

US-China Relations and the North Korean Nuclear Crisis

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North Korea's nuclear test of September 9, 2016, the fifth and largest measuring twice the force of previous blasts, prompted a predictable round of condemnations by the United States and its allies along with calls for China to step up its enforcement of sanctions on North Korea. Yet few "expert" analyses suggest that China will risk destabilizing North Korea or that further United Nations resolutions and international sanctions will succeed in deterring North Korea from pursuing its nuclear weapons and missile programs.

The Obama administration's reliance on China to rein in North Korea is at odds with its efforts to contain China's influence in Asia, a quixotic goal in itself. It reflects an unrealistic desire for China to be influential just enough to do the bidding of the United States but not powerful enough to act in its own interests.

North Korea is, after all, China's strategic ally in the region, and it is in South Korea that the United States plans to deploy THAAD, a defense system with radar capable of tracking incoming missiles from China. It is simply not in China's interest to risk losing an ally on its border only to have it replaced by a U.S.-backed state hosting missile-tracking systems and other military forces targeting it. And China knows it is not the target of North Korea's nukes. If the United States cannot punt the problem of North Korea's nuclear weapons to China it must deal with North Korea directly.

Indeed, in response to U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter's recent condemnation of China's "role" and "responsibility" in failing to restrain North Korea's nuclear pursuits, the Chinese Foreign Ministry issued a statement calling on the United States to take a long hard look at its own foreign policy:

The cause and crux of the Korean nuclear issue rest with the US rather than China. The core of the issue is the conflict between the DPRK and the US. It is the US who should reflect upon how the situation has become what it is today, and search for an effective solution. It is better for the doer to undo what he has done. The US should shoulder its due responsibilities.[1]

In equally unmincing terms, the *Global Times*, an offshoot of the *People's Daily*, charged the United States with "refusing to sign a peace treaty with Pyongyang" in a September 11, 2016 editorial. Alluding to a long history of U.S. nuclear threats against North Korea, the editorial elaborated: "The Americans have given no consideration to the origin and the evolution of North Korea's nuclear issue or the negative role Washington has been playing over the years." It further clarified: "Without the reckless military threat from the US and

South Korea and the US's brutal overthrow of regimes in some small countries, Pyongyang may not have developed such a firm intent to develop nuclear weapons as now.”[2]

Despite President Barack Obama's efforts over his two terms in office to “pivot” or “rebalance” U.S. foreign policy to Asia and the Pacific and his repeated identification of the United States as a Pacific power, the memory of nuclear ruin in the region is shadowed by the history of the United States as a first-user of atomic weapons against civilian populations in Japan at the close of World War II and as a tester of devastating nuclear technology, including human radiation experiments, in the Marshall Islands during the Cold War. Moreover, it has not gone unnoticed that President Obama, despite his professed commitment to nuclear de-escalation, has refused to issue an “unequivocal no-first-use pledge.”[3]

In Korea, the one place on the planet where nuclear conflagration is most likely to erupt, given the current state of affairs, President Obama can still end the threat of nuclear warfare. This would require what few in his administration appear to have entertained, namely, the elimination of the demand for North Korea to agree to irreversible denuclearization as a precondition for bilateral talks. This rigid goal makes it virtually impossible for the United States to respond positively to any overture from North Korea short of a fantastic offer by that country to surrender all its nuclear weapons. The premise that the denuclearization of North Korea is necessary to ensure peace and stability on the Korean peninsula needs to be shelved, and all possibilities for finding common ground upon which to negotiate the cessation of hostilities on the Korean peninsula should be explored.

It should be recalled that possibly no country, including Japan, has greater fear of overbearing Chinese influence than North Korea. Arguing for the relevance of past U.S. negotiations with North Korea, Stanford scholar Robert Carlin points out that North Korea in 1996 opposed President Clinton's notion of Four-Party talks involving China because they “went counter to a basic Pyongyang policy goal; that is, to limit Chinese influence by improving U.S.-DPRK relations.”[4] More recently, former CNN journalist Mike Chinoy, similarly observed: “[North Koreans] hate the idea that the Chinese can come in and tell them what to do. And the reality is the Chinese can't.”[5]

At this juncture, given the demonstrated failure of President Obama's “strategic patience” or non-negotiation policy with North Korea, the unthinkable must be seriously considered. Could an alliance between the United States and North Korea preserve U.S. influence in the region, albeit along avowedly peaceful lines, provide North Korea with a hedge against infringement of its sovereignty by China and eliminate the rationale for deploying THAAD in South Korea, thus alleviating a major sore point between China and the U.S.-South Korea alliance?

Let us also recall that North Korea offered to halt testing of its nuclear weapons if the United States agreed to put an end to the annual U.S.-South Korea war games.[6] Combining live artillery drills and virtual exercises, these war games, as of this year, implemented OPLAN 5015, a new operational war plan that puts into motion a preemptive U.S. nuclear strike against North Korea and the “decapitation” of its leadership. Unsurprisingly, North Korea considers this updated operational plan to be a rehearsal for Libya-style regime change. In January of this year, the United States turned down North Korea's offer before the start of the spring U.S.-South Korea war games, and did so again in April.[7] The United States has thus twice this year dismissed the prospect of halting North Korea's advance towards

miniaturizing a nuclear bomb and fitting it atop an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) capable of reaching the continental United States ostensibly because North Korea refused to entertain U.S. insistence on its complete denuclearization as part of the package.

President Obama should prioritize any and all possibilities for achieving a halt to North Korea's nuclear programs by diplomacy, over the goal of achieving an illusory agreement for complete denuclearization. As an achievement, halting North Korea's nuclear advances is far short of the peace treaty needed to bring an end to the Korean War and a lasting peace to Korea. It is far short of creating international conditions for the Korean people to achieve the peaceful reunification of their country. And it is a far cry from achieving nuclear disarmament on a global scale. Yet, as a redirection of U.S. policy towards engagement with North Korea, it would be the greatest achievement in U.S. Korea policy of the last fifteen years, and a concrete step towards achieving denuclearization in the region, and worldwide.

Notes.

[1] "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on September 12, 2016," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, 12 September 2016, available online at http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1396892.shtml.

[2] "Carter Wrong to Blame China for NK Nuke Issue," *Global Times*, 11 September 2016, available online at <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1005942.shtml>.

[3] David E. Sanger and William J. Broad, "Obama Unlikely to Vow No First Use of Nuclear Weapons," *The New York Times*, 5 September 2016, available online at <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/06/science/obama-unlikely-to-vow-no-first-use-of-nuclear-weapons.html>.

[4] Robert Carlin, "Negotiating with North Korea: Lessons Learned and Forgotten," *Korea Yearbook: Politics, Economy and Society*, eds. Rüdiger Frank et al. (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008), 241.

[5] Qtd. in James Griffiths, "What Can China Do about Nuclear North Korea," *CNN*, 7 January 2016, available online at <http://www.cnn.com/2016/01/07/asia/north-korea-china-nuclear-test/>.

[6] See "North Korea Says Peace Treaty, Halt to Exercises, Would End Nuclear Tests," *Reuters*, 16 January 2016, available online at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-nuclear-usa-idUSKCN0UT201>.

[7] See "Obama Rejects North Korea's Offer to Ease Nuclear Tests if U.S. Stops War Exercises with South," *Association Press*, 24 April 2016, available online at <http://news.nationalpost.com/news/world/obama-rejects-north-koreas-offer-to-cease-nuclear-tests-if-u-s-stops-war-exercises-with-south>.

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