

Flawed Mediation and a Compelling Mission: Chinese Diplomacy in the Six-Party Talks to Denuclearise North Korea

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Abstract This paper examines China's role in the Six-Party Talks, a multilateral initiative with the aim of denuclearising North Korea. As North Korea's behaviour has become increasingly provocative, evidenced by the Cheonan and Yeonpyeong Incidents and the newly unveiled uranium enrichment plant at Yeonbyon, China's indecision in dealing with the deteriorating situation has dramatically undermined Beijing's ability to continue successfully to play the leading mediator role. Yet if China fails to take decisive action now, the consequences could be dire. Further deterioration in North Korea's behaviour could trigger a nuclear arms race, severely hamper regional economic development and even create a geopolitical split in East Asia, leading to a confrontation between the US, South Korea and Japan acting together on one side, and China, Russia and North Korea aligned on the other. The factors that have prevented China from making further progress in the diplomatic process are many and various and this paper will reveal the complexity of the North Korean issue for China. Foreign academics and policy makers have tended to attribute China's indecision over North Korea to China putting its own security interests first. But this is far too simplistic a picture of the complex relationship that China has with North Korea. There are a host of factors at work that need to be taken into account to understand the present impasse in the diplomatic process. These factors include China's emotional ties to North Korea and empathy with its position as the weakest party in the Talks, the conflicting attitudes within the Chinese government itself towards the North, and the competing interests and lack of trust between the different stakeholders. It seems that for the foreseeable future, the North Korean issue will continue to plague Chinese foreign policy until all the parties involved act as a collaborative body to reach a consensus on how to resolve the situation.

Keywords Chinese diplomacy · Denuclearisation · Korean peninsula · Mediation · North Korea · Six-party talks

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Introduction

Since the outbreak of the second North Korean nuclear crisis in October 2002, China's positive efforts to engage with North Korea, and play a 'mediator role', initially boosted China's regional reputation. However, Beijing's later indecision over whether to condemn and to put pressure on North Korea has dramatically undermined China's ability to play this 'mediator role'.¹ The year 2010 appeared to be a watershed year, when foreign ministers from the US, Japan and South Korea refused to accept Beijing's emergency calls to establish a dialogue with the Six-Party Talks' chief representatives on 6 September 2010. Since that time, Beijing's position in this multinational dialogue appears to have been eclipsed. Will 2011 witness the continued stagnation of the Six-Party Talks, or its reinvigoration? At this stage it is still too early to say but scepticism seems to have reached new highs. For example, at Stanford University on 27 January 2011, Christopher Hill, former Assistant Secretary of State to the Bush Administration and US chief representative to the Talks, said that "the North Koreans lied to the United States" and to all Six-Party participants. Hill said that he believed that the Six-Party process was over. He stated that there is "absolutely no value" in restarting Six-Party Talks so that "the North Koreans can go and lie to us again". He added that just returning to the Six-Party Talks without really applying pressure on North Korea to denuclearise is "China's way of getting off the hook".² This remark contrasts sharply with Mr. Hill's previous attitude during his time as US Chief Representative to the Talks, when he praised China for its contribution. His change of opinion highlights Beijing's current predicament.

So why is China reluctant to move more decisively to rein in North Korea? The conventional wisdom is that China does not want to lose North Korea as a buffer zone between China and the US military in South Korea. Thus China does what it must, shoring up the Kim family dynasty to prevent Korea from reunifying on South Korean terms. Indeed, the controversy in Chinese eyes is not really about Korean reunification – few in Beijing speculate that the end result will be otherwise – but to what extent reunification can be achieved without damaging China's own security. Every time North Korea acts provocatively – testing nuclear bombs, launching missiles, touting its secretive uranium enrichment facilities and killing South Korean soldiers and civilians – China comes under diplomatic fire. Beijing's chronic indecisiveness about the North, and apparent unwillingness to use its leverage, shields its socialist ally from international condemnation and seems to present to the wider world an image of a China obsessed with her own narrow interests. But these interests are hard to quantify. The volume of China's trade with South Korea is almost 70 times that with the North. Thus, if China truly is a mercantilist power, as many in the West claim, she should tilt decisively towards a policy of supporting the South over the North.

¹ For strong criticism of Beijing's failure to take action against North Korea's provocative behaviour, please see 'China Returns U.S. Criticism Over Sinking of Korean Ship', *New York Times* (June 30, [12]); Bonnie Glaser and Brad Glosserman, 'China's Cheonan Problem', *The Pacific Forum/CISS PacNet* 31 [22]; Henry A. Kissinger, 'Reining in Pyongyang', *The Washington Post* [28]; Anne Applebaum, 'Shadow Boxing in Pyongyang: Why All the Threats? We'd Best Ask China', *The Washington Post* [2].

² "Christopher Hill Declares the 6 Party Talks Useless," *The Nelson Report* [14].

What factors are responsible for China's reluctance and indecision to engage when North Korea displays provocative and reckless behaviour, for example when North Korea revealed its growing nuclear capability by announcing its HEU programme? Why does Beijing seem reluctant to leverage its influence over Pyongyang to secure its own position at the Six-Party Talks? Additionally, to what extent has China yielded, and will China yield, as events cause her role in the talks to decline? Although it was the administration of US President George W. Bush which first proposed the Six-Party Talks format, they have since been shaped by the central role that Beijing has played as host and mediator. Beijing's prominent role has been widely perceived as indicating China's growing regional activism and its deepening awareness of its international responsibilities [46, 56]. But why have Beijing's efforts not had a bigger impact? A second nuclear test in May 2009 and the ensuing UNSC Resolution 1874 brought about a policy shift in the Obama Administration. However this did not deter North Korea; on the contrary, it has only led to more provocative behaviour, as evidenced by the most recent incident in 2010. Why has China been indifferent to these changes? What direction will Chinese mediation diplomacy take? This paper will examine Chinese mediation diplomacy in the Six-Party Talks, and will explore those factors which prevent China from going further. This paper reaches the conclusion that in the foreseeable future the North Korean issue will continue to plague Chinese foreign policy.

A Theoretical Framework for Mediation Diplomacy

Mediation in international conflicts is an approach to conflict resolution in which impartial third parties intervene to help disputing parties seek and reach compromises, with the final objective of moderating/managing conflict or settling it through negotiations [16]. In the history of international relations, mediation has always been a common form of diplomatic activity between states. In the post-Cold War period, mediation appears to have played a distinct role in preventing and resolving international conflicts. The decline in ideological confrontation, combined with the potentially more catastrophic consequences of military conflict, means that mediation should have a better chance of working in the contemporary international environment. However, the record suggests that international conflict issues do not appear to have been significantly better managed, despite these favourable conditions and the institutionalisation of various mediation mechanisms. But considering the lack of alternatives, international mediation remains an important part of conflict management and it often provides a foundation upon which crises can be resolved.³

³ Regarding the role and significance of international mediation in resolving international conflicts in the post-Cold War era, see Jacob Bercovitch, et al, *Resolving International Conflicts: The Theory and Practice of Mediation* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, [5]), pp. 11–35. For a review and evaluation of international mediation in the post-Cold War age, refer to: Sasdia Touval and I. William Zartman, 'International Mediation in the Post-Cold War Era' in Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson and Pamela Aall (eds.), *Turbulent Peace: The Challenges of Managing International Conflict* (Washington, DC: United State Institute of Peace, [63]).

Mediation in the case of the North Korean nuclear issue differs from the norm. It differs from the ‘peace-keeping’ form of mediation, which involves some form of military intervention to halt armed conflict and to rebuild peace and order. It also differs from the more general type of political mediation which involves a third-party intervention to help resolve a regional conflict or dispute. Crucial to the success of these forms of mediation is the neutrality of the mediator, the existence of motivational drivers for peace and the capability to devise and deliver mediation plans.⁴ During the mediation process, the mediator can appeal to the power and authority of international organisations, use political and economic tools to leverage intervention and mobilise other international forces to make up for any resource deficiency. In these cases, the motivation of the mediator will rarely be challenged and the success or failure of the mediation is determined by the capability and will of the mediator. The international status of the mediator and the nature of the conflict will typically determine the progress and outcome of mediation.

In general, the outcome of mediation is primarily determined by two factors: firstly, at what point the mediator becomes involved and secondly, who the mediator is. The optimum time for a third-party to intervene is when the crisis has passed the peak of the first ‘apex’ of conflict. The best candidate for the mediator role is a state which is not directly involved in the conflict but which nevertheless wields considerable influence over the disputants [39]. Traditional mediation theories argue that mediation can have its greatest impact only once a conflict – even if it is not a direct military clash – reaches a ‘self-exploding’ point, after which it becomes very difficult to manage. When mediation comes within the context of a low-level, evolving conflict it is often thought that it is comparatively difficult to convince disputants to compromise. Recent theories hold that the most desirable time to initiate mediation is when the disputants have come to an impasse, when the nature and threat of the crisis is serious, and when the parties are not able to find ways to establish channels for dialogue themselves [20].

Not only should we consider the immediate source of the dispute but also the potential side effects that the crisis may trigger. The greater the likelihood that the conflict will have a wider regional or global impact, the higher the probability that intervention will occur as potential mediators can more keenly discern their own interests. This is also the time when the international community is most likely to accept or push for a mediation solution [62]. However it appears these prerequisites are rarely met; international mediation in the post-Cold War era is a familiar but uncommon practice. Since the end of the Cold War, only 35% of regional military conflicts have led to some form of international mediation.

Regarding the conduct and content of mediation, studies reveal that successful mediation depends on deploying a specific methodology with clear objectives and targets. A mediation strategy ought to be assessed against the following criteria: (1) to what extent the strategy facilitates direct communication and consultation between

⁴ For an introduction to mediation theory in international relations literature, see Jacob Bercovitch (ed.), *Resolving International Conflicts: The Theory and Practice of Mediation*, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, [5]); J. A. Wall and A. Lynn, ‘Mediation: A Current Review’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 37:1 [66], pp. 225–229; C.R. Mitchell and K.Webb, *A New Approach for Conflict International Mediation*, (New York: Greenwood, [39]).

disputants; (2) how clearly it formulates rules and norms that can act as the basis for conflict resolution and problem solving; (3) the extent to which the agenda and development of negotiations can be controlled and manipulated [4]. The ability of the mediator to control the content and momentum of negotiations amongst the major parties is the most important factor in reaching the desired outcome.

The Complexity of Nuclear Crisis Mediation in East Asia

Looking at the North Korean case, it is clear that this situation has the potential to trigger multiple regional crises. If the North Korean nuclear problem were to deteriorate, this could lead to military clashes that would threaten peace and stability in the entire Northeast Asian region. The continued stagnation of diplomatic dialogue and the lack of progress in convincing North Korea to abandon its nuclear arsenal may prompt a regional nuclear arms race and lead to a proliferation of geopolitical and strategic problems. Such events are likely to hinder further attempts at economic development and regional cooperation and even undo any regional progress made to date. The failure of North Korea to denuclearise promptly is likely to exert a highly negative impact on regional security, potentially encouraging more East Asian countries to develop their own nuclear arsenals and thus triggering rapid nuclear proliferation; the security structure that has shaped the region since World War Two might be torn apart. If the situation were to escalate, leading to military clashes or heightened confrontation, the DPRK's economy would be likely to collapse and as a result, thousands of refugees would flee across its borders. Domestic instability in North Korea could also mean that there would be a high risk of nuclear materials being less secure and potentially falling into the hands of terrorist organisations. Thus any deterioration in the situation on the Peninsula would certainly exacerbate China's national security concerns. Conceivably, Beijing's mediation role is to a large extent motivated by its own interests. By mediating the North Korean nuclear crisis, Beijing could strengthen ties with Washington, placate a suspicious Japan and bring round a hesitant South Korea. Undoubtedly, creating better prospects for North Korea's nuclear dismantlement would boost Beijing's regional power and influence. Thus theoretically speaking, there should be strong motives for China to move more decisively to pursue a policy of denuclearisation in East Asia.

Yet Beijing's mediation role has never been automatically assured. Although disputed by some over the past few years, North Korea remains China's close ally. Politically, the Sino-North Korean 'traditional friendship', as a component of Beijing's official ideology, has remained strong through different generations of leadership in both the countries.⁵ Economically, China has become a leading trading partner with Pyongyang. Since the Cheonan Incident in March 2010, Beijing's

⁵ Chinese official ideology is in stark contrast with the expectations of the international community, who look to China to keep North Korea in check. Beijing insists that its friendship with North Korea has not weakened with time, having successfully overcome many challenges, and that Beijing hopes that the alliance will continue into the future. Such opinions conflict with any expectation that China will adopt a tougher policy in dealing with the North. For a thorough analysis of this topic, please refer to Zhu Feng, "China's Contradictions about N. Korea," *Project Syndicate*, [78]; Bonnie S. Glaser and Scott Snyder, "Responding to Change on the Korean Peninsula: Impediments to U.S.-South Korea-China Coordination," Washington: *CSIS Working Paper Series*, [23].

assistance to and investment in North Korea has continually increased. Socially, the majority of the Chinese people remain sympathetic to North Korea, even if they dislike Kim Jong-II's regime.⁶ Beijing's mediation style has been heavily influenced by its view of North Korea. From the Chinese perspective, while Kim Jong II's regime is far from ideal, maintaining stability and cooperating with North Korea are China's major concerns. For conservative Chinese, an independent Pyongyang cushions the strategic impact of the US-South Korea alliance and drives a wedge between Russia and the US as they compete for influence in East Asia [21, 29, 30]. Moreover, non-Westernised North Korea can also strengthen Beijing's bargaining power vis-à-vis Tokyo and Washington. From the viewpoint of the Chinese leadership, while the Kim Jong II regime survives, there is a greater necessity for Washington, Tokyo and Seoul to cooperate with Beijing, rather than these countries exclusively focusing on the rise of China militarily.⁷ Therefore, Beijing's mediation role has formed an important part of its own geopolitical strategy, yet has been subject to its limited capacity to moderate power relations and to avoid the worst case scenario of military strikes against North Korea.

Beijing has contended that its progress in mediating the North Korean crisis has been limited by the conflicting viewpoints and continued distrust between the US and the DPRK, and the lack of genuine consensus amongst all parties on how to push the multilateral talks forward. The strategic interests of involved parties are so diverse that it is difficult to reach a consensus. Although there is a shared desire for denuclearisation, the main players have diverging and possibly conflicting ideas about the steps required to reach that goal [68]. Another significant factor which has hindered Six-Party Talks cooperation are the differing conceptions held by China and the US over the role of mediation. Differences centre on the level of risk a mediator should be willing to take and how mediation diplomacy can be balanced with policy re-orientation. In other words, is Beijing willing fundamentally to alter its bilateral ties with Pyongyang if that is what it takes to change the status quo? Beijing's mediation diplomacy is constrained by its dual – and possibly competing – interests of denuclearisation and stability on the Korean Peninsula [77].

Although there exist inherent constraints, this does not mean that Beijing's mediation role has not made an important contribution. On the contrary, Beijing's role is still crucial if progress is to be made in the process of denuclearisation. As long as all parties continue to adopt a 'regional approach' as the best policy option (regional approach is a reference to a multinational organisation which involves the major players in East Asia and strives for a diplomatic solution to North Korea's nuclear programme), China's role cannot be overlooked or sidelined. However, the success of such a regional approach relies on satisfying two preconditions. The first

⁶ The online survey conducted by the Global Times in December of 2010 shows that 71.2% Chinese do not want to see Beijing adopt a policy of inaction if North Korea continues to act provocatively. *The Global Times* (Huanqiu Shibao), (December 12, 2010).

⁷ What is striking is that over recent years is that Chinese thinking is more closely associated with power interactions in East Asia and what strategic posture China should take to secure its own position. There is no doubt that potential strategic rivalry between China, US and Japan fuels Chinese nostalgia of Cold War relations with Pyongyang. For a detailed analysis, please refer to Li Xiaoguang, "Take N. Korea as China's Core Interest", *The Global Times*, [34]; Zhang Zhaozhong, "US uses N. Korea to contain China," *CCTV World Today*, [75].

precondition is that North Korea must have a genuine desire to stop behaving provocatively, to be more open about its own nuclear programme and to dismantle its nuclear facilities. The second precondition is that other parties adopt a more favourable attitude regarding the DPRK's survival. In other words, China's mediation role is consistent with the 'grand bargain' assumption: respecting the DPRK regime and conducting negotiations which satisfy its requests while pushing for gradual nuclear dismantlement. Examples of China's productive contribution can be seen in 2007–2008, when the second-term Bush Administration opted for striking a deal with Pyongyang and also in the leading role that China played in the formulation of the Joint Statement on 19 September 2005. This Joint Statement affirms the DPRK's commitment to give up its nuclear weapons, while other parties agreed to lift sanctions, normalise relations and establish a peaceful regime on the Peninsula.

The complexities of the North Korean nuclear issue make it a very difficult case for mediation diplomacy. Indeed, Beijing has little influence over North Korea and other parties when they get into diplomatic or military disputes. Firstly, China cannot alter Pyongyang's policy choice at present, nor has it been able to do so in the past [3, 27, 60]. It seems that Beijing has no adequate resolve to rein in North Korea. This is evident from Beijing's inability to deal with crises, such as when Pyongyang declared its withdrawal, tested its nuclear bomb or provoked the South. Secondly, Beijing is unable to rebuild some kind of consensus at present because other parties feel outraged by North Korea's deception and misconduct. Thirdly, Beijing is often unwilling to take swift and decisive action in terms of having to 'choose a side' between North Korea and other parties. This is true even if China's own credibility may be badly damaged as a result, for example when Beijing made the unpopular decision to call for the 'unconditional' resumption of the Six-Party Talks. On the other hand, Beijing has on rare occasions complied with other parties after North Korea has displayed provocative behaviour. Inconsistency surrounds Beijing's diplomatic engagement in dealing with the nuclear issue on the Peninsula. China's mediation was initially targeted at denuclearisation, but it appears that Beijing often cares more about striking a balance between denuclearisation and other concerns. A consequence of China's indecision to join other parties in condemning and penalising Pyongyang has disappointed the other parties and heightened the tensions.

Another controversial point worth discussing, in terms of China's mediation role on the Korean Peninsula, is the Chinese perception of both the US and, more generally, of regional security. There is no single Chinese foreign policy issue that has been more disputed or caused more tensions than North Korea. Chinese policy-makers and academics can be divided primarily into four groups in terms of their views on North Korea.⁸ The first group of people are the Chinese Nationalists. This group attaches a great importance to the historic link between the two countries and is still scarred by the memory of the hundreds of thousands of PLA soldiers who died in the Korean War between 1950–53. They also believe that the relationship

⁸ The domestic debate about North Korean policy in China has typically been grouped into two competing campuses: the traditionalist group and the strategist group. I do not think that this offers a truly nuanced look at what is really going on in China's domestic policy debates on North Korea.

between China and North Korea remains ‘one of teeth and lips’, a Chinese expression meaning that there exists a strong degree of interdependence between the two sides. Furthermore, the collapse of the DPRK would make China feel more insecure because China would face direct exposure to US-ROK allied troops. The second group are the Chinese Realists who contend that the DPRK is a rare strategic asset overseas and therefore there is no reason why Beijing should sever relations with North Korea. This group attributes Pyongyang’s nuclear adventurism to Beijing’s pro-US policy and believes that China has failed to treat the North properly for decades. These people regard the DPRK as China’s unalienable ‘sphere of influence’. The third group are the Chinese Internationalists who argue that North Korea’s provocative behaviour has had a highly negative impact on China’s national interests, often triggering international crises. Cuddling up to Pyongyang is undermining China’s reputation and international image. This group insists that Beijing should act more decisively to rein in the North while Pyongyang still depends on China for its survival. This group generally believes that the reunification of North and South Korea is only a matter of time and so it is futile to try to assist an economically moribund North Korea. The fourth group are the Chinese Liberalists. This group of Chinese deny that traditional relations and the alliance relationship with North Korea serve Chinese security interests and they insist that Pyongyang’s political regime, a sort of family hereditary system, is totally against human liberty and freedom. They argue that China should immediately seek to distance itself from North Korea and that Beijing should shift its considerations away from Kim Jong Il’s regime and focus instead on North Korea’s suffering people. As a result of these four conflicting viewpoints, Beijing’s policy towards North Korea has struggled to strike a balance and lacks a coherent strategy. Even at the highest levels of the Chinese leadership, disagreements are not uncommon when formulating a policy towards North Korea.

A consequence of domestic disagreements over North Korean policy leads to a confused picture of China’s mediation strategy. Beijing shies away from any political show-down over the contentious North Korean issue and has always struggled to avoid ‘choosing a side’ between denuclearising North Korea and abandoning North Korea. Therefore, over the past few years, Beijing’s strategy has been to improve dialogue and encourage reconciliation between Washington and Pyongyang. From the Chinese perspective, it is Washington who holds the key to the denuclearisation process. The issue has been unresolved for a number of years and US-DPRK distrust dates back even further than the nuclear problem. Even after the end of the Cold War, the US continued to consider North Korea to be a ‘rogue state’. US President Bill Clinton was close to ordering a military attack on the DPRK after the nuclear crisis first broke out in 1994.⁹ Mutual distrust has continued to define relations despite the signing of the Agreed Framework in 1994. Pyongyang regularly denounces the US for its hostility and policy of isolating North Korea whilst

⁹ For an analysis of the first North Korean Nuclear Crisis and the policy of the Clinton Administration see: Michael J. Mazarr, *North Korea and the Bomb: A Case Study in Non-Proliferation* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, [36]); Leon V. Sigal, *Disarming Strangers: Nuclear Diplomacy with North Korea* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, [57]); Joel S. Wit, Daniel B. Poneman and Robert L. Gallucci, *Going Critical: The First North Korean Nuclear Crisis*, (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, [69]).

Washington has always been critical of North Korea's intent to develop nuclear capability through 'illegal' means. President George W. Bush suspended dialogue and direct communication with the regime and labelled the DPRK a 'rogue state' that formed part of an 'Axis of Evil' with Iran and Iraq. The North Korean problem has remained a key issue in US policy since the end of the Cold War when the US established the priority of preventing the spread of Weapons of Mass Destruction. This priority is in direct conflict with Pyongyang, who has designated its uranium enrichment programme a top national security priority. The recalcitrance of both sides makes it a very difficult case for international mediation.¹⁰

The unpredictability of the North Korean regime adds to the complexity of the problem. In the past seven years, not only China but also the United States and successive South Korean governments, have been deceived by Kim Jong Il. His regime, with its self-imposed isolation from the world, cares little about its international prestige and is widely perceived as 'bizarre, isolated and eccentric' [74]. Notions of human rights, people's welfare and national development – essential to the ideology of the modern nation-state – are wilfully disregarded in the DPRK. The question of nuclear capability has little to do with national security and everything to do with the continued power of the Kim family dynasty. Despite being North Korea's closest ally, biggest trading partner and most generous aid donor, China has found it has surprisingly little leverage over the regime. That this engagement has brought China little influence over Pyongyang is largely due to the unique nature of the North Korean regime.

The DPRK's negotiating behaviour is consistently inflexible and unrealistic. Typically, North Korea uses tactics of imposing threats, deception and blackmail. Unless there is a serious crisis, there seems little way to influence Pyongyang's behaviour [73]. As Chuck Downs has observed, "North Korea has tenaciously adhered to this set of inflexible and unrealistic demands as a device for blocking progress, backing out of agreements, and restructuring the arrangements for negotiations...North Korea initiates negotiation by appearing to be open to fundamental changes in its policies, uses its willingness to participate to demand benefits and concessions, and terminates discussions when it has gained maximum advantage" ([19]: 245). There is much confusion over the motives of the DPRK leadership. There is still no agreed consensus on why Kim Jong Il decided to provoke the Obama administration with a second nuclear test. Does North Korea think that brinkmanship will strengthen its negotiating position? Or was it demonstrating its contempt for negotiations? What is clear is that the events of early 2009 mean that only a few observers now believe that denuclearisation of the Peninsula can be achieved through negotiation. This has further magnified Beijing's failure to use mediation to deliver results and encourages all concerned parties to seek a new approach to manage a nuclear North Korea.

¹⁰ According to the classification of Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osier Hampson and Pamela Aall, conflicts which have lasted for long time, are serious in nature and involve conflicting ideologies will be the most difficult to resolve. See reference in *Taming Intractable Conflicts: Mediation in the Hardest Cases*. pp. 7 – 9.

China's Mediating Role in the Six-Party Talks: *An Essential Assessment*

At the beginning of the Six-Party Talks, China actively and enthusiastically engaged in mediation, keen to diffuse the nuclear crisis and demonstrate its support for a multilateral approach [37]. China believed its unique position, as the only country with good relations with both the US and North Korea, meant that Beijing was in a strong position to help the Six-Party Talks progress smoothly. China's perspective was supported by the wider international community, who recognised that the Six-Party Talks were not perfect but agreed that it was the best available means to resolve the North Korean nuclear problem. By the end of 2008, China's mediation role was crisis management driven rather than nuclear dismantlement driven, and so Beijing tried a variety of tactics to boost direct dialogue between the US and the DPRK. As long as North Korea is predisposed to cooperate, albeit in a limited way, China's role has proved to be productive. Similarly, as long as China and the US coordinate to align their responses, North Korea would not be in a position to manipulate the Talks, and would be forced to take cooperation more seriously. This is not to say that in the future China will move to criticise any provocative moves by North Korea. Actually China's inability to reign in Pyongyang has long been a source of annoyance and even anguish for Beijing. To date, Beijing's policy on North Korea has been characterised by inconsistency and indecision. This seriously discredits China's ability to act as the leading mediator, and compromises its overall reputation in the diplomatic sphere.

When nuclear crisis broke out on the Korean Peninsula in October 2002, the confrontation between the US and North Korea rapidly escalated. Pyongyang seemed to be using the declaration of its nuclear programme as a means to compel Washington to engage with Pyongyang, seeking guarantees of the normalisation of relations and economic assistance in return for the promise to denuclearise. North Korea may have been prompted to seek nuclear capability because it was concerned that it was likely to be targeted by the US as a part of the 'axis of evil'.¹¹ As a result of the nuclear crisis, the Bush Administration refused to communicate directly with Pyongyang and suspended the supply of heavy oil that had been allocated under the Agreed Framework. From December 2002, North Korea began to expel IAEA investigators, reactivated the 5-megawatt graphite reactor, and announced its withdrawal from the Non-Proliferation Treaty. In response, the Bush Administration refused to 'give up any policy means', including military force, in seeking to compel North Korea to abandon her nuclear facilities and weapons programme. By January 2003, the crisis had escalated to the point where there seemed to be a high probability of armed clashes on the Korean Peninsula. It was in this context that Beijing initiated mediation efforts, hosting the Three-Party Talks in April 2003, which was then extended to the Six-Party Talks in August. A total of five rounds of negotiations were held up until the end of November 2005.

¹¹ On why the DPRK admitted to possessing a nuclear weapons programme in 2002 see Victor D. Cha and David C. Kang, *Nuclear North Korea: A Debate on Engagement of Strategies*, New York: Columbia University Press, [10]; Michael O'Hanlon and Mike Mochizuki, *Crisis on the Korean Peninsula: How to Deal With A Nuclear North Korea*, Washington: the Brookings Institution Book, [40]; Liu Pei (ed.) *Chaohe Wei Ji Toushi – Mei E Ri Han Zhuanjia Lun Chaohe Wei Ji* (Beijing: Junshi Yiwen Zhubanshe, [35]).

From the beginning China has assumed the leading role in initiating mediation and promoting multilateral talks amongst major regional stakeholders. This is a significant achievement and reflects China's increased activism in international affairs. To facilitate the multilateral talks, China engaged in a vigorous policy of 'shuttle diplomacy' in order to liaise with various parties and steer them towards the negotiating table. Beijing helped both Washington and Pyongyang overcome their initial reluctance to engage in discussion by devising a multilateral framework that satisfied both parties. As well as acting as hosts and providing logistical support, China has endeavoured to act with neutrality and fairness in order to keep the talks going, often working against strong opposition. Mediation and the inauguration of the Six-Party Talks have helped to foster cooperation and enhance the level of trust between countries that have different perspectives on many regional security issues. For many this has demonstrated China's ability to act as a 'responsible power' and is a keystone of China's 'new diplomacy' policy [38, 47, 55].

Throughout the Six-Party Talks China has often had to use creative measures to keep negotiations going when US and North Korean relations were deadlocked. Tense moments typically arose prior to each round of negotiations, when both sides looked to strengthen their own bargaining positions. For example, on the eve of the second round of talks, North Korea demanded *a priori* implementation of America's 'written assurance of security'. Similarly, before the third round of talks, the US demanded that the DPRK 'confess' to its hidden supplies of enriched uranium as a necessary condition for participation. North Korea demanded an apology from the US before it would return to the table for the fourth round of negotiations and before the fifth round, North Korea insisted on first settling the issue of light-water reactors before talking about 'nuclear abandonment'. China was typically the party that worked towards compromise between Pyongyang and Washington so that talks could continue. The experience has offered invaluable training for Chinese diplomats in an age when China is likely to be involved in a growing number of international security issues.

During this time, China had to deal with intense pressure from the US as Washington has repeatedly linked success in the Six-Party Talks with continued amity in Sino-US relations. It was the efforts of Chinese diplomats that gradually changed the initially inflexible attitudes of US delegates. China cut off oil supplies to North Korea twice, in 2003 and 2006–07, in order to apply greater pressure [18]. The Bush administration went from a policy of 'regime change' in the DPRK to supporting the more limited efforts at nuclear abandonment that were outlined in the September 2005 Joint Statement.¹² The Joint Statement was the product of Chinese and South Korean efforts to convince the DPRK to give up some of the more extreme demands made in its declaration of 10 February 2005. There was no doubt that the pressure imposed by Chinese leaders was crucial to Pyongyang's finally

¹² The Joint Statement concluded on September 19, 2005 provides a model for achieving denuclearisation through a series of targets. It elaborates on the North Korean commitment to giving up its nuclear weapons and nuclear programme, establishing a peaceful regime on the Peninsula, lifting sanctions, and normalising relations. Further information can be found online at: <http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/dprk/2005/dprk-050920-kcna03.htm>

agreeing to sign the statement.¹³ China revised the Joint Statement numerous times to produce a version that might be accepted by all parties. Despite seemingly vindicating China's mediation practice, the signing of the Joint Statement quickly ground to a halt when North Korea made fresh demands regarding a civilian nuclear reactor programme. This illustrates how quickly Chinese mediation efforts can turn into nothing if the DPRK chooses not to cooperate.

North Korea's insistence on LWR development led to the US announcement that it would impose financial sanctions at the end of 2005. Washington declared the freezing of 2.5 million dollars at the Macau-based BDA Bank. North Korea retaliated with its first nuclear test on 9th October 2006. Making efforts to ease tensions, China played the 'messenger' through a policy of shuttle diplomacy and helped to establish a series of bilateral talks between Washington and Pyongyang in Berlin, Geneva and New York. Further progress was made in 2007, when the notion of 'nuclear disablement' was incorporated into the talks. The Six-Party Talks moved forwards with the establishment of two phase-out agreements. As part of these agreements North Korea would explode the Yeonbyon cooling tower and promised nuclear clarification in exchange for the unfreezing of BDA money and trade and the lifting of North Korea from the black list of terrorism sponsorship states. China cooperated with Washington's investigation of bank accounts when the US Treasury went after Macao-based Banco Delta Asia in 2007 in reaction to North Korea's improper use of the international banking system. When Kim Jong Il did not agree to full verification, the Six-Party Talks were immediately stalled again in early December 2008.

One of the most positive consequences of the Six-Party Talks is that it has served to institutionalise a multilateral dialogue on regional security issues. The Phase-One and Phase-Two agreements on nuclear disablement indicate that multinational mechanisms like the Six-Party Talks could be useful in furthering the process of denuclearisation. There are hopes that it may provide a foundation for a broader model of Northeast Asian security cooperation in the future.¹⁴ However, although the risk of military conflict has lessened over the past seven years, it is hard to find many notable improvements. The basic problem is that while Beijing's mediation efforts have succeeded in bringing parties to the negotiating table, this has only had a limited impact on North Korea's behaviour. When Pyongyang behaves provocatively there is a limit to what China can do to mediate the situation. And it seems the more provocative the behaviour of North Korea, the more muted Beijing's reaction is. This is reflected in the difference between the condemnatory language Beijing adopted during the two nuclear tests in 2006 and 2009: Beijing used words such as 'brazen and flagrant' deferring to the international community to strongly rebuke North Korea's first nuclear test in 2006. However, its response to the second nuclear

¹³ This point comes from the author's personal interviews with Chinese Foreign Ministry officials who were involved in the process of negotiating the drafting and signing of the Joint Statement in October 2005.

¹⁴ A consensus has been reached between policy makers and academics that the Six-Party Talks on North Korea could be expanded to provide the foundation for a Northeast Asian security mechanism. See Joseph R. Cerami, "From the 6 Party Talks to a Northeast Asian Security Regime? Cooperative Threat Reduction Strategies and Institutional Development" (The Korea Economic Institute of America: The North Korea Nuclear Issue, [9]), pp. 59–76.

test was **unexpectedly softer**, saying that North Korea was in **‘severe violation’** of the committed statement.¹⁵

Furthermore, the Cheonan and Yeonpyeong incidents did not trigger a more decisive response from China to restrain North Korean behaviour. Beijing has inexplicably rejected South Korea’s request that China send a team to Seoul to review the evidence, a step that Russia agreed to. And when South Korea dispatched its own team to New York to brief the UN Security Council on the findings of the investigation, China asked for a deferral. With Chinese and Russian intervention, Pyongyang was shielded from UNSC condemnation in June 2010. China lightened sanctions against North Korea despite its apparent role in the sinking of the Cheonan vessel. China’s failure to accept the conclusions of the multilateral investigation or to carry out its own investigations actually leaves North Korea with more room for manoeuvre in terms of power politics and encourages more provocative behaviour. This has had a negative impact on China’s reputation and it will be hard for China to undo this damage in the near future. Beijing has been widely criticised as ‘hard-nosed’ and ‘self-interested’ in terms of its foreign policy.¹⁶ Since the Cheonan Incident, Beijing has continued to dismiss international calls for a tough line against North Korea [26].

Despite the threat to stability posed by **inter-Korean clashes in the Yellow Sea along the Northern Limit Line**, China has historically downplayed them as a natural consequence of the disputed maritime boundary. Likewise, it does not consider Pyongyang’s provocations and the subsequent calls for action from the international community, particularly from the UN Security Council, as serious as North Korean nuclear tests. However **China’s approach to the North is also powerfully shaped by increased concerns in Beijing about the potential of a US strategic return to Asia and rising opposition to further entrenchment of the American regional military and political presence** [29, 30]. Thus Beijing tends to focus on the potential instability and collapse of North Korea rather than on holding Pyongyang accountable for its actions. This approach was evident when Beijing raised its prime concerns as achieving ‘stability, peace and denuclearisation’ following the shelling of Yeonpyeong.¹⁷ According to Beijing’s official rhetoric, ‘denuclearisation’ will lead to ‘stability’ and ‘peace’.

Yet, Beijing’s indecision over whether to take a tough stance and hold Pyongyang accountable embarrassingly puts China in a difficult position in terms of multinational diplomacy in East Asia; Chinese indecisiveness has undeniably

¹⁵ “China Remonstrates Nuclear Test by N. Koran and Ask for Restraint,” *The People’s Daily*, [11].

¹⁶ Oddly, the majority of Chinese policy makers and academics argue that the issue of the sunk Cheonan warship has not been clarified, and strongly object to the conclusions of the ROK-led international investigation. In term of its official response, Beijing condemns the criminal act of torpedoing the Cheonan warship, but fails to condemn Pongyang as the responsible party. Chinese suspicion to that probe conclusion is no doubt a Beijing’s protocol to move tougher against N. Korea; and the response could presumably accord with the “real truth” as clearly released. Therefore, Chinese officials contend that their primary response to the Cheonan Incident is ‘impartial’. The author is very impressed by this after interviewing a good number of officials in Chinese Foreign Ministry, CPC International Department, PLA Intelligence Department, and the office of CPC Foreign Affairs Leadership Group.

¹⁷ “China’s Wen Calls for Peace, Stability on Korean Peninsula”, Bloomberg, Nov. 24, [13]; Press conference of Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman on [43]. *The People’s Daily*, November 28, 2011.

damaged its position as mediator and discredited Beijing's reputation. Beijing is widely criticised for shielding provocative Pyongyang from punishment and for China's inability to rebuild an international consensus and to avert crises. Washington, Seoul and Tokyo's dismissal of Beijing's calls for emergency talks illustrates the greatest divide ever seen since the founding of the Six-Party mechanism. There have never been more doubts among the international community over the efficacy of the Six-Party Talks [24]. Furthermore, Beijing does not seem as concerned as expected about the newly revealed uranium programme at Yonbyon. Chinese Vice Minister Cui Tiankai refused to comment on the EHU issue on 14 January 2011, saying that the uranium enrichment facilities were not open for Chinese inspection and that China was 'unclear of it'.¹⁸ His words indicate that Beijing wishes to avoid dealing with this breaking news, and does not want to confront North Korea's about its 'lies' in the previous rounds of the Six-Party Talks. Only after President Obama applied much pressure during a state visit to Washington on 18th January 2011 did the Chinese President Hu Jintao concede that the EHU issue is a 'common concern' for both countries [31, 49].

Beijing has, however, genuinely recognised the growing need for action following the provocation by North Korea in November 2010, when the North shelled Yeonpyeong, and the revelation of a new uranium plant. Chinese top diplomat and State Counsellor Mr. Dai Binguo paid an emergency visit to Seoul on 27–28 November and to Pyongyang on 1–2 December 2010. Given previous inaction in mediating the Korean Peninsula crisis, Dai's visit had little impact in terms of influencing Washington, Seoul and Tokyo's emergency policies. The parties who participated in the multinational talks were not able to produce a coherent response. Despite Chinese opposition, South Korea and the US staged a joint military exercise at the end of November. The exercise included sending the George Washington aircraft carrier and a number of accompanying ships into the Yellow Sea, which borders China and the two Koreas. This exercise was aimed at deterring further attacks by the North and signalling to China that unless it can rein in its unruly ally, it will see an even larger American presence in the vicinity [50]. The US, Seoul and Tokyo prefer to halt the Six-Party talks and give priority to inter-Korean dialogue to identify the level of North Korea's 'sincerity' to abandon its nuclear weapons and nuclear programme.

As North Korea's provocative behaviour has consistently worsened the situation in East Asia since early 2009, regional politics on denuclearisation have also shifted. The issue of making North Korea give up nuclear weapons has evolved into how to tackle the more urgent task of preventing Pyongyang from proliferating its dangerous WMD technology and avoiding the escalation of military conflicts between the North and the South. The Obama Administration has concluded that North Korea's new nuclear plant, which is designed to enrich nuclear fuel, uses technology that is in direct violation of the United Nations Resolutions 1695 and 1784, and that North Korea's nuclear technology is significantly more advanced than that which Iran has managed to develop over the past two decades. America believes that North Korea is preparing to expand its nuclear arsenal or to build a far more

¹⁸ "The Blue Hall Forum Attracts a lot of Attention," *Guangzhou Daily*, [64].

powerful type of atomic bomb. North Korea says that a new uranium enrichment plant would produce fuel for reactors that could supply electricity to its impoverished country. But the North does not yet possess such reactors and the plant could provide the country with another pathway to increase its nuclear arsenal if it is used to produce highly enriched uranium [48, 51]. Furthermore, North Korea has a notorious track record regarding its nuclear responsibility. For example, it provided Syria with assistance to build a nuclear reactor, which was subsequently destroyed by Israel during a bombing raid in 2007. Therefore the construction of new North Korean centrifuges will likely be of interest to any country that wishes to obtain nuclear technology. More importantly, the intelligence community believes that there is a high likelihood that North Korea had built uranium-enrichment facilities in its territory during the Six-Party Talks before December 2008. Moreover, as evidenced by the attacks on the Cheonan warship and Yeonpyeong Island, a nuclear-armed North Korea seems to have become more unstable and belligerent.

It appears that Beijing's mediation only works under certain conditions, namely, when North Korea's behaviour is comparatively calm and there is a relatively strong desire amongst all parties to cooperate both at the diplomatic and political level. However, as soon as Pyongyang resorts to its 'old tricks' of brinkmanship and blackmail, China's ability to mediate is severely limited. The year 2010 has also seen Beijing squandering almost all of its capital to grapple with troublesome North Korea and it in general 2010 has been a very bad year for foreign policy for Beijing. The release by WikiLeaks of American diplomatic cables, written between 2004 and 2010, which contain considerable material relating to China's policy on North Korea and reveal an apparent readiness on the Chinese side to accept the reunification of Korea on South Korean terms. This proposition is very surprising as it starkly contrasts with China's actual actions; Beijing failed to openly condemn North Korea both for its sinking of the South Korean warship Cheonan in March and for the recent artillery attack on South Korea's Yeonpyeong Island. Similarly, rather than calling for North Korea to halt its brinkmanship, China's leaders have instead called for emergency consultations involving the United States, Japan, Russia, China, the United Nations and South Korea. None of these actions suggest a willingness to punish the North Korean regime for its provocative behaviour. China has no interest in creating a 'new Cold War' in East Asia, so Beijing should be pushing for denuclearisation and playing a bigger role in curtailing North Korea's nuclear provocations. The irony is that Chinese dithering has triggered Cold War-type concerns in South Korea, Japan, and the US. Indeed, due to a lack of confidence in China's readiness and willingness to keep the North in check, South Korea is now seeking even deeper defensive ties with the US, as well as enhancing its political and defence cooperation with Japan. Beijing should recognise that the currents in the region's security have started to run against its preferences.

The Six-Party Talks, hosted and mediated by China, represent the principal multilateral mechanism for finding a diplomatic and political resolution to the question of North Korea's nuclear programme. Six rounds of the Six-Party Talks have taken place since their inauguration in August 2003, and have been accompanied by other measures such as shuttle diplomacy and economic sanctions. Yet no significant progress on the nuclear issue has been achieved to date. Instead tensions have worsened significantly since North Korea's second nuclear test on

25th May 2009, the sinking of South Korea's warship "Cheonan" on 26th March 2010, resulting in the death of 46 Korean navy personnel, and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island on 23rd November 2010, killing 2 civilians and 2 military personnel. The latter two events placed the Korean Peninsula on the brink of war, and have triggered numerous military alerts across the region. Unsurprisingly, there is increasing scepticism that multinational talks can persuade the most reclusive and isolated regime in the world to scale back a nuclear programme which it seems to see as crucial to its survival [8, 61].

The puzzle here is not over the extent to which China has influence over the North, but instead rests on the Chinese resolve and indecision over whether to stand up to a malign and bellicose Pyongyang. The key question is why has Beijing been so blind to the fundamental changes on the Korean Peninsula, namely a more provocative Pyongyang and less servile Seoul, and why a corresponding policy has shift not followed with adjustments to Beijing's mediation strategy?

The Problem of China's Mediation in the Six-Party Talks

A variety of reasons can be adduced to explain the failure thus far to halt North Korea's nuclear programme. There is no doubt that one reason for the nuclear standoff is that Beijing's role, as a mediator and key contact between the DPRK and other interested parties, makes it reluctant to leverage its influence in a more substantial way. In an ideal scenario, the mediator is willing to use its influence to break diplomatic impasses and drive forward the optimum solution, taking into account all parties' demands. Yet an analysis of the mediating role played by China since the current nuclear crisis began in October 2002 suggests that the inherent contradictions in Beijing's approach have served to diminish its leadership role. The Six-Party Talks have become a platform for different parties to pursue their conflicting interests rather than a vehicle for denuclearisation. Beijing has found that its leading role as mediator has been continually eclipsed, with Pyongyang making direct appeals to Washington for bilateral talks and South Korea's Lee Myung-bak government outlining its own version of a 'grand bargain'. Due to this apparent failure, the most recent evidence suggests that Beijing has decided to move from being a 'mediator' to 'coordinator' on the North Korean nuclear issue. This shift denotes a desire to cooperate better with other members of the Six-Party Talks at the expense of the DPRK. It is still too early to say if China's policy on North Korea will dramatically change. But Beijing's decision to expend fewer resources on mediating with Pyongyang in favour of enhanced international coordination is a positive sign. Regardless of how long it takes to restore the Six-Party Talks, the shift in China's position means that the DPRK will have less room for diplomatic manoeuvre and will be less able to employ the kind of underhand tactics that they have used in the past.

Following the second nuclear test on 25th May 2009, it has become clear that a solution to the North Korean issue can no longer be found solely through China's mediation efforts. Within the framework of the Six-Party Talks there are many factors which limit what Beijing can achieve. Relying on China to play a mediating

role will ensure the continuation of the Six-Party Talks mechanism but it is not an assurance that substantial progress can be made to find a diplomatic solution.

It will be increasingly difficult for China to remain neutral as a mediator in the Six-Party Talks and not consider its own national interests. Although China has striven to take into account the interests of all participants, the fact remains that China has its own specific interests on the Korean Peninsula. The historical links between China and the DPRK, cemented during the Korean War, combined with China's own geopolitical considerations make Beijing reluctant to pressure Pyongyang as much as other parties would like. China's calculation of its own interests vis-à-vis North Korea make it very difficult to coordinate and balance the perspectives of the different stakeholders.¹⁹ Conflicting interests clearly undermine efforts to reach a common consensus in the Six-Party Talks. Beijing hopes that the problem will have a 'soft landing', that is denuclearisation combined with incremental political and economic reform to prevent the collapse of the North Korean regime. The US continues to believe that the most credible solution to the nuclear challenge remains regime change and pushes China to reduce its support for the DPRK. But Beijing prefers to undertake a 'peaceful evolution strategy' to wait for North Korea to initiate its own process of 'reform and opening up'.

The Chinese government has clearly stated its desire for a denuclearised Korean Peninsula but also maintains that North Korea's legitimate security and economic interests should be respected. Beijing's stance reflects the fact that North Korea's nuclear programme is tied up with the broader issue of the 'North Korea question' and the future of the Peninsula.²⁰ China's reluctance to take a tougher stance towards Pyongyang is not only because it fears isolation and coercion will be counter-productive in moving forward the Six-Party Talk, it is also because Beijing fears that China will be the immediate victim of any conflict escalation, risking the probable influx of refugees, potential armed conflict and the possibility of a unified Korea under US patronage.

China has not been the only party unwilling to apply heavy pressure to North Korea. South Korean governments, as outlined by their 'Sunshine' policies, have tended to adopt a conciliatory rather than isolationist policy towards North Korea in the interests of 'peace and prosperity'. This reflects Chinese national opinion, which has increasingly identified with North Koreans as 'fellow countrymen'.²¹ In the eyes of the US, the positions of China and South Korea mean that these countries are of limited use as principal mediators in the negotiations. Opinion in the Six-Party Talks has therefore been typically split between China, South Korea and Russia on the one

¹⁹ For the US perspective on China's role in mediation and China-North Korean relations see Andrew Scobell, "China and North Korea: From Comrades – in – Arms to Allies at Arm's Length" [54], www.carlistel.army.mil/ssi/pdf/00364.pdf; Anne Wu, "What China Whispers to North Korea", *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 28:2 [72], pp. 35–48.

²⁰ On relations between the Nuclear Question and the North Korean Question see: Zhu Feng, "The 6-Party Talks: North Korean Question or the North Korean Nuclear Question", *Guoji Zhengzhi Yanjiu (International Politics Studies)*, No. 3 [76], pp. 28–38.

²¹ This is perceived to have caused a 'drifting' in relations between the US and South Korea. See Norman D. Levin, 'Do the Ties Still Bind? The US-ROK Security relations after 9/11', (Rand: Project Air Force, [33]).

hand and the US and Japan on the other. Attempts at mediation are still unable to overcome these fundamental differences in interests. The Six-Party Talks still lack the institutional power of a mature multilateral mechanism or the presence of a single authoritative voice to overcome these differences [15].

These dynamics have changed since the election in 2008 of South Korean President Lee Myung-bak, who has looked to strengthen ties with the US, after a period when they were considered to be ‘drifting’ apart. A closer US-South Korean relationship automatically brings South Korea closer to Japan, which is also tied to the US through its security alliance [10]. Any confrontation on the Korean Peninsula would see US troop reinforcements coming from the ‘rear base’ of Japan. Although South Korea shares China’s bitterness over the historical role played by Japan in East Asia, it does not seem to have stopped Seoul moving closer to Tokyo in recent months. Such developments mean Beijing is at risk of becoming strategically isolated in the region.

Therefore China has looked to restore its delicately balanced relations with Pyongyang, Seoul and Tokyo. For example, it backed the June 2009 UN Resolution 1874 to impose sanctions on the DPRK and did not support Pyongyang when it demanded sanctions first be lifted before multilateral talks could begin. Since former US President Bill Clinton’s visit to Pyongyang in early August 2009, China has appealed to other parties to ‘grasp the opportunity to reopen the Six-Party Talks’. But at the same time China also acknowledges it has to adapt to the new levels of coordination between Washington, Tokyo and Seoul in dealing with the nuclear threat of North Korea. Even after Wang Jiarui, Director of the Chinese Communist Party’s International Department, visited Pyongyang, China has shown its sensitivity to the concerns of other parties by not looking to ‘seduce’ the DPRK back into talks with promises of aid and economic assistance as it has done in the past [44].

In most cases of international mediation, few results are yielded if the mediating parties have direct interests in the situation. US efforts at mediating in the Israel-Palestine conflict are a classic example of this. Despite repeated high-level engagement in the Middle East peace process since the early 1980s, Washington has been unable to bring about progress on key issues. Studies have concluded that the US is simply not detached enough from the region, owing to the depth of its interests, to act as a mediator. In this case, it seems that whether mediation is successful or not depends on the identity of the mediator [53]. This analysis can also be applied to the North Korean nuclear issue. China has historically had considerable economic and geopolitical interests on the Korean Peninsula. Although China and other parties share a common goal of denuclearisation, differences of interest prevent the formation of a shared policy on the future of North Korea [41].

Even if China had been a more flexible mediator, it is still not clear whether Beijing has the genuine will or intention to abandon the North Korean regime by cutting off or threatening to cut off all aid. The first term of the Bush Administration did not indicate any willingness to engage in ‘grand-bargaining’ or agree to compromises or concessions ([40]: 7–18). During its second term the Administration adopted a more flexible approach on ways to address North Korean nuclear issues. But CVID (comprehensive, verifiable, irreversible denuclearisation) still remains the central mantra. President Obama is unlikely to take a radically different approach. Domestic support for a more conciliatory approach is limited, particularly

considering the human rights situation in North Korea and the revelations that the DPRK has provided Syria with nuclear assistance. It is also clear that the threat posed by Pyongyang helps Washington to strengthen its military alliances with South Korea and Japan. Thus Beijing's has always been suspicious of the US's true intention; does America really want to denuclearise North Korea to consolidate its regional position and even tighten the encirclement around China? Therefore, Beijing's mediation efforts have been significantly constricted by its own interests and the potential cost of damaging or even changing relations with the DPRK. At the heart of Beijing's strategy regarding the Korean Peninsula is the belief that any change to the DPRK should occur gradually, even if regime collapse is the inevitable endpoint. This mentality is not rooted in the traditional Sino-North Korean 'lip and tooth' friendship, but in China's growing insecurity given the unshakable US primacy in East Asia.

Both the Bush and Obama administrations have expressed thanks to China for the 'positive part' it has played in pushing forward the Six-Party Talks. But they also expect China to play a bigger role. Former US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, was critical of China's policy towards the DPRK when she visited Beijing in July 2005, expressing her belief that Beijing should take a tougher stance [7]. The Obama administration has yet to make its concerns public but in 2009 officials complained in private about China's lack of action. However the events of 2010 have significantly altered the US view of China's role in the Six-Party Talks. The combination of open criticism and applying pressure in private has characterised America's 'China push' to persuade Beijing to play a bigger and tougher role regarding North Korea. In fact, neither Beijing nor Washington is individually willing to expend the resources that would be required to coerce Pyongyang into abandoning its nuclear weapons programme. To a certain extent both sides fear any change in the status quo on the Peninsula. This means that both sides tend to make competing claims that the other has a greater responsibility to resolve the situation [58].

Post-Yeonpyeong Era: Will a Changed Paradigm Shape Up China?

The sinking of the Cheonan warship and the artillery attack on Yeonpyeong Island in 2010 have notably altered the balance of power on the Korean Peninsula. Lee Myung-bak's government swears it will retaliate with immediate military action if there is one more provocation from the North and this is a big test for China's policy of appeasement to North Korea. Despite Pyongyang's impressive appeals to Seoul for peace talks since 1st January 2011, neither Seoul nor Washington is willing to compromise unless there is significant action on the North Korean side. President Obama's strategy towards the North, called the 'strategic patience plus', has been to demonstrate that Washington will not engage until Pyongyang ceases provocations and demonstrates that it is living up to its past commitments to dismantle its nuclear facilities and ultimately to give up its nuclear capability. Therefore it is unlikely that the Six-Party Talks will revert back to the old format of a 'consensus-driven' process, even if they were to resume again in the days to come.

To prevent acts of desperation on the North Korean side, the US is more likely to explore new approaches to directly engage Pyongyang in an attempt to deter any new provocative acts which might lead to a military conflict between North and

South Korea. If necessary, the US is ready to increase its military presence in East Asia in order to counterbalance a provocative North Korea and a rising China. This will force China to face up to a serious strategic impetus in the region. China has decided to preserve its vital interests by prioritising North Korean stability over supporting the US, who typically uses threats to pressurise North Korea. Due to South Korea's determination to retaliate against any future attacks and the low likelihood that North Korea will willingly surrender its nuclear weapons, there is now a real danger of war in the region. Beijing's indecision will not help China to escape this danger. Moreover, the longer the Six-Party Talks are stalled, the more gloomy the outlook both for regional security and China's own security. This trend might add to Chinese domestic nationalistic sentiments and make the Chinese leadership find it harder to reconcile the two. Although Beijing has no intention of confronting the US over the Korean Peninsula, it is unlikely that China can be counted on to pressure North Korea in the way the US would like. But at the very least, Beijing should strive to persuade Pyongyang to show restraint.

Yet, unless Beijing provides Pyongyang with diplomatic cover it will feel the pressure from North Korea. Washington, Seoul and Tokyo proclaim that any more provocative acts will mean North Korea must face 'grave consequences.' However, while China or Russia still support North Korea in the UN Security Council, Pyongyang may well continue to take risky and provocative action to get attention. Pyongyang has bet that China will not adopt a tough policy against North Korea. So exploiting the complexity of power relations and the China-Japan tangle has proved to be Pyongyang's long-term 'matrix levitation'. Therefore, it is not only the power transition process but the overall dynamic of power relations in the region that creates incentives for North Korea's provocative actions. The Dear Leader knows all too well that deeper cooperation between the US and China would be fatal to North Korea as it would remove the flow of external resources into the country which is necessary for the regime's survival. Thus Pyongyang will continue to walk the tightrope between the US and China. Its provocation and brinksmanship is therefore cunningly 'choreographed'.

With this in mind, we cannot overlook the importance of China-US cooperation if we are to find a way out of the Six-Party Talks impasse. From the Chinese perspective, Beijing welcomes an inter-Korea dialogue. But at the same time Beijing feels that no party should shelve the Six-Party talks. The restoration of the talks not only indicates that all parties recognise the DPRK as a durable and legitimate state, capable of making and implementing the commitments made to other players, but also signals that future evolution of the region's security architecture will not lead to China being sidelined or threatened.

The other parties can get China on board to tackle the problem of a nuclearised North Korea largely by reshaping and rethinking the Six-Party process and, more specifically, by fostering closer China-US relations. As Stephen Blank says, "this process is not merely about North Korean nuclear disarmament. Rather, it is about creating a new, legitimate and enduring peaceful order in Northeast Asia where all parties, including North Korea, can participate securely" [6]. Dr. Henry Kissinger also warns that "it is not enough to demand unstated pressures from another affected country, especially China. A concept for the political evolution of Northeast Asia is urgently needed" [28].

Throughout the Six-Party Talks, all parties have had to deal with North Korea's unpredictability, which is the main reason why the path to denuclearisation has been

far from smooth. One hope is that North Korea's willingness to display risky, provocative behaviour may be constrained by growing domestic tensions. The most important indicator of this domestic tension was the surprising currency reform launched in November 2009, which seems to have produced chaotic results. Plagued by internal and external policy failures, Pyongyang will perhaps increasingly lose patience with the diplomatic process and be more eager to break out of the impasse. For example, the New Year Statement by North Korea's Labour News released on 1st January 2010, called for an end to the long-term hostility between the DPRK and the US. North Korea proposed that the two sides negotiate a peace treaty and offered to return to the Six-Party Talks if sanctions were lifted. In 2011 North Korea is in no position to demand 'any conditional participation' in the Six-Party Talks. Kim's offer of a conditional return to the negotiating table cannot be countenanced.

There is no clear evidence that North Korea will quickly reaffirm its commitment to the 2005 Joint Statement, when it proclaimed its willingness to abandon its nuclear weapons programme. Similarly, there is no sign of Pyongyang's readiness to accept 'grand bargaining', in other words, giving up its nuclear capability in exchange for economic assistance, the lifting of sanctions and diplomatic normalisation. Beijing should join Washington and other parties to reconstruct the 'rules of the game' as this is the only credible way for China to maintain its position at the centre of the 'mediation' process. First of all, North Korea should make conciliatory overtures to its South Korean counterparts and promise to refrain from further aggressive acts, which recently have been more forceful and lethal in comparison with previous decades. Secondly, Pyongyang should reaffirm its commitment to the Joint Statement, close its uranium enrichment plant, and accept a full inspection of all its nuclear facilities and programmes. This means that North Korea must cooperate with the full inspection demands as set out in the 3 October 2007 agreement of nuclear disablement. Thirdly, the fulfilment of this obligation should quickly lead to the resumption of food shipments and energy assistance. Finally, any friction or rift between parties should not be used by North Korea as a justification to withdraw from the multinational talks. Otherwise, other parties, including China, will automatically tighten economic and financial sanctions against North Korea. As all parties work towards restarting the Six-Party Talks, a variety of bilateral dialogues should be set up to facilitate the process. Both bilateral and multilateral dialogues should target the lifting of economic sanctions, normalisation of diplomatic ties and ways to establish a peaceful regime on the Peninsula.

Beijing's role as mediator in the North Korean nuclear crisis has traditionally been composed of two major elements: first, to persuade Pyongyang to return to the Six-Party Talks by offering economic incentives and second, to convince the US to adopt 'soft' approach—using more incentives while applying less pressure—in its dealings with North Korea. However, the Cheonan and Yeonpyeong Incidents and the newly unveiled uranium enrichment plant at Yeonbyon have impeded any 'soft approach'. It is clear that Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions will never be tempered as long as it thinks that it has room to manoeuvre and play other powers off against each other. A new approach should therefore aim to undercut and minimise North Korea's room for manoeuvre. Beijing has no intention of helping Pyongyang maintain freedom to act provocatively. Denuclearisation firmly serves China's security interest in East Asia. China's Minister of Defence, Liang Guanglie, made

this clear during his November 2009 visit to Pyongyang, stating that Beijing will not provide North Korea with any military assistance unless it decides to denuclearise.²² The Chinese President Hu Jintao has also repeatedly told the Dear Leader that strengthening economic cooperation between China and North Korea will only occur if this goes hand in hand with political change, a process known as ‘government boosting whilst market driving’ [71]. Pyongyang has been anxious to acquire military technology from China in order to update its own weapons systems, and has urged China to provide sizable economic assistance in 2009–2010 [32]. But there is no evidence that Beijing has visibly increased economic aid to and investment in North Korea and in fact China’s actual assistance to North Korea is far less than the requested level. Chinese commerce officials confess that Beijing’s actual level of assistance is rather ‘tiny’ and disproportionate when compared to the friendly overtures Kim Jong Il made by visiting China twice in 2010 and to the potential aid China could provide, taking into account its huge fiscal capability.²³

Despite this, Beijing is still not ready to apply more pressure to North Korea. China has a growing awareness of the limits of its traditional mediation role and no longer believes that Pyongyang can be convinced to ‘open up’ by gentle persuasion alone. Beijing instead hopes to see the end of the current impasse in the Six-Party Talks through US and South Korean efforts to restart the talks. Without China’s support, the options for Kim Jong Il are considerably reduced. Beijing has concluded that it must continue to provide Pyongyang with a lifeline, in the hopes of stabilising the regime and allowing the process of domestic change to occur more gradually in the North [42]. If North Korea fails to temper its behaviour, and China’s approach is still to support a dangerous, nuclear-armed state, strategic rivalry across East Asia might revive and take the form of a Washington-Tokyo-Seoul axis versus a China-North Korea coalition. Unsurprisingly, this prospect offers little comfort to China and yet China seems to turn a blind eye to it all. Unfortunately, China’s traditional ideology plays a key role here. Although China claims that it ‘normalised relations’ with North Korea in 2009, its policies and attitudes towards the North remain mired in a morbid comradeship. For example, in October, on the 60th anniversary of the start of the Korean War, Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping hailed the conflict as a glorious fight against a ‘US-initiated invasion’.²⁴

The majority of Chinese people dislike Kim Jong Il’s dynastic, Leninist regime. And the two countries diverge enormously in terms of their political, economic and social ideology. Yet China’s leaders still seem unable to abandon North Korea, no matter how outrageously it behaves. This is partly because China’s diplomatic values are shaped by an official emphasis on sympathising with the weaker side struggling against the stronger side, and by comradely reminiscences about North Korea, which is by far and away the weakest of the participants in the Six-Party negotiations with the US, South Korea, China, Russia, and Japan. So in the end, Chinese outrage at North Korea’s behaviour usually gives way to a refusal to play any part in the

²² Author’s interview with officers of PLA Foreign Affairs Office in December of 2009.

²³ Author’s interview with officials specifically in charge of external assistance affairs in Chinese Ministry of Commerce in December of 2010.

²⁴ “Xi Jinping Makes Important Remarks in the Memory of 60 Anniversaries of the Korea War,” *The People’s Daily*, [70].

demise of its neighbour and long-term ally. More than one Chinese official has told me of their hearty affection for North Korea's people. They recognise that North Korea is a huge burden on China, but, like loving parents of a rogue son who cannot bring themselves to disown him, China cannot bring itself to disown North Korea. These emotional ties, combined with the typical bureaucratic love of the *status quo*, are the real causes of China's failure to alter its North Korean policy. Whenever a crisis erupts, China certainly becomes agitated. However, instead of seeking a new path, it inevitably re-traces its old steps.

Beijing's indecision over how to react to North Korea's provocation in 2010 has become a growing source of irritation in Washington. The US feels increased frustration with China's insistence to push for the 'restoration of the Six-Party Talks'. This was clearly reflected in President Obama's remarks at the G20 summit in Toronto, where he noted "there's a difference between restraint and wilful blindness to consistent problems".²⁵ When Admiral Michael Mullen visited South Korea in December 2010 to strengthen the coordination of future responses to a North Korean attack, he stated that "China has unique influence. Therefore, they bear unique responsibility".²⁶ Pressured by the US, China agreed that Pyongyang's uranium enrichment is a grave 'concern' as highlighted in the January 2011 Sino-US Joint Statement. This Statement affirms that the two countries have a shared interest in the promotion of stable inter-Korean relations and called for "sincere and constructive inter-Korean dialogue" [65]. However, China has also opposed the issue being taken up by the UN Security Council and has rebuffed South Korean efforts to even acknowledge the issue in a Sino-South Korean Joint Statement. This has created a rift between the two countries, which has become increasingly apparent following the different responses of the two sides to the Cheonan and Yeonpyeong incidents in 2010. A consequence of this has been that Washington used North Korea's provocations in 2010 as an opportunity to promote solidarity with Seoul and Tokyo. And South Korea and Japan have markedly leaned towards the US by conducting historic trilateral foreign ministerial talks on 6 December 2010, which appear to have been designed to demonstrate to China that Beijing's approach to North Korea is counterproductive as it is seen as an attempt to secure China's interests in the region. China's actual behaviour contradicts Beijing's traditional emphasis on a 'good neighbour' policy, and threatens its own national security. However, despite the negative consequences, Beijing seems to have no intention of changing its strategy. Therefore, Beijing's North Korea policy is plagued by inertia rather than sensitivity to its own national interests. This is not to say that China's policy on North Korea will never change. But change will require that China's leaders find a way out of this 'abrasive diplomacy'.

Fortunately, Chinese thinking on North Korea nowadays is no longer monolithic. Indeed, among China's elite, there is no foreign policy issue that is more divisive. And given North Korea's ability to threaten China with its geographical proximity and the prospect of a sudden regime collapse (with all its security implications, including an influx of refugees), these divisions are likely to grow. As a result,

²⁵ "Remarks by President Obama at G-20 Press Conference in Toronto, Canada, [45]", at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-obama-g-20-press-conference-toronto-canada>

²⁶ Admiral Michael Mullen Press Conference, Seoul, [1]; at <http://www.jcs/mil/speech.aspx?id=1502>

China's calculations about North Korea will remain complex, even as the risks posed by the North's behaviour increase. China's fears could be addressed by greater international collaboration, but China must be willing to cooperate as well, and, as we have seen again in recent days, it is unlikely to be forced out of its indecisiveness. That change will only come when Beijing willingly opens its eyes to collaboration. Even though it has been sidelined in the aftermath of the Yeonpyeong shelling, Beijing remains confident that China's leverage over North Korea will be essential if any deal can be struck. In the context of the US's evolving North Korea strategy, Beijing has reduced its traditional reliance on economic incentives as a tool to influence the behaviour of North Korea. Rather, China has leaned towards the international community's aspiration of Pyongyang's nuclear dismantlement. Beijing's commitment to UN Resolution 1874 may affect its relationship with the DPRK, but not irreparably. Nobody wants to see the North crushed by starvation and humanitarian disaster. China hopes that, while the regime in North Korea may be weakening, the country is not on the verge of immediate collapse. China strongly believes that the international community should maintain contact with the North rather than isolating it. A combination of pressure and engagement will be the most effective method to change Pyongyang's mindset and behaviour. However, what is clear is that a staunch Beijing's willingness to calibrate its responses to North Korean provocations is the key to the West's strategy to moderate Pyongyang's behaviour. In the past decade, this logic has rarely touched Beijing, and will not work in the future.

Conclusion

China's mediation role during the North Korean nuclear crisis has in many ways been successful. However, while China has prevented the situation from deteriorating rapidly, there are limits to what it can hope to achieve. Japan and South Korea do not trust China enough to act as an 'honest broker' in resolving the nuclear issue. Driven mainly by the goal of nuclear crisis management rather than the pursuit of a quick solution, China seems reluctant to risk Pyongyang's regime collapse or any fundamental change in bilateral ties with Pyongyang to achieve North Korea's nuclear dismantlement. China's complex fears about the endgame and the dangers that political collapse in the North might bring outweigh Beijing's worry of damaging its reputation. Behind China's indecision to firmly condemn Pyongyang is the security dilemma that exists between Beijing and Washington. The US and China clearly have different geopolitical interests when it comes to the question of the future of the Korean Peninsula. The US has no intention of resolving the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula at the expense of undercutting the American military presence, while China remains concerned about the impact of its indefinite exposure to US-centred military allies in its peripheral territory. Thus Chinese concerns over its future influence on the Peninsula are reflected in China's tendency to look at the Korean Peninsula through the lens of Sino-US strategic relations. Chinese thinking remains torn between its desire for stability on the Peninsula, which makes it reluctant to support punitive measures against Kim Jong Il's regime, and its interest in denuclearisation. These factors mean that China cannot act as a mediator in the

same way, for instance, as the United Kingdom did when cooperating with the US over Libya's nuclear program ([59]: 146).

These limitations mean that China has looked to use its mediation role as a way of avoiding crisis escalation rather than as engaging in fundamental problem solving. Beijing's hesitation to break the status quo by cutting its ties with the DPRK – and there is some evidence which suggests that this is what it really wants to do – has sparked international criticism. Some contend that, given China's historical and political links with the DPRK, it is not suited to play a mediating role because its interests diverge too much from those of the other parties. Others have suggested that the logic of China's continued development will eventually force it to adopt a more coercive stance towards North Korea [25]. For the time being, Beijing should seek to demonstrate that it can be tough on its old ally if it really wants to convince others that China is not a liability acting as mediator. Beijing's long-term aim must be to convince the international community that China can be a credible, stabilising force in the region.

These signs have given Beijing hope that if North Korea's nuclear desires can be moderated, albeit probably through a different process, i.e. not through 'isolation and pressure', but through 'transplanting' reform and opening up to North Korea, a policy which has proven to be so successful in China. However other involved parties already appear to have lost confidence in the 'sino-centric' approach as a feasible means to change North Korea's behaviour. US policy on North Korea has never been clearer: Washington will never recognise a nuclear DPRK, never 'buy the same horse twice', and never enter bilateral negotiations unless Pyongyang reaffirms its commitment to the 2005 Joint Statement, and is sincere that it will undertake nuclear dismantlement and accept the terms of verifiable and irreversible nuclear dismantlement. Washington is also willing to risk straining its relations with China in order to get Beijing to push its ally harder and to work with the US to pressure Pyongyang should North Korea display provocative behaviour one more time. This tough stance is also echoed by Seoul and Tokyo. President Lee Byungbak says any improvement in relations with North Korea will be preconditioned on nuclear dismantlement; Seoul will never revert back to the 'Sunshine policy' [52]. It is imperative for Beijing to renew its nuclear diplomacy, otherwise, China will be alienated from the other parties and the converging interests among Asian powers will increasingly diverge. China cannot disagree with this logic. But it remains unclear if the new 'hard' approach will function to generate change in its North Korean policy [29, 30]. How will coordination between the US, South Korea and China be carried out in order to apply concerted diplomatic pressure on the DPRK? The lingering standoff on the Korean Peninsula will fuel distrust between China and the US, as Washington argues that North Korea's nuclear threat is increasingly severe, and that China is exacerbating the problem. Despite sharing many common interests, there seems to be a high likelihood that China and the US will find themselves as antagonists in a serious crisis. There may be severe consequences as the crisis is also inherently unpredictable and misinformation, miscommunication and misunderstanding can all play their part in propelling events in unforeseen and often undesirable directions.²⁷

²⁷ For an interesting discussion of how such a dynamic has played out, see Wang Jisi, "China's Search for a Grand Strategy," *Foreign Affairs*, [67]; Thomas J. Christensen, "The Advantages of an Assertive China," *Foreign Affairs*, [17].

The current reality calls for the US, South Korea, Japan, Russia and China to act as a collaborative body. They need not only to work together on resolving the current impasse but also need to coordinate better on contingency scenarios in the event of regime collapse. Otherwise, the North Korean issue might trigger a geopolitical split in East Asia and lead to a confrontation between the US, South Korea and Japan, and China, Russia and North Korea. Who will lead the international effort to undertake nation-building in the North? How is the North Korean military to be factored into a united Korea? In what ways will fissile material be secured? Shared answers to these questions currently do not exist. It will likely test the limits of East Asian cooperation on security issues.

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