

# **China's Dilemmas over Stalled North Korean Denuclearization Talks**

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**PSNA Working Paper Series (PNSA-WP-11)**

**February 21, 2020**

## **Summary**

As North Korea continues to stall talks with the United States and South Korea, there is a greater need for China to play a more assertive role to help break the impasse. However, Beijing's efforts to promote sanction relief for Pyongyang when it is unclear what North Korea will do about its nuclear programs make people wonder about Chinese objectives. This essay first analyzes Chinese views about North Korea's commitment to denuclearization, and then discusses the main perceived interests that may inform Chinese deliberations of goals and approaches to denuclearization talks. The growing great power competition between Washington and Beijing has complicated potential Chinese calculations and presents a tension between pursuing long-term nonproliferation goals and near-term geopolitical interests. Despite the competing pressures behind China's policy, the essay offers steps that Beijing can take to bridge its near-term and long-term policy gap, help move forward the deadlocked denuclearization talks, and work with other players to preemptively defuse a looming crisis as North Korea resumes provocative behavior.

## Introduction

As U.S.-North Korea bilateral denuclearization talks are deadlocked and repeated South Korean efforts to improve the inter-Korean relationship yield no results, what China could do to help advance the goal of a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula becomes increasingly important. It is puzzling to many observers that China has called for lifting sanctions on North Korea even after the DPRK reversed some of its previous measures of self-restraint, resumed missile tests, and rejected substantive working-level negotiations, contributing to the current diplomatic impasse.<sup>1</sup> When China, together with Russia, proposed and promoted a draft U.N. Security Council resolution that would remove important sanctions on North Korea, it was unclear what Beijing sought to achieve, given the obvious lack of support for such proposals from the United States, France, the United Kingdom, and other members of the Security Council.<sup>2</sup> What are the rationales and driving forces behind China's policy?

## Chinese Understanding of North Korean Intentions

A country's suppositions concerning North Korea's objectives and intentions strongly influence the crafting of its North Korea policy. Since the start of North Korea's charm offensive in the spring of 2018, there has been considerable international skepticism about the sincerity of North Korean leadership's political commitment to achieving complete denuclearization in the foreseeable future. China's security community seems to have greater faith than their counterparts in many other countries in Kim Jong Un's willingness to trade away his nuclear weapons for security assurances and economic benefits. Many influential Chinese experts argue that the primary challenge to achieving North Korean denuclearization is the long-standing distrust between Pyongyang and Washington.<sup>3</sup> According to this popular view, trust can only be built step-by-step and the key to success is for the United States to offer North Korea sufficient security and economic benefits. But as Beijing hoped for the best by pushing for sanction relief at the United Nations and calling for others to address Pyongyang's concerns, a question emerges: How much of this optimism will continue to exist in China, when it becomes increasingly clear that North Korea has not stopped building its nuclear capabilities, has refused discussion of key issues related to denuclearization such as a basic roadmap, and has recently declared that denuclearization is off the negotiating table?

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<sup>1</sup> The United States and South Korea have replaced large-scale joint military drills with exercises of smaller scale since the spring of 2018. North Korea accuses the United States of violating a personal commitment from President Trump to Chairman Kim to ending all joint exercises. It is unclear when or whether President Trump made such a promise. Senior U.S. defense officials have emphasized the importance of continuing joint exercises to which North Korea pointed as evidence of U.S. violation of the Singapore summit agreement.

<sup>2</sup> Nichols, Michelle. "Russia, China to Hold More U.N. Talks on Lifting North Korea Sanctions: Diplomats." *Reuters*, December 30, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Kang, Siyun (康巳鏊) and Xinyang (顾心阳) Gu. "Significance and Implication of Second Dprk-U.S. Leaders Meeting (朝美领导人第二次会晤的意义和影响)." Charhar Institute (察哈尔学会), February 26, 2019, Yang, Xiyu (杨希雨). "The Origin and Evolution of North Korean Nuclear Issue and China's Policy toward Korean Peninsula Denuclearization (朝鲜核问题的由来, 发展与对中国对朝鲜半岛无核化的政策)." *Journal of Fujian Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)* (福建师范大学学报(哲学社会科学版)), no. 4, 2019, pp. 61-71, Yu, Xiaoqing (于潇清). "Dprk and U.S. Talking at Each Other at End of Year: Experts Predict Dprk Will Not Cross U.S. "Red Line" (朝美年底隔空喊话, 专家: 预计朝鲜不会越过美国“红线”)." *The Paper* (澎湃新闻), December 31, 2019.

Indeed, doubt about North Korea's will to denuclearize appears to be gradually growing within the Chinese security community. In the public domain, however, it still causes eyebrows to raise for one to openly speculate that North Korea's goal may not be to disarm but to keep its nuclear weapons. The growing hostility between Beijing and Washington also increases people's inclination to blame the United States for all international problems, including the deadlocked denuclearization talks. Under such circumstances, open domestic debates are rare, which makes the reading of what is publicly said and written in the Chinese literature less helpful to an understanding of how Beijing really thinks about North Korean intentions.

### **Conflicting Views and Interests**

China is deeply concerned about the security implications of a nuclear North Korea, especially if that would make Japan and South Korea more likely to go nuclear. At the same time, Beijing rejects the option of using crippling economic sanctions to force Pyongyang to choose between regime survival and denuclearization. China fears the consequences of becoming a foe to a nuclear-armed North Korea. Many experts worry that a destabilized North Korean regime could increase risks of war, refugees, and a unified Korea under the domination of Seoul and influence of Washington. In recent years, as China reemphasizes its socialist ideology and the common political values that it shares with North Korea,<sup>4</sup> its sympathy toward Pyongyang and against Washington grows and its willingness to impose crippling pressure continues to decline.

Many Chinese experts hope that significant inducements could motivate North Korea to suspend and gradually roll back its nuclear development, step-by-step; and that, after North Korea becomes less poor and weak, it would no longer feel a need for nuclear weapons. But it is unknown whether this hope is based on a true belief of what is likely to happen or is a result of the fact that denuclearization through inducement is the only acceptable approach to Beijing.

Regarding North Korea's need for security assurance, some Chinese experts have convincingly pointed out that Pyongyang has never really trusted Beijing,<sup>5</sup> let alone Washington. North Korea also makes increasingly clear that it believes in nothing but its own independent defense capability. Under such circumstances, it is puzzling that China still expects the international community (especially the United States) to be able to provide external security assurance as an effective inducement for North Korea to disarm. Very few in China have seriously confronted the uncomfortable question: will inducement work if Pyongyang's plan is to maintain an independent nuclear deterrent for as long as possible? Once economic pressure on North Korea is relaxed and the government gets breathing room, it would be up to Pyongyang to decide when or whether to disarm.

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<sup>4</sup> Li, Chengri (李成日). "Sino-North Korean Relationship in the New Era: Changes, Drivers, and Impact (新时代的中朝关系: 变化、动因及影响)." *Contemporary International Relations (现代国际关系)*, no. 12, 2019, Zou, Zhibo (邹治波). "Three Main Goals for Chairman Xi Jinping's First Visit to Dprk (习近平主席首访朝鲜有三大目标)." *China Daily (中国日报)*, June 18, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Bo, Cheng (柏丞). "Shen Zhihua: Where Does Dprk's Confrontational Attitude toward China Come from (沈志华: 朝鲜对华的对抗心态从何而来)." *DW News (多维新闻)*, March 17, 2016, Shen, Zhihua (沈志华). "Conflicts and Disputes between China and Dprk Senior Leadership and Their Resolution During Korean War: A Case Study of Interstate Relations within Socialist Camp During Cold War (朝鲜战争期间中朝高层的矛盾、分歧及其解决——冷战中社会主义阵营内国家关系研究案例之一)." *Jinan History (暨南史学)*, 2007, pp. 277-304.

Is China ready to accept a permanently nuclear-capable North Korea that may result from its proposed policy? There seems no clear consensus answer to this question. Most members of the Chinese expert community strongly oppose accepting a nuclear-armed North Korea but, at the same time, they support sanctions relief. Their views seem somewhat self-contradictory. They provide no good answer to the question of how to rid North Korea of its nuclear weapons if sanctions are lifted and Kim Jong Un balks at disarming. On the other hand, other Chinese experts perceive and seem to be open to accepting the reality that North Korea is on the path of becoming a permanent nuclear state. Many of them perceive a geostrategic necessity to do so and see the United States as much more threatening to China's long-term strategic interests than North Korea. To shield against the geopolitical influence of Washington and its allies, Beijing strives to keep Pyongyang close to itself. For these Chinese security experts, other major powers never treated nonproliferation as an unbreakable principle: the United States facilitated the normalization of India's illegal nuclear status to help contain China's rise, for example. The escalating strategic competition between Washington and Beijing may shift more Chinese decision-makers to embrace realpolitik when dealing with the North Korean nuclear issue.

Further justifying this realpolitik perspective is the often-heard view in Beijing that the United States is not as committed as it appears to denuclearizing North Korea. Some influential Chinese experts believe Washington wants to keep the nuclear crisis simmering so as to have a permanent excuse to control its allies and build up its military presence in the region. Many experts think that Washington is unwilling to pay the necessary price to reach a denuclearization agreement with Pyongyang, which would require Washington to provide credible security assurance in the form of withdrawing troops and cutting military support to South Korea. They argue the U.S. refusal to take such measures is due to Washington's fundamental goal to contain China (and Russia), through extensive military buildup in this region. From this perspective, if the United States prioritizes great power competition over North Korean denuclearization, why should China adopt a different approach? From this perspective, for Beijing to support Pyongyang's position that its legitimate security concerns need to be addressed would offer China an opportunity to push back against perceived U.S. military containment and undercut the U.S. alliance system in the region.

### **What Can China Do?**

Looking into the future, China's policy is likely to continue vacillating between opposing North Korea's long-term nuclear status while having no viable option to change it and pursuing near-term geostrategic interests that inadvertently helps secure Pyongyang's permanent nuclear status.

A more coherent policy requires a deep reflection on China's objectives and bottom lines. If Beijing decides that a nuclear North Korea is not acceptable, it will need to pressure Pyongyang to demonstrate a credible commitment to denuclearization. Specifically, the least that North Korea could do to help show its sincerity and to clarify what it wants in return for denuclearization would be to start serious and substantive discussion on a reciprocal and balanced roadmap for denuclearization. If Pyongyang points to its distrust of Washington as the reason for not having that conversation, nothing would prevent Beijing and Moscow from asking Pyongyang to discuss such issues first in a trilateral group or in a six-party format. In fact, as U.S. leverage for the resumption of bilateral negotiations with North Korea decreases, China should take a more assertive leadership role and explore the option of multilateral talks. This would provide a more transparent platform for

discussions of North Korea's expectations for security assurance and economic benefits.

In the long run, in addition to tackling the nuclear problem, addressing North Korea's deep fear and paranoia toward the outside world should be a top priority for China and other members of the international community. To some extent, North Korea's obsession with nuclear weapons, as well as many other problems it presents to international peace and stability, are the results of its paranoia. Decades of self-isolation and disconnection from the outside have contributed to this paranoia, and today, as a result of the "new path" it has declared, North Korea is poised to become even more seclusive and inward-looking at the political and social level. This trend, if continued, would make the prospects of resolving the nuclear problem even less hopeful. Therefore, measures that facilitate North Korea's exposure to and connection with the international community need to receive as serious attention as measures to contain its nuclear program. China, the United States, and other relevant parties should coordinate on how best to institutionalize North Korea's gradual opening up and reintegration to the international community and make this a central demand in future negotiations with North Korea.

For the near future, Pyongyang's top objective, through North Korea's own maximum-pressure campaign, will remain to pressure Washington into offering more substantial concessions. There is a fair chance that Pyongyang will attempt to increase negotiating leverage by stepping up military provocations and displaying or testing more advanced strategic weapons. To prevent such brinksmanship from again bringing Northeast Asia close to the edge of military conflict, there is an urgent need for China to work with other major powers and collectively present North Korea with a clear sense of the consequences it would face if certain provocations take place.

It may have been hard for Beijing to draw red lines for Pyongyang on a bilateral basis over the last couple of years when their relationship was warming up. But as North Korean provocations start to challenge Chinese interests again, Beijing should consider supporting a multilateral effort with the other major powers to set clear boundaries on North Korea's behavior.

To contain the looming crisis, it is time for China to reinvigorate its freeze-for-freeze proposal and help ensure the U.S. and North Korean commitments to and implementation of freeze-for-freeze will move forward. With its important diplomatic legacy under threat, Beijing needs to speak up and call on relevant parties to secure the only pathway it believes to be practical toward achieving denuclearization. In particular, it needs to condition its existing economic and trading relationship with North Korea on the latter's continuation of its moratorium on long-range missile and nuclear tests. In the coming months when domestic growth slowdown and the coronavirus crisis threatens China's own economic stability, Beijing may have greater incentive to resume trade with North Korea to reboot the economy in Northeast China. Nonetheless, China should ask for substantial measures of self-restraint from North Korea, such as stopping the production of fissile materials and missiles, before it agrees to again raise the issue of sanction relief at the Security Council. It is also a good idea to work toward setting a limited term for initial sanction exemption and to ensure sanctions can snapback if North Korea fails to uphold its part of a deal. At a time when North Korea is stalling talks and the United States is preoccupied with domestic election, China needs to be decisive in support of diplomacy and in preventing dangerous escalation.