

Resolving the North Korean Nuclear Problem: Status Quo vs. Transformative Approach¹

(Steven C. Kim, Assistant Professor, Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies)

Resolving the North Korean nuclear problem through the six-party talks has proved to be difficult because the five countries—China, Russia, South Korea, Japan and the United States—have not been able to agree on a common approach for divesting North Korea of its nuclear program. While they ostensibly share a common goal in ending North Korea's nuclear arms program, they have advocated different approaches for achieving that end. These methodological differences have greatly hampered the progress of the six-party talks not only by undermining cooperation among the five countries, but also their efforts to get North Korea to engage in serious negotiations. In fact, North Korea has been skillful in exploiting their differences to influence the direction and the pace of the talks and, as a result, strengthen its own bargaining position vis-à-vis its negotiating partners.

The reason they have failed to agree on a common approach is because their differing domestic and foreign policy interests have led them to pursue conflicting policy goals toward North Korea which, in turn, have shaped the approaches of the respective

¹ The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the of the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, the U.S. Pacific Command, the U.S. Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.

countries in resolving the nuclear problem. Their divergent interests have caused a fundamental split among themselves over the question of whether or not North Korea should remain a viable political entity—that is, whether the North Korea regime should be preserved or whether it should be transformed or changed altogether. It is this key difference in their policy goals toward North Korea that has led them to adopt conflicting approaches to resolving the nuclear problem. That is, the countries have adopted different approaches depending on whether their overall interests are better served by the preservation of the North Korean regime or not. In fact, the nuclear problem has only helped to amplify and sharpen these differing interests that divide them. Thus the fault line has not been caused by North Korea's nuclear problem per se, but by the wider ramifications of how their differing policy goals toward North Korea, arising from their differing interests in the Korean peninsula, are negatively or positively affected by the way in which the North Korean nuclear problem is ultimately resolved.

As a result of their differing policy goals, the five partners in the talks have coalesced into two distinct groups distinguished by their conflicting approaches for resolving the North Korean nuclear problem.² The first group, consisting of China,

² Although the six-party talks were originally convened to resolve the North Korean nuclear crisis by bringing to bear on Pyongyang the collective will of China, South Korea, Russia, United States, and Japan to divest North Korea of its nuclear program, they have not been able to agree on how best to achieve that goal. In fact, what has crystallized from the talks is their sharp disagreement over the proper approach in dealing with the North Korean threat. This disagreement has become increasingly evident with each escalation of the nuclear problem by North Korea. Even Pyongyang's declaration of its nuclear power status and amid concerns soon afterwards that North Korea might be preparing to conduct nuclear tests have not resulted in any appreciable decline in the conflict among the five countries over the proper problem solving approach toward the nuclear problem. One cannot read a press account of the ongoing North Korean nuclear crisis by the mainstream news media without seeing some reference to the conflicting approaches of China, Russia, and South Korea on the one hand and US and Japan on the other as an obstacle toward resolving the nuclear issue. See, for example, Christian Caryl, *Newsweek*, June 20, 2005; Tom Raum, "Bush, S. Korean Leader Differ on N. Korea," washingtonpost.com (accessed 6/10/2005); Norimitsu Onishi, "South Korea Urges the North to Rejoin Talks on Weapons," *New York*

Russia, and South Korea, favors a patient, pragmatic, and risk-averse problem solving approach designed to avoid conflict because they believe their interests are best served by preserving the North Korean regime□ that is, preventing its collapse□ the status quo approach. The second group, however, consisting of US and Japan, supports a speedy, uncompromising, and confrontational approach aimed at pressuring DPRK to abandon its nuclear program because they believe that their interests require a transformation or change of regime in North Korea□ the transformative approach. It is their conflicting policy goals that have hampered them from reaching consensus on how best to achieve their goal of nuclear-free North Korea.³ Therefore, in order to understand the current predicament of the five countries in adopting a common approach for resolving the North Korean nuclear problem, this paper will attempt to explain how their conflicting policy goals toward North Korea, shaped by their differing domestic and foreign policy interests, are linked to their contrasting problem solving approaches, and the implications of the complex nexus of policy goals-interests-problem solving approaches of the five countries for the prospects of resolving the North Korean nuclear problem.

Status Quo Approach of China-Russia-South Korea

Times, May 13, 2005, p. A12; and Joseph Kahn, □China Says U.S. Criticisms Impeded North Korea Arms Talks,□*New York Times*, May 13, 2005, p. A12.

³ See Andrew Scobell, □China and North Korea: From Comrades-In-Arms to Allies at Arm's Length,□ <http://www.carlisle.army.mil/ssi/pdf/pub373.pdf>, p. 26. The author states that □China and the United States have different priorities. Beijing's top priority is Pyongyang's survival, while Washington's aim is preventing Pyongyang from possessing and proliferating WMD.□ Also, see Bates Gill and Andrew Thompson, □A Test for Beijing: China and the North Korean Nuclear Quandary,□*Arms Control*, May 2003, <http://www.armscontrol.org/subscribe.asp>. The authors state that the differing approaches taken by China and the US to resolve the North Korean nuclear crisis have exposed □divergent priorities and strategic preferences between Washington and Beijing.□

United by their common interest in preserving the North Korean regime (though not indefinitely by South Korea) because the consequences accruing from its collapse (that might be precipitated by a hard-line approach) will be harmful to their domestic and foreign policy goals or interests, China, Russia, and South Korea have adopted a status quo approach in resolving the North Korean nuclear problem.⁴ This problem solving approach is aimed at engaging North Korea in negotiations through bargaining and compromise in order to achieve a peaceful settlement of the nuclear problem. To insure a peaceful, negotiated settlement of the nuclear problem, they believe it is imperative that the five countries eschew any moves to apply direct pressure on North Korea that might lead to a military conflict in the Korean peninsula which, in turn, will likely lead to the collapse of the Kim Jong Il regime. They also believe that successful negotiations will require the two primary antagonists in the six-party talks—North Korea and the US—to acknowledge each other’s legitimate grievances and resort to compromise in settling their differences. Thus the unwavering goal of this approach is for the five parties to work towards a peaceful settlement of the nuclear issue with the current regime in North Korea, in which, Pyongyang abandons its nuclear weapons program in return for economic assistance, diplomatic recognition, and security guarantees from its partners—that is, to engineer a soft rather than a hard landing. According to these countries, the only way

⁴ According to Gill and Thompson, Beijing and Seoul have a common interest in “giving a high priority to a more accommodating, negotiated resolution” to the North Korean nuclear problem. Gill and Thompson, “A Test for Beijing: China and the North Korean Nuclear Quandary.” See also, Robert Sutter, “The Rise of China and South Korea,” in *Joint U.S.-Korea Academic Studies*, vol. 15, 2005, p. 25 and Alastair Iain Johnston, “China’s International Relations: The Political and Security Dimensions,” in Samuel S. Kim, ed., *The International Relations of Northeast Asia* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004), pp.80-81. For Russia’s support of the status quo approach, see Clay Moltz, “Russian Policy on the North Korean Nuclear Crisis,” http://nautilus.org/DPRK_BriefingBook/russia/ruspol.htm (accessed 6/2/2005). According to the author, “Russia sees the solution to the current crisis in a negotiated settlement, believing that threats, sanctions, and accusations are counter-productive.”

to avoid military conflict and the possible regime collapse in North Korea is to avoid any actions that might undermine the success of the negotiations to effect a peaceful outcome

Although all three countries support the status quo approach, China and Russia's reasons for doing so are different in some crucial aspects from South Korea's. China and, to a lesser extent, Russia have a fundamental interest in preserving the North Korean regime because they believe their domestic and foreign policy interests are best served by preventing the collapse and the possible demise of the regime.⁵ They are concerned that the turmoil accompanying a sudden collapse of Kim Jong Il regime will lead to a massive refugee problem and disruption of their economies, as well as threaten their internal security, and possibly their own political stability.⁶ For the Chinese, the impact of turmoil in North Korea on the Chinese economy is especially worrisome since regional peace and stability is crucial for what are the imperatives of the ruling communist party—maintaining a high economic growth rate and internal political stability.⁷ Also, as two of the handful remaining Leninist regimes left in the world, the Chinese believe that the continued viability and the health of the North Korean regime is important for bolstering its own political legitimacy. For the Russians, they do not want any instability along

⁵ For a thorough discussion of the bilateral relationship between China and North Korea and the ramifications of the North Korean nuclear problem for Chinese geopolitical interests, see Scobell, "China and North Korea: Comrade-In-Arms at Arms Length."

⁶ Ibid., p. 16. The Chinese fear that the process of Pyongyang's collapse will be highly "destabilizing, probably tumultuous, and perhaps even cataclysmic" and "play out to China's detriment."

⁷ See Paul H.B. Godwin, "China as Regional Hegemon?" in John Rolfe, ed., *The Asia-Pacific: A Region in Transition* (Honolulu: Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2004), pp. 84-86 and David Murphy, "Softening at the Edges," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, November 4, 2004.

their border that might interfere with their political and economic development, as well as their security, especially in the Russian Far East.⁸

The collapse of Kim Jong Il regime, moreover, has important long-term strategic implications for China and Russia. Russia and China have a comprehensive and strategic view of North Korea and its ongoing nuclear problem as a result of Pyongyang's geographic closeness and geostrategic importance of the Korean peninsula for the region.⁹ In their desire to counter the US dominance in the region, North Korea serves the useful purpose of checking US and its allies, South Korea and Japan. The utility of North Korea in this regard is growing especially for the Chinese because Japan is seeking to counter the "rise" of China by playing a more assertive diplomatic and military role in the region, as well as strengthening its military alliance with the US. Should the collapse of the North Korean regime lead to a South Korea-led reunification of the Korean peninsula and to a united Korea allied with US and Japan, China and Russia will no longer have North Korea as a buffer in their strategic competition with the US, as well as to balance the South Korea-US alliance in the Korean peninsula and the South Korea-Japan-US alliance in Northeast Asia.¹⁰ Much to the unease of the Chinese, a South

⁸ Joseph P. Ferguson argues in "Russia's Role on the Korean Peninsula and Great Power Relations in Northeast Asia," *NBR Analysis*, vol. 14, no. 1 (June 2003) that Russia's primary goal is regional stability because it wants to economically develop the Russian Far East with a minimum of disturbance.

⁹ The enduring nature of the geostrategic interests of China and Russia in the Korean peninsula can best be seen in the case of China, in which, the same geopolitical considerations that guided China's policy toward the North Korea's nuclear program in 1991 and 1992 are again evident in the current North Korean nuclear crisis. See Chae-Jin Lee, "The Evolution of China's Two-Korea Policy," in Bae Ho Hahn and Chae-Jin Lee, eds., *The Korean Peninsula and the Major Powers* (Sungnam, Korea: The Sejong Institute, 1998), pp. 134-138.

¹⁰ China and Russia share a common strategic interest in maintaining a multipolar world and leveraging their regional and global cooperation against the US's preeminence in world affairs. See Rouben Azizian, "The Optimists Have the Lead, for Now: Russia's China Debate," in Satu P. Limaye, ed., *Asia's China Debate Special Assessment*, Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, December 2003. See also, Denny Roy, "China's Reaction to American Predominance," *Survival*, vol. 45, no. 3 (Autumn 2003), pp. 63-65,

Korea-led unification, moreover, will result in "an industrially strong, nuclear weapons-capable, and democratic Korea at China's borders and dramatically alter the geopolitics of Northeast Asia."¹¹ For China and Russia, given the prospects of a growing strategic rivalry in Northeast Asia, even a nuclear armed North Korea may not be totally unpalatable as long as they are able to retain influence over North Korea.¹² Lastly, a divided Korea enables China and Russia to maximize their influence in the Korean peninsula and in Northeast Asia.¹³

In addition, North Korea has an added strategic significance for China seeking reunification with Taiwan and global power status. By keeping US military engaged in the Korean peninsula, the US's ability to effectively respond to a military crisis across the Taiwan straits would be lessened. Lastly, the Chinese fear that the collapse of the North Korean regime increases the likelihood of conflict between China on the one hand and US and its allies, South Korea and Japan, on the other over the future of the Korean peninsula, since China might intervene in North Korea in order to protect its vital interests in a contingency.¹⁴ Notwithstanding the Taiwanese issue, China does not feel

for a discussion of China's circumspect attempts to externally balance against the United States by seeking security cooperation with North Korea and Russia.

¹¹ Brahma Chellaney, "China Reconstructs Past to Chart Future," *The Japan Times*, October 25, 2004. See also, Victor Cha, "Defensive Realism and Japan's Approach toward Korean Reunification," *NBR Analysis*, vol. 14, no. 1 (June 2003), p. 23. According to the author, "China would not pass lightly over the security implications of an "another noncompliant power (like Vietnam) on its southern flank with a competing ideological and social system."

¹² Scobell, "China and North Korea: Comrade-In-Arms at Arms Length," p. 14. According to the author, Chinese analysts affiliated with government think tanks believe that China is "able to live with a nuclear North Korea (although it would certainly prefer not to)."

¹³ Geoffrey York, "U.S. Misreading China's Stand on North Korea," <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/LAC.20050517.KOREA17> (accessed 5/18/2005). The author states that, according to one Chinese scholar, "China is determined to preserve the North Korean regime as a way of maintaining its influence in the region."

¹⁴ Scobell, "China and North Korea: Comrade-In-Arms at Arms Length," p. 31. Scobell makes the point that, based on the Beijing's December 2002 *Defense White Paper*, "it is quite likely that Chinese military

that it can afford to antagonize the US for the foreseeable future because, in order to realize its long-term aspirations of replacing "the US as a regional hegemon" and achieving "parity with the US in global terms," China must concentrate its energies in overcoming the existing gap in their capabilities.¹⁵

Although South Korean interests overlap with those of China and Russia in pursuing the status quo approach, ROK has its own unique reasons for avoiding military conflict and, thereby, preventing the possible collapse of the North Korean regime.¹⁶ As with China, the collapse of North Korean regime poses grave problems for South Korea. The turmoil in North Korea will lead to a massive refugee problem and disruption of the economy, threaten internal security, and, moreover, place an enormous economic burden on South Korea, as it faces the daunting task of economic reconstruction of North Korea. But, more importantly, regime collapse has ominous implications for South Korea's long-term goal of engaging North Korea in order to achieve a peaceful, gradual reunification.¹⁷ Because China and US may unilaterally intervene in the event of a regime collapse in North Korea in order to protect their vital security/strategic interests in the Korean peninsula, there is no guarantee that South Korea will be able to control the process of

would intervene in North Korea in the event of an implosion or military conflict north of the DMZ in order to secure a buffer zone along its border. See also, Chae-Jin Lee, Conflict and Cooperation: The Pacific Powers and Korea, in Nicholas Eberstadt and Richard J. Ellings, eds., *Korea's Future and the Great Powers* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), pp. 73-74.

¹⁵ Denny Roy, "China's Reaction to American Predominance," *Survival*, vol. 45, no. 3 (Autumn 2003), p. 73.

¹⁶ For a succinct analysis of the South Korean approach in dealing with the North Korean nuclear issue and how it differs with the US approach, see Chung-in Moon, "Conflict and Cooperation in Northeast Asia," <http://www.asiamedia.ucla.edu/print.asp?parentid=3407> (accessed 7/8/2005).

¹⁷ See Chung-in Moon and David I. Steinberg, eds., *Kim Dae-jung Government and Sunshine Policy: Promises and Challenges* (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 1999) for a discussion of South Korea's engagement policy (or more popularly known as the sunshine policy) initiated by the former President Kim Dae-jung and continued by President Roh Moo-hyun, to achieve peaceful unification through exchange, cooperation, and peaceful co-existence.

reunification free from the influence of the major powers in the region. In fact, direct involvement of external powers in determining the integration of the peninsula might diminish South Korea's role in shaping the future of reunified Korea.¹⁸ Since these contingencies may complicate and ultimately hamper reunification, the only way in which South Korea can insure that reunification proceeds in accordance with its interests is to independently engage North Korea in order to effect a gradual, peaceful, and mutually beneficial reunification. This process from the South Korean perspective, in turn, would insure laying the foundation for the creation of a multilateral security organization in Northeast Asia, in which, a unified Korean state would be better able to pursue a foreign policy in accordance with its national interests. Therefore, it is the importance of preserving North Korea in order to protect their various domestic and foreign policy interests that have led the three countries to steadfastly support the status quo approach in opposition to equally persistent US-Japanese support for the transformative approach. In fact, the support of China, Russia, and South Korea for nuclear-free North Korea is driven by the fear that Pyongyang's nuclear program will lead to a military conflict between Pyongyang and Washington which, in turn, might lead to the demise of the North Korean regime.¹⁹

¹⁸ The official position of North and South Korea is that unification should be effected by the two countries alone without foreign intervention as embodied in the joint communiqué issued by North and South Korea on July 4, 1972 and the agreement reached by the South Korean president Kim Dae Jung and North Korea's leader Kim Jong Il at the inter-Korean summit held in Pyongyang in June 2000. Chuck Downs, "Discerning North Korea's Intentions," in Nicholas Eberstadt and Richard J. Ellings, eds., *Korea's Future and the Great Powers*, p. 91.

¹⁹ Scobell, "China and North Korea: Comrade-In-Arms at Arms Length," p. 12. The author notes that the Chinese are fearful that "a nuclearized Pyongyang could mean the end of the regime because this development could cause the United States to respond militarily and oust the regime."

While the three countries support a status quo approach in resolving the North Korean nuclear problem due to their common interest in preserving the North Korean regime, they have competing interests that, depending on the actions of North Korea, may force them to move closer to the transformative approach favored by the US and Japan. If the prospects of a negotiated settlement grow dimmer as a result of increasing confrontation between US and North Korea, the three countries might have to reconsider their status quo approach in resolving the nuclear problem. South Korea must weigh the consequences of worsening relations with the US, increased security risk, and long-term instability in the region in the face of growing nuclear threat from North Korea. Likewise, China and Russia will have to reassess the destabilizing effects of deteriorating relations with the US, stronger US-Japan alliance relationship, and possible nuclear arms race in Northeast Asia on their interests. Therefore, while the three countries continue to support the status quo approach, they might be forced to move closer to the transformative approach as the disadvantages begin to outweigh the advantages of their status quo approach in the face of North Korean actions to escalate tension in the Korean peninsula.

Transformative Approach of US-Japan

In contrast to the status quo approach favored by China, Russia, and South Korea, US and Japan have adopted a transformative approach in resolving the North Korean nuclear problem because their security/strategic interests or goals are best served by fundamentally transforming and, if possible, changing the North Korean regime.²⁰ US

²⁰ Mark E. Manyin, "Japan-North Korea Relations: Selected Issues," CRS Report RL32161, Congressional Research Service, November 26, 2003, p. 1. The author states that Japan "has been the strongest supporter

and Japan, while stressing the importance of negotiations in resolving the nuclear problem, have in effect pursued an approach aimed at pressuring Pyongyang to eliminate its nuclear arms program.²¹ US has been adamant that it can only make concessions when North Korea commits itself to a thorough inspections regime to verify that it is free of suspected nuclear weapons. The two countries and, US in particular, have also warned that if negotiations do not make substantive progress toward ending North Korea's nuclear program, they will resort to sanctions such as referring North Korea to the Security Council or imposing a naval blockade to interdict shipments of nuclear- and missile-related materials carried by vessels in and out of the North. From the perspective of US and Japan, a negotiated settlement is possible only if North Korea unequivocally accepts responsibility for the nuclear problem and abandons its nuclear ambitions. Therefore, US and Japan have adopted a confrontational approach in order to pressure the regime to end its nuclear program.

The reason why US and Japan have adopted a transformative approach aimed at transforming and, if possible, changing the North Korean regime is because their interests are threatened not only by the North Korean nuclear arms program per se, but also by the hostile nature of the regime itself, such that a hard-line approach is needed to effectively eliminate the overall threat posed by North Korea. The US has taken the lead in

of the Bush Administration's policy of pressuring North Korea to abandon its nuclear program, and has been more willing than China, South Korea, and Russia to employ coercive diplomatic measures against Pyongyang.

²¹ US's transformative approach toward resolving the North Korean nuclear problem is encapsulated in the strategy of "hawk engagement" advocated by Victor Cha, professor turned Director for Asian Affairs at the National Security Council, the White House. He argues that North Korean intransigence in resolving the nuclear problem leaves no choice for the US but to isolate and contain North Korea until it abandons its nuclear threat. See Victor D. Cha, "Korea's Place in the Axis," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2002 and Victor D. Cha and David C. Kang, "The Debate over North Korea," *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 119, no. 2 (Summer 2004).

advocating a forceful approach to resolving the nuclear problem because it believes that a nuclear armed North Korea poses a short- and long-term threat to its vital regional and global interests. It is concerned that North Korea might proliferate nuclear weapons by transferring its nuclear technology or materials to third parties hostile to the US which, in turn, might threaten US interests elsewhere in the world. A hostile North Korea armed with nuclear weapons also poses a threat to the safety of US troops stationed in Northeast Asia, as well as that of its allies, South Korea and Japan. The US, moreover, is equally apprehensive that a nuclear armed North Korea will undermine its ability to secure its vital interests in Northeast and East Asia by eroding US deterrence and constraining US actions in response to threatening moves by Pyongyang. Lastly, US is concerned that the North Korean nuclear threat can set off a nuclear arms race in Northeast Asia that will undermine US interests by destabilizing the US security structure in the region and, thus, eroding long-term US dominance in East Asia.²² Therefore, the danger of the North Korean nuclear threat lies in the fact that it has serious regional as well as global security/strategic implications for the US.

Japan is also extremely concerned with the adverse impact of the North Korean threat on its security interests, which largely coincide with those of the US. Just as the Korean peninsula has loomed largely in the geopolitical considerations of China because of the Korea's geographic closeness, the same is also true of Japan. A hostile regime in

²² Kent E. Calder, "U.S. Foreign Policy in Northeast Asia," in Samuel S. Kim, ed., *The International Relations of Northeast Asia* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2004), p. 227. The author states that the network of highly asymmetric U.S. security alliances with key countries of the Pacific including Japan and South Korea has reinforced American dominance.

the Korean peninsula would be "strategically well-situated to threaten Japan."²³ In fact, Japan's geostrategic vulnerability was made painfully evident when North Korea tested its Taepodong ballistic missile over Japan on August 1998, which shocked the country. The Japanese became aware that their country's close proximity to North Korea made it especially vulnerable to a WMD missile attack from Pyongyang.²⁴ Therefore, a hostile North Korea armed with nuclear weapons and medium- and long-range missiles is a direct threat to Japanese security and, moreover, to Japan's ability to respond effectively in a military crisis by constraining its actions. In addition, the North Korean threat has larger security ramifications for Japan. North Korea's nuclear status will have a destabilizing effect on the region by initiating a nuclear arms race and, thus, upsetting the strategic balance of power in Northeast Asia favoring Japan.²⁵ Lastly, if North Korean regime with its nuclear arsenal becomes a lasting source of instability in the region, Japan, as well as the whole region, will suffer economically as a result. Therefore, Japan's interests dictate a tough approach toward North Korea in order to eliminate its missile and nuclear programs in an expeditious manner.

Unlike China, South Korea, and Russia whose interests would be irreparably damaged by the collapse of the North Korean regime, US and Japan's interests would be well served if their transformative approach leads, not just to the transformation, but to

²³ Victor Cha, "Defensive Realism and Japan's Approach toward Korean Reunification," p. 12.

²⁴ Rising perception of North Korean threat since the late 1990s, due to launching of Taepodong Missile over the Japanese islands in 1998, abduction of Japanese citizens, and incursions of North Korean ships into Japanese waters, has led Japan to strengthen its security posture by bolstering US-Japan alliance, expanding its offshore, non-combat security role, and aligning its policies more closely with Washington's especially in dealing with the North Korean threat. See Michael H. Armacost, "Tilting Closer to Washington," in Richard J. Ellings and Aaron L. Friedberg, eds., *Strategic Asia 2003-04: Fragility and Crisis* (Seattle: The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2004), pp. 80-107.

²⁵ Mohan Malik, "Japan Wary of Assertive China," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, December 2000.

the collapse of the regime. This is due to the fact that, for US and Japan, the North Korean threat does not emanate only from the nuclear program, but also from the nature of the regime itself. In fact, it is the inherent danger posed by a xenophobic, isolated, and politically rigid nature of the North Korean regime that makes Pyongyang's possession of nuclear weapons an untenable proposition for the US and Japan.²⁶ Insofar as the nature of the North Korean regime is the source of continuing enmity and conflict between North Korea on the one hand and US and Japan on the other, the only way to decisively end this conflict would be a regime change in North Korea. For the US and Japan, even a negotiated settlement of the nuclear problem through the six-party talks is no guarantee that North Korea will respect the agreement given its long history of mistrust and hostility toward the US and Japan, as well as the ongoing need to legitimate the regime by creating external enemies. Therefore, given the grave implications of the North Korean nuclear threat and the threat emanating from the regime itself, US and Japan have adopted an approach designed to force North Korea into compliance with their wishes through coercive measures that could potentially destabilize the North Korean regime. If the destabilization of the North Korean regime caused by external pressure applied to North Korea leads to its collapse, the North Korean threat would be eliminated at its source.

While US and Japan have compelling reasons for adopting a transformative approach in order to resolve the North Korean nuclear problem, they are not immune from the necessity of evaluating the viability of their transformative approach in view of

²⁶ For a perceptive analysis of how the rigidities built into the North Korean socio-politico-economic system make it extremely difficult to carry out reform, see Kongdan Oh and Ralph C. Hassig, *North Korea: Through the Looking Glass* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2000).

the North Korean counter actions to that approach. If North Korea takes actions to raise the stakes in the conflict in order to counter US and Japan's pressure, US and Japan might have to reconsider whether the possible military conflict in the Korean peninsula, precipitated by their hard-line approach, is worth the price of trying to force North Korea to accede to their demands for defusing the nuclear crisis. Just as China, Russia, and South Korea might be forced to reconsider their status quo approach by adopting a tougher stance in the light of growing North Korean threat, US and Japan might have to reappraise their own approach in favor of taking a more accommodating stance toward North Korea in order to prevent a worst-case scenario from unfolding in the Korean peninsula.

Conclusion

Contrary to the expectations raised by the six-party talks that the collective opposition of South Korea, Japan, China, Russia, and the United States to a nuclear armed North Korea would eventually lead to Pyongyang abandoning its nuclear ambitions, the talks have stalemated because the five countries have failed thus far to agree on a common approach in resolving the North Korean nuclear problem. The greatest obstacle in achieving consensus among the five parties has been their differing interests that have led China, Russia, and South Korea on the one hand, and the US and Japan on the other to pursue conflicting policy goals toward North Korea. Because China, Russia, and South Korea believe that their interests are best served by preserving the North Korean state, they have supported a problem solving approach designed to

avoid military conflict and the possible collapse of the North Korean regime□ the status-quo approach. In contrast, because US and Japan believe their interests are furthered by transforming and, if possible, changing the North Korean regime, they have favored a confrontational approach aimed at pressuring North Korea to end its nuclear program and, thereby, possibly destabilizing its regime. In short, their divergent policy goals toward North Korea, rooted in their differing interests, have hampered them from reaching consensus on how best to achieve their goal of nuclear-free North Korea. As a result, the six-party talks have been reduced in effect to □three-party talks□between North Korea, China-Russia-South Korea, and US-Japan.

The failure of the five parties to develop a common approach in resolving the North Korean nuclear threat has three important implications that do not bode well for bringing an end to the nuclear crisis. First, given the fact that the conflicting approaches of China-Russia-ROK and US-Japan are rooted in their differing policy goals toward North Korea which, in turn, reflect their sharply divergent domestic and foreign policy interests, it will not be easy for them to reconcile their conflicting approaches. Only the future actions of Pyongyang in the unfolding crisis will determine whether one group decides to support the approach of the other group after reassessing their interests in the light of those North Korean actions. Therefore, until the five countries can agree on a common approach, one cannot expect that there will be substantive progress toward resolving the North Korean nuclear problem.

Second, the lack of agreement over the proper approach in dealing with the North Korean nuclear threat among the five parties has strengthened the negotiating position of Pyongyang by enabling it to play one group – China-Russia-South Korea – against the other – US-Japan – and, thus, effectively putting it in control of the negotiating process. North Korea has skillfully taken advantage of the conflicting policy goals and interests of the two groups to persuade China-Russia-South Korea that it is in their interest to restrain US-Japan. Pyongyang has been able to argue that the confrontational approach of the US-Japan has forced it to take equally strong measures to counteract what it perceives to be threatening moves made by US-Japan. Then, by taking advantage of China-Russia-South Korea’s fear of an open conflict breaking out over the nuclear issue, it has argued in turn that, in order to prevent dangerous escalation of the problem, China-Russia-South Korea should persuade US-Japan to abandon their hostile policy toward North Korea and seek accommodation in resolving the nuclear problem with North Korea. In fact, Pyongyang has largely been successful thus far in pushing China and South Korea to urge US to put a more flexible and concrete proposal on the table for reaching a peaceful, negotiated settlement to the nuclear problem.²⁷ China has gone so far as to ask the US to be more sincere in their efforts to end the crisis implying that US was not being totally honest when it claims that it is interested in resolving the problem through negotiations.

Lastly, the North Korean nuclear problem is increasingly turning into a Sino-US problem. Because the conflict between US and China over Pyongyang’s nuclear program

²⁷ Of the three countries supporting the status quo approach, Chinese have been especially vocal in blaming the US for the current impasse in resolving the nuclear crisis. They believe the US’s refusal to compromise with North Korea is inhibiting the progress of the six-party talks and a resolution of the nuclear problem. Scobell, “China and North Korea: From Comrades-in-Arms to Allies at Arm’s Length,” p. 25.

is taking place against the backdrop of growing strategic rivalry as US seeks to counter a rising China, neither side is willing to accommodate the other's position in resolving the North Korean nuclear issue for fear of ceding their respective long-term geostrategic interests in the region. If one side were to submit to the wishes of the other under pressure, it would make itself susceptible to further encroachments by the other and, thus, undermine its relative influence and power in the region. The conflict between China and the US over the North Korean nuclear issue is the clearest sign so far that the two are strategic competitors rather than partners, and foreshadows a growing strategic rivalry and power politics between a rising and a reigning great power with ominous implications for the peace and stability of the region.

As amply manifested in the six-party talks thus far, Pyongyang has skillfully manipulated the conflicting interests and the policy goals of the five parties toward North Korea not only to increase its leverage over its negotiating partners, but also to frustrate their efforts to bring an end to the crisis. As long as DPRK can exploit these differences to its own advantage, finding a solution to the nuclear problem will be extremely difficult. Although the five countries may yet agree as to which one of the two approaches—the status quo or the transformative approach—to lend their full support in resolving the North Korean nuclear problem as the crisis continues to unfold, it will require an extraordinary set of circumstances created by the complex dynamic involving mutual calibration of interests, policy goals, and problem solving approaches between the five parties to achieve that breakthrough.

