

Securing the Periphery: China-North Korea Security Relations

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Abstract

The People's Republic of China (PRC)'s security relations with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea) have been highlighted in the recent period for their enduring relationship, their uninterrupted military pact from July 11, 1961, by-and-large similar positions on issues related to opposing Japan and the United States-led military alliances and troop deployment in the region. The October 9, 2006 announcement of testing nuclear devises by the DPRK adds a new dimension to the security relations between the PRC and the DPRK. This paper seeks firstly to outline the security perceptions, interests and objectives on the Korean Peninsula and argues that this region is crucial for its periphery in the coming years. Secondly, after discussing several Chinese initiatives, it ponders whether China has the effective leverage and will to persuade the DPRK in regard to the nuclear issue. Thirdly, China appears to have prioritized the Taiwan issue when considering the North Korean issue. Finally, such relations are deeply indicative of the primacy given by China to the military balance of power issues. In the same breathe as it suggests the desire to build a 'well-off society' by 2020, China also recognizes the equally deep need for a secure periphery.

Key Words: security perceptions, interests, objectives, initiatives, balance of power

Introduction

The PRC's security relations with North Korea are highlighted by their enduring relationship, their uninterrupted military pact from July 11, 1961, by-and-large similar positions on issues related to opposing Japan and the United States-led military alliances and troop deployment in the region. The geopolitical and strategic importance of each other, informed of balance of power equations, similar (and sometimes shared) political systems and beliefs and unfulfilled national reunification ambitions on their own terms, characterizes some of their common perspectives. However, significant differences exist between the two, specifically in security relations. First this paper outlines Chinese security perceptions, interests and objectives on the Korean Peninsula as reflected in the official, academic and media commentaries and argues that this region is crucial for its periphery in the coming years. Secondly, after discussing several direct and indirect Chinese initiatives, it ponders whether China has the effective leverage and will to persuade North Korea on the nuclear issue. Thirdly, China appears to have prioritized the Taiwan issue when considering the North Korean issue. Finally, such relations are indicative of the primacy given by China to military balance of power issues. Even as it suggests the vital importance of building a "well-off society" by 2020, China also sees itself as needing a secure periphery.

The Chinese official account of its relations with North Korea depicts it as "two friendly neighbors joined by common mountains and rivers" [*shanshui xianglian de youhao linju*].¹ Earlier accounts of China underline the importance of North Korean 'heroic deeds' in

¹ See Ding Yayi, 'Zhonghua renmin gongheguo yu Chaoxian guanxi' [PRC and North Korean relations], in Tang Jiaxuan (ed.), *Zhongguo Waijiao Cidian* [Dictionary of China's Diplomacy] (Beijing: World Knowledge Publications, 2000), pp. 567-569. Such friendly relations were cemented by the common struggle against Japanese imperialism.

boosting Chinese security.² Changes in the US military doctrine towards Asia in the late 1960s were cited as the reason for expanding relations between China and North Korea in 1971.³ Nevertheless, China reminds North Korea that it is a “near/close neighbor” [*jinlin*] with its attendant security considerations or sometimes refers to it in the pejorative sense as “poor little kid” [*qiong xiaozi*].⁴

Although the Chinese government has regularly stated that its relations with North Korea “continue to be solidified [and] developed” [*jixu gonggu fazhan*] in the political, economic and security areas, bilateral relations are not always amicable between the two.⁵ Even though both are socialist in their political program, it appears that tensions between the two have existed from the beginning.⁶ Several

² See Pei Jianzhang (ed.), *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo waijiao shi 1949-1956* [History of Foreign Policy of the PRC] (Beijing: World Knowledge Publications, 1994), p. 81.

³ For Mao Zedong’s statement that the real target of the US-Japan alliance is not North Korea but that it is aimed at the PRC, see Wang Taiping (ed.), *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo waijiao shi 1970-1978* [History of Foreign Policy of the PRC] (Beijing: World Knowledge Publications, 1994), p. 37.

⁴ See Ruan Cishan, “Han Chao hejie Zhongguo shi zuida yingjia,” June 20, 2000, <http://www.zaobao.com/special/korea/pages/korea200600c.html>.

⁵ Although several Chinese refer to their contributions in the Korean War efforts, important differences persisted even on this issue. See Shen Zhihua, “Zhong Chao guanxi” [China-North Korea relations], June 28, 2005, <http://www.coldwarchina.com/zgyj/zcgx/index.html>. See also Taeho Kim, “Strategic Relations Between Beijing and Pyongyang: Growing Strains Amid Lingering Ties,” in James R. Lilley and David Shambaugh (eds.), *China’s Military Faces the Future* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1999), pp. 306-309. You Ji, “China and North Korea: A Fragile Relationship of Strategic Convenience,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 10, No. 28 (August 2001), pp. 389-390.

⁶ Some trace the political difference between China and North Korea to the existence of two factions among Koreans. Two factions were identified among these “northern” Koreans: the so-called Chinese communist-backed “Yanan” faction and the Soviet Union-backed “Kapsan” faction [belonging to Kim Il Sung who ruled over North Korea from 1950s till his death in 1994]. These different factions may explain partly to the relative influence of the Chinese and Soviet policies on the North Korean leadership, though Soviet forces withdrew in 1948 and the Chinese forces in 1958 (and completely by 1994). See Bruce Cummings, *The Origins of the Korean War 2 Vols.* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); William Stueck, *The Korean War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University

factors may have contributed to these tensions including differences in political praxis,⁷ national interests,⁸ suspicion of each other being closer to the US⁹ and historical differences that have re-emerged recently.¹⁰

At the highest levels, leaders of both the countries have visited each other at relatively regular intervals. The Cold War period witnessed about 37 visits at the highest political levels. Of these, visits made during the earlier period were far less compared to the 1980s. Five visits were made in the 1950s with the North Korean leader Kim

Press, 1995); and Allen S. Whiting, *China Crosses the Yalu* (New York: Macmillan, 1960).

⁷For instance, the North Korean leadership reportedly critiqued the Chinese socialist experiments of Great Leap Forward, Peoples Communes, Cultural Revolution during Mao's times and dismissed China's economic reform and opening up of the recent decades as inimical to the socialist project. See Bernard Schaefer, "North Korean 'Adventurism' and China's Long Shadow, 1966-1972," *Working Paper No. 44*, Cold War International History Project (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, October 2004); Andrew Scobell, "China and North Korea: From Comrades-in-Arms to Allies at Arm's Length," March 2004, <http://www.carlisle.army.mil/ssi/>. However, in the recent visits to Shanghai and other places, Kim Jong Il reportedly praised Chinese reforms.

⁸Differences on perceptions related to more than 1,300km land and maritime borders between the two countries, methods to follow on the Korean reunification issue, etc., could be mentioned here. See Scobell, *Ibid*.

⁹Interestingly, Ren Donglai, writing from Nanjing, suggested that the US Secretary of State Madeline Albright's visit to North Korea and her reception by Kim Jong Il smacks of *realpolitik* specifically in the backdrop of the Chinese losses of thousands of its soldiers in the Korean War. Ren argued that despite the downslide in the Sino-US relations in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square Incident in 1989, the US still wanted China to be the mediator between the US and North Korea. See "Mei Chao hejie dui Zhongguo de yingxiang" [US-North Korea compromise and its impact on China], October 25, 2000, <http://www.zaobao.com/special/korea/pages/korea251000d.html>.

¹⁰For instance, the issue of Koguryo kingdom which was established in 43 B.C. to sixth century A.D. became a major contention between China and the Koreans, with the opposition to Chinese claims coming mainly from South Korea, although North Korea has also expressed indignation. The Chinese contention that the kingdom was established by Chinese ethnic minorities and that it is a local government in that period has led to protests on the Korean Peninsula. See Hyoung-Sik Shin, "History of Koguryo," <http://www.dprk-cn.com/en/history/koguryo/>.

Il Sung making four of the five visits. This contrasts with the relatively fewer number of visits during the turbulent 1960s - just two visits on either side - although the number of agreements signed between the two during this period was high. In the 1970s, six visits were made with a majority of them from China. During the 1980s, about 18 visits were recorded - with almost equal emphasis on both sides. However, surprisingly, just one "state visit" was made in this period (by Kim Il Sung in 1982). Interestingly, these contacts indicated 11 "friendly visits" (6 from China); 20 "official visits" (with official friendly visits numbering 11 - a majority of them by the Chinese leaders); five 'unofficial visits' were made (with North Korean leaders making three such visits).¹¹ The disintegration of the Soviet Union - the main aid-giver to North Korea - has ushered in several changes in the bilateral relations between the PRC and the DPRK.¹²

The post-Cold War period has established new security dynamics for both the PRC and North Korea.¹³ From the PRC's perspective, as its 14th, 15th and 16th Communist Party Congresses emphasized, economic development, reform and opening up to the outside world are to be the watchwords with its obvious stress on stability in the region. Economic globalization, global military transformation and the emergence of non-traditional security issues

¹¹ See for the compilation of visits in Ding, op.cit., p. 568.

¹² Ao Guang argued that disintegration of the USSR led to the collapse of the Soviet nuclear umbrella over North Korea and this factor was the main reason behind the current North Korean nuclear program. For the Chinese part, given the gradual increase in the US strategic and conventional superiority in the region, Ao argued that in its own national security considerations, China needs to "resume" [*hui fu*] military balance on the Korean Peninsula. See Ao Guang, "Chao he weiji dui Zhongguo anquan liyi de yingxiang: Shizhi shi junshi pingheng bei pouhui" [North Korean nuclear crisis and its impact on China's security interests: Essence is destruction of the military balance], *Jianquan Zhishi* [Naval & Merchant Ships], No. 9 (August 2003).

¹³ See Taeho Kim, "China's Post-Cold War Relations with the Korean Peninsula: A Testing Ground for its Power and Prosperity," in K. Santhanam and Srikanth Kondapalli (eds.), *Asian Security and China 2000-2010* (New Delhi: Shipra Publications, 2004), pp. 205-215.

have brought in new considerations in the Chinese security calculus as compared to its policies prior to the reform period. Yet certain considerations remained constant including its minimalist security considerations on keeping the United States forces at bay and restricting Taiwan's influence in the region.

In the context of the Korean Peninsula, the PRC now is faced with several challenges and prospects. The PRC's normalization of relations with South Korea – after both Koreas' were made United Nations members in 1991 - offered China with the much needed economic and technological resources for its modernization. On the North Korean front, China faced both challenges and prospects. Reports about economic problems in North Korea coupled with the prospects of an unwelcome influx of refugees¹⁴ and its quest for acquiring weapons of mass destruction posed serious security challenges to the PRC. The reported North Korean occupation of several islands at the Yalu and Tumen Rivers by 1993 was viewed with concern.¹⁵ This situation resulted in the emergence of both military security issues along with non-traditional security issues which were inclusive of human, economic, environmental and energy dimensions.¹⁶ On the other hand, China is acutely aware that in the aftermath of the Korean War of 1951-1953, it has lost Taiwan almost forever due to US military deployments in the Taiwan Straits.

¹⁴ There are several estimates on the influx of the North Korean refugees into China and other countries. While Japan estimates possible influx of nearly two million refugees in the event of a North Korean regime collapse, the Korean Buddhist group Good Friends estimate such numbers in China around 140,000 to 300,000 in the northeast of China alone. In addition, late 1990s and in the last six years, several reports indicated to such refugees attempting to take asylum in several embassies in Beijing and other places. See http://www.csis.org/pacfor/cc/993Qchina_skorea.html.

¹⁵ See Joseph Yu-shek Cheng, "China and the Korean Situation: The Challenge of Pyongyang's Brinkmanship," *East Asia* (Winter 2003).

¹⁶ On the other hand, the spread of SARS incidences in China during 2003 made both Koreas to make efforts to block entrée points. Thus North Korea and South Korea both took measures to scuttle flights from China during this period.

Extracting concessions from the US on the Taiwan issue by being the principal mediator between the US and North Korea offers potential leverage in regards to the hoped for Chinese reunification with Taiwan.

Strangely, as compared to the Cold War period, the 1990s were to be a period of few high-level political visits between the two, although the official yearbooks mention that both leaders are in regular touch. After the 1992 trip, it took nearly nine years for the Chinese President to visit Pyongyang, while the North Korean leader Kim Jong Il made three non-official visits to China in May 2000 (the first in 17 years), January 2001 and April 2004.¹⁷ In addition, it was reported that Kim made a secret visit to China in January 2006. The Chinese President Hu Jintao visited North Korea in October 2005. Besides these contacts, the Chinese foreign minister visited the DPRK in October 1999 and March 2004.¹⁸ During Chinese President Jiang Zemin's visit in 2001, he suggested to Kim Jong Il that both should "inherit traditional [ties], look towards the future, develop a harmonious friendship, [and] strengthen cooperation" [*jicheng chuantong, mianxiang weilai, mulin youhao, jiaqiang hezuo*] between the two countries.¹⁹ Jiang reportedly told Kim Jong Il that:

China is a close neighbor of the Korean Peninsula. The basic principle in dealing with Korean Peninsular affairs for China is to devote itself to keep the peace and stability on the peninsula. China hopes the North and South will improve their relations and welcomes the two leaders' meeting and supports peaceful unification based on their own effort.²⁰

¹⁷ See Piao Jianyi, "Xinshiqi Zhong Chao guanxi xin fazhan" [New developments in the China-North Korean relations during the New Century], November 3, 2005, <http://www.iapscass.cn/xueshuwz/showcontent.asp?id=658>. Yang Shangkun visited in 1992 followed by Jiang Zemin in September 2001.

¹⁸ This information is based on the Chinese Foreign Ministry Policy Planning Department Ed *Zhongguo Waijiao* [China's Foreign Affairs] (various yearbooks) (Beijing: World Affairs Press, various years).

¹⁹ See Piao, op.cit.

²⁰ Jiang cited in Zhang Yunling, "Toward peace on the Korean Peninsula: What

In the wake of the October 2005 visit of President Hu Jintao to Pyongyang, Piao Jianyi argued that four new developments characterized the bilateral relations in this new period. Firstly, for mutual benefit, they should continue the “close high-level visits, strengthen mutual communications, expand the spheres of exchanges, enrich cooperative intensions, carry forward cooperation in the economy and commerce, accelerate common development, actively coordinate cooperation, and preserve common interests” [*miqie gaoceng wanglai, jiaqiang xianghu goutong, tuozhan jiaoliu lingyu, fengfu hezuo neihan, tuijin jingmao hezuo, cujin gongtong fazhan, jiji xietiao peihe, weihu gongtong liyi*]. Secondly, they should seek to, by peaceful diplomatic talks, under the Six-Party Talks framework, resolve the Korean nuclear problem, thirdly, strengthen cooperation in the economic and commercial sectors. Finally, both need to appraise each other of the developments unfolding in the region.²¹

Security Issues

Historical and contemporary events, balances of military power and economic considerations lay at the roots of Chinese security perceptions about the Korean Peninsula in general and North Korea in particular. Major features that recur in the Chinese literature about its interests on the Korean Peninsula allude strongly to its historical role, with most authors tracing Chinese efforts to keep away other foreign influences such as during the Qing Dynasty and the Korean War of 1951-53. In other words, China treats this region as a ‘buffer’ zone. Its

should we do?” in the Korea Economic Institute (ed.), *Cooperation and Reform on the Korean Peninsula* (Washington, DC: 2002), <http://www.keia.org>.

²¹ See Piao, op.cit.

earlier efforts were to keep Japan and US forces from coming closer to its vicinity.²² It has opposed the US military alliances and deployments in South Korea and Japan. In addition, currently, it is opposed to the planned deployment of a ballistic missile defense system in East Asia. The military pact of July 1961 can be clearly explained in terms of such efforts. In addition, Chinese leaders have emphasized in the recent period that they prefer stability in the region that is conducive for its economic development. With this approach, China intends to enhance its “comprehensive national power.”

North Korea is generally depicted in Chinese writings as a “security door” [*anquan menhu*] for China. According to Ao Guang, since the Tang Dynasty through to the Qing Dynasty, China has been concerned about the security events on the Korean Peninsula. Late 19th century Japanese intrusions through this region and the occupation of Korea between 1910 and 1945 are frequently cited to indicate that from the security point of view China has every reason to be concerned. This was cited as one of the main considerations behind the Chinese active involvement with about 850,000 “volunteers” in the Korean War of 1951-53 and the subsequent events which followed.²³ The last Chinese troops were only to withdraw from North Korea in 1994.²⁴

Overall, the recent Chinese official statements indicate China’s desire for peace [*heping*] and stability [*wending*] on the Korean

²²For a recent perspective see Niklas Swanstrom and Mikael Weissmann, “The Chinese Impact on the DPRK Negotiations,” *Peace Review*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (July 2004).

²³The main objective of the Chinese People’s Volunteers’ five campaign efforts during the Korean War is to protect Chinese security interests. See Han Xianchu and Meng Zhaohui, “Kangmei yuanchao zhanzheng” [War to resist US Aggression and aid Korea] in *Zhongguo Dabaike Quanshu: Junshi* [Chinese Encyclopedia: Military Affairs], 2 Vols. (Beijing: Chinese Encyclopedia Publications, 1989), Vol. 1, pp. 629-631.

²⁴See Ao, op.cit.

Peninsula, guaranteeing North Korean security but also clearly seek to avoid any chaotic transition period in its periphery²⁵; supports a nuclear-free zone in the region while opposing any plans for regime change in the DPRK. China has stated that the choice of reunification as well as changes, if any, to the internal political system have to be made by the Koreans themselves without any *outside* [read American] influence.²⁶ However, the ‘stakeholder’ image promoted by the US recently for China and the latter’s desire to paint itself as a ‘responsible’ power puts pressure on China’s policy towards North Korea and its strategic programs. China has encouraged the diplomatic normalization of North Korean relations with the western countries, specifically with the US, so that at the minimum the current *status quo* on the Korean Peninsula prevails.²⁷

Ren Jingjing, a professor at the international relations institute of the People’s University, has termed the North Korean nuclear issues as the ‘most complicated, most sensitive, [and] most intractable’ of all the security issues of the region.²⁸ For Men Honghua, the East Asian

²⁵ See Piao, *op.cit.*

²⁶ See Yi Xiaoxiong, “A Neutralized Korea? The North-South rapprochement and China’s Korean Policy,” *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (Winter 2000), pp. 71-118; Yuan Jing-dong, “China and the North Korean Nuclear Crisis,” <http://cns.miis.edu/research/korea/chidprk.htm>. This is also reflected in the Chinese formula of ‘*zizhu heping tongyi*’ [independent (and) peaceful reunification] of the Korean Peninsula. See Piao, *op.cit.*, interestingly, Qing Song, from Hebei Province, argued that South Korean formulas for reunification with North Korea may alleviate Chinese financial and security burdens in supporting North Korea, although US troops presence and mixed responses within Taiwan on reunification with China may not be conducive to the Chinese security interests. See “Zhongguo leguan HanChao tongyi” [China optimistic about Korean unification], June 21, 2000, http://www.zaobao.com/special/korea/pages/korea_210600d.html.

²⁷ See Choon Heum Choi, “China’s policy toward East Asia and North Korea: Continuity and change,” (Seoul: KINU, 2001), <http://www.kinu.or.kr/eng/content/view.asp?page=7&startpage=1&cno=24>.

²⁸ Ren Jingjing, “Dongya duobian anquan jizhi: Zhongguo de kunnan yu xuanze” [East Asian multilateral security mechanism: China’s problems and choices], *Jinri Shijie* [World Today], No. 10 (2005). Ren suggested that two possibilities may emerge from the Six-Party Talks: A new organization or a new forum from the region

region is crucial for Chinese security as one of the most dynamic regions in the world. Hence, China needs to carefully articulate its position in the coming years with the US as a crucial factor in the region.²⁹

According to Chen Ke, a Beijing-based political writer, the central dilemma of the Chinese leadership pertains to the Taiwan issue, refugee problems and the economic slowdown in the event of Chinese participation in a second Korean war if the US unleashes preemptive strikes. For him, the Korean situation has forced China into a “chicken rib” [*jile*] by being forced to recognize the Korean identity and request assistance from the US to negotiate with the former on the one hand, while making efforts to dissuade the US from waging a war on North Korea.³⁰

Xia Yi has argued that China may not interfere if the US declares war on North Korea over the latter’s nuclear program and that China would abide by the UN Security Council sanctions if these were imposed. In Xia’s opinion, China would not repeat the 1950s-kind of support to North Korea and would be satisfied if the Taiwan issue is not affected by these events.³¹

The main security objectives of China vis-à-vis the Korean Peninsula are to retain its ability to influence the security environment in the region and counter “extra-regional” or even regional powers. It

that could solve the current imbroglio. Ren also suggested that China should enhance its capabilities to counter border ‘outbursts’ [*tufa*] on its northeast borders.

²⁹ See Men Honghua, “Jujiao dongya: ZhongMei de chongtu yu hezu” [Focus (on) East Asia: Sino-US conflict and cooperation], *Mao Zedong Deng Xiaoping Lilun Yanjiu* [Mao Zedong Deng Xiaoping Theory Research], No. 6, 2005.

³⁰ Chen Ke, “Chaoxian de ‘he ezha’ he Zhongguo de liangnan” [Korean ‘nuclear blackmail’ and China’s dilemma], <http://www.zaobao.com/special/korea/pages/korea260303.html>.

³¹ Xia Yi, “Chaohe weiji yu Zhongguo zhengfu lichang” [Korean nuclear crisis and Chinese government’s standpoint], February 21, 2003, <http://www.zaobao.com/special/china/general/letter210203.html>. However, he warned that Japan may take advantage of the North Korean nuclear issue.

wants to evolve measures to reunify the two Koreas preferably under its enduring influence. Additionally, China intends to keep Taiwan out of the Peninsula and see to it that the 1950s experience is not repeated. Keeping this in mind, it has opposed any South Korean initiative in improving relations with Taiwan. Equally, China reportedly opposed North Korea in utilizing the “Taiwan card.” When, in June 2002 Taiwanese big business firm Formosa Plastics chief Wang Yung-ching visited North Korea, China was concerned. Overall, with the recent ‘good neighborliness-good partnerships’ policy, China wishes to stabilize the region for her own economic development.

Security Initiatives

In order to pursue her security interests and objectives on the Korean Peninsula, China has initiated several measures in the recent period on issues related to the North Korean nuclear program, reunification efforts, amongst other issues. China was at the forefront in the trilateral and multilateral talks between North Korea, the US and others. It has also adopted quasi-military postures in strengthening its military prowess to compel the North Korean leadership to resume the talks. To strengthen North Korean integration with the outside world, China has helped form multilateral cooperative efforts on the Tumen River Delta region between Russia, North Korea, Japan and China. On the other hand, between June 1-25, 2000, China closed its border with North Korea in anticipation of possible challenges at the inter-Korean summit meeting in Pyongyang on June 13-15, 2000 between Kim Jong Il and Kim Dae Jung. The 2003 Chinese deployments on her borders with North Korea, stopping of energy exports for a brief period and the August 2005 joint exercises with Russia (with its undeclared objective of developing abilities to deal with potential regime change in North Korea),³² are some of the most obvious and proactive Chinese security initiatives.

The North Korean nuclear developments have attracted considerable attention from the Chinese. Different views were expressed on this subject and varied approaches were considered to resolve this issue.³³ Officially, China prefers a diplomatic initiative in resolving the North Korean nuclear issue and has indicated (as also in the cases of Iran and Iraq) opposition to regime change or “arbitrary sanctions” or intrusive inspections by the IAEA or other agencies (such as UNSCOM in Iraq).³⁴ Possibly, with diplomatic efforts, less damage will be done to North Korea, and as a result, North Korea may acquire enough time to be persuaded to give up the nuclear option (or, on the contrary, North Korea may get more time to develop its nuclear capabilities). But more importantly, as a veto holding power in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), China would still be at the center of diplomatic activity on the peninsula.³⁵

³² See Srikanth Kondapalli, “Sino-Russian Joint Exercises: Implications to Security Aspects,” *Chinese Military Update* of RUSI Journal (London), Vol. 3, No. 1, 2006.

³³ Two different views are prevalent on this theme. Niklas Swanstrom and Mikael Weissmann have suggested that China indeed has higher influence on North Korea than compared to any other country. See “Can China Unite the Gordian Knot in North Korea?” *Korean Journal of International Affairs*, No. 1 (2004). However, Andrew Scobell has argued that while China made efforts to rope in Pyongyang under the multilateral talks, it has not been able to effectively control North Korean ambitions in acquiring nuclear weapons. See Scobell, *op.cit.*

³⁴ Samuel S. Kim viewed Chinese emphasis on mediation as a part of its conflict management approach. See “China’s Conflict-Management Approach to the Nuclear Standoff on the Korean Peninsula,” a paper presented at Stockholm, December 16-17, 2005. For Howard M. Krawitz, this is reflective of the general Chinese preference for a multilateral approach. See “Resolving Korea’s Nuclear Crisis: Tough choices for China,” *Strategic Forum* (NDU), No. 201 (August 2003).

³⁵ To mention a few, such diplomatic efforts are seen in the October 2000 meeting between Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji and South Korean President on cooperation on Four-Party Talks; March 2003 discussion between Chinese Ambassador to Seoul and South Korean Prime Minister; July 2003 meeting in Pyongyang and November 2003 meeting of Dai Bingguo in Seoul; August 2003 meeting of Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing in Seoul; August 2003 meeting of General Xu Caihou in Pyongyang; September 2003 meeting of North Korean National Security Advisor in Beijing; April 2003 South Korean Foreign Minister’s meeting

China is aware of the potential for North Korean nuclear fallout on the East Asian region as a whole with the potential cascading effect on South Korea and Japan and probably even on Taiwan's nuclear program. Indeed, soon after North Korea indicated in October 2002 that it has intentions to go ahead with a nuclear program despite the 1994 Agreed Framework, China has expressed concerns about the potential impact of North Korean nuclear weapons on Chinese security. Furthermore, the January 10, 2003 announcement of the North Korean government withdrawing from Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty has added fuel to the fire. In this context, Wu Junfei argued that although the impact of Japan acquiring nuclear capabilities, citing the North Korean programs, will only impact upon Chinese security indirectly, nevertheless, the instability factor for China could increase in the future.³⁶ Another writer has argued that China, in its own interests, should “firmly urge the DPRK to steer well clear of nuclear weapons” and carry out a comprehensive “crisis management” effort to solve the issue. The unidentified writer has argued thus:

... what China needs to be wary of or worried about in its neighborhood for a long time to come not only includes the unparalleled nuclear strength that the United States has right now, but also includes the real and potential nuclear arsenals of the “minor nuclear powers” and potential nuclear states, the latter of which are probably more dangerous to China in some respects.³⁷

in Beijing; February 2004 meeting in Seoul; October 2003 meeting between Wu Bangguo and Kim Jong Il; April 2004 meeting between Chinese leaders and Kim Jong Il in Beijing; May 2004 1st round of working-level meeting on Six-Party Talks and June 2004 2nd round meeting in Beijing and February 2006 efforts of Vice Minister Wu Dawei in Pyongyang.

³⁶ Wu Junfei, “Chaohe weiji yu Zhongguo anquan” [North Korean nuclear crisis and China's security], *Zaobao*, April 16, 2003, <http://www.zaobao.com/special/korea/pages/korea160403a.html>.

³⁷ “DPRK Nuclear Crisis and China's Strategic Security,” *21 Shiji Huanqiu Baodao* [21st Century Worldwide Reports] reprinted in *Renmin Wang*, January 23, 2003 in US Department of Commerce, Foreign Broadcast Information Service Daily

The writer further cautioned specifically with the following two possible scenarios:

- (1) To contemplate the worst-case scenario, it is not impossible that China may be confronted with nuclear blackmail over some issue one day and when this happens, China may find itself stuck between a rock and a hard place strategically or in its foreign policy; and
- (2) If the DPRK comes into possession of a sizable nuclear arsenal, it may be inevitable that Japan will be provoked into embarking on a path of nuclearization or it will certainly give the right-wingers in Japan a crucial justification with which they can persuade the majority of the Japanese public to consent to the nuclearization of Japan. ³⁸

While agreeing that the North Korean government “is the originator of the nuclear crisis, who should be held responsible for the potential devastating impact on security in East Asia” and seeing this behavior as fitting into the North Korean strategy of “seeking negotiations by provoking a crisis,” Shi Yinhong, Director of People’s University of China’s Center for American Studies, argued that the North Korean actions predate the “axis of evil” speech of President Bush and the September 11 events. He said two developments in North Korean “international behavior” in the recent period are of particular relevance. These are outlined as follows:

- (1) the DPRK secretly violates international agreements and resume its nuclear development; and
- (2) the DPRK withdraws from the international mechanism for nuclear non-proliferation and insists on continuing its nuclear development scheme.

Reports (hereafter *FBIS-CHI*) *FBIS-CHI-2003-0207*, February 10, 2003.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

From China's security point of view, these developments pose a 'greater danger' than even the US nuclear forces in the region. This is because, from the Chinese perspective, the "first danger comes from the DPRK's nuclear weapons under development and the nuclear arsenals in South Asia. The second is probably biochemical weapons that can be used directly or indirectly by individual countries (through terrorist forces)." In weighing options for resolving this crisis, Shi argued that the "right tool" for China lay in insisting on a dialogue and keeping open diplomatic channels; otherwise the US will not be able to "have fundamental tranquility." Shi was prepared to consider referring the North Korean nuclear issue to the UNSC and was even prepared to consider the imposition of economic sanctions.³⁹

Zhang Yunling, Head of the Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, has argued that the intransigent responses of both the US and North Korea are to be blamed for the impasse on the Korean Peninsula. He suggested that China's interests in the region emphasize peace and stability, although for long-term peace it is necessary to address "both the Cold War mentality and the Cold War policy." He acknowledged, however, that the North Korean nuclear program could receive 'unwelcome responses from others.'⁴⁰ If the North Korean regime succeeds in developing nuclear weapons, the blame, according to Huang Binhua, should rest with the US which has reneged on the promised aid package and construction of two light water reactors. The North Korean leadership, according to Huang, finds this - in addition to the US inability to fight in two theatres and the "axis of evil" speech - as a "diplomatic chip" to further its nuclear program.⁴¹ However, Zhang Lintao has suggested that the US respects

³⁹ Shi Yinong, "How to Understand and Deal With the DPRK Nuclear Crisis," *Ta Kung Pao*, January 15, 2003, p. A11 in *FBIS-CHI-2003-0115*, January 16, 2003.

⁴⁰ Zhang Yunling, *op.cit.* He suggested that Chinese assistance to North Korea is of "greatest" significance.

⁴¹ Huang Binhua, "Pingyang weihe chengren hewu jihua?" [Why will Pyongyang

the role of China in resolving the North Korean nuclear issue. He argued that it is in China's interests to influence and persuade North Korea into giving up this option for the security of the Korean Peninsula.⁴² For Sun Chuanwei, since the US is busy in Iraq operations, it is comfortable with the idea of utilizing China to help deal with the North Korean issue due to its influence over the North Korean regime. However, he has argued that underneath the bonhomie between the two, there exists a friction in the China-North Korean relationship.⁴³

China's efforts are to mainly keep the North Korea situation under its control and oppose any outside intervention, including that of the UNSC. In March 2003, for instance, the Chinese Ambassador to the UN opposed any UNSC role in resolving the nuclear standoff between North Korea and the US. Earlier, the Chinese envoy to the UN, Zhang Yan, said on January 6, 2003 (coinciding with the tripartite talks between US, South Korea and Japan) that China will support efforts at a peaceful settlement of the dispute and that it stands for a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula.⁴⁴ On January 10, 2003, in a telephone conversation, Jiang Zemin told President Bush that "China does not approve of the DPRK's withdrawal from the 'Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons'."⁴⁵ Subsequently, several

admit its nuclear program?], October 24, 2002, <http://www.zaobao.com/special/korea/pages/korea241002a.html>.

⁴² Zhang Lintao, "Chaoxian hewu yingxiang Zhong Mei guanxi" [Impact of North Korean nuclear weapons on Sino-US relations], October 23, 2002, <http://www.zaobao.com/special/korea/pages/korea231002.html>.

⁴³ Sun Chuanwei, "Buru waijie xianglang ban he xie: Zhong Chao guanxi sui miqie dan you moca" [Frictions in China and North Korean relations despite outside world's depiction of a harmonious relation], October 28, 2002, <http://www.zaobao.com/special/korea/pages/korea281002.html>.

⁴⁴ See Wang Li, Zhao Jiamin, Ren Yujun, Xu Baokang and Lu Yansong, "Conversation Over Hot Topic of Favorable Turn in DPRK's Nuclear Issue," *People's Daily*, January 10, 2003 in *FBIS-CHI-2003-0110*, January 17, 2003.

⁴⁵ "DPRK Nuclear Crisis and China's Strategic Security," op.cit.

delegations visited Pyongyang to avert any conflict. These included delegations from Australia, the UN, South Korea, Russia and Indonesia. The US reportedly proposed that it is prepared to talk to the North Koreans under the 5+5 formula of five permanent members of the UN and the DPRK, South Korea, Japan, European Union and Australia.⁴⁶ Seeing that such mediatory efforts are leading nowhere or even slipping out of its hands, China appeared to have suggested instituting direct talks, specifically in the light of the IAEA's planned move to refer the issue to the UNSC. On February 12, for instance, the IAEA declared that North Korea "has violated" its commitments. Wang Li suggested that although multinational mediation efforts to resolve the dispute are positive, there should be more emphasis on talks between the concerned parties.⁴⁷ However, in a show of solidarity with the North Korean government, *People's Daily*, in its review of developments in North Korea in 2002, stated that North Korea has "nourished their fighting spirit of the 1950s." After recounting the economic progress made by North Korea, *People's Daily* further said:

With their spirit of proud fighting and arduous struggle, they are writing a new song of loyalty for this century, a song of enterprise. The facts will show that the people of the DPRK in the not-so-distant-future will attain Kim Chong-il's [Kim Jong Il] larger goal of turning the country into a strong socialist nation.⁴⁸

More relevant is its article on defense. *People's Daily* praised the North Korean armed forces for making 'fresh headway' under Kim

⁴⁶ Wang Li, "Korean Nuclear Question: Endless Mediation But No Change in Situation," *People's Daily*, February 8, 2003 in *FBIS-CHI-2003-0208*, February 10, 2003.

⁴⁷ See Wang Li, "Mediation is Not as Good as Face-to-Face Talks," *People's Daily*, February 19, 2003 in *FBIS-CHI-2003-0219*, February 24, 2003.

⁴⁸ Zhao Jiaming, "Victoriously Marching Toward the New Year," *People's Daily*, February 16, 2003 in *FBIS-CHI-2003-0217*, March 28, 2003.

Jong Il and his ‘military work as the center’ [as compared to Deng Xiaoping’s policy of “economics at the center”].⁴⁹

Eventually, after a North Korean announcement on April 12, China arranged for a tripartite meeting on April 23-25, 2003 between the North Korean and US delegates.⁵⁰ Evidently, South Korea and Japan were excluded from these talks. It was also reported that China desired that there should be direct talks between the US and North Korea in resolving the nuclear issues and was reluctant for the multilateral discussion of these issues.⁵¹ It appeared from the above that both North Korea and China opposed the multilateral talks to be expanded to include Russia and Japan as these countries have ‘no direct relation’ to issues on the Korean Peninsula.⁵² Later, Vice Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Seoul and Tokyo for consultations on the nuclear issue. On May 9, 2003, US Secretary of State Powell called Li Zhaoxing to emphasize the need for discussions on the issue.⁵³ The Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman said that the just concluded US-South Korean Presidents meeting and the “zero tolerance” [of nuclear weapons] joint statement in Washington are positive and that what is essential ‘now is to maintain momentum of dialogue’ on the North Korean nuclear issue.⁵⁴ She also suggested that Japan and South Korea should play a “vigorous” role in the peaceful

⁴⁹ Zhao Jiaming, “Korean People’s Army Scores Fresh Success,” *People’s Daily*, April 9, 2003 in *FBIS-CHI-2003-0409*, April 11, 2003.

⁵⁰ Ren Yujun, “Tripartite Talks on DPRK Nuclear Issue Attract Attention,” *People’s Daily*, April 23, 2003 in *FBIS-CHI-2003-0423*, April 24, 2003; Wang Li, “Talks on DPRK Nuclear Issue Open in Beijing,” *People’s Daily*, April 24, 2003 in *FBIS-CHI-2003-0425*, April 28, 2003.

⁵¹ Chen Ke, op.cit.

⁵² See “Chao Zhong fandui Ri E canjia hewu tanhui” [North Korea and China oppose the participation of Japan and Russia in the nuclear talks], *Hanguo xianqu bao*, April 16, 2003, <http://www.zaobao.com/special/korea/pages/korea160403.html>.

⁵³ “PRC FM Spokesman: Beijing Talks ‘Good Start’ For Resolving DPRK Nuclear Issue,” *Xinhua*, May 13, 2003 in *FBIS-CHI-2003-0513*, May 14, 2003.

⁵⁴ “PRC FM Spokesman: US-ROK Joint Statement Shows Consensus for Peace on DPRK Issue,” *Xinhua*, May 15, 2003 in *FBIS-CHI-2003-0515*, May 16, 2003.

resolution of the issue.⁵⁵ Subsequently, the joint statement issued by the Chinese and Russian Presidents in Moscow on May 27, 2003 declared that both the countries wished to see peace and stability in the East Asian region by guaranteeing North Korean security and economic development and that the “two parties do not approve of a solution that would exert pressure or use military force.”⁵⁶

One of the major achievements of China is in hosting the Six-Party Talks on the North Korean nuclear issue. The first Six-Party Talks commenced in Beijing on August 27-29, 2003. Reportedly, North Korea proposed three suggestions: North Korea will abandon nuclear weapons in lieu of oil supplies; in lieu of normalization of diplomatic relations with the US and Japan, North Korea will resolve the missiles issue; and the US should complete two light water nuclear reactors.⁵⁷ Three major outcomes of the first Six-Party Talks were noted by Gu Ping. These include keeping the Korean Peninsula nuclear free as the goal; an agreement for adopting a parallel and coordinated approach in resolving the crisis (whether to first resolve North Korean security concerns or abandon the nuclear program) and continuing the talks.⁵⁸ Subsequently, four more rounds of talks were held on February 25-28, 2004, June 23-26, 2004, July 27, 2005 and November 9-11, 2005. However, on October 4, 2004, Beijing confirmed that North Korea possessed a uranium enrichment program. On February 10, 2005, the DPRK announced indefinite suspension of its participation in the Six-Party Talks, although it

⁵⁵“PRC FM Spokesman Welcomes US-ROK Summit, Urges ‘Vigorous Role’ by Japan, ROK,” *AFP*, May 15, 2003 in *FBIS-CHI-2003-0515*, May 16, 2003.

⁵⁶Sino-Russian joint statement cited at “DPRK Radio Cites PRC, Russian Opposition to Military Response to DPRK,” *Central Broadcasting Station* (Pyongyang), May 29, 2003 in *FBIS-EAS-2003-0529*, June 2, 2003.

⁵⁷Ren Yujun, “Inside Story of the Beijing Six-Party Talks on the DPRK Nuclear Issue,” *People’s Daily*, August 29, 2003 in *FBIS-CHI-2003-0829*, September 2, 2003.

⁵⁸See Gu Ping, “Six-Party Talks Mark An Important Step Forward,” *People’s Daily*, August 30, 2003, *FBIS-CHI-2003-0830*, September 2, 2003.

joined the talks in the fifth round.⁵⁹ Currently, the talks remain suspended and with the North Korean announcement of testing nuclear weapons on October 9, 2006, the whole exercise of multilateral talks faces problems in terms of legitimacy. More importantly, the tests undermine the Chinese position that it has credible leverage in persuading North Korea to give up the nuclear option. With the July 2006 testing of long-range missiles by North Korea, China's position in dissuading the former is being questioned.

Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, China took certain proactive measures - some of which were positive for North Korea while others are geared to compel the North Korean leadership to restart diplomatic talks. The Chinese foreign ministry and other sources have indicated that there have been regular military exchanges with the North Korean counterparts in the last five decades. However, it is not clear whether this included substantial cooperation in conventional and strategic weapons programs. Although it was reported that China helped North Korea in its missile program - specifically with its aborted DF-60 missile technologies in the 1960s - most of the North Korean strategic weapons know-how and components were reportedly acquired from the then Soviet Union, including the Yongbyon nuclear facilities and scud-type missile technologies. Nevertheless, it was reported that about 107 metric tons of sodium cyanide, useful in the manufacture of nerve gas, were exported from China to North Korea in 2003.⁶⁰

On the other hand, against the backdrop of the March 2003 visit of the *USS Carl Vinson* aircraft carrier battle group in the East Asian seas as a show of strength against the North Korean nuclear program, the Chinese military and other concerned organizations started taking

⁵⁹ See Scott Snyder, Ralph A. Cossa and Brad Glosserman, "The Six-Party Talks: Developing a Roadmap for Future Progress," *Pacific Forum CSIS* (Honolulu, Hawaii), Vol. 5, No. 8, August 2005 and "New Round of Six-Party Talks to Lay Groundwork for Implementing Joint Statement," *People's Daily*, November 8, 2005.

⁶⁰ A South Korean report cited at http://www.csis.org/pacfor/cc/0403Qchina_skorea.html.

over patrolling duties on the North Korean border. Some estimate the figure to be around 150,000 troops, although this figure appears to be an exaggeration given the total strength of the Shenyang Military Region.⁶¹ The PRC has upgraded its borders with North Korea by deploying troops and replacing the border guards, ostensibly to check against North Korean refugees.⁶² It was also reported that the Chinese government has ordered the blocking of energy supplies to energy-starved North Korea to bring the latter to the negotiating table. In addition, the January 2003 military maneuvers in northern Hebei province and other places with land, sea and air forces were conducted in the context of the Korean Peninsula tensions. In the same month Shenyang Military Region troops took part in 7-day exercises in rapid deployments, preparations for air attacks and testing survival abilities. The military region also conducted joint operations bordering North Korea.

Another crucial issue is China's response to the efforts aimed at Korean reunification. Although officially China has welcomed the inter-Korean efforts at reunification, it has also expressed concerns over the issue of the US troop presence in the region. However, while such opposition to the US troops in the region was acute during the Cold War period, it appears to have mellowed gradually with the imperatives of peace and stability becoming more pronounced in Chinese security policy. One writer suggested that in the 1990s, China viewed the US-led alliance system in South Korea as conducive to the *status quo* in the region.⁶³ An anonymous Chinese writer has

⁶¹ See *China Reform Monitor*, No. 512, September 17, 2003, <http://www.afpc.org>. The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for pointing out this aspect.

⁶² *AFP*, September 16, 2003 in *FBIS-CHI-2003-0916*, September 17, 2003; "China's political and diplomatic motive of massing troops at North Korea and Burma borders," *Kanwa News*, September 30, 2003. This trend appears to have continued in the subsequent period. See <http://69.64.39.126/rmb/articles/2004/10/8/32791.html>.

suggested that in order to get out of the current log-jam on the Korean Peninsula, serious efforts should be made to reunify North and South Korea, albeit under the influence and guidance of China. As the current situation between the two is ‘war-like,’ both need to disarm, relax rules and regulations, form a confederation with the North Korean ruling Korean Workers’ Party taking refuge in China and reforming North Korea with agricultural and industrial modernization and bridge the economic and technological divide between North and South Korea. In addition, this writer suggested that if the US restricts its influence regarding Taiwan and contributes to the peaceful reunification of China and Taiwan, China would make efforts for Korean reunification and end the East Asian crisis.⁶⁴ However, according to Choon Heum Choi, although China is keen that both Koreas come together, it “does not want a strategy for a rapid establishment of bilateral trust” between the two Koreas.⁶⁵ This indicates the Chinese limitations in regard to the Korean reunification issue.

Conclusion

Although China and North Korea have evolved an uninterrupted

⁶³ See Wang Fei-ling, “Tacit Acceptance and Watchful Eyes: Beijing’s Views about the US-ROK Alliance,” January 24, 1997, <http://www.carlisle.army.mil/ssi/>.

⁶⁴ See “Dongya heping jihua” [East Asian Peace Plan], December 27, 2002, <http://www.zaobao.com/special/china/general/letter271202.html>. This writer suggested that North Korean economy is on the brink of collapse. See also Andrew Scobell, ‘North Korea’s Strategic Intentions,’ July 2005, <http://www.carlisle.army.mil/ssi/>. However, Denny Roy has argued that China may be amenable to the South Korean takeover of the entire peninsula. See “China and the Korean Peninsula: Beijing’s Pyongyang Problem and Seoul Hope,” *Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (January 2004), <http://www.apcss.org>. For practical problems related to investments, technology, etc., in a post-reunified Korea, see Joseph M. Conforti, “The China Model of Korean Reunification,” *East Asia* (Winter 1999).

⁶⁵ Choi, op.cit.

relationship despite the transformation in global affairs after the Soviet Union's disintegration, China's security concerns on the Korean Peninsula in general and North Korea in particular became exacerbated from the 1990s. Despite a relatively recent decline in the importance of North Korea for China, it still wants to retain its "traditional" ties in changed circumstances as well as wishing to secure its peripheries. China's main security concerns – the US troops' presence in the region and the Taiwan factor are gradually giving way to the greater prominence given to peripheral security and the stability of the country in its modernization drive. Although core sovereignty and military security issues are not neglected by China - reflected in such events as dissuading both Koreas not to expand relations with Taiwan, coercive diplomatic intentions behind military exercises, the reported blockade of the North Korean border and refugee repatriation - economic growth imperatives have forced China to adopt a more nuanced diplomatic approach of normalization with South Korea and others.

China is aware of the destabilizing effect that the North Korean weapons program can have on East Asia. For this reason, China has been at the forefront of multilateral security initiatives in resolving the pressing Korean Peninsula issues. Yet, these have not been effective as ultimately no headway was made on the strategic weapons issue. While China is aware that the North Korean nuclear issue could have a cascading effect on the other East Asian countries, it intends to follow a twin policy of tying down concerned countries with diplomatic and other obligations and critiquing the proposed ballistic missile defense system on the one hand and, on the other, preparing militarily with the objective of seizing the initiative in the region. China has also expressed concerns and hopes to be prepared for any eventuality if the US indeed follows the policy of regime change in North Korea. More importantly, China intends to use the North Korean issue as a bargaining chip with the US for concessions on

Taiwan.

China has advocated national reunification policies towards its ‘lost territories’ of Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan. However, it has not shown equal interest in the Korean unification efforts. Indeed, any unification of an economically and technologically vibrant South and nuclear North is considered to be a challenge for Chinese security. However, in the case of a US troop withdrawal or their transformation into a peace keeping force on the Korean Peninsula with the approval of the North Korean leadership, it is likely that China’s position may change provided it is still conducive to its overall strategic and economic interests. These positions will be tested in the context of the Korean Peninsula over the coming years.