



U.S. Policy toward North Korea: The China Fallacy

by Adam P. Liff

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Images of Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's warm embrace of North Korean leader Kim Jong-il during this week's visit to Pyongyang to celebrate the 60th anniversary of PRC-DPRK diplomatic relations may have surprised observers of the North Korea nuclear issue. After all, the conventional wisdom in U.S. foreign policy circles is that the Chinese leadership is increasingly angry with Pyongyang in the wake of its recent provocations and that Beijing is willing and able to use its leverage to pressure Pyongyang to give up its nuclear weapons program. This embrace should give such observers pause: it manifests a clear disconnect between the conventional wisdom and reality.

Admittedly, Wen did not leave Pyongyang empty-handed. He extracted a pledge from Kim to return to multilateral negotiations on North Korea's nuclear weapons program, albeit with the condition that they be preceded by direct talks with the United States. Kim's apparent change of heart, together with U.S. Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg's statement last week reiterating the Obama administration's willingness to open a bilateral dialogue within the six-party framework, bodes well for bringing Pyongyang back to the negotiating table.

Before this next round of negotiations begins, however, it is incumbent upon the U.S. to ensure that it does not repeat past mistakes. In particular, it must rid itself of the illusion that six-party dialogue is the only channel through which to achieve denuclearization. In the pursuit of a resolution to the North Korea nuclear issue, a multilateral framework is necessary, but it is not sufficient.

Since 2002, U.S. policy toward North Korea has been largely predicated on the false assumption that the bulk of the heavy lifting can be outsourced to China. It is this belief that has provided one of the main rationales for the Six-Party Talks. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, UN Ambassador Susan Rice, and other U.S. officials' effusive praise of China for its role in multilateral efforts to address the North Korea nuclear issue belie this mindset. In this core aspect of policy toward North Korea, the Obama administration differs little from its predecessor.

Yet public statements on North Korea notwithstanding, major differences between Beijing and Washington persist. In fact, peaceful resolution of the nuclear crisis and denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula demand that the U.S. lower its expectations of China and reconsider its approach toward North Korea.

Most basically, China's perception of the threat posed by a nuclear North Korea – its Cold War ally and major trading partner – differs sharply from that of the U.S. and its allies, particularly Japan. Denuclearization is a much lower priority for Beijing. If North Korea successfully miniaturizes a nuclear warhead and mounts it on a ballistic missile, the safest place to be may be Beijing. By contrast, the least safe place may be Seoul or Tokyo.

For Chinese leaders, it is not the regime of Kim Jong-il but the possibility of regime collapse that poses the most serious threat to Chinese security. Regime implosion could result in instability in China's northeast, a flood of North Korean refugees into China, or worse, precipitous reunification with South Korea and a U.S. military presence north of the 38th parallel. Not only is China unwilling to risk open conflict with North Korea, it is also reluctant to put the screws to Pyongyang, a fact manifest in its vehement opposition to threats of force, resistance to tough sanctions, and its insistence on softened language in United Nations Security Council Resolution 1874. (China and Russia threatened to veto earlier drafts that explicitly authorized the use of force during inspections of North Korean ships suspected of carrying illicit weapons or technology.)

Moreover, Chinese leaders are fatigued by their shuttle diplomacy. Many Chinese observers view North Korea's nuclear program as a direct response to misguided U.S. policies and believe the U.S. should clean up its own mess. Although this view has lost some traction since the Obama administration took office with a clear willingness to engage Pyongyang, they privately express resentment at Washington's demands for Beijing to "step up" and argue that given Pyongyang's clear desire for direct talks with the U.S., it is Washington – not Beijing – that is best positioned to push for denuclearization.

Many Chinese believe that even if they wanted to take a harder line against North Korea (e.g., cutting trade flows) Beijing does not wield sufficient influence in Pyongyang to persuade the regime to ease tensions and eliminate its nuclear weapons program. They argue that China has applied the pressure it can. Following the first North Korean nuclear test in October 2006, Yang Xiyu, a former career diplomat and the inaugural director of the Chinese Foreign Ministry's Office for Korean Peninsula Issues, argued that the success of negotiations "lies in Pyongyang's desires, not in what China does."

That isn't to say Chinese are indifferent to North Korean behavior. Peking University scholar Zhu Feng argued in a June 1 *PacNet* that the May 25 nuclear test was a "slap in the face of China." Indeed, Beijing's backing of UNSC Resolution 1874, its support for limited sanctions, and Wen's visit this week reveal that China is willing to pressure Pyongyang. However, the fact that even after a *second* nuclear test a consensus on what became a watered-down version of Resolution 1874 was not reached for 18 days – when a prompt and decisive response from the international community was called for – reveals how deep the fissures are.

Above all, Chinese see themselves as realists. While they express anger and frustration with North Korea's provocations, a disconcerting number of Chinese observers also believe that the window of opportunity for solving the nuclear issue has closed. At a recent conference, a Chinese scholar from a government-affiliated research institute argued that North Korea's second nuclear test demonstrates Pyongyang does not want a deal; rather, it is intent on de facto recognition from the international community as a nuclear power. Many Chinese believe that the best hope for regional stability is a focus on counterproliferation. Recent sanctions, the joint statement at the inaugural U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED), which "emphasized the importance of implementing" Resolution 1874, and the seizure of vanadium at Dandong on the China-North Korea border in late July should be seen in this light. When it comes to denuclearization, on the other hand, many Chinese observers take a long-term view – believing that the problem can only be solved by bringing North Korea into the international community through a process of gradual "reform and opening up" similar to China's experience since 1978.

The lessons are clear. While China sincerely opposes Pyongyang's pursuit of a nuclear arsenal, it seems unwilling to increase pressure on North Korea to the extent that many in Washington would like. Put another way, at least in the short-term, Beijing seems willing to accept North Korea as a de facto nuclear state. Therefore, Washington must realize that relying on China to solve the North Korea nuclear issue is likely to fail. If the U.S. objective is denuclearization – not merely containment – it must rethink its policies.

China should be expected to faithfully implement Resolution 1874, particularly as it concerns counterproliferation measures, and pressure Pyongyang to return to the Six-Party Talks. However, barring an unprecedented provocation, regime collapse, or the outbreak of war on the Korean Peninsula, Beijing and Washington's views on the urgency of denuclearization are unlikely to converge anytime soon.

U.S. policy toward North Korea must have realistic expectations about China's role. Neither country should forget that the significance of bilateral cooperation transcends the denuclearization issue. Deeper mutual trust between the U.S. and China is a prerequisite not only for resolution of the North Korea nuclear issue but also for the consolidation of stability throughout East Asia. Indeed, the number of security issues on the bilateral agenda is growing daily, running from the need to institutionalize top-level security dialogue among the United States, China, Japan, and South Korea to the need for a

multilateral response to nontraditional and transnational security threats such as infectious disease and natural disasters. Both countries should view cooperation on North Korea in this context.

In addition to quietly stressing the ramifications of a nuclear North Korea for stability in East Asia, in particular a potential regional arms race, Washington should promote more extensive dialogue with Beijing on the sidelines of the S&ED and other bilateral talks to clarify the role that China is willing and able to play in denuclearization efforts. It should make a concerted effort to mitigate China's concerns about instability in North Korea, for example by pledging to help with refugee issues or guaranteeing that U.S. troops stationed in South Korea will not move north in the event of Korean reunification. Throughout this process, close coordination and trilateral contingency planning with South Korea and Japan, together with regular briefings of Chinese and Russian officials on these plans, is imperative.

A U.S.-led approach that couples direct bilateral engagement with simultaneous "Five-Party" dialogue may pressure Pyongyang to return to the Six-Party Talks. In the latter venue, the five powers should carry out advance planning over how to respond to future North Korean provocations. This will ensure that the international response next time is swift and resolute.

Whether North Korea is prepared to willingly denuclearize is an open question. However, any chance of success is incumbent upon the U.S. reexamining its approach to the issue. While steadfast support from China – particularly on containment and counterproliferation – is essential, the idea that "the road to Pyongyang runs through Beijing" is fundamentally flawed.