

China and North Korea

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This paper was produced as part of the project “Improving Regional Security and Denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula: U.S. Policy Interests and Options.”

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Introduction

China is furious at North Korea for totally disregarding PRC warnings not to detonate a nuclear device in 2009, directly defying Beijing once more as it had in 2006. It is angry that Pyongyang has walked away from the Six-Party Talks. It is gravely concerned about the implications of Pyongyang’s insistence on maintaining nuclear weapons for decisions to be made in Tokyo, Seoul and Taipei—as well as for the PRC’s own more direct security interests. And it is prepared not only to join in resolutions of condemnation but to take more steps than it ever has before to penalize the North for its actions—and to coordinate those steps with the United States and others.

At the same time, because it worries about the potential unintended consequences of sanctions that Beijing endorsed at the United Nations, China is not prepared to support—vocally or with action—some of the more extreme forms of sanctions that the United States and some others are in the process of putting in place. Beijing reasons not only that such steps will be unproductive, failing to produce the necessary disincentives to cause Pyongyang to reverse course, it feels they will be counterproductive, both risking instability in the North and likely provoking the North to take ever more dangerous steps in an escalatory cycle that could get out of hand.

Thus, while it condemns what the North has done, and makes clear that the previous “lips and teeth” relationship—or any “special” relationship—no longer exists, it is acting with great caution on measures that could push the North into a corner.

Interestingly, large segments of the Chinese commentariat are way ahead of the government, not only calling for more stringent measures but even criticizing Beijing for its timidity. So far, however, the central authorities seem to feel they can manage even in the face of such wide-spread sentiments, indeed that they must. Moreover, there are other voices urging caution, even some (e.g., a recent editorial in the *People’s Daily*-owned *Global Times*) that openly blame the United States for the latest downturn in the situation. Still, one needs to be on the alert for any sign that the public feels that national security—and not merely national pride—have been placed at serious risk by the North’s actions, and that the PRC leadership is not responding adequately. One presumes that there is a spectrum of views among the leadership and that decisions at that level are not immune from the effects of any sign of serious erosion in public confidence in the leadership’s ability to protect China’s interests. So far, however, there is no reason to believe that we are anywhere near such a loss of confidence.

Changing PRC-DPRK Relations

The dedication of the revolutionary generation of China’s senior leaders to a “lips and teeth” relationship with their counterparts in Pyongyang—to the extent that it ever was serious beyond the utilitarian value attached to keeping the United States at bay—may have died out even before Kim Il Sung’s demise in 1994, but it certainly faded into

nothingness in the years following. The notion that China valued having a socialist ally on its border has long since lost whatever ideological attraction it might have had. But that the North Korean state provided a physical buffer against an American military presence right up against China’s northeastern border retained considerable value in an era when, despite dramatically improving Sino-American relations, mutual strategic suspicion between Washington and Beijing remained a salient driver of policy. As the U.S. went about strengthening its ties with countries around China’s periphery—forming a virtual wall of containment, at least as perceived from Beijing—the PRC proceeded to mend its fences with those same neighbors, seeking to undercut any possibility that the U.S. could work with and through those neighbors either to contain China or to confront it, especially in a Taiwan contingency.

Changing Regional Realities

Although that pattern of behavior continues on both sides, other considerations have intervened to change China’s calculation with respect to the Korean Peninsula. In the first place, Beijing has developed, if not a warm and fuzzy relationship with Seoul, at the very least a quite workable one. While future South Korean presidents may not be as outspoken as Roh Moo Hyun in making clear that ROK bases will not be available for the United States to use against China, the likelihood that the South will move to the same position Japan has as a “reliable rear area” for any such contingency is very low. So is the probability that Seoul would countenance a permanent American military presence north of the 38th Parallel, even if North Korea collapsed. Thus, although the recently-issued U.S.-ROK “vision statement” was replete with heartfelt pledges of cooperation and mutual support, and although American officials are beginning to shade the rhetoric about the U.S.-Japan alliance being “the” cornerstone of the U.S. security role in the region (and beyond)—increasingly pairing the two alliances in such a role, the fact remains that Tokyo, for all of its reticence, does play a role in the American *regional* security strategy that South Korea does not and is not likely to play.

...and the Fading PRC-DPRK Alliance

So, this relieves some of the pressure on China to maintain the fiction of not only a “lips and teeth” relationship with the North, but even of an alliance. When the Chinese foreign ministry spokesman was asked in early June 2009 whether the 1961 PRC-DPRK Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance was still viable after the North’s second nuclear test, the spokesman totally avoided any reference to the Treaty. Instead what he said was:

I’d like to stress that it serves the common interest of all parties to properly handle the [nuclear] issue through negotiations and dialogue, adhere to denuclearization on the Peninsula, safeguard peace and stability of the Peninsula and Northeast Asia and prevent the situation from escalating or getting out of control. Relevant

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countries should make unwavering efforts to that effect, and China will continue to play a constructive role in that area.¹

Perhaps even more telling was the response given a week earlier to a question about the Chinese Government’s “attitude” toward the DPRK:

China and the DPRK have normal state-to-state relations. On the basis of the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence, China develops its relationship with the DPRK *as with any other country around the world.*²

Somewhat more ambiguously, when the spokesman was asked whether, in this important 60th anniversary year of the establishment of PRC-DPRK diplomatic relations—a year previously dubbed “China-DPRK Friendship Year”—the many scheduled celebratory activities would go forward, he avoided answering directly, responding:

China has expressed its opposition against the DPRK’s nuclear test. We develop our relations with the DPRK on the basis of the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence and decide our policies and position according to the own merits of the issue. The normal exchanges between China and the DPRK will not be affected.³

Rethinking China’s Past Actions

Statements such as these, and the reported decision not to dispatch a number of senior officials to Pyongyang as previously scheduled, obviously reflect China’s reevaluation of the situation on the ground and its unwillingness to be seen as openly sympathetic to the North. At the same time, China’s caution in either directly cutting symbolic ties such as those referred to, or in putting the North in a corner, may come in important measure from a reevaluation of the effects of its own past actions.

In making that reevaluation, Beijing may have in mind what happened the last time around. In July 2006, China reacted strongly to the DPRK missile test (also in the guise of a satellite launch) and supported a UNSC Resolution condemning it. As the April 2009 missile-satellite shot drew nigh, *Choso’n Sinbo*, a DPRK mouthpiece in Japan warned people to reflect on what happened in that case. Then, the paper said, the UNSC condemnation of the missile launch had driven the decision to test a nuclear weapon three months later, and the paper strongly suggested that the same thing could follow now if the UN Security Council took similar condemnatory action.⁴

¹ Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Qin Gang’s Regular Press Conference on June 9, 2009 (<http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw/s2510/t566947.htm>)

² Foreign Ministry Spokesman Qin Gang’s Regular Press Conference on June 2, 2009 (<http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw/s2510/2511/t565945.htm>) Emphasis added.

³ Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Qin Gang’s Regular Press Conference on June 11, 2009 (<http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw/s2510/t567498.htm>)

⁴ The *Choso’n Sinbo* said: “[T]he DPRK conducted the nuclear test [in October 2006] based on the ‘theory of self-defense’ that made it necessary to take self-defensive measures, as it [the DPRK] regarded the UN Security Council Resolution 1695, adopted by taking issue with the ‘routine military exercise’ that had

Beijing might have felt that its support of only a UNSC presidential statement in April 2009, after the Taepodong II launch at that time, preserved the apparent PRC commitment not to allow a condemnatory “resolution,” thus avoiding a repeat of the course *Choso’n Sinbo* had described. The net result, however, was that the DPRK brushed off any difference and used the UNSC presidential statement as an excuse to justify its second nuclear test in June.⁵

Although Beijing joined in the drafting of UNSC Resolution 1874 condemning the nuclear test in June 2009, it softened some of the provisions the U.S. and others were seeking. Moreover, and of significance, even though this was the second test, and arguably angered China even more than the first test three years earlier, Beijing refrained from using the exceptionally harsh language—either in its unilateral statements or in the resolution—that it used after the nuclear test in 2006.⁶

The point is that, as it approaches the future handling of North Korea, China may feel it let its anger get the best of it in 2006, and that the results were not in the PRC’s interest. They might also judge that the more restrained approach they thought they were taking in April 2009 was still used by the North as an excuse to behave as it wished and also led to no useful outcome. Moreover, the PRC evidently believes that “as a close neighbor,” China “naturally” has a “particular concern” over the situation on the Korean Peninsula. Not only does Beijing want a peaceful and stable region, a goal that everyone shares, but “we hope to see a stable, harmonious and jointly developing neighborhood.” “Countries in Europe or even the other side of the Pacific may not feel that way.”⁷

Facing Reality

Nonetheless, it seems pretty clear that Beijing has now given up any realistic hope that Pyongyang will agree to give up its nuclear weapons in current circumstances. Although it says it has not given up on diplomacy—indeed that that is the only way forward—it

taken place three months earlier, as a ‘de facto *declaration of war*.’” (Spokesman for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs)

Choso’n Sinbo then drew the parallel in 2009 for any who missed the point: “In case the commotion of sanctions gets repeated, forgetful of history, an ultra-hard line from the DPRK could once again be provoked.”

(These quotes are from Kim Chi-yo'ng: “UN Security Council’s Discussion of DPRK’s Satellite Launch, an Opportunity To Tell Will To Honor Commitment to Six-Party [Talks],” Tokyo *Choso’n Sinbo*, 26 March 2009, translated by Open Source Center, KPP20090326025001.

⁵ In September 2009, the DPRK Representative to the United Nations wrote a letter to the president of the UN Security Council in which he made that causal link explicit: “Had the UNSC, from the very beginning, not made an issue of the DPRK’s peaceful satellite launch in the same way as it kept silent over the satellite launch conducted by south Korea on August 25, 2009, it would not have compelled the DPRK to take strong counteraction such as its 2nd nuclear test.” (KCNA, “DPRK Permanent Representative Sends Letter to President of UNSC,” 3 September 2009)

⁶ The most obvious example is the decision to forgo the use once again of the term “flagrant”—*hanran* (悍然)—a term theretofore reserved for castigating the U.S imperialist aggressors in the days before Normalization.

⁷ Foreign Ministry Spokesman Qin Gang’s Regular Press Conference on June 2, 2009 (<http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw/s2510/2511/t565945.htm>)

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appears to have dropped its plaintive calls for resumption of the Six-Party Talks, per se (though not necessarily the Six-Party “framework”), recognizing that Pyongyang has definitively turned its back on them.⁸ Some in the PRC say that the only way to effect a change in that DPRK policy is to change the regime, but there is no hint in Beijing that the authorities will at this point condone any effort—including draconian sanctions—that might lead in that direction. Doubtless their reasoning is that, before it got to that point, it would likely first lead to DPRK actions that endangered PRC security interests more directly and more quickly than the North holding onto a nuclear arsenal for awhile would do.

What Might the PRC Do?

In theory, the PRC could take a variety of steps to squeeze the North more subtly. Some such steps would involve making China’s banking facilities less and less convenient for the DPRK to use. Beijing could adopt measures to slow transactions at the border, including customs inspections. It could, as some American officials believe it did in the past, interrupt the flow of oil through the pipeline for a very limited period of time—or slow it considerably (but not cut it off to prevent clogging up of the pipe, rendering it useless in the future) for a longer period of time. There are unconfirmed reports it has already slowed deliveries over the weeks since the nuclear test.⁹ Theoretically, it could even resort to cutting back on food supplies crossing the border.

China could also cooperate, as American officials believe it is committed to do, in inspecting DPRK planes and ships in Chinese ports and airports that are suspected of carrying prohibited (i.e., WMD or missile-related or major military) equipment and materiel. China has, after all proclaimed itself as in agreement with the non-proliferation goals of PSI, only expressing reservations about actions of questionable legal validity such as high-seas interdiction.¹⁰

In fact, PRC spokesmen have repeatedly made the point that they want to be a cooperative part of the concerted effort to deal with the denuclearization issue. They have stressed that “the Chinese Government will take an active part in non-proliferation cooperation in line with its national non-proliferation policy, laws and regulations and its international obligations so as to make due contribution to regional and international peace, security and stability.”¹¹ Dotting the eyes on their view, one spokesman added:

⁸ In answer to a question in mid-June about whether Beijing has stopped using the phrase “Six-Party Talks,” by omission the spokesman left the clear impression that this was, indeed, the case. What he said was:

“I want to stress that the Korean nuclear issue could only be solved peacefully through dialogue and consultations, among other political and diplomatic means. China is willing to work together with other parties so as to push the issue back to the track of peaceful resolution through dialogue and consultations.” (Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Qin Gang’s Regular Press Conference on June 16, 2009, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw/s2510/t568094.htm>)

⁹ “Reports: China Sending Less Oil to N.Korea,” *Chosun Ilbo (Arirang Press)*, June 15, 2009

¹⁰ Foreign Ministry Spokesman Qin Gang’s Regular Press Conference on June 2, 2009 (<http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw/s2510/2511/t565945.htm>)

¹¹ Ibid.

“Our reservations to the PSI will not affect us joining the non-proliferation efforts of the international community.” Following adoption of the UNSC resolution, they affirmed that China “will implement the resolution in an earnest way.”¹²

American officials have expressed confidence that if a suspect ship refuses to be inspected on the high seas, and if it is then directed to port for inspection but refuses, and if it then ends up in a Chinese port, Beijing will, in accordance with 1874, refuse to refuel and resupply it.¹³ We may soon see that proposition tested.

But who is going to identify such “suspect” ships and planes, based on what evidence? China’s experience with American use of “irrefutable” evidence to charge illegal PRC shipments in the past has not been happy one.¹⁴

Moreover, Beijing’s reticence was seen in a statement issued after passage of UNSC Resolution 1874 that, after reiterating China’s “firm opposition” to the DPRK test, said:

China also believes that the sovereignty, territorial integrity and legitimate security concerns and development interests of the DPRK as a sovereign country and UN member should be respected. After its return to the *Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)*, the DPRK will enjoy the right to the peaceful uses of nuclear energy as a state party. The Security Council action is not all about sanctions, and political and diplomatic means is the only way to resolve the relevant issues on the Peninsula.¹⁵

So, although it is clear that China will take greater action than in 2006 or in the aftermath of the April 2009 missile launch, due to PRC concern about risking social and political chaos in the North, it is quite probably that those actions will not reach the point that many in the United States have hoped.

What Could Cause China to Act More Assertively?

What might cause China to change its mind and adopt a more activist approach to squeezing the North? Could that come from concern about possible decisions to “go nuclear” in Japan or the ROK or even Taiwan? Actually, probably not. Beijing does remain concerned about the implications of the North’s retaining a nuclear weapons capability over a long period of time for proliferation in the region. But that concern is

¹² Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Qin Gang’s Regular Press Conference on June 16, 2009 (<http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw/s2510/t568094.htm>)

¹³ David E. Sanger, “U.S. to Confront, Not Board, North Korean Ships,” *New York Times*, June 16, 2009.

¹⁴ In the summer of 1993, the United States charged that the Chinese freighter *Yin He* was carrying chemical weapons-related materials to Iran. Although it is likely that such materials had been destined for the *Yin He*, in fact they were never loaded. Thus, when, after a three-week chase, the ship was finally inspected, no such materials were found. China has cited this incident frequently since that time to demonstrate the flaws in U.S. intelligence.

¹⁵ Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Qin Gang’s Statement on the Adoption of the UN Security Council Resolution 1874 on the DPRK Nuclear Test, June 13, 2009 (<http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw/s2510/t567565.htm>)

probably a lot less intense than it was in 2006, when it worried that Abe Shinzo, the then-Prime Minister of Japan, was heading in the direction of removing constitutional constraints and promoting an independent Japanese strategic capability. Today, there is no sustained public outcry to move in the direction of nuclear weapons. Moreover, the PRC also probably believes the United States has a reasonably firm grip on any proliferation tendencies not only in Japan but also in South Korea and Taiwan, where Washington has stopped programs before.

The U.S. has nonetheless reportedly sought to highlight the risks, arguing to Beijing that, unless concerted effort by all parties concerned lead the North to change course, then there will be a more robust U.S. military presence in the region and that Japan is likely to adopt a much more robust military modernization program.¹⁶ And none of this would likely be met with great enthusiasm in Beijing.

If possible risks are not sufficient to move Beijing, are there inducements or reassurances that might cause China to feel it could safely, and usefully, adopt a more assertive stance toward sanctions or other pressures on the North? Given that the PRC’s concerns are really focused quite specifically on Pyongyang’s behavior, it is hard to see what those would be.

Dealing with Contingencies

One other area of potential cooperation that addresses a different set of concerns is what steps the United States and China might take if, against all of Beijing’s hopes, chaos descends on the North. The PRC instinct might be to protect Chinese national security from within North Korea (i.e., by deploying PLA troops in North Korea) rather than from its own side of the border. And the United States might seek to control the North’s weapons of mass destruction and fissile material. It would seem logical that an in-depth bilateral dialogue about such a contingency—and the provision of credible mutual assurances that neither nation seeks to gain strategic advantage, including a long-term military presence there—could contribute to a modicum of trust that would facilitate cooperative, or at least coordinated, efforts.

In any case, though such a conversation might have side benefits in terms of facilitating greater trust in handling the sanctions issue now, one could certainly not count on that. Again, the issue for China at this point is not at heart to counter U.S. strategic advantage, but to protect Chinese strategic interests in its immediate neighborhood. So far, at least, Beijing’s conviction that pushing Pyongyang to the wall is counter-productive and likely to bring about chaos and perhaps even war will trump any putative benefit from going along with what it sees as a potentially risky U.S. policy.

Afterword

¹⁶ David E. Sanger, “U.S. Weighs Intercepting North Korean Shipments,” *New York Times*, June 7, 2009. China and North Korea

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If, for whatever reason, the North does come back to the negotiating table, while Beijing—like Seoul and Tokyo—would like to be in the room, the Chinese are quite comfortable with the U.S. meeting with the DPRK bilaterally. What they would insist upon, and what the Obama administration appears quite prepared to give them, is full prior coordination and a flat refusal to deal with the North on any basis that conveys upon the DPRK “nuclear weapons state” status or accepts that the North will be allowed to keep its nuclear weapons forever regardless of its legal designation under the NPT.