

Coping with a Nuclear North Korea

Zhang Liangui

On Oct. 9, 2006, North Korea brazenly carried out a nuclear test in defiance of the international community. The test reveals that long ago the DPRK's leaders made a decision to develop and possess nuclear weapons. Having crossed the nuclear threshold, it is unlikely that Pyongyang will give up its possession of such weapons.

North Korea's action was undoubtedly a challenge to the international community's staunch opposition to nuclear proliferation. It has furthermore seriously damaged peace and stability in Northeast Asia. If North Korea's acquisition of nuclear weapons is analyzed from the perspective of the North Korean nuclear crisis as a process still underway as well as the result of North Korea already a nuclear nation, we find that the degree of cost and benefit differs for each of the relevant parties. Regardless, however, China is the biggest loser.

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The North Korean move clearly runs counter to its own repeated promise to keep the Korean Peninsula free of nuclear weapons and has crossed the red line set by the international community on the issue. Therefore, Pyongyang's nuclear status is still reversible, and all concerned nations should continue to seek new methods to bring about denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. However, all available options have very difficult tradeoffs for China.

Lessons from the North Korean Nuclear Test

The nuclear test conducted by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), commonly known as North Korea, reveals that government leaders long ago made a decision to develop and possess nuclear weapons. Having made such a commitment, it is unlikely that they will give them up – not for anything.

For a long period of time there has been a theory that the North Korean claim to develop nuclear weapons was a bluff, that in fact, it had neither the desire nor the ability to carry it through. Later, the progress North Korea made in the field led to the theory that its development of nuclear weapons aimed to discourage invasion, since the United States labeled it as part of the “axis of evil” and threatened its security. It now seems clear that neither theory is necessarily accurate.

The impetus of North Korea's development of nuclear weapons goes beyond the events of the recent past. The development of nuclear weapons is no trivial pursuit and data shows that the DPRK has been pursuing nuclear technology for decades.¹ It requires great human ingenuity, massive material and financial resources, all underpinned by long-term sustained effort. In the late 1950s, North Korea signed two agreements with the Soviet Union for cooperation in nuclear technology. In the 1960s, it constructed the Yongbyon nuclear R&D complex and has been steadily advancing its nuclear program ever since. Despite having signed the *Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons* (NPT) in the mid-1980s, the *Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula* with South Korea and the 1994 *Agreed Framework* between the USA and the DPRK, North Korea never stopped its nuclear program throughout this time.

North Korean resolve to possess nuclear weapons can be understood to have both an ‘ultimate objective’ and ‘process objectives’. Its ultimate objective is to master a powerful instrument in order to constrain the surrounding

big powers and work to transform its strategic relations with them. One only needs to carefully read the collection of articles by the past two generations of North Korean leaders to know that they believe North Korean history is replete with invasion and intervention by other powers. They even have their own explanation along this theme of why China aided North Korea against

American aggression. Given the perceived gap in its strength compared with the major powers, the mastery of nuclear weapons was considered by North Korea to be an inevitable choice.

To constrain the surrounding big powers, North Korea's ultimate objective is to master nuclear weapons.

In addition, nuclear weapons also serve to restore the strategic balance – even if only psychological – with South Korea. Since 1948, when the North and South

states were founded, there has existed an acute struggle over inheritance of the Korean Peninsula. The balance of comprehensive national strength began to tip in the early 1970s, and widened dramatically with the South's economic power growing 30 times greater than the North. Frustrating the North is the fact that there is no conceivable reversal for the near future. North Korean leaders see mastering nuclear weapons as the only possible measure to dispel the fear of failure in this competition and, even possibly to take the initiative in unifying the Korean Peninsula through force.

North Korea's nuclear program was for a long period of time a highly covert operation but once the program was exposed by the outside world, North Korea turned it into a tool for pursuing practical interests, thus generating a number of 'process objectives':

First, Pyongyang aims to use its nuclear program to meet domestic political needs. With a stagnant economy and worsening poverty of its people, successful tests provide them with an explanation since nuclear weapons are regarded as a symbol of national strength and scientific and technological prowess. This can be seen in slogans like "military-first politics" and "construct a powerful country." The nuclear program helps to stabilize society, eliminate feelings of failure and enhance the legitimacy of the system.

Secondly, it can be used as leverage for seeking practical gains. The United States is the undisputed superpower in the modern world. North Korea is eager to break the ice and improve its relations with the United States, but has been given the cold shoulder. North Korean leaders feel that only by

developing nuclear weapons is it possible to capture the attention of the United States and hold bilateral talks because the United States cares most about nuclear proliferation. Meanwhile, North Korea can leverage its nuclear program to strengthen its hand in negotiations with the United States. When necessary, North Korea can make limited concessions (such as temporarily slowing down or freezing its nuclear program) in exchange for substantive economic benefits and diplomatic gains.

The third objective is to prevent a U.S. invasion. North Korean leaders have always lacked confidence in their own security. The Iraq war thoroughly reinforced that notion. If Saddam Hussein had nuclear weapons at his disposal, the United States would not have dared to attack and topple him – so the logic goes. This is why, after Baghdad was occupied in April 2003, North Korea broke away from its former tactic of denial and began to openly declare its intention to develop nuclear weapons at every opportunity in a bid to discourage the United States from attacking it as well.

Crossing the Nuclear Threshold

Throughout the past years of negotiations, North Korea has obscured its real intentions. In the hurly-burly of complex talks, Pyongyang has deluded all the concerned countries into believing that it could be persuaded to give up its nuclear program. In this way, North Korea has bought itself more than a decade, safely passing unscathed through the period of tense security crisis, and successfully stepping over the nuclear threshold.

Although North Korea had previously succeeded in mastering the technology for nuclear armaments, it had never conducted a nuclear test.

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Therefore, the military value of its nuclear program was not only doubted by the outside world, it cast grave suspicion on North Korea. Consequently, North Korea had to fulfill two pressing tasks for its nuclear program. The one is to carry out a nuclear blast to verify its capability and possession of an atomic bomb, which was also needed to further design improvements in terms of miniaturization and application. The other goal is to speed up the improvement of its missile technology including short-range, medium-range and long-range missiles to provide means of delivery for its nuclear weapons.²

Both goals of North Korea's nuclear program were advanced with the test firing of seven missiles of a variety of models on July 4 and the nuclear detonation on October 9 of this year. The DPRK's leaders have decided upon the possession of nuclear weapons as its strategic policy, therefore the country will surely carry out more nuclear explosion tests in the future, indicating that North Korea has truly passed over the nuclear threshold. The denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula has been forcefully shattered.

Six-Party Talks Bogged Down

The effect of this on the six-party talks is that they are now hopelessly bogged down with little chance of resumption. Many countries are still calling to restart the talks but even if North Korea agrees to return to the talks under current international pressure, another round will unlikely achieve any practical result.

First of all, the fate of the six-party talks is ultimately due to the fact that the diplomatic objectives of each side are perceived differently, leading to a number of contradictions. North Korea has always stressed that the nuclear issue is a matter between it and the United States, and all the other countries that interfere are merely "third parties." North Korea took part in the six-party talks because it was trying to find an opportunity and channel by which to become reconciled with the United States when bilateral talks were out of the question. It also needed to play for time with the international community.

When the six-party talks merely became a mechanism whereby to solve the North Korean nuclear issue through negotiations, as with this latest and longest battery of talks beginning in August of 2003, they fundamentally became incongruent with North Korea's interests. Being forced to discuss the topic it was most loath to discuss, namely, its denuclearization, it began tactics of obfuscation.³

That the five rounds of six-party talks were carried through to five rounds speaks to the fact that both North Korea and the United States wanted to use them as a stalling technique to put off a showdown between one another. By contrast, the other countries considered the six-party talks as a process, perhaps even the only process, to really resolve the problem. These differences ultimately made the talks a mere formality.

Take for instance the dispute following the Phase I meetings of the fifth round. The six-party talks came to a standstill ostensibly because of the financial sanctions imposed on North Korea by the United States in October of 2005, an act that North Korea claimed had ruined the atmosphere of the talks. However, the real reason was that it eliminated the talks' function of delaying the showdown between North Korea and the United States. When the Joint Statement of 'material content' was adopted at the conclusion of the fourth round it directed the discussions for the fifth session toward specific measures for abandonment of nuclear weapons, thus ending the stalling allowed by the "non-substantive stage" of the earlier rounds.

It has been 15 years since the emergence of the North Korean nuclear issue and four years since the outbreak of the second North Korean nuclear crisis. The reason that no showdown occurred during the period is that all the parties concerned needed the process to drag on. On the part of North Korea, it needed to buy time to develop its weapons; on the part of the United States, it believed that North Korea's nuclear weapons were not a direct threat to it for the time being and it had more urgent issues to deal with, such as the Iranian nuclear issue. In addition, the United States also wanted to convince South Korea and China that the North Korean nuclear issue could not be solved through dialogue. South Korea had no alternative, fearing a war might ruin the progress of decades of its economic development. As for China and Russia, they believed that the development of nuclear weapons by North Korea was just a bluff and, even if they were real, they would not constitute a threat to them and even, to the contrary, would be a card to play against the United States.

But things have irrevocably changed. Although North Korea may succumb to another form of talks to replace the six-party talks, such as new three-party or four-party talks, under sufficient international pressure, their mandate will

The DPRK has held the initiative while the big powers have taken a back seat.

certainly not be accepted as a mere reinstatement of the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, as hoped, but must be about new topics. North Korea will be speaking about nuclear disarmament in the capacity of a “nuclear power” and will demand other nuclear powers to concede to reduction and disarmament requests before discussing North Korea’s nuclear situation. If they refuse, it can charge them with torpedoing the talks. It is also noteworthy, that any new talks will start from scratch, buying more time for North Korea.

All nations concerned must face facts: so far North Korea has held the initiative on the nuclear issue, while all the other big powers have been in the back seat. Until now, the fundamental needs and policy of the United States, South Korea, China, Russia and Japan in the North Korean nuclear issue have remained unchanged. They want to keep up the current slow pace and continue the talks without setting deadlines. But the needs of North Korea have changed.

In declaring itself in possession of nuclear weapons on Feb. 10, 2005, North Korea has transformed its position on the nuclear issue from one of “strategic defense” to one of “strategic offense.” That is, North Korea is now no longer in defensive mode regarding its nuclear weapons program but will take the initiative to use it to achieve its strategic goals. This has signaled that the goal of buying time in order to develop nuclear weapons has been fulfilled and the next task is to force the international community to accept it as a nuclear power. In this way, the pacification attitude of the concerned countries toward the issue of nuclear proliferation will completely transform into a concrete policy. The specific approach of North Korea is to exploit those countries that fear a showdown or war to engage in explicit high-profile publicity, brandish its nuclear capabilities, deprive these countries of excuses for making a choice and give them an ultimatum: accept the facts and recognize North Korea’s nuclear power status, or persist in their anti-nuclear proliferation stand, which means war. They must make a choice, without any further delay.

Consequences for the Six Parties

Undoubtedly, failure of the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula is absolutely detrimental to all countries and peoples, including the North Korean people. However, if we analyze the nuclearization of North Korea

from two aspects: process (North Korean nuclear crisis is still underway) and result (North Korea has already become a nuclear country), then we find that the degree of cost and benefit differs for each of the relevant parties.

First and foremost, the consequences of DPRK nuclearization have been detrimental in all respects for the North Korean people. By devoting colossal human, material and financial resources to the development of nuclear weapons, North Korea will definitely exacerbate the problems of its mired economy and poor living standards. An extra burden will come with the annual cost of safety maintenance of the nuclear weapons. In addition, the narrow Korean Peninsula is densely populated, with 70 million people living on 220 thousand square miles. This is a land intended for habitation, not testing atomic bombs. For instance, in such a heavily-populated area,

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where would North Korean citizens go in the event of a nuclear accident during a test? North Korea would certainly face stern condemnation and sanctions of the international community for its disregard of the universal opposition to nuclear weapons and become even more isolated in the world. Its economy would have no hope of recovery and the lives of its people would become even more difficult. In addition, nuclear weapons will not increase North Korea's security. Rather, they will put North Korea in an even more dangerous position. The United States may detest the present DPRK government but it would have no need to attack a non-nuclear North Korea. On the other hand, a nuclearized North Korea automatically upgrades the country as a target of U.S. nuclear attack and seriously raises the possibility of preemptive strike. With North Korea's relatively small territory and lack of 'strategic depth', maintaining a strategic force necessary for second-strike capability, and thereby providing mutual deterrence with the United States, is highly unlikely.

At the process level, the biggest winner (other than the North Korean government) is Japan. For a long time, the right wing in Japan has tried to revise the pacifist nature of its constitution and push the country toward rearmament. Although this has so far been blocked by opposition among the Japanese public, the North Korean missile launches and nuclear test have done the political right a big favor. The Japanese view of rearmament has

shifted as most now truly feel that Japan is being threatened by North Korea and that they have no choice but to strengthen its defense capabilities. Against such a background, the Japanese right wing is preparing a revision of the constitution to turn its Self Defense Force into a conventional military.⁴ Under the pretext of guarding against North Korean missiles, Japan has sharply increased its military spending, set up the missile defense system in cooperation with the United States, launched several reconnaissance satellites, expanded the maritime combat force, drawn up a strategy for a preemptive strike and strengthened the Japanese-American alliance, thereby accomplishing a long-held wish.⁵ Furthermore, according to Japanese media coverage dated May 22, 2005, a report from the U.S. Senate Republican Policy Committee claimed that if China continued its ambiguous policies on the North Korean nuclear issue then the United States would encourage Japan to become nuclearized and turn “Japanese nuclear weapons” against “North Korean nuclear weapons.”⁶ It would also organize an “alliance system” that included Taiwan, Australia, South Korea, Japan and other Southeast Asian countries and regions.⁷ In this way, Japan would in one stroke become a nuclear power and a central force in a new East Asian military alliance.

At the process level, the United States will roughly receive equal losses and benefits. The benefits include opportunities to adjust its military deployment by leveraging the North Korean nuclear crisis and strengthening its military presence in East Asia; curbing the centrifugal tendencies of South Korea and Japan and cementing its alliances with each country respectively; increasing military equipment sales in the region; reaping economic gains; and further isolating and punishing the DPRK to weaken the regime of Kim Jong Il. The losses are significant as well. By developing nuclear weapons, North Korea has challenged the authority of the NPT and broken the existing nuclear order, which may trigger a loss of control over nuclear proliferation and constitute a threat to the hegemonic interests of the United States. North Korea’s nuclear tests have also destabilized the regional security environment, which could lead to unknown negative consequences for American interests in East Asia.

At the process level, the losses for China far outweigh any gains. Since China is in strategic competition with the United States and Japan, their gains, as set out above, are China’s losses. To make matters worse, some of their losses are also losses for China. This latter category would include nuclear proliferation and the consequent instability in East Asia. In short, the losses for China are mainly manifested in a rapidly deteriorating regional security

environment. Furthermore, China is caught in a difficult bind. On the one hand, since a North Korea with nuclear weapons is not in China's interests or the common interests of humankind, as a responsible major power, China must take a clear stand of opposition. Otherwise, its international image and prestige will be severely tarnished. Even an ambiguous attitude will result in China being isolated and denounced by the international community. On the other hand, unequivocal opposition from China toward the DPRK is bound to cause vicious reprisal from North Korea, certainly leading to changes to Sino-DPRK relations. China is cornered diplomatically. Merely, the gains are that the North Korean nuclear issue will have temporarily occupied and restrained the United States and perhaps also that China will have added to its diplomatic credentials as mediator and participant in the Six Party Talks. China's losses are wide-ranging and permanent, while its gains are conditional, transient and full of risks.

If only the 'result' of the North Korean nuclear tests is observed and not the costs and benefits of the 'process' of their development then all are losers. Starkly put, the reality is that North Korea has come to own nuclear weapons without suffering mortal punishment. From a geopolitical perspective, Japan will be the primary target of North Korean nuclear weapons, exposing Japan to its gravest security threat since the end of World War II. Japan has no alternative but to intensify its theater missile defense plan, reinforce coastal defense, beef up its reconnaissance forces and develop its own nuclear weapons to form mutual deterrence.

In South Korea, some politicians privately believe that a North Korea with nuclear weapons is not necessarily a bad thing for the South, as these weapons will come into South Korea's possession when the two sides are reunited. This is erroneous thinking. With nuclear weapons in its hands, North Korea will be even more obstreperous regarding the contentious outstanding issues between the North and South. South Korea has no way to contend with the North's strong position. As a result of these developments, the balance of forces between the North and South will be even more skewed in the North's favor, resulting in South Korea becoming hostage to North Korea.

For the United States, the losses as a result of North Korean nuclear weapons capability are obvious. Although they will not constitute a direct threat to United States territory in the short term, Americans will live in constant fear if North Korea pursues nuclear proliferation by selling its nuclear technology, nuclear materials and even atomic bombs to the Middle East or terror-

ist groups. North Korea's successful crossing of the nuclear threshold will certainly have a demonstrative effect among the number of nations harboring nuclear ambitions, invariably leading to grave harm to international law and the existing nonproliferation system. As leader of the current international order, the United States' authority and power will be severely damaged.

From the perspective of the outcome of a nuclear North Korea, the biggest loser is, again, China. Similar to the United States and other countries, nuclear proliferation is also very bad for China, and will pressure Japan, South Korea and even Taiwan toward arming themselves with nuclear weapons, causing a dangerous nuclear arms race in East Asia. This would degrade China's security environment to an unprecedented level. The so-called "nuclear peace" as described by some scholars is unrealistic because nuclear proliferation on a wide scale will lead to a loss of control of the international security environment as the probability of irrational decision-making and the occurrence of nuclear accidents increase. To ensure the absolute safety of nuclear weapons and the

authority of the NPT, China will persist in its diplomatic policy of "opposing nuclear proliferation."

China is the biggest loser with a nuclear North Korea.

Second, North Korean possession of nuclear weapons may push China into a new security dilemma in Northeast Asia.

For a long time, in Chinese strategic thinking, the American military presence in Northeast Asia has been a latent threat to China's national security. Yet, it is because of the U.S. protective nuclear umbrella that Japan has exercised self-control in terms of developing nuclear weapons. But with North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons, only through U.S. military presence and nuclear deterrence in Northeast Asia will Japan (and possibly South Korea and Taiwan) possibly be dissuaded from developing nuclear weapons themselves in the foreseeable future. China would then be in a position of having to choose between two unfavorable alternatives: accepting Japan and South Korea with their own nuclear weapons or cementing a high-profile U.S. military presence in Northeast Asia.

Third, although North Korean nuclear weapons are not directed at China, no one can be sure how things may turn out in five or ten years. The lesson of Vietnam should not be forgotten. The political and economic center of China is on the eastern coastal areas, which are adjacent to North Korea. If, in the future, North Korea uses its nuclear weapons to threaten or blackmail China

or has a nuclear accident due to a loss or loss of control, the consequences for China will be dire.

Options for the International Community

Now that North Korea has conducted a nuclear test, the concerned nations must respond. Before any countermeasures are taken, however, an important judgment must be made that will strongly bear on the options ahead and the countermeasures to be taken: Is it possible for North Korea to retreat from its nuclear position? That is, can the Korean Peninsula return to a non-nuclear status?

If it is agreed that the North Korean nuclear issue is irreversible, the conclusion is naturally that we must accept the reality, admit that the previous efforts at denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula have failed and recognize North Korea as a nuclear country. Logically, what should be considered then is not how to eliminate North Korea's nuclear weapons, but how to coexist with a nuclear-armed North Korea. If North Korean nuclearization is judged to still be reversible, then concerned nations should continue to seek new methods to bring about denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

The first judgment is defeatist. Through a concerted effort, the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula can and must be resumed. The alternative will be too high a price for humanity. Therefore, the second judgment is the only option, and whether or not this ideal can be reached will be entirely dependent on human effort and imagination. This is why we need to advance the discussion.

Theoretically, there are a number of possible solutions to the North Korean nuclear issue. The first possibility is a peaceful solution based on negotiations. This would mean North Korea returning to the six-party talks to reach agreement through negotiation. In this scenario, North Korea would give up its nuclear weapons program for sufficient compensation that is also acceptable to the international community. Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula would be realized through an implementation process, where the nuclear weapons, facilities and materials would be transported outside the country and destroyed. This is naturally the best solution, for it is a peaceful one and based on dialogue and mediation that entails the lowest cost, minimum of risk and would be an open process that can curtail any secret deal. On the one hand, the participation of multiple parties in a negotiation process increases the

chances for reaching agreement. However, they are also complex and drawn out, and would give North Korea more time to further strengthen its nuclear arsenal, which could have the opposite effect of undermining the talks.

The second possibility is a solution based on the use of force. Obviously, under this scenario, the six-party talks would be dead. The UN Security Council would pass a resolution to intensify sanctions against North Korea. During the act of enforcing it, an armed conflict led by the United States, and/or a multinational force, would break out by launching military strikes at North Korea, topple its existing regime and take control of its nuclear facilities, which are then transported abroad to be destroyed. Although the solution could instantly and thoroughly restore denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, it may cause enormous loss of life and property resulting in a turbulent and chaotic security environment for years to come.

The third possibility is that the United States secretly interferes in the internal affairs of North Korea creating dramatic changes in the political situation. This method could quickly and thoroughly restore the non-nuclear status of the Korean Peninsula without triggering excessive turmoil or casualties. But, from the perspective of legal principles, this is not an aboveboard solution and could have serious consequences if the situation got out of control during implementation.

The fourth possibility is where the United States independently reaches a compromise with North Korea through a clandestine deal. This is an option the United States might resort to in order to punish China and Russia if they continued to resolutely oppose the wishes of the United States to use force against a North Korea -- with whom a negotiated deal through peaceful talks is considered very difficult. This would be a deal whereby North Korea promises not to pursue nuclear proliferation and, while the United States tolerates the nuclear status of North Korea, it would encourage Japan, South Korea and even Taiwan to develop nuclear weapons. For China, this is a worst case outcome.

China's Difficult Tradeoffs

In terms of the Korean Peninsula, China's core interests are two-fold: to realize the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and ensure that North Korea remains a friendly neighbor. Therefore, a peacefully negotiated solution to the North Korea nuclear issue is naturally the optimal choice for China;

however, such a solution is highly dependent on North Korea's attitude. If the six-party platform resumes, what conditions will a nuclear North Korea raise during the talks? This is completely unknown by all. On Sept. 16, prior to the nuclear test, Kim Yong Nam, the number two figure in North Korea, indicated that "the preconditions for giving up its nuclear weapons is that neighboring countries should also discontinue their nuclear programs and that the big powers should realize nuclear disarmament."⁸ It can be inferred from his remarks that after returning to the six-party talks, North Korea is very likely to take nuclear disarmament of the big powers as a precondition for abandoning its own nuclear weapons. This will effectively render progress in the talks impossible.

If it is impossible to achieve the goal of a denuclearized Korean Peninsula, a force-based solution authorized by the Security Council seems the second-best option for China. Not only would such a solution instantly achieve the goal of a denuclearized peninsula, it could be under a unanimous decision of the Security Council member countries, which would be open and transparent and take into account the interests of all. But the North Korea nuclear issue is hard to measure purely from the angle of interests. The opposition to the use of force in solving disputes has always been a distinct feature of China's diplomacy, and it would be almost impossible to give up its habitual stance at a session of the Security Council in favor of a draft resolution that supports the use of force. Only after a major breakthrough in its own diplomatic policy would China be likely to support the Security Council in using force to solve the North Korea nuclear weapons issue.

The third possible solution to the North Korea nuclear issue is that the United States catalyzes a transformation of political power inside North Korea. Although it would achieve denuclearization, such a clandestine solution would involve many trade-offs that would not be brought into the open. Under such a scenario, it is very possible that with a presence in North Korea, the power of the United States would be significantly bolstered and bring even greater harm to Chinese interests. Some Western scholars speculate about whether China will meddle in the internal affairs of North Korea and support a pro-China faction. Such speculations are entirely groundless. First,

***The worst outcome for
China would be a
secret American-
North Korea deal.***

it is a fundamental diplomatic principle of China to not intervene in the internal affairs of other countries, let alone incite a coup in another country. Furthermore, there is no so-called “pro-China faction” in North Korea. What North Korea has established is an “exclusive ideological system.” As early as the 1950s, North Korea purged the influence of the “Yan’an faction.”⁹

However, for China, the worst outcome of the North Korean nuclear issue would be a secret American-North Korea deal. Such a solution could hinder both the goal of denuclearization and would not ensure that North Korea remains a friendly neighbor of China. Of course, such a situation depends highly on how North Korea and the United States judge each other and the necessity of major adjustments in their policies toward one another.

Conclusion

Since the North Korean nuclear test, the relationship between China and North Korea is no longer the same. First, a nuclearized North Korea will have a greater advantage in bilateral relations with China, and it will be difficult for China to anticipate, let alone influence, its next move. A nuclearized North Korea will bring countless problems to China’s politics and its diplomacy. Second, although the *Sino-Korean Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance* contains provisions on a military alliance, China has no wish to be dragged into a war and will decide whether or not the provisions therein regarding military aid should be implemented based on the specific circumstances. Lastly, many Western scholars presume that China is unwilling to see North Korea collapse because it would have to deal with the issue of North Korean refugees. Although the refugee issue might have an impact on China, it is certainly not China’s main concern. China’s aim on the Peninsula will be to avoid a humanitarian disaster in North Korea. But the heavier burden of a flood of refugees resulting from collapse of the North would fall on South Korea rather than China. China has a vast territory and even millions of refugees would not have a huge impact on its economy. Besides, the international community would also help to mitigate the humanitarian consequences.

A nuclear North Korea has not only strained Sino-North Korean relations, but could also put to the test the Sino-American relationship. The Security Council Resolution 1718, adopted on Oct. 14, 2006, excludes military sanctions as an option, though it contains wordings like “in accordance with Chapter 7 of the U.N. Charter.” This was perhaps a necessary and wise compromise

made between all parties, but as such, it disqualifies UN sanctions as a viable standalone option for solving the North Korean nuclear issue. Those who understand the North Korean style of doing things know that no economic and political sanctions will suffice to bring North Korea back to the six-party talks, let alone give up its nuclear weapons. On the contrary, it will respond in an even more vehement manner. This is what they call “fighting fire with fire.” Therefore, following a period of implementation of Resolution 1718, little will change and the same old question will reemerge: accept North Korea as a nuclear country and bear the consequences, or persist in the non-nuclear state of the Korean Peninsula and take relevant measures. This choice must be made.

If further talks prove futile, China and the United States will certainly greatly differ as to whether the Security Council should try to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue through the use of force. China’s diplomatic stand has consistently been to oppose force as a basis for taking action against another country. This stance will be strongly challenged in the process of deciding what to do about North Korea. In addition, the following question will surely be posed: “Who should be held accountable for North Korea developing nuclear weapons?” The gap between the United States and China’s approaches and interests could turn the North Korean nuclear issue into a point of serious contention between the two countries. This is the last thing the Chinese want to see but both sides should be prepared, cracking this nut may be a long time in coming. 🍪

Notes

¹ Robert S. Norris, Hans M. Kristensen, “North Korea’s Nuclear Program 2005,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 61, no. 03, May/June 2005, pp. 64-67.

² Following the latest nuclear test, North Korea will work steadily to advance its nuclear weapons production capabilities and transforming them from products of scientific research into armaments with military significance. When this is completed, a further task facing North Korea is to enhance the strike precision of its missiles and increase the quantity of its nuclear weapons. It is said that another nuclear reactor is under construction in Yongbyon and will start operation two years from now and make North Korea capable of producing 30 nuclear weapons a year.

Reference: “North Korea’s Nuclear Weapons Program,” Congressional Research Service Issue Brief (IB91161). See: <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/nuke/IB91141.pdf>.

³ The day after the first round of talks a spokesman of the North Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs described the talks as being “not only useless, but also harmful in all means.”

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⁴ “The North Korean Nuclear Test will drive Japan to Military Expansion and Arm itself with Nuclear Weapons,” *Agence France-Presse*, Oct. 9, 2006. See: <http://www.chinanews.com.cn/gj/yt/news/2006/10-09/801429.shtml>.

⁵ “Japan and the US Exaggerate North Korean Missile Tests,” *International Herald Leader*, June 25, 2006. See: <http://news.sina.com.cn/o/2006-06-23/12419280551.shtml>.

⁶ “Anticipating a North Korean Nuclear Test: What’s to Be Done to Avert Further Crisis,” Policy Papers, U.S. Senate Republican Policy Committee, May 19, 2005. p.3. See: <http://www.senate.gov/~rpc/index.cfm>.

⁷ Ibid. p.4

⁸ “Kim Yong Nam Explains North Korean Standpoint of Solving the Nuclear Crisis,” *Rodong Sinmun*, (the organ of the Korean Workers’ Party Central Committee), Sept. 18, 2006. See: http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2006-09/18/content_5104561.htm.

⁹ The “Yan’an faction” refers to the pro-china faction in the Korean Workers' Party (KWP). As early as the 1950s North Korea called for establishing “Kim Il-sung thought,” which was the result of purging a number of other competing factions at the time including “South Faction” (南劳党派), the “Soviet Union Faction” (苏联派), and the “Yan’an Faction” (延安派). The demise of the Yan’an Faction meant both opposition to “serving the big” (反对自大, big refers to China’s influence in North Korean history) and also achieving “self-defense” (自卫) in military affairs. Reference: Zhang Liangui, “The Unification of Korea Peninsular and China's Role,” *Contemporary Asia-Pacific Studies*, Issue 5, 2004. See: <http://www.weachina.com/html/01695.htm>.