK's nuclear issue. Second, the paper will re-construct in some details how North Korea's nuclear problem started and how it evolved in the 1990s. This will be important in understanding the continuities and changes of the strategic goals and the negotiation tactics North Korea pursued later on. My argument will be that Pyongyang's goals and tactics during the first phase of the nuclear crisis were consistent with those in the second phase, including the North's pursuance of nuclear weapons option. One reason for this was that Kim Jong-il was in charge in both the first and second phase. Third, the paper will analyse the more recent developments surrounding Pyongyang's nuclear ambition that began in late 2002 and still continues. Here, the emphasis will be on China's changing roles, its motivations and its contributions in dealing with the nuclear conundrum of its immediate neighbour. In the concluding section, the paper will make some suggestions concerning the future of the Korean peninsula, the nuclear programme in particular, and China's role in it.

(2) DIPLOMATIC NORMALIZATION AND SINO-DPRK RELATIONS

Despite the efforts China had so meticulously and painstakingly exerted prior to the normalization, China's decision to establish diplomatic relations with South Korea was extremely difficult for North Korea to accommodate. How difficult it was for the North to live with the decision is well described in the memoir written by Qian Qichen, Minister of Foreign Affairs, who as a special envoy of President Hu Jintao flew to Pyongyang to meet Kim Il-song face to face and inform him of the coming announcement of the diplomatic normalization.³ That was in July 1992, about a month before the normalization became official. According to Qian, Kim carefully listened to the oral message from President Hu. When he had finished, with the reassurance of China's continuous and unfailing support of North Korea, Kim said a few words of appreciation and left. The meeting he had that day was "the shortest of all meetings President Kim Il-song had had with a Chinese delegation". After the meeting, "the DPRK did not give a banquet in our honour, contrary to what it had

³ Qian Qichen, *Ten Episodes in China's Diplomacy*, HarperCollins Publishers, 2005, chap. 5, "The Road to Seoul".

always done in the past”.⁴ Qian was not the first Chinese senior official to meet Kim and talk to him about the normalization. Earlier, such high ranking Chinese leaders like Li Peng, the premier, in April 1991, and Yang Shangkun, the state president, in April 1992, went to Pyongyang to warn Kim that the normalization was inevitable and would come before long. Of course, the Chinese government did not expect Pyongyang to welcome its decision, but hoped that the reactions would not be harsh. It was wrong. After the normalization, the exchange of visits by the top leaders of two governments came to a complete stop. Kim Il-song who came to China either on official visits or on unofficial “internal” trips once a year on the average in the past never set his foot on China again until he suddenly passed away two years later.⁵ Obviously, Kim was deeply disappointed and felt abandoned, if not betrayed by China. How can one explain this? I believe the answer may lie in the personal attachments Kim had towards China and the circumstances under which the normalization came.

For Kim Il-song, China had a special meaning. China was like a second home for Kim as he had spent much of his young and adult years in China’s northeastern region near the Chinese border with Korea. It was there that the young Kim, probably a member of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) during the 1930s,⁶ led a small group of anti-Japanese guerrilla fighters composed of both Koreans and Chinese, earning a reputation as a future leader.⁷ His Chinese as he learnt the language while attending school in China was fluent enough to converse with the Chinese leaders like Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping without interpreters. During the Korean War, which he started with Stalin’s blessing, it was the Chinese and not the Russians who came to save him from total military defeat. Later on, Pyongyang’s relations with Beijing were strained when the Sino-Soviet disputes forced Kim to walk on a tight rope between his two major communist allies and also during the Cultural Revolution in China when the red guards attacked Kim as a fascist revisionist. But overall, Kim always felt special attachment and close to China.

⁴ Qian Qichen, *Ten Episodes in Chinese Diplomacy*, p. 124; in the Chinese edition, p. 158–9.

⁵ Li Chongsuk, *Bukhan ga Junggug (North Korea and China)*, 2000.

⁶ About Kim Il-song’s CCP membership, see Pak Dong-un, “*Bukhan gongsandang*”, *Asiayungu*, Vol. 15 (September 1964), Korea University.

⁷ Suh Dae-sook, *Kim Il Sung: A Biography*, University of Hawaii Press, 1989. Also, Suh Dae-sook, *Hyundae bukhan jidoja: kim ilsong ga kim jongil*, Eulyoomunhasa, 2000, pp. 32–52.

The other reason was the timing as much as the fact of the normalization.⁸ The fall of the communist states in Eastern Europe and the collapse of the Soviet Union left China the only country Pyongyang could depend on for political and economic support. Seoul already established diplomatic ties with the Soviet Union and East European countries, deepening Pyongyang's international isolation and economic hardship. North Korea's domestic situation was equally gloomy. In the early 1990s it was about to experience the worst agricultural disaster for several years to come in what later was known as "the arduous march", i.e. years of famine when numerous people, some estimates put the number to 3,000,000, reportedly died of starvation. This, along with other mistakes like the huge wasteful investment in hosting the International Youth Games in 1989, the North Korean version of the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games, pushed its economy to the brink of total breakdown.⁹

It took eight years before the high level exchange resumed between China and North Korea. Kim Jong-il, Chairman of the National Defense Commission, now the highest ruling body in North Korea under the new constitution revised in 1998, visited China in May 2000. Since then, Kim travelled to China three more times, in January 2001, in April 2004, and in January 2006. On the Chinese side, President Jiang Zemin returned the visit to Pyongyang in September 2001. Also Hu Jintao, the new president of the PRC and the general-secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, paid an official visit to North Korea in 2005. With the resumption of high-level visits, the bi-lateral trade increased significantly. Pyongyang's imports from China were \$329 million in 1999 whereas in 2003 it jumped up to \$628 million. The sharp upward trends continued in the following years with \$799 million in 2004, \$1,081 million in 2005, \$1,232 million in 2006, \$1,393 million in 2007, and \$2,033 million in 2008.¹⁰ In 2008, China alone provided North Korea with over 40 per cent of the commodities North Korea imported. In energy, Chinese assistance was of absolute significance, over 90 per cent of what the North needed. Besides, China provided anywhere

⁸ On China's relations with the two Koreas, see Lee Chae-Jin, *China and Korea: Dynamic Relations*, The Hoover Institution, 1996, chap. 2; Scott Snyder, *China's Rise and the Two Koreas: Politics, Economics, Security*, Lynne Rienner, 2009; Jae Ho Chung, *Between Ally and Partner: Korea-China Relations and the United States*, Columbia University Press, 2007

⁹ Nicholas Eberstadt, *The North Korean Economy: Between Crisis & Catastrophe*, Transaction Publishers, 2007; Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, *Famine in North Korea: Markets, Aid, and Reform*, Columbia University Press, 2007, Part. 1.

¹⁰ Dick K. Nanto and Emma Chanlett-Avery, *The North Korean Economy: Leverage and Policy Analysis*, CRS Report for Congress, 26 August 2008, p. 25.

between 300,000 and 500,000 tons of grain to North Korea every year. This amounted to 30–50 per cent of North Korea's annual grain shortage. There is other evidence one can cite to show how close the relationship between Beijing and Pyongyang had become.¹¹

All these notwithstanding, the bi-lateral ties between the two were not like what they had been in the past. Certainly, the memory of being abandoned by its only ally at a time of utmost deprivation was not easily forgotten. Also, there were other developments subsequent to the PRC-ROK normalization that transformed the basis of the PRC-DPRK ties. These included the changes in China's domestic and foreign policies, its rapidly increasing security cooperation with the U.S. and the unprecedented expansion of cooperative ties with Seoul.¹² By the time the second nuclear crisis of North Korea erupted in 2002, the relationship between Beijing and Pyongyang, although close, friendly and did reveal many incidences of unusual cooperation, was no longer special as it once was. It appeared to have become what some Chinese scholars described as a normal relationship between two neighbours: close but also increasingly driven by somewhat detached calculations of one's strategic interests. This was evident in the differences in the roles China played and the contributions it made during the two nuclear crises. To understand these differences, a close look at the first nuclear crisis will be helpful.

(3) THE FIRST PHASE

North Korea's nuclear programme became a subject of intense international concern in March 1993 when Pyongyang declared its intention to withdraw from the Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT). At the core of the dispute was the request by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) for special inspection over two sites in North Korea's nuclear research complex in Yongbyon. The IAEA inspectors who did the on-site checks at the Yongbyon facilities came to question the validity of the

¹¹ For instance, see Scott Snyder, *China's Rise and the Two Koreas: Politics, Economics, Security*, Lynne Rienner, 2009, chap. 5.

¹² About the growing cooperation between China and the ROK, see Chae-Jin Lee, *China and Korea: Dynamic Relations*, Hoover Institution, 1996; Scott Snyder, *China's Rise and the Two Koreas*, chap. 2; Samuel S. Kim, *The Two Koreas and the Great Powers*, Cambridge, 2006, chap. 2.

initial reports Pyongyang had submitted to the agency.

There were many suspicions. For instance, the reprocessing facility was too big for the purpose of scientific experimentation the North claimed it was being built for and being partially operated. Also, the inspectors could not see the power grids, which would be essential as the North explained the facilities were to generate electricity rather than to make bombs. They were particularly disturbed by the result of the random sampling which contradicted the North's explanation that it reprocessed only one time to get a small amount, less than one kilogram, of fissile material. This amount would have no military significance as it would require around five to seven kilograms of plutonium to make one bomb. Contrary to the North's claim, the test result on the sample, along with the close scrutiny of the reactor's operational records, indicated that the North could have separated enough plutonium for up to one and half bombs.¹³

The IAEA board of governors met to discuss the situation and adopted a resolution demanding North Korea to accept a special inspection. Pyongyang's response was to withdraw from the NPT on 12 March, 1993 shortly before the deadline for the special inspection. The NPT regulations required a 90-day grace period before the declaration of withdrawal became effective. A series of bi-lateral contacts in New York between the U.S. and the DPRK led to an agreement to hold negotiations between the two while Pyongyang "suspended" its decision to withdraw. It was in mid-June of 1993, just a few days before the grace period expired. This allowed North Korea technically to remain a member of the NPT. The subsequent negotiations were extremely rough and on several occasions came close to the point of complete breakdown. The U.S. pursued multiple goals. One was to assure Pyongyang remain in the NPT. The U.S. also demanded that North Korea as a signatory to the Declaration on Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula with the ROK respect its commitments, accommodate the

¹³ On the first phase of the nuclear crisis, see Chae-Jin Lee, *A Troubled Peace: U.S. Policy and the Two Koreas*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006. Joel S. Wit, Daniel B. Poneman and Robert L. Gallucci, *Going Critical: The First North Korean Nuclear Crisis*, Brookings Institution Press, 2004. Michael J. Mazarr, *North Korea and the Bomb: A Case Study in Nonproliferation*, St. Martin's Press, 1995. Selig Harrison, *Korea Endgame: A Strategy for Reunification and U.S. Disengagement*, Princeton University Press, 2002, chap. 16–18. Leon Segal, *Disarming Strangers: Nuclear Diplomacy with North Korea*, Princeton University Press, 1996.

full IAEA inspection regime including the one over the two suspected sites and ultimately give up all of its nuclear-related activities. In return, the U.S. along with its allies like South Korea and Japan would provide Pyongyang with two light water reactors (LWR), which were not proliferation-proven but more proliferation-resistant than the graphite-moderated 5-MWe reactor. North Korea was also to obtain military, economic and political quid pro quo including the promise of non-aggression, energy assistance of half a million tons of heavy fuel oil each year until one of the two LWRs commences to generate electricity, and the normalization of diplomatic relations with the U.S.

The tactics North Korea employed in the negotiation was a triplet of threat, i.e. the threat to withdraw from the NPT, the threat to drive a wedge between the U.S. and the ROK, and the threat to reopen the nuclear facilities to reprocess the fuel rods for military purposes. In particular, Pyongyang's insistence on the exclusion of South Korea from the negotiation table was persistent and often created awkward and tense moments between Washington and Seoul. When the negotiation began, there was a tacit agreement between Washington and Seoul that although the official negotiation was between the U.S. and the DPRK, the de facto mode of negotiation would be a three-way consultation with the ROK participating as an unnamed third party. Yet, once the negotiation began in Geneva, North Korea took advantage of each and every opportunity to extract concessions from the U.S. while driving a wedge between Washington and Seoul. Indeed, at one point, as the negotiation broke down over the issue of the exchange of special envoy between Seoul and Pyongyang, the prospect of a serious military conflict in the Korean peninsula became real.

It was in the spring of 1994. Pyongyang threatened to set Seoul on a sea of fire. It also asked the IAEA inspectors to leave North Korea, and in the absence of the IAEA monitors began to unilaterally unload the 8,000 spent fuel rods from the 5-MWe reactor. The speed of the unloading far surpassed the expectation of the IAEA experts in Vienna. The IAEA especially worried about the loss of critical information essential for the verification of the past nuclear activities of North Korea. Hans Blix, the IAEA secretary-general, made repeated warnings that North Korea was fast approaching the critical point beyond which the technical verification of its past nuclear activities would be impossible. Pyongyang did not blink and the IAEA

decided to send the matter to the UN Security Council. With the IAEA referring the case to the UN Security Council, the U.S. which long considered the unilateral unloading of the spent fuel rods a redline for shifting its policy from negotiation to a sanction-based approach began to make preparations for a contingency plan. That plan was focused on an aerial surgical strike of the key nuclear installations in Yongbyon.¹⁴ As William Perry, the U.S. Secretary of Defense, later recalled, the U.S. and the ROK were dangerously close to a war with North Korea.¹⁵

Fortunately, the danger was aborted by the last-minute trip former U.S. President Jimmy Carter made to Pyongyang in mid-June. Taking advantage of the long-standing invitation from Kim Il-song to visit North Korea, President Carter embarked on a trip to Pyongyang and meeting his host tried to talk him out of the crisis. Probably, what the former U.S. president did was to tell Kim Il-song face to face what the U.S. military leaders were planning to do, that a surgical strike was a real possibility, and why he should not start a war. Obviously, Kim trusted Carter, who, as the 39th President of the United States in the late 1970s, tried to reduce and eventually pull U.S. forces out of South Korea. For this, he was long regarded as a friend of North Korea. At any rate, Kim decided to permit the IAEA inspectors to return to Yongbyon and have North Korean negotiators return to Geneva to resume the negotiation.¹⁶ Kim also concurred to the proposal by President Kim Young Sam of South Korea to hold a summit between the two Korean presidents. Carter, before proceeding to Pyongyang, met the South Korean president in Seoul who asked him to relay his proposal for the inter-Korean summit to Kim Il-song. Carter did and Kim Il-song accepted it without conditions. It was a turning point, perhaps a historic breakthrough for both the nuclear negotiation and the inter-Korean relations. Why did Kim Il-song agree to this drastic turn of events?

I believe Kim Il-song made the decision because he did not know how serious the situation had become, as he was not in direct charge of the confrontational policy Pyongyang had pursued. The decision to confront the U.S. was made by Kim Jong-il

¹⁴ See *Going Critical*, chap. 5–7. Chae-Jin Lee, *A Troubled Peace*, chap. 5.

¹⁵ William Perry, *The Preventive Diplomacy*. Conversation with the author, May 1995.

¹⁶ Marion V. Creekmore, Jr., *A Moment of Crisis: Jimmy Carter, The Power of A Peacemaker and North Korea's Nuclear Ambitions*, Public Affairs, 2006.

who had controlled the entire military forces of the DPRK as the supreme commander of the Korean People's Army, a position he assumed in 1992. He was also in direct charge of his country's nuclear weapons programme in his capacity as the vice chairman of the National Defense Commission. His father was the chairman of the Commission, but beginning in 1990 if not earlier, the senior Kim had delegated the power to his son. So, when Kim Il-song learnt of the seriousness of the situation, he decided to step in and using the meeting with Carter managed to make an exit.

Of course, I do not have direct evidence to support it. But a few circumstantial evidences seem to be worth mentioning. First, Carter said that in meeting with Kim he had the impression that Kim did not seem to know that the IAEA monitors had been expelled.¹⁷ As this incidence, the expulsion of the IAEA inspectors, was the most crucial event that triggered the whole escalatory process, it may suggest that Kim was kept in the dark as to what was exactly going on and how seriously the situation had gotten. It may be in this context that Kim told Carter that he did not understand why the situation had become so bad. Also, at the time when the first nuclear crisis began, there were reports, although not confirmed, that Kim Jong-il did not report to his father what had exactly been going on. Certainly, this should have been, if true, out of a filial consideration of his father's health, rather than to usurp the power from the father. Already by that time Kim Il-song had his son take over the direct management of the Party, the government and the military so that there was no need for the son to usurp the power.

Now, as to the role of China during the first phase, I believe it was minimal. There were several reasons for this. One was China's own domestic political situation. In the wake of the Tiananmen crackdown in June 1989, the leadership in Beijing still remained divided over the policies towards the West. Jiang Zemin and his fellow third generation leaders who officially came to power at the 14th Party Congress in October 1992 tried to maintain a balance between the liberals and the conservatives. For instance, Li Peng who had considerable followings within the conservative groups in

¹⁷ Leon Segal, *Disarming Strangers: Nuclear Diplomacy with North Korea*, Princeton University Press, 1996, pp. 155–162. According to Segal, Kim Il-song did not seem to know that the IAEA inspectors were expelled. Later, according to Dick Christenson who interpreted for Carter, "Kim had asked his advisers for clarification on that point". Also, Kang Suk-joo in separate meetings with Carter said many things that contradicted Kim's earlier remarks.

the party and the military retained his position as the premier of the state council, second only to Jiang Zemin both in the official ranking and influence.¹⁸ Also, the sanctions the West imposed on China remained in effect. Reflecting this and other factors, China's foreign policy at the time was largely defensive, passive, and much suspicious of the West.¹⁹ Many in China believed that the West was trying to contain it from outside while simultaneously trying to undermine it from within. The debate in the West on China's threat began to surface at around this time. These along with the worsening bilateral relations between Beijing and Pyongyang in the wake of the PRC-ROK normalization, made any expectation of China's active role in the first phase unrealistic.

The U.S. did try to solicit China's support like when adopting a resolution either at the IAEA board meetings or during the UN Security Council deliberations. President Clinton called President Jiang a few times as Secretary Christopher often did his Chinese counterpart Qian Qichen to ask the latter's cooperation.²⁰ But during the first phase the negotiation was primarily between the U.S. and the DPRK. In fact, most of the time North Korea did not inform Beijing of what was going on, much less consult it. Often Chinese officials learnt what had transpired in Geneva between the U.S. and the DPRK from either Washington or Seoul. When the IAEA board of governors' meetings were held in Vienna or when the UN Security Council met in New York to discuss North Korea's non-compliance, China did urge non-coercive measures but when it came to casting the ballots it voted for abstention, not objection as Pyongyang would have preferred. Indeed, Chinese officials often complained in private that North Korea was not listening to China just as the North Koreans often said they could not trust China.

4) THE SECOND PHASE AND CHINA'S ROLE

The second crisis began in October 2002 over the suspicion that North Korea, in contravention of the commitments it had given to the U.S. and to the ROK, attempted

¹⁸ See Joseph Fewsmith, *China since Tiananmen*, Cambridge University Press, 2008 edition, chap. 5–6.

¹⁹ Robert G. Sutter, *Chinese Foreign Relations: Power and Policy since the Cold War*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2008, chap. 6; James Mann, *About Face*, Vintage, 2000, chap. 10.

²⁰ *Going Critical*, pp. 152–6. Here, the authors also cite China's role to help North Korea.

to secretly develop nuclear weapons through the highly enriched uranium (HEU) programme. As the tension rose, China made a swift and decisive intervention. At first, the test China confronted looked something like one of protocol: how many participants should gather at the negotiation and how the seating arrangement should be made. As the meeting began, however, the test turned out to be much more than a procedural matter. China soon realized that a compromise between Pyongyang's insistence on a bi-lateral meeting with Washington and the U.S. preference for a multi-lateral forum was extremely difficult because the positions of the two sides appeared almost non-negotiable.²¹ There were good reasons for this. On the other hand, North Korea had different packages of reward it planned to obtain from the individual countries in the Six-Party Talks. From Japan, for instance, North Korea planned to get a huge sum of monetary compensation, reportedly over \$10 billion, in return for diplomatic normalization. With the U.S. its game plan was to ask for a series of political and military concessions including a pledge of non-aggression, full diplomatic relations, and a peace treaty that would presumably be followed by the withdrawal of the U.S. forces from South Korea, its long-standing goal. Without doubt, a multi-lateral negotiation would weaken, if not destroy, this game plan Pyongyang had. During the first phase, it had successfully established a precedent of negotiating only with the U.S. The involvement of South Korea was adamantly opposed even at the risk of a war. And indeed it succeeded in concluding an agreement only with the U.S. After the signing of the Geneva Agreed Framework, North Korea bragged about it as a great diplomatic triumph. North Korea was on a par with the U.S. negotiating on an equal footing and often even on a higher ground. This was something North Korea remembered with pride.

The U.S., on the other hand, preferred a multi-lateral forum for reasons of its own. One was the legacy of the electoral politics. During the presidential campaign Bush criticized Clinton for excessive concessions to North Korea on a bi-lateral negotiation. Bush's assessment of the Geneva Agreed Framework was so negative that his policy towards North Korea was once depicted as anything but Clinton (ABC). Furthermore, Bush personally had a strong aversion of North Korea as an oppressive regime, a

²¹ The sources for the discussions here on the second phase of the nuclear crisis are Chae-Jin Lee, *A Troubled Peace*, chap. 6, pp. 219–256 esp.; Charles L. Pritchard, *Failed Diplomacy: The Tragic Story of How North Korea Got the Bomb*, Brookings Institution Press, 2007.

rogue state and the axis of evil. That image was genuine as it reflected his visceral belief, which became reinforced by the traumatic experience of the terrorist attack in September 2001. To him, talking to North Korea bi-laterally after the 9/11 tragedy was like embracing an evil which had just committed a terrible horror.²² At least, that was where he seemed to have agreed with the neoconservative leaders like Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. This explains why James Kelly, the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs was sent to Pyongyang with a straight jacket on him: no rights to speak, only the duty to hear what the North had to say. It was like Kelly being sent there not as an envoy to start a negotiation but on an impossible mission to accept the surrender of the enemy. In that sense, Kelly's mission to Pyongyang signalled an inauspicious beginning of the Six-Party Talks.

China did its best to organize the first meeting after Kelly's visit to Pyongyang and the subsequent chain of events. This chain of events that followed each other in a rapid succession included the announcements by Pyongyang of its withdrawal from the NPT, the expulsion of the IAEA inspectors from Yongbyon, the declaration of the Geneva Agreed Framework null and void, and the decision to re-activate the reactor and the reprocessing facility. As the escalatory cycle began, China dispatched Qian Qichen, its most eminent senior diplomat, to persuade North Korea to come forward to the negotiation table. Pyongyang insisted on a bi-lateral talk with the U.S. while Washington already informed Beijing that only the Six-Party Talks would be the appropriate format. Both sides were not willing to give in. The compromise Beijing suggested to Pyongyang was a three-way talk, with China participating as a third party but only to make it appear as something more than a purely bi-lateral encounter. When Pyongyang put out strong resistance even to this idea, then Beijing resorted to a measure of unusual type: shutting off the oil pipeline for three days excusing this for a mechanical failure; a Chinese way of wielding hard power in a soft way. Apparently it hit Pyongyang where it hurt most. Pyongyang reluctantly agreed to the three-way meeting with the understanding that the format of three would mainly be for the purpose of picture taking and that the actual negotiation would be between Pyongyang

²² *Failed Diplomacy*, chap. 2.

and Washington.²³

The three-way meeting finally held in April 2002, however, was a non-starter. The Bush administration was inimical to the idea of sitting with North Korea alone. China continued to persuade, and pressure North Korea to comply with the Six-Party Talks. Little is known what China exactly did to make North Korea accept the Six-Party Talks. Probably, China offered North Korea considerable amount of economic assistance along with the promise that even in the Six-Party Talks ample occasions would exist for bi-lateral dialogue. Whatever it was, we know that North Korea, four months after the second abortive three-way talks, changed its mind and agreed to the Six-Party Talks, which formally met in August. This episode is a telling example of how hard China had tried to realize the multi-lateral meeting and how rough the road ahead could be. For China, the frustration it experienced in the first few months in the spring of 2003 was only the beginning of what would subsequently follow. Much more difficult challenges were in the making.

The agenda of the Six-Party Talks was more numerous and complex than it was in the first phase. In the first phase, the agenda was largely limited to the three major issues: to find out how much fissile material North Korea had obtained by re-processing the spent fuel from the 5-MWe reactor; to freeze the operation of the nuclear-related facilities in Yongbyon with the 8,000 spent fuel rods temporarily stored in the pond until they were eventually shipped out of North Korea; and stopping the construction of the 50-MWe reactor in Yongbyon and 200-MWe reactor in Taechon. There was no serious chance that North Korea had manufactured nuclear bombs as the fissile material in its hand was too small in amount and no nuclear tests had been conducted. But in the second phase, the issues on the agenda included the uranium programme, the weapons as well as the plutonium programme. Also, there were the issues of the declaration and the verification: North Korea should make correct and complete declaration on the past operation of the nuclear facilities and the amount of the fissile material in its possession; these were then to be verified through scientific methods to confirm their accuracy. And before all these issues could be put on the table for serious negotiation, the priority task would be to have North Korea shut down and

²³ According to Pritchard, Qian first proposed a Five-Party Talks to Pyongyang, and when it rejected the idea, he made a revised proposal of the Three-Party Talks, p. 62.

freeze the operation of all nuclear facilities subject to the IAEA inspection. The negotiation strategy the U.S. agreed with the other participants of the Six-Party Talks was to proceed in three phases: First to shut down and freeze the facilities, then to disable, and finally dismantle them. At each of these three phases, there had to be agreements on the details and appropriate quid pro quo: the compensations to be granted to North Korea. Indeed, the tasks of the Six-Party Talks, and for China as the chairman of the Talks, were overwhelming.

The progress was difficult and uneven. North Korea strongly objected to placing the issue of its uranium programme on the negotiation table.²⁴ It took more than five years and five rounds of on-again off-again negotiation before the agreement on disabling the facilities could begin serious implementation in October 2008. But even then Pyongyang's strenuous opposition forced these disablement activities confined only to the facilities in Yongbyon: the uranium facilities as well as the weapons and the fissile material were not to be subjected to either the declaration or the verification. Worse yet, whenever an agreement was reached, new obstacles surfaced delaying or interrupting the implementation. Some of these obstacles were unexpected but many were not necessarily so as the agreements with unresolved ambiguities had been rushed and pushed through "to sustain the momentum of the negotiation". Later, these ambiguities re-emerged, and the familiar pattern of mutual accusations, stonewalling, interruption and re-opening of negotiation repeated. For instance, when the joint statement on the principles of comprehensive resolution was announced on 19 September 2005, the issue of the illicit financial transaction involving North Korea, the Banco Delta Asia issue, obstructed the progress for nearly two years.²⁵ Another example is the provision of the LWR. The timing of the delivery of the LWR was sensitive and important since it was to be sequenced with many other key actions the participants would take. This was the case in the first phase. The Geneva Agreed Framework stipulated that the core part of the LWR would be delivered after the special inspection. But ambiguity remained as to the exact time. The U.S. insisted that special inspection should commence before the installation of the core part, while North Korea argued special inspection would be permitted only when the work of

²⁴ For the Six-Party Talks, Shirley A. Kan, *China and Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction and Missiles: Policy Issues*, Congressional Research Service, 27 July 2009.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 24–39.

installing the core part began. North Korea took advantage of this ambiguity to delay the special inspection until the framework itself was finally thrown out over the uranium programme. Similarly in the second phase, after a long prolonged negotiation, an agreement was reached in September 2005 that the provision of the LWR would be discussed at “an appropriate time”, again a vague expression dictated by the disagreement between the U.S. and the DPRK. When the joint statement was announced, Pyongyang immediately argued that the “appropriate time” should be before the verification, directly contradicting the U.S.’s explanation to the contrary.²⁶ North Korea’s move might very well be in anticipation of future negotiation, but the agreement, having been rushed against time, did contain ambiguities Pyongyang later raised objections to. It was like the U.S. and the DPRK first agreed only to disagree later. All these may sound like unnecessary hassles over trivialities. But these were what had taken so long to agree and later impeded the progress in the Six-Party Talks.

Of course, the achievements of the Six-Party Talks are not insignificant. First, it did produce a number of agreements including the confirmation by North Korea and other participants of their commitments towards the eventual goal of the complete and verifiable denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. Future negotiations over the specifics may stall, but this confirmation to the complete and verifiable denuclearization will serve as a roadmap for future negotiations too. Second, the transparency over the North Korean nuclear programme has considerably been enhanced. It is the case especially with respect to the Yongbyon facilities. For instance, North Korea in May 2008 has turned over to the U.S. the document, some 18,000 pages, of the history of the operation of these facilities since 1987.²⁷ This document will be valuable in determining the accuracy, or lack of it, of Pyongyang’s claim of their nuclear activities in Yongbyon. Third, the Six-Party Talks succeeded in partially disabling the three core facilities in Yongbyon including the 5-MWe reactor, the re-processing unit and the fuel fabrication plant. These facilities were disabled, up to 80–90 per cent of their capacities. The most dramatic moment for the Six-Party Talks came when North Korea blew off the cooling tower at Yongbyon on 27 June 2008. This might well be a visual event, but at the same time it was symbolic of what

²⁶ U.S. State Department, “U.S.-DPRK Agreement on Denuclearization Verification Measures” *ibid.*, p. 39.

²⁷ *Yonhap News*, Seoul, 4 July 2008; Shirley Kan, *China and Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction*, p. 54.

the Talks had achieved.

Fourth, the Talks have demonstrated that North Korea cannot always get away with its acts of defying the demands of the international community. When North Korea launched a long-range missile in July 2006, the United Nations Security Council adopted a resolution condemning it. Another resolution 1718 was adopted after Pyongyang's nuclear test in October 2006. The second resolution containing harsher measures of sanction was unanimously adopted only five days after the test. The rapidity and unanimity with which the resolution was passed was an unmistakable warning to Pyongyang that its act of defiance would carry a high price tag. Later, Pyongyang did continue with the launching of the missiles and another round of nuclear test in April and May 2009, but each time the international community became more united and determined to confront North Korea with the consequences. After the second nuclear test on 25 May 2009, some in the U.S. Congress suggested that Pyongyang should be sent back to the U.S. list of the states supporting terrorism and trading with the enemies.²⁸ Pyongyang had worked very hard to get out of these lists and finally succeeded in late 2008 shortly before the end of President Bush's second term. For North Korea to be released from these lists is important not only for its obtaining financial assistance from the international organizations like the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank but also for political reconciliation with the U.S. to begin in earnest. Legal prohibitions aside, it would be politically difficult for the U.S. to negotiate full diplomatic normalization with a country it designated a state sponsoring terror and trading with the enemies.

(5) ASSESSING CHINA'S STRATEGIC CALCULUS AND ITS CONTRIBUTIONS

In achieving these, China made valuable contributions. The role it played was multiple. China was not merely the host of the Six-Party Talks. It played the role of an organizer, a mediator, a broker, a coordinator, and a facilitator. As Anne Wu pointed out, one of the problems with China in the Six-Party Talks was exactly this multiplicity of its roles: mixing up the roles did not help China as an honest broker of

²⁸ *New York Times*, 5 June 2009; *Chosun Ilbo*, 7 June 2009.

the negotiation.²⁹ Whatever it was, in playing these roles, China was mostly cautious, prudent, timid, and at the same determined and proactive, often inviting complaints and criticisms from some members of the Talks. But before we discuss China's role and contribution, we will first examine its motivations.

In engaging itself in the Six-Party Talks, China appeared to have considered several factors. First, there was China's new foreign and security policy.³⁰ Emerging in the late 1990s with President Jiang Zemin introducing the new security concept, China's new foreign and security policy envisioned Beijing more actively embracing the existing regional and global regimes of cooperation. It was a strategy of the infra-system rise, which Beijing believed was the best approach for its rise and arrival as a great responsible power (*fuzeren de daguo*). China's suspicion of the west did not completely disappear but compared to the 1990s its policy became much more positive, confident and comfortable in reaching out for and sharing responsibilities with other major powers including the U.S. In the case of the Korean peninsula and Northeast Asia, the strategy envisioned China's acceptance of the U.S. presence as a predominant power and a policy of actively cooperating with the U.S. and other nations in the region in shaping and enhancing a new post-Cold War regional order. The second phase of North Korea's nuclear crisis became a test for this policy Beijing was promoting. Also, the importance of the timing was unmistakable. It was around the same time as the outbreak of the Pyongyang's HEU programme in later 2002 that Beijing under the new fourth generation leadership headed by Hu Jintao began to make strenuous efforts in stressing the peaceful nature of its rise and the potential contributions it could make to the international and regional community. Beijing's new policy was designed not merely to emphasize the virtue of modesty and humility to hide its growing potential as a great power (*taokang yanghui*): it was to admit and embrace the inevitable interdependence of China's peace and development (*heping*

²⁹ Wu Xiaohui (Anne), "China and the U.S. beyond the Korean Peninsula, The Bigger Power Game", in *Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 13, No. 2, July 2006; Qian Cheng and Wu Xiaohui, "The Art of Mediating Regional Conflict in Asia: Chinese Experience of the Nuclear Crisis on the Korean Peninsula", *Asian Affairs*, No. 29, 2009.

³⁰ On China's new diplomacy and strategy, David Shambaugh, "China Engages Asia: Reshaping the Regional Order", *International Security*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Winter 2004/5); Mingjiang Li, "Explaining China's Proactive Engagement in Asia", *Living with China: Regional States and China through Crises and Turning Points*, Shiping Tang, Minjiang Li and Amitav Acharya (Eds.), Palgrave, 2009, pp. 17–38; "Ambassadorial Conference", *China Brief*, November 2009.

fazan) with that of the outside world. A new era of diplomacy was to begin in which China would reach out to the world (*zou chu qu*), not merely passively receiving from abroad (*yin jin lai*).

Another important factor related to China's proactive role was the request from the U.S. As Pyongyang began to take the escalatory actions, President Bush reportedly called his Chinese counterpart, President Jiang Zemin, asking his help in harnessing North Korea. Earlier, the two presidents met in Crawford, Texas, in October 2002 as Bush invited the Chinese president as his special guest at his private ranch, an unmistakable sign of the warm personal friendship between the two leaders as well as the expanding cooperative partnership between the two governments. There, in an informal atmosphere, the two presidents discussed the global and regional issues of mutual concern. Although we do not know what had transpired at the ranch, it would not be unreasonable to assume that the agenda they discussed included North Korea's nuclear problem. The timing of the visit is important. Kelly's confrontation with Kang Suk-joo over the HEU programme took place on 9 October and Jiang met Bush on 25 October, just about two weeks later. By the time Bush met Jiang, he must have had a full report on the meeting Kelly had with Kang in Pyongyang. Kelly already returned to Washington and Bush had a full report of Kelly's trip and the confrontational encounter he had with Kang. According to a report, Bush asked Jiang to be more engaged with North Korea in resolving the nuclear problem while Jiang sought Bush's commitment on Taiwan.³¹ Jiang himself described the meeting as a "constructive and productive in-depth discussion on bi-lateral relations and other issues of common concerns".³² The meeting had a special meaning for Jiang who, having inherited tense and difficult U.S.-PRC relations as he assumed the state presidency of the PRC in 1993, extended so much efforts to improve them. The major issue was Taiwan where its new president Chen Shui-bien, in office during 2000–2008, actively searched for independence. Jiang sought Bush's cooperation on this issue and largely succeeded. Now, it was Bush's turn to ask for Jiang's assistance in

³¹ David E. Sanger, *The Inheritance: The World Obama Confronts and the Challenges to American Power*, Harmony Books, New York, 2009, pp. 309–311.

³² "Jiang: Talks with Bush Constructive and Productive", *China Through A Lens*, Top News, in <http://www.china.org.cn/english/2002/jct/46863.htm>; for the Foreign Ministry spokesman see <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/topics/3719/3721/t19081.htm>.

dealing with North Korea including its HEU programme. Some claim that the Crawford meeting marked the beginning of close cooperation between Washington and Beijing in handling the second phase of Pyongyang's nuclear crisis. While it is arguable if China's role in the second phase of North Korea's nuclear crisis was a derivative of what had been discussed at the Crawford, the need for close cooperation with the U.S., including over the Taiwan issue, appeared to have weighed significantly in Beijing's decision for active engagement.

Finally, there was the Chinese concern with the potential outbreak of serious tension and confrontation in the Korean peninsula. When the second nuclear crisis began to evolve, the military situation in other parts of the world was already very ominous. The Bush administration, bolstered by its victory of war against the Taliban forces in Afghanistan in 2001, launched a surprise attack of Iraq in March 2003, occupying Bagdad in April and declaring the conclusion of the major battle in May. Watching the war in Iraq with extreme concern, the Chinese government came to genuinely worry that North Korea could become the next target of the U.S. pre-emptive strike. In invading Iraq the U.S. did not seek the endorsement from the United Nation, demonstrating its willingness to act unilaterally if necessary. China obviously feared the possibility of a similar unilateral action by the U.S. against North Korea.

Regarding China's role and contribution, one has to admit that it was quite substantial, if not instrumental. Chinese intervention was timely and effective, at least to a degree. As pointed out earlier, China succeeded in organizing the multi-lateral talks, first the three-way and then the six-way talks, right after the crisis broke out. This prevented the crisis from further exacerbation. After the first nuclear test Pyongyang conducted in October 2006, Beijing again succeeded in bringing both North Korea and the other participants of the Six-Party Talks back to the dialogue. For this, China dispatched its senior official in charge of foreign affairs, Tang Jiaxuan, on a shuttle diplomacy to Washington, Moscow, and Pyongyang. This paid off, as Tang said on his return from Pyongyang to Beijing that his trip was "not in vain", an unusually positive remark for the cautious diplomat. Even the U.S. officials who had been critical of China's nonchalance applauded China's contributions saying that "now China has become a

better friend”.³³

Perhaps, the finest moment came earlier on 19 September 2005 when the joint statement on the principles of the negotiation was agreed at the fourth round of the Six-Party Talks. The statement contained in a comprehensive manner what the participants would undertake towards the final settlement of North Korea's nuclear quandary. It was an outline of verbal commitments by the individual participants to be followed by actions later on. It was here that Pyongyang confirmed its commitments to complete and verify denuclearization of the Korean peninsula including the elimination of the plutonium programme and the nuclear weapons. The statement enabled the subsequent rounds of the Talks to continue to negotiate the action measures necessary for the implementation of the commitments the participants made in the statement. Had it not been for this statement, the Six-Party Talks might have lost the momentum and possibly gone into an irreversible deadlock. To realize this deal Beijing again mobilized considerable diplomatic assets in its possession and applied them on the participating nations of the Six-Party Talks, particularly on Pyongyang and Washington. To satisfy the participants Beijing drafted the statement for five times often working for long hours until early in the morning. When some still expressed reservations, Beijing gave the ultimatum: take it or leave it.³⁴ Fortunately, this worked and participants including the U.S. and North Korea agreed to the fifth draft. After the statement was adopted unanimously, all the participating governments applauded the statement and the role China played in it. No one can say for sure what China would have done if the ultimatum was not accepted, but it certainly shows how hard China worked for the progress of the Six-Party Talks.

Yet, after all these, the Six-Party Talks did not succeed in resolving the nuclear issue of North Korea. Whatever criterion of success one may apply, there is no denial that the issue of denuclearization remains unresolved: denuclearization has been achieved barely up to the shut-down and partial disablement; and even this is confined to facilities in Yongbyon; the uranium programme, the fissile material and the bombs are yet to be unaccounted for. The question is why it is so. Obviously, many factors have been involved. The most important could be Pyongyang's intention and strategy. As

³³ *Chosun Ilbo*, 19 October 2006.

³⁴ Pritchard, *Failed Diplomacy*; Kan, *China and Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction*.

we pointed out earlier in examining the first phase and Kim Jong-il's role in it, with North Korea having determined earlier on to develop the nuclear programme for military purposes, the Six-Party Talks could hardly have been successful in persuading Pyongyang to completely give up the programme. But the question remains if China's role was sufficient. The answer to this question does not appear to be wholly positive: at least that seems to be the perception in the United States, Japan and the ROK. Despite what China did including the shuttle diplomacy, the appliance of subtle and sometimes not so subtle coercive measures like the provision of aid and oil, and the denunciation of North Korea's defiant acts at the UN Security Council deliberations, Beijing invariably chose to side with Pyongyang and refused to join in any action that could destabilize the status quo in the Korean peninsula. As time passed, China's indulgence and patronization of Pyongyang's provocative actions seems to have become more acquiescent. China may believe that this was inevitable and necessary for maintaining peace and stability in the Korean peninsula but also to continue the diplomatic efforts to resolve the nuclear issue. But often there were occasions when China's motivations appeared more to safeguard its own interests. By engaging in acts of patronizing North Korea, China may commit at least two mistakes: giving a wrong signal to Pyongyang and sacrificing the long-term goals for the near-term interests. China's reaction in the wake of North Korea's nuclear test could be an example.

China was angry, even furious when North Korea conducted the nuclear tests. After the first test in October 2006, a Chinese scholar said that Pyongyang just slapped Beijing on its face. Some even said North Korea spat on China. Before the test, Hu Jintao gave a public warning to Pyongyang not to go ahead with the test. That was one day before the test and the occasion was a joint press conference with the new Japanese Premier who came to Beijing to start a new relationship with China. Many depicted this as a historic journey to break the ice and bring a new era to the bi-lateral ties between Beijing and Tokyo. Also, earlier in October 2005, Hu went to North Korea on a first official visit as the state president of the PRC and the secretary-general of the CCP. There he discussed with Kim Jong-il "various issues of mutual concern" which probably included the nuclear issue of the North.³⁵ His trip was

³⁵ On Chinese policy to North Korea, including its reaction to Pyongyang's nuclear test, see

proceeded by visits by such high ranking Chinese officials as Dai Bingguo, the new state councillor of foreign affairs, Wang Jiarui who directed the CCP's relations with North Korea, and Wu Yi, the vice premier in charge of external economic relations. Dai's portfolio included the Sino-U.S. relations and the North's nuclear problem and Wu was the highest government official responsible for economic assistance to Pyongyang. Their trip suggests the possibility of China's provision of a substantial amount of aid to North Korea around this time. Yet, despite all these, Pyongyang went ahead with the nuclear test giving Hu an advance notice of only half an hour. Given these circumstances it was understandable that the first official reaction by the Chinese government was to condemn the test as a brazen and flagrant act (*hanran*). China never used this expression on North Korea before. It was used on such occasions when Beijing condemned the U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade and the incidence over the U.S. PE-5 spy plane near the Hainan province.

But China's anger did not last long. When the UN Security Council adopted a resolution condemning the test, China urged moderation, balance, and non-military measures. This was to be repeated later during the second nuclear test Pyongyang conducted in May 2009.³⁶ China did try to persuade Pyongyang to cooperate in denuclearization. But it tried to dissuade and discourage Pyongyang from upsetting peace and stability more than to engage it in taking positive actions for denuclearization. It was more focused on maintaining the status quo than moving for a better future. Viewed in Seoul, Washington and Tokyo, such an act of indulgence and patronage by Beijing could dampen and weaken the resolve of the international community and even mislead North Korea to engage in similar acts of provocation later on.

Christopher Twomey, "Explaining Chinese Foreign Policy toward North Korea: Navigating between the Scylla and Charybdis of proliferation and instability", *Journal of Contemporary China* (2008), 17(56), August, 401–423; Bonnie S. Glaser and Wang Liang, "North Korea: The Beginning of a China-U.S. Partnership?" *The Washington Quarterly*, Summer 2008; Gregory J. Moore, "How North Korea threatens China's interests: understanding Chinese 'duplicity' on the North Korean nuclear issue", *International Journal of the Asia-Pacific*, 2008 8(1), 1–29; David Shambaugh, "China and the Korean Peninsula: Playing for the Long Term", *The Washington Quarterly*, Spring 2003, 43–56; Bonnie S. Glaser, "China's Policy in the Wake of the Second DPRK Nuclear Test", *China Security*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2009; Victor D. Cha, "What Do They Really Want? Obama's North Korea Conundrum", *The Washington Quarterly*, October 2009,

³⁶ On Chinese government's official response to North Korea's nuclear test of 25 May 2009, see the comments made by the spokesman of the Foreign Ministry, Ma Chaoxi in Xinhua, 27 May 2009 in <http://news.sohu.com/20090527/n264188799.shtml>. This article in Chinese contains the Chinese government's official reactions to North Korea on other occasions too.

(6) CONCLUSION

This paper suggests that China's role in resolving the nuclear issue in the Korean peninsula, while valuable and substantial, has certain limitations. The priority goal China pursues is the assurance of peace and stability. The goal of denuclearizing the Korean peninsula is important and China does not disagree to this. Yet, this goal of denuclearization may be pursued only under the condition that peace and stability is not disrupted. China did try to persuade North Korea to give up the nuclear programme but when the latter presented strong opposition, then China stepped back fearing that North Korea might react in a way that could endanger the already volatile situation there. China did try a number of approaches including a soft way with economic incentives and a more coercive method of exerting pressure and holding back the material rewards Pyongyang desperately needs, but the overriding principle was invariably the priority on "peace and stability". This has been demonstrated many times during the Six-Party Talks. As many pointed out, China fears what might inevitably follow from the collapse of peace and stability. One such consequence might be a massive rush of the North Korean refugees crossing the border into its northeastern provinces where about two million ethnic Korean Chinese reside. There are other consequences Beijing has strong strategic interests in avoiding. For instance, an eruption of violence and military conflict in Korea would force Beijing to divert its attention and resources away from domestic economic priorities. Also, its relations with the U.S., Japan and the ROK would suffer more than it would when the goal of denuclearization is not achieved but still peace and stability is maintained. That seems to be the strategic balance sheet China has in Korea in pursuing what is basically a policy of the status quo.

But serious and important questions remain. For instance, does the breakdown of the status quo have always to be an outbreak of a war in the peninsula? How far does China believe its policy of preferring the status quo can continue without a more fundamental change in North Korea? What does China think would be the impacts of a nuclear-capable North Korea on the strategic dynamics in the Korean peninsula and Northeast Asia? That is, what implications for its grand strategy does China envision if the stalemate in North Korea's nuclear conundrum continues? This paper did not

attempt to seek answers to these questions. It is not clear whether even China has the answers. But sooner or later China will have to come up with answers to these questions. Otherwise, its role and contribution will have to be continuously incomplete and unsuccessful. Efforts to find the answers will have to consider a wide variety of uncertain future including the future of North Korea where an unusual type of power transition seems to be underway. But the Chinese attempt to find out the answers may require painful and candid soul searching of the strategic goals it prefers to pursue and its place in the emerging regional and global strategic architecture. This is an unfulfilled task for China as it confronts a new post-cold war era where its rise will be a key component. Our analysis in this paper seems to indicate that so far China is hesitant and reluctant to embrace the confrontations.

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