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No. 229

**Dealing with the "North Korea Dilemma":
China's Strategic Choices**

You Ji

**S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies
Singapore**

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ABSTRACT

Pyongyang's adventurism during 2010 such as the Yeonyeong shelling has further complicated the already strained Sino-DPRK relations, despite closer interaction between the two countries. The biggest challenge to Beijing was to shake the foundation of China's DPRK policy, defined as maintaining the status quo by crisis aversion, with the emphasis on *ad hoc* guidance for immediate crisis management. Chinese analysts criticised Beijing's lack of an effective overarching strategy toward Pyongyang. Clearly its current approach of accommodation vis-à-vis Kim Jong-Il may not be sustainable. This principle not only symbolises Beijing's buffer zone mentality concerning the North's regime survival but also its difficulty in finding any feasible substitute. Beijing does see the high cost of continued support for an unpredictable neighbour.

North Korea's actions in 2010, arguably in response to the South's increasingly hard-line attitude against Pyongyang, translated North/South confrontation into unnecessary Sino-US tension, much to Beijing's anger. China's "neutrality" made it look the odd man out in Northeast Asia. But its biggest dilemma is that the fallout of a sudden collapse of the DPRK may be worse to its overall security environment than the propping up of Kim Jong-Il. Therefore, it has to stick to its current DPRK "non-policy" of maintaining the status quo in order to trade time for space: gradually creating favourable conditions for dealing with an eventual regime upheaval in the DPRK.

Dr You Ji is Reader at School of Social Science, the University of New South Wales. He is author of three books, including *the Armed Forces of China*, and numerous articles. His papers appear in journals such as *the Problem of Communism*, *the China Journal*, *the Pacific Review*, *Comparative Strategy*, *Asia Policy*, *Japanese Studies*, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, *the Naval War College Review*, *Journal of Contemporary China*, and *Contemporary Security Policy*. The latest include: "China's

Response to the Deadly Triangle: Arms Race, Territorial Disputes and Energy Security”, *CLAWS Journal*, Summer 2010; “Politics as the Foundation for Health Balance of Power”, *Asia Policy*, No. 8, 2009; “In Search of A Modern Fighting Force: Chinese Military Transformation – 1949-2009”, in Lai-ha Chan & others (eds.), *The PRC at 60: the Global-Local Connection*, World Scientific, 2011; “Friends in Needs or Comrades in Arms: Sino-Russo Military Cooperation”, in Andrew Tan (ed.) *The Global Arms Trade*, Routledge, 2010; “The Soviet Military Model and the Breakdown of the Sino-USSR Alliance”, in Thoms Bernstein and Hua-yu Li (eds), *The Soviet Influence on China in the 1950s*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2010. You Ji is on editorial board of the *China Journal*; *Provincial China*; *East Asia Policy*; *Asian and Middle East Studies* and *Journal of Contemporary China*

Dealing with the “North Korea Dilemma”: China’s Strategic Choices

Introduction

The Korean crises in 2010 may have arguably replaced Taiwan as China’s top worry of war. For a long time until May 2008 Taiwan’s independence was the only Chinese scenario of war, especially between China and the United States.¹ The two incidents, namely, the sinking of South Korea’s warship Cheonan in March and the North’s shelling of the Yeonpyeong island on 23 November, almost brought the Peninsula to the point of actual war. Both Koreas put their armed forces on top-level alert and mobilised for further action. China was caught in the verbal cross fire. Were there a war in the Peninsula, it would be hard for China not to be involved. Furthermore, the US-ROK naval drills in the Yellow Sea unnerved Beijing which saw the US carrier battle group in China’s exclusive economic zone (EEZ) as a grave threat to its national security, as that would bring Beijing within the range of direct attack.² Additionally, in China’s perception, the new trilateral defence commitment by Washington, Tokyo and Seoul after Yeonpyeong was not just a response to the North’s provocations but aimed ultimately at China. It could accelerate US redeployment of military capabilities from elsewhere to Northeast Asia.³ President Hu Jintao used unusual language such as “very fragile and on the brink of getting out of control” to characterise the tension in his telephone conversation with President Obama in December.⁴ Beijing’s Korean policy is facing its biggest test in the post-Cold War era.

Pyongyang’s adventurism has further complicated the already strained Sino-North Korean relations, although on the surface the year since the Cheonan incident

¹ James Thomson, “US Interests and the Fate of Alliances”, *Survival*, Vol. 45, No. 4, 2003-2004, P. 214. The perceived prospects of another Korean war can be seen from Dai Bingguo’s prompt visit to Seoul on 27 November 2010, just three days after China postponed the scheduled foreign minister meeting in Seoul in protesting against the entry of US carrier Washington in the Yellow Sea. This revealed Beijing’s assessment of the explosive situation in Korea: this was no time to place “diplomatic face” above efforts of war aversion.

² Interview with rear Admiral Yin Zhuo (尹卓), *环球视线* (Global vision), 21 June 2010.

³ The commander of the US Pacific Command played a crucial role in getting the ROK and Japan together in arranging three-way naval drills, as the way of greater military cooperation. Defence ministers of Japan and South Korea discussed signing of a bilateral military cooperation agreement that allows more combat logistical support and intelligence sharing in Seoul on 10 January 2011. If such a military accord is reached, it is unprecedented. *The Chosunilbo*, 11 January 2011.

⁴ *Xinhua News Agency*, 6 December 2010.

recorded closer interaction between the two countries.⁵ The biggest challenge it posed to Beijing is that it undercut the foundation of its DPRK policy, defined as maintaining the status quo of crisis aversion. In fact the status quo emphasis is mainly on *ad hoc* guidance for immediate crisis management. Even Chinese analysts criticised that Beijing had no overarching and long term strategy toward Pyongyang.⁶ Clearly its current principle of accommodation vis-à-vis Kim Jong-Il may not be sustainable. This principle not only symbolises Beijing's buffer zone mentality concerning the DPRK regime's survival but also its difficulty in finding any feasible substitute. Beijing does see the high cost of continued support to an unpredictable neighbour: in 2010 China looked like an odd man out in Northeast Asia due to its neutral response to the North's action. Yet its dilemma is that the fallout of a sudden collapse of the DPRK regime may be worse for its overall security environment. Therefore, it has to stick to its current passive DPRK policy, and maintaining the status quo as the most sensible option.

On the other hand, China may have to draw a new bottom line in dealing with Pyongyang as a result of being forced to swallow the bitter pill administered by North Korea in 2010. Although Beijing has not made any negative comment of the DPRK in the open, in private it deeply resented Pyongyang's acts which had seriously harmed its vital interests. In trying to create conditions to avoid such crises in the future, Beijing will need to be more flexible in its status quo policy guidance. Given the precarious security environment in and around the Peninsula, especially the deepening crisis inside the DPRK, Beijing may have to make a change in policy direction.⁷ This paper will show that Sino-DPRK relations are in flux. Sooner rather than later Beijing has to formulate an alternative approach vis-à-vis Pyongyang and it

⁵ The two sides exchanged a large number of high level visits in the year. From the Chinese side civilian and military leaders Wen Jiabao, Zhou Yongkan, Guo Boxiong, Dai Bingguo and Men Jianzhu made official visits in less than a year and received unprecedented reception in Pyongyang. Kim Jong-Il went to the airport to meet Wen and accompanied Zhou to review the national day parade, very rare protocol for him to greet foreigners. An important mission of their visits was to pressure North Korea to restrain itself for the sake of regional stability. For instance, Wen made it clear that any Korean crisis would hurt Chinese interests. From North Korea Kim Jong-Il visited China three times in about a year, something very unusual to the increasingly fable leader.

⁶ Xiu Li's paper to the conference *Assessment and prediction of security situation in Northeast Asia*, Chinese Academy of Social Science, Beijing, 29 June 2007.

⁷ According to Jin Canrong, Beijing's near term policy response to the new situation in the Peninsula was to try to stabilise it and to prevent new events from happening. Beyond that it had to attempt new approaches in handling the Korean challenge. His speech to 世纪大讲堂 (Grand Academic Forum), Phoenix TV, 13 December 2010.

is in search of a better option. The next few years are crucial for Sino-DPRK relations and also for the entire East Asia.

The Myth of Historical Brotherhood

Both Chinese and North Korean leaders are fond of saying that Sino-DPRK relations are built on the foundation of life and blood of the old generation of revolutionaries. Many analysts also attribute the current uneasy bilateral ties to the passing of Mao Zedong and Kim Il-sung who had forged the brotherly relations. However, few realised that the current Sino-DPRK troubles have deep historical roots that trace back to the very beginning of the DPRK. The much vaunted relationship of lips and tongue is more of a myth than fact.

The early DPRK elites comprised two major sources: Korean guerilla fighters based in China and in the Soviet Union. The former group to which Kim Il-sung belonged was far larger than the latter. However, among the first group were a number of guerrilla veterans who enjoyed at least the same level of respect and seniority as Kim Il-sung. In the power struggle in the mid to late 1940s Kim first swung behind the pro-China factions and achieved the ultimate leadership.⁸ Then he purged his peers one after another, with the help of the USSR trained cadres. In this way he decimated the pro-China group within the Party and thereby planted seeds of great dissatisfaction among China's first generation leaders. In the 1950s China offered refuge to a number of senior pro-China DPRK leaders who had fled Pyongyang, and gave them ranking positions in the Chinese government. Many of them are still on the wanted list in the DPRK.⁹

Major disagreements continued to trouble bilateral relations throughout the first few decades of the PRC. These included: Mao's anger at Kim's launch of the war without informing Beijing in 1950; Kim's anger with Mao over the latter's decision to halt

⁸ For instance, at Kim's request three regular divisions of over 37,000 soldiers from the PLA Fourth Field Army, Divisions 164, 165 and 156 were handed over to North Korea in 1949 and 1950, forming the backbone force for the North's military. All the key leaders of these divisions were executed in the early 1950s. Accessed from <http://www.jjzy.cn/bbs/simple/index.php?t35990.html> 12 January 2011.

⁹ For instance, Lu Min spent most of his revolutionary years in China. When he returned to North Korea in the late 1940s he was appointed General Secretary of the Korean Communist League. He was later purged and escaped to China where he was given a senior cadre's rank in the Beijing Institute of Contemporary International Relations until retirement in the mid-1980s.

troop advance after Seoul was seized in 1951; Kim's frequent intervention in of Marshal Peng Dehuai's command of Chinese-Korean joint forces¹⁰; the way the Armistice Treaty was negotiated (China was not a formal party to it); the forced withdrawal of the PLA forces from the North, as Kim was worried about Chinese presence; and Kim's insatiable demands for China's economic aid. During the Sino-USSR conflict Pyongyang played the Beijing card to get Moscow's security and economic support, leading to suspension of the bilateral relations during China's Cultural Revolution.¹¹ For instance, many tombs of PLA soldiers who died in the Korean War were destroyed at Pyongyang's order, including Mao Anying's (Mao Zedong's son).

One historical event profoundly damaged Sino-DPRK relations in the 1970s and its residual effect still weighs heavily today. This was Mao's refusal to back the old Kim's succession plan for Kim Jong Il. In his last meeting with Mao 18 April 1975 Kim Il-sung told Mao of his plan for Kim Jong-Il to takeover and asked for the support of Mao and Zhou Enlai for the arrangement. Mao, however, did not reply directly but emphasised that there had been no family succession in the communist world. Dynastic heredity was against the principle of communism. His opposition was clear.¹² It was not until the 1980s did the CCP finally endorse Kim Jong-Il's anointment. In September 1982 Kim Il-sung, made an unannounced visit to China. Deng Xiaoping accompanied him to his hometown in Sichuan.¹³ During the journey, Kim explained why he had to let his son succeed him. He said that it was difficult to choose a successor from his peers. With similar seniority they would engage in infighting among themselves after he passed away. But they had all promised to support the younger Kim. The older Kim said he had no other choice. Deng expressed

¹⁰ For instance, during the fifth campaign in February 1951 Kim ordered its elite troop the 1st Corps to retreat without notifying the Chinese, causing huge losses to the PLA's 38th Army, which formed a joint defence line with the 1st Corps. The general feelings of PLA commanders were that North's forces were not reliable.

¹¹ Interviews with Zhang Tingyan, Mao's Korean interpreter and China's first ambassador to Seoul, *中国记忆* (Chinese memories), *Phoenix TV*, 1 August 2009.

¹² See You Ji, "China and North Korea: A Fragile Relationship of Strategic Convenience", *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 10, no. 28, 2001, pp. 34-57.

¹³ This is according to Zhang Tingyan (China's first ambassador to South Korea), <http://gb.cri.cn>, (国际在线), 5 October 2010.

his support for the succession plan both by situational necessity and by his pragmatism.¹⁴

However Deng's assurance came too late and was no longer really needed. Both Kims had fought for the arranged succession through the mid-1970s. If Mao had supported it then, it would make some difference. Instead the Soviet bloc gave Kim Jong Il the approval he sought eagerly, and this changed the basic attitude of Kim Jong-Il towards Beijing. During the Korean War he used to love the country, when he studied in the same middle school (the Huiwen School) that his father did in Changchun, China.¹⁵ But he never forgot nor forgave Beijing's lukewarm support for his accession, the most crucial step in his political career. During his father's China tour in 1982, the old Kim promised Deng that he would arrange his son to visit China once every year to study Deng's reform programme. Kim Jong-Il followed his father's instruction to conduct a 10-day study tour in China in 2-12 June 1983. At Deng's suggestion the younger Kim visited Shenzhen for a field study of China's reform experiment. However, after that he never went back until 2000. In fact he criticised almost every single major reform policy implemented in the PRC as a betrayal of socialism.¹⁶

The historical discord really runs deep in both capitals. In the psychological hierarchy the Chinese had never seen North Korea as an equal partner. They hardly conceal their feelings towards the DPRK at international occasions, which has led North Korea to lodge repeated protests to senior Chinese leaders since the 1980s. Most Chinese diplomats say that they got along more easily with the officials from the South than from the North. In fact the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs regularly issues orders to Chinese officials that they must not comment on the DPRK affairs with the presence of foreigners.¹⁷ This shows that China's quarrel with the DPRK is

¹⁴ Interview with a former senior Chinese diplomat to Pyongyang in Beijing in January 2000.

¹⁵ This Huiwen middle school still has a Kim Il-sung Classroom where the two desks of the old and young Kims are on display. Kim Jong-Il made a special visit to this middle school in his latest visit to China in 20-26 May 2011.

¹⁶ The Chinese embassy held an event to celebrate 25-year anniversary of Kim Jong-il's visit to China in June 2005. Kim Jong-il attended it personally and talked about his experience in China. Information from staff of Chinese embassy, Beijing, September 2008. To prepare for the Kim junior's "study tour", the Chinese foreign Ministry set up a special group but this group never had a chance to welcome Kim. Interview with a member of the group in Beijing in December 1999.

¹⁷ From my own experience working in the foreign service in Beijing.

not only about reform, nor over the nuclear issue. It is a feeling of Chinese chauvinism that Pyongyang has sensed historically and the clash of interests that profoundly impact the bilateral relations.

Sino-DPRK Relations in Flux

Despite the lack of a clear DPRK policy, Beijing's crisis aversion strategy is discernible. This is part of President Hu Jintao's overall principle for diplomacy: foreign policy should serve the national priority of domestic stability and economic development.¹⁸ Moreover, in the policy hierarchy the Taiwan challenge receives more leadership attention and more resources than that of North Korea. Therefore, Beijing's DPRK policy connotes a spirit of "not broken, no need to fix" but with contingency plans to be formulated against any worst case scenarios.¹⁹

The structural conflicts of interests

Beijing's vital interests in the Peninsula would be served by a reunified Korea which would once and for all remove the threat of war that may badly affect China. Yet given geo-strategic constraints Beijing's support for reunification is calculated on this new Korea being friendly to China, free of US military presence and maintaining a distance from Japan. Since such a preferred outcome is far from certain, Beijing would rather maintain the status quo there, while creating favorable conditions for the transition.²⁰ A prevailing view in Beijing is that prompt political change in the DPRK may become inevitable in the next decade or so.²¹ To cope with this inevitability Beijing has to promote strategic relations with the Republic of Korea (ROK). The German model may be the most cost-effective solution to the Korean conflict, although political and economic cost would still be enormous.²² In Chinese perception

¹⁸ Hu Jintao always stressed the importance of foreign and defence policy serving domestic development. See Liu Jixian (刘继贤), "Renovation of PLA theory of political education and study Hu Jintao's ideas of military political work", *PLA Political Work*, No.10, 2008, p. 2.

¹⁹ In Beijing's strategic calculus Taiwan is the number one core national interest. See, You Ji, "The Anti-Secession Law and the Risk of War in the Taiwan Strait", *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vo. 27, no. 2, 2006.

²⁰ Interviews with Chinese diplomats in Beijing in January 2003. See You Ji, "Understanding China's North Korea Policy", *China Brief*, the Jamestown Foundation, Volume: 4 Issue: 5, 2004.

²¹ China's DPRK observers believe that the current political structure cannot handle the next round of succession. The outcome may either be a military junta or a situation of civil war. My numerous talks with PLA researchers in the last decade.

²² Most of China's Korea specialists the author had talked to recently pointed out that peaceful absorption is the only feasible solution in the long run. On the cost of reunification, RAND estimated

acceptable reunification can be potentially conceptualised on Korea's anti-Americanism that may make it difficult for continued US military deployment after reunification;²³ and time-honored anti-Japanese feelings that may help Korea keep a good relationship with China. Under president Lee Myung-bak the ROK has firmly leaned toward the US and ROK-Japanese relations warmed up. Yet the South's anti-Americanism and anti-Japanese feelings are deeply rooted and a change of government in Seoul may recharge it. In addition, as the ROK has become increasingly dependent on China for economic growth, it could not ignore Beijing's interests in a reunified Korea, and China is likely to be the largest financial source to help a reunified Korea absorb the economic dislocation in the initial years of reunification.

The level of Sino-DPRK friction is rising as their structural conflict of interests deepens. As mentioned earlier, Kim Jong-Il's animosity towards Beijing is personal. In a rare interview with US media Kim bluntly labelled China as "untrustworthy", often sacrificing Pyongyang's interests at the critical moment".²⁴ Ideologically, Kim sees Chinese reforms as capitulating to capitalism and its diplomatic ties with the ROK as selling out a long term ally. Beijing's motive for holding the Six Party Talks (SPT) is more for helping Washington than for Pyongyang. In his eyes, while China eagerly acquired nuclear bombs in 1964 to break its enemy's nuclear blackmail it now disregarded the North's similar security needs.²⁵ Kim was openly vocal about his resentment towards China employing the DPRK card in interacting with the US and other world powers.²⁶ All these were behind Kim's effort to exclude China from the

in the late 1990s that at least US\$ 700 billion would be needed in the first few years for stabilising the situation.

²³ Balbina Hwang, "Anti-Americanism in South Korea: Implications for Future US-ROK Military Alliance", *East Asia*, Vol. 20, No. 2, 2003, pp. 60-73.

²⁴ "Do not trust the Chinese", *Lianhezaobao*, 18 July 2006.

²⁵ My personal chat with DPRK delegates to *The 14th Asian-Pacific Security Roundtable*, Kuala Lumpur, 3-7 June, 2000. Jonathan Pollack makes valuable points about the goal of North Korea's nuclear program which is for freeing it from any foreign control over its affairs. Jonathan Pollack's new book *No Exit: North Korea, Nuclear Weapons and International Security*, Adelphi Book, Longdon: Routledge, 2011. Therefore, it is only natural that Chinese pressure on its denuclearisation is viewed with a lot of resentment in Pyongyang.

²⁶ When Premier Zho Rongji accompanied Kim Jong-Il to Shanghai in 2001, Zhou talked about long term ties between the two states but Kim coldly replied that "We North Koreans have always been the object of major powers' competition". Talks with Senior colonel Xu Weidi in the 2003 PSNSS Beijing Seminar on Northeast Asian Security, Beijing 12-14 January 2003

Peninsula peace-making construction in the ROK-DPRK Summit in October 2007.²⁷ The Kim-Roh Moo-Hyun communiqué used ambiguous wordings to downplay China's role in the process by saying that the negotiations should be jointly pursued by *three or four* parties without naming them. Here *three* clearly meant both Koreas and the US. "*Or four sides*" was to preempt China's certain reaction if it said just *three*. But it was apparent that Kim and Roh really meant *three*, nor *four*.

The DPRK's missile programme is seen as a convenient excuse for Japan to justify US-Japan missile defence that actually targeted China.²⁸ So is its nuclear weaponry that may galvanise the regional nuclear proliferation. Less strategically, the refugee problem, counterfeiting Chinese currency and insatiable demands for aid are tearing at the uneasy ties. Both sides have become vocal about their quarrel in public. Beijing used the unusually strong word "brazen" to condemn the North's nuclear test, a word reserved to criticise its foes.²⁹ In response Kim Kye Guan, the DPRK representative to the SPT, told the Americans "not to trust Beijing which would achieve nothing in the SPT without Pyongyang's cooperation".³⁰

Buffer zone versus liability

The DPRK's usefulness lies in its geographic separation of the US military presence from the Sino-DPRK border. Despite its doubtful intentions and unpredictable behavior, its very existence is of strategic value to China whose worst security nightmare is another Korean war that brings U.S. troops close to the Yalu River, a key reason for China's entry into the Korean War in 1950.³¹ With a scenario of a Sino-US showdown in the Taiwan Strait remaining valid, a hostile military at the doorstep in

²⁷ *The Chosunilbo*, 5 October 2007. During the Kim-Roh summit, Kim was reportedly said that since China had no soldiers deployed in the Peninsula it should not be as a party to the final settlement of the Korean War. This prompted the Chinese to issue an open statement that China is a legitimate party to the peace-making process in the Peninsula. Spokeswoman of Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Jiang Yu's Briefing, 9 October 2007, Beijing.

²⁸ Kori Urayama, "China Debates Missile Defence", *Survival*, Vol. 46, No. 2, 2004.

²⁹ See special report entitled "Brazen North Korea", *Zhongguoxiwenzhoukan* (Chinese News Week), No. 296, 16 October 2007.

³⁰ Kim Kye Guan's talk to an Asian Society reception in LA April 2007. *Everyday Affairs*, Phoenix TV, 21 April 2007.

³¹ Zhang Baijia, "Resisting America": China's role in the Korean and Vietnam War", in Michael Swaine and Zhang Tuosheng (eds), *Managing Sino-American Crisis*, Washington DC: Carnegie Foundation, 2006, p. 190.

the northeast would seriously worsen China's entire security situation.³² This has long been the foundation of Beijing's DPRK policy. Much of Chinese geo-strategic calculus is so oriented. The buffer thesis entails a special Sino-DPRK relationship aiming at preventing eruption of crisis in the Peninsula.³³ This "buffer" mentality is buttressed by China's continued economic aid which serve as a pillar of the status quo policy and an indicator of its reluctance to punish DPRK adventurism.

The clash in vital interests has led a growing number of Chinese analysts to see North Korea as a liability.³⁴ The DPRK's nuclear test, and especially its provocations of 2010, have substantially enhanced this perception, as the latter events have generated long-term negative consequences for China's relations with key powers in the region. China's refusal to consider Pyongyang's request for J-10s, China's third generation combat aircraft (equivalent to America's fourth generation), revealed Beijing's basic positioning of Pyongyang.³⁵ Pyongyang's perception is reciprocal. Ironically, it also employs the buffer zone thesis to define its China policy. Kim the father and son always believed that in 1950 they had protected China rather than the other way round. Later they saw Chinese aid as compensation for the strategic buffer they offered to Beijing. There was no need for them to be grateful.³⁶ In the mid-2000s the North successfully persuaded Washington to hold the Kim Kye Guan-Christopher Hill contact which was interpreted as US-DPRK effort to marginalise China's directional leadership over the SPT. For its part Washington feels uncomfortable with an overt dependence on China to engage the DPRK.³⁷ The Hill-Kim Gye-guan "second track" actually set the overall agenda for the talks, despite Beijing's strenuous effort to promote a positive outcome.³⁸ The advocates of the liability school do not oppose

³² Shen Dingli: "North Korea's Strategic Significance to China", *China Security*, Autumn 2006, pp. 19-34.

³³ Yuan Peng, "Sino-US relations and security in Northeast Asia", *World Economics and Politics*, No. 325, September 2007, p. 9.

³⁴ Wang Zhongwen, "Look at the problem of North Korea and Northeast Asia in a new angle", *Zhanlieyuguanli* (Strategy and management), No. 4, 2004, pp. 92-94. Due to the article's strong criticism of Kim Jong il and the protest from Pyongyang, the journal was banned.

³⁵ This was revealed by Li Youguang, professor of the PLA National Defense University, website of the *People's Daily* 31/01/2007.

³⁶ "Kim Jong-Il moving further away from China", *Yunsiluntan*, accessed from www.Lianhezaobao.com 10 April 2008.

³⁷ Andrew F. Diamond and Daniel A. Pinkston, "Don't Outsource North Korea Problem to China", *The Korea Times*. April 25, 200.

³⁸ Zhang Lianggui, "The Six-Party Talks enters a second track?", *Chinese news week*, No. 330, 16 July 2007.

Beijing's stance on sustaining the survival of the DPRK. Yet they insist that Beijing's backing for the North should be conditional, denuclearisation being a central indicator.³⁹ They are for continuing economic aid to the DPRK as a key leverage to maximise Chinese influence in the Peninsula but they are disgruntled as they see aid taken by the North as free-lunch.⁴⁰ They argue that the buffer-zone mentality not only legitimises Pyongyang's ingratitude but also its further blackmail of Beijing for more aid because in Kim's logic "since we are your security buffer, you have to pay for it".

On the other hand both schools of thought share key policy preferences.⁴¹ First they see continued decay of the DPRK. The DPRK's economy is neither reformable nor saveable. A faulty succession may likely trigger upheavals. This crisis is already looming large, as the weakness of the chosen heir apparent is brewing a power struggle among top leaders in Pyongyang. And U.S. pressure has tightened since US-ROK abandonment of the "Sun-shine" policy and "soft-landing" stratagem after Lee Myung-bak came to power.⁴² The embryonic US-DPRK rapprochement came to an end owing to protracted animosity and the change of guard in the White House. Therefore, both schools call for long term contingency plans vis-à-vis Pyongyang. Secondly with absence of alternatives they both hope to see Beijing continue its accommodation based DPRK policy against unwanted risks brought about by a sudden change.⁴³ Thirdly they hope to see Beijing treat the DPRK as a normal neighbour and according to China's national interests and Pyongyang's merits.⁴⁴ While supporting the status quo, they argue the policy of accommodation should not be static. The DPRK's nuclear tests have forced some convergence of the two policy arguments, as symbolised by China's enhanced cooperation with the US over denuclearisation, by its support of UNSC resolutions 1718 and 1784, and by its

³⁹ Shi Yinghong's speech at the specialist workshop, *Multinational security framework in East Asia*, Seoul, 20-21 November 2003.

⁴⁰ For instance, China's food aid is largely in the form of corn (easy to preserve). This can be used to influence the DPRK's war preparation.

⁴¹ For the buffer-liability debate, see You Ji, "Understanding China's North Korea Policy", *China Brief*, Jamestown Foundation, Vol. 4, No. 5, 2004.

⁴² On these two policy orientations, see Selig Harrison, "Promoting a Soft Landing in Korea", *Foreign Policy*, no. 106, 1997; and Joel S. Wit, "Enhancing U.S. Engagement with North Korea", *Washington Quarterly* Spring 2007.

⁴³ Yuan Peng, p. 8.

⁴⁴ In an international event Ambassador Yang Wenchang characterised Sino-DPRK relationship as one between two normal neighbours, probably the first open expression from Chinese official circles. This is has profound significance as it provides new definition of Sino-DPRK alliance treaty. *Chosun Ibo*, 8 June 2007.

greater pressure to bring North Korea back to the SPT. These efforts suggest rising influence of the "liability school" in China. Yet Beijing's "neutrality" on the North's 2010 adventurism underlines its choice to preserve North Korea as a counter against enhanced Washington-Tokyo-Seoul trilateralism that serves as a key element in US hedging strategy against China's rise.⁴⁵ In this regard North Korea is still a useful Cold-War card. In the transition of China's DPRK policy the buffer option is built into its status quo strategy that will change only if there is dramatic change inside Pyongyang or in response to drastic US-ROK action against the North's provocations. Therefore, the buffer-liability debate will continue.

North Korea's Nuclear Challenge

Pyongyang's nuclear ambition poses a number of serious challenges to China. Firstly it has sabotaged China's status quo strategy defined as North Korea remaining nuclear-free and the US refraining from launching a regime change strike against Pyongyang. As a result Beijing's space to conduct normal relations with Pyongyang is being gradually eroded, forcing it to adopt policies that it has been reluctant to adopt all along, such as endorsing UN sanctions against the DPRK. In the last few years Beijing has been forced to de-link its denuclearisation policy from its overall DPRK policy for pragmatic reasons. However, this does not mean China has accepted the North as a nuclear power. As long as Pyongyang retains its nuclear ambition, the bilateral ties will not be entirely normal and conflict is constant. For instance, although the North's immediate goal to develop nuclear power is to deter US war of regime change, in the long run an unfriendly nuclear neighbour automatically poses a serious threat to China, as it may resort to nuclear blackmail against China in times of crisis.⁴⁶ *China's Defense White Paper* now identifies a nuclear Korea as a source of threat, a visible departure of the PLA's tradition not to criticise North Korea openly.⁴⁷

Secondly, if Pyongyang could not get what it bargains for from denuclearisation, mainly in the form of written security guarantee from the US and substantial economic aid, it may choose to possess a nuclear capability permanently. In the short

⁴⁵ Kurt Campbell made it clear in his testimony to Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the enhanced Washington-Tokyo-Seoul trilateralism is US diplomatic priority in 2012, not only for dealing with the North Korea threat but for building regional security architecture as a whole. March 1, 2011(2011?).

⁴⁶ Zhang Lianggui, "Coping with a Nuclear Korea", *China Security*, Autumn 2006, pp. 2-18.

⁴⁷ See *China's Defense White Paper*, released on 31 March 2011.

term this is for deterring a US war of regime change which can be achieved only through a war on the ground. The use of nuclear device in any form would cause huge casualties to invading soldiers. This option may trigger a total crisis for all parties involved.⁴⁸ The nuclear stand-off will further move US-DPRK relations in the direction of armed confrontation that would undermine China's strategic environment for domestic development. For instance, one of North Korea's nuclear facilities is located only 20 km from the Sino-Korean border. Any such attack would adversely impact China.⁴⁹ For instance, a surgical strike against this nuclear site would unleash nuclear pollutants to Chinese territories with consequences much worse than Japan's nuclear plant accidents after the 2011 earthquake.

Thirdly, Beijing's North Korea policy has a strong international dimension.⁵⁰ In fact China's relations with the DPRK are largely subject to its strategic calculus vis-à-vis the US, and with Taiwan in the background. Pyongyang's intention to keep some of its nuclear material, even if it partially gives up its nuclear facilities, may induce tough US reactions which narrow the space for Beijing-Washington interaction. For instance, China will be hard pressed to honour its pledge of imposing economic sanctions on Pyongyang. Then Beijing's resistance against US demand will become less justifiable. In drafting UN Resolution 1718 the Sino-US dichotomy was on whether Article 42 (about military sanction) should be employed as part of the Document. Although its final version avoided the reference, at the insistence of China and Russia, Pyongyang's intransigence may open the way for the Article to be invoked. The North's future nuclear tests and its announced uranium enrichment programme have made it harder for China not to follow its sanction commitment. Its partial suspension of oil shipment to North Korea in September 2006 could be viewed by Pyongyang in this light. Kim Yong-sam, a top North Korean leader, declared that sanctions meant war.⁵¹ Moreover, it may provide the US with additional reason to use the Proliferation Security Initiative to intercept DPRK ships. Then Beijing will be forced to make a delicate decision where to stand.

⁴⁸ Christopher Hughes, "North Korea's Nuclear Weapons: Implications for Nuclear Ambition of Japan, South Korea and Taiwan", *Asia Policy*, January 2007.

⁴⁹ Hu Side *Nuclear capabilities of the region around China* Beijing: Yuanzhineng chubanshe, 2006, p. 37.

⁵⁰ Phillip Saunders, "Korea as Viewed from China", in Jonathon Pollack (ed.), *Korea: the East Asian Pivot*, Newport: Naval War College Press, 2006.

⁵¹ "Tough sanctions will mean war", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 October 2006.

Fourthly, the North's nuclear programme forces Beijing to use pressure-based measures to ensure the latter's compliance with SPT commitment, making it difficult for Beijing to maintain a workable relationship with Pyongyang. The nuclear programme is part of North Korea's "military first" policy and most vigorously pushed by the armed forces. In soliciting the military's support Kim has been constrained in weighing various policy options.⁵² The nuclear test showed that the hawkish generals in the ruling clique had an upper hand. In a way these generals are also those harbouring anti-Chinese sentiments. Beijing's firm anti-nuclear stance has placed it in direct confrontation with the most powerful interest group in the DPRK and aggravated the difficult relations between the two militaries.⁵³

Unless the nuclear standoff is resolved, the military dimension of the DPRK challenge to China will not ease. In 2002 the PLA deployed regular units in the border region to respond to a perceived heightened threat. Beijing explained that this was a normal practice as border security was the responsibility of regular armies. It is true in some of the border sections but not in others. All depends on the level of threat perceived.⁵⁴ Right after the nuclear test the 16th Group Army was put on high alert. Officers of the local army units in the Yanbian Military Sub-District received intensive training for nuclear/chemical warfare, which was unprecedented.⁵⁵ According to US analysts who had extensive interviews with their Chinese counterparts in 2007, the PLA had made contingency plans for military intervention across the borders, such as PLA personnel carrying out humanitarian aid; UN peace-keeping/making missions; and sending PLA nuclear/chemical warfare units to clear the contamination caused by the destruction of

⁵² Ken Gause, *North Korea Civil-Military Trends: Military-first Policy to a Point*, Carlisle: US Army War College, 2006.

⁵³ For instance, in 2003 Vice Marshal Cho Myong Nok, the first deputy chairman of the NDC went to the PLA's 301 Hospital for medical treatment. The Korean generals accompanying him complained that the PLA side did not give him due protocol during the whole process. He was the top military leader in North Korea but was taken care of only by a major general from the PLA Foreign Affairs Office. Information from PLA participants to a workshop on Northeast Asian security organised by the 9th Institute, 14 January 2004. Actually the PLA has maintained much more closer ties with the ROK military than with the DPRK military in terms of institutionalised top mechanism.

⁵⁴ Major general Jia Fengshan, *Junshi qianyan huati* (Frontier topics of the military), Beijing: the PLA Academy of Military Science Press, 2004, p. 382.

⁵⁵ Hu Fen, "The revealed contingency plans for the PLA to enter North Korea", *Phoenix Weekly*, No. 4, 2008 (January 25 2008), pp. 50-52.

DPRK nuclear facilities.⁵⁶ If large numbers of Korean refugees flood into Chinese land, the PLA may have to react in a decisive way, crossing the border line being a potential option of self defence.

The DPRK nuclear crisis has vindicated Deng's far-sighted decision to keep the Jinan Military Region (MR) in 1984. Because it is geographically outside China's six strategic zones, the majority view of the Central Military Commission at the time was to remove it from the PLA structure so that the six MRs would match the China's six strategic regions. Deng's reason for retaining the Jinan MR was that it served as the national strategic reserve base for both North and East China. Geographically, the Shangdong peninsula shields the oceanic approach to Beijing and the North China Flat. Militarily, it is close to the Korean peninsula and Japan, which embody many strategic uncertainties that require constant vigilance.⁵⁷ The Jinan MR is a key link in national defence against military threats from Northeast Asia. So it is home to high profile PLA group armies which can be dispatched quickly to Sino-Korean border regions (e.g., the 54th GA and the 15th Airborne Army).⁵⁸

China and the Six-Party Talks

The Six-Party Talks has been simpolic of China's epoach turn toward pro-actively leadership of a multilateral security mechanism to deal with a crucial security challenge in the region.⁵⁹ There are three basic assessments on the SPT. Its best imaginable outcome was complete denuclearisation and the resultant easing of tension between the DPRK and the US. The SPT indeed provides a platform for this collective bargaining process to move forward. The next best outcome was to defuse the immediate danger of war through a forum which may at least present a hope for a mutually acceptable solution. This can be seen as a mechanism of trading time for space. With or without any positive result the priority of SPT was war prevention. Keeping the parties talking may be the only feasible method for this purpose. The

⁵⁶ The Bonnie Glaser, Scott Snyder and John Park Report on China's debate on North Korea, CSIS, 2007.

⁵⁷ PLA Academy of Military Science, *Weilai de guofang jianshe* (The future national defense), Beijing: PLA Academy of Military Science Press, 1988, pp. 142-143.

⁵⁸ You Ji, *The Armed Forces of China*, Sydney, London & New York: Allen & Unwin and I.B. Tauris, 1999.

⁵⁹ Samuel S. Kim, "China's New Role in the Nuclear Confrontation", *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 28, No. 4, 2004.

worst is the failure of the SPT and the resultant uncertainties this would entail. After the two armed confrontation in 2010, the SPT was frozen, if not buried. The South raised a number of preconditions for it to return to the talks. Its position has been supported by the US and Japan. Logically Seoul could not pretend that nothing had happened after the sinking of the warship, as domestic political pressure was enormous. Yet this can play into the hands of the North because the longer its nuclear programme drags on, the more likely its weaponisation would be realised. The ultimate victim is the South and its neighbours.

From the start Chinese analysts were not hopeful that the first scenario was achievable because denuclearisation would decisively depend on whether Washington's ideologically oriented policy toward Pyongyang would change.⁶⁰ After the first round of talks in 2003, seeing that no progress was made, Chinese vice foreign minister Wang Yi lamented that the US-DPRK mistrust ran so deep that it would take years for the talks to attain some positive outcome.⁶¹ Yet to Beijing there was hope that the second best option was worth trying. No party was ready for the worst case scenario of war. If time is given a chance, Beijing clings to the hope that some positive signs may emerge. This is especially valuable to China which is eager to extend the current strategic opportunity period to 2020. Nevertheless the PLA has been prepared for the worst, as is every other participant.

Pressuring the DPRK

Before 2010 there was some chance for the first scenario to be approached because Beijing thought it was possible for Pyongyang to relinquish the nuclear programme if its security needs were met and enough compensation was granted.⁶² In addition Kim Jong-sung promised a number of times to the international community that the DPRK was committed to a non-nuclear Peninsula. Kim Jong-Il repeated this pledge to Hu Jintao in their Summit meetings. Thus ideologically, some justification could be found for Pyongyang to move in the direction of denuclearisation. Therefore, as mentioned earlier, the biggest obstacle would be Pyongyang's security concern: its

⁶⁰ Shao Feng, "The prospects of DPRK nuclear standoff and East Asian security mechanism", *World Economics and Politics*, No. 325, September 2007, p. 12.

⁶¹ *Renmin ribao*, 27 August 2003.

⁶² The majority view of Chinese participants at a workshop on North Korea's nuclear issue in Beijing in January 2004. The event was organised by the 9th Institute of the PLA's General Armament Department.

nuclear programme was meant to deal with a US war of regime change. It was intended to use it inside North Korea to kill large numbers of US soldiers when a war of regime change erupts than to launch it around the region, although the latter is always on the cards. As such the programme is related to DPRK's survival. However, the North also realises the extremely expensive nature of the option of keeping its nuclear weapon ambition. It also contravened Pyongyang's diplomatic priority to break its diplomatic isolation, set by Kim Jong-il personally in the late 1990s.⁶³ The precondition for this is rapprochement with the US. If there is a better mechanism that provides a similar security guarantee for the regime's survival and generates enough economic benefits, it is not entirely impossible for Kim to take it, according to some Chinese analysts who have long worked in Pyongyang. This would be the most cost-effective solution that can be found.⁶⁴ Even seasoned US diplomats long dealing with the North saw possibilities of a solution to the nuclear impasse other than war: "In talks with the North it is possible to break down complex, seemingly insurmountable problems into component parts and then focus on the parts in a logical order, so that successfully dealing with the first (usually the easiest) boosts the chances of dealing with subsequent, more difficult items".⁶⁵

The SPT was first designed to bridge the gap between possibility and possible reality exactly in such a manner. The key to its success is whether and how a security guarantee to Pyongyang can be found, and put in the form of a formal, written and legally binding document collectively reinforced by all parties in the SPT. Pyongyang is eager to improve relations with the US and the nuclear programme is the way with which to engage Washington bilaterally.⁶⁶ North Korea also needs money to finance its economic reforms that have triggered high inflation and public resentment.⁶⁷ Kim is pragmatic enough, though that is disguised by his brinkmanship. He wants to

⁶³ By 2002 Pyongyang had made visible progress in this regard. It realised North-South Summit, official talk with Albright, resumption of diplomatic ties with a number of western countries but now all this was rolled back.

⁶⁴ Wang Zaibang's the 2003 PSNSS Beijing Seminar on Northeast Asian Security in Beijing 12-14 January 2003.

⁶⁵ Testimony of Robert Carlin before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 1 March 2011.

⁶⁶ The remarks of DPRK chief negotiator to Christopher Hill, the US chief negotiator at the six-party talks on 21 December 2006. *Phoenix TV News*, 22 December 2006. And Sun Xiangli, "The Korean nuclear issue and security in East Asia", *World Economics and Politics*, No. 325, September 2007, p. 11.

⁶⁷ John McKay, "How Significant and Effective are North Korea's Market Reforms?" *Global Economic Review*, Vol. 34, no. 1, 2005, pp. 83-97. Marcus Noland, "Famine and Reform in North Korea", *Asian Economic Papers*, Vol. 3. No. 2, pp. 1-40.

extract the most from denuclearisation. China, the US under Bush, the ROK under the previous presidents, and Russia shared the view that if Pyongyang's security and economic needs were met, it would be possible the nuclear programme could be suspended, if not terminated.⁶⁸ Yet to achieve this end the carrot and stick need to be employed cleverly.

China has applied unprecedented pressure on Pyongyang. State Councillor Dai Bingguo and his successor Wang Jiarui, as President Hu's special envoys, repeatedly warned their counterparts about possible US actions if the nuclear standoff continued. They also listed the benefits attached to a mutually acceptable solution.⁶⁹ Pyongyang's nuclear adventure forces the US to make a choice between maintaining the state quo in the Peninsula and maintaining its strategic interests globally (e.g., preventing WMD proliferation by all means). If the latter option is taken it may induce US actions that may destabilise the region and hurt Chinese interests. In such a scenario Pyongyang could not expect Chinese help.⁷⁰ Economic pressure has also been employed cleverly. The unannounced stoppage of energy supply for three days in 2003 may have conveyed a message that Pyongyang could not ignore.⁷¹ Many analysts interpreted this to be Beijing's measure to force North Korea to join the three-party talks in April 2003 in Beijing, against the latter's insistence on bilateral talks with the US.⁷² In order to resume the SPT in the Spring of 2008, delayed by the North's declaration of enrichment of nuclear material, Wang Jiarui expressed the Chinese frustration face to face with Kim Jong-Il on 30 January 2008. He said that "There could have been progress in the SPT but now not the case". This compelled Kim to reply that "Delay was temporary and difficulties can be resolved soon. And

⁶⁸ This was the view expressed by a high level delegation from China Institute of International and Strategic Studies in a Roundtable with Asia-Australia Institute, Sydney. 24 July 2003. See also Zhang Liankui, "A good beginning and the future long and arduous journey", *World Affairs*, no. 18, 2003, p. 20.

⁶⁹ Professor Thomas Christensen revealed that when he was assistant secretary of the State such a "message of necessary actions" was repeatedly conveyed to Beijing and the latter took it seriously and passed onto Pyongyang in all meetings at the senior level. His talks at NUS and NTU, Singapore, 18 and 19 January 2011.

⁷⁰ Numerous articles about US military plans against the North have been published in Chinese news media. For instance, Zhang Liangui, "The escalation of North Korea's nuclear issue?", *World Affairs* (Shijie zhishi), no. 12, 2003, p. 23.

⁷¹ Gregory Moore, "How North Korea Threatens China's Interests", *International Relations of Asia-Pacific*, October 2007.

⁷² The event was excused on the repair of transportation facilities. Chinese diplomats claimed that three-day stoppage was not important because China's supply was calculated on the monthly basis. Talks with a senior Chinese official in Seoul in November 2003.

then the SPT would move forward”.⁷³ As special envoy of Hu Jintao, Wang clearly meant to put pressure on the DPRK leader.

Persuading the US

China is clear that its pressure on the US to provide a security pledge to Pyongyang contravenes the US’ ultimate objective towards North Korea. Yet this clash of strategic interests is reconciled by the expedient short-term policy convergence of both sides to stop the North’s nuclear programme on the one hand and on the other hand Washington’s lack of any alternative beyond negotiation.⁷⁴ The US is still embroiled in the war against terror. The Chinese point out that Pyongyang’s nuclear programme itself does not pose an immediate and direct security threat to China, as it is more a problem for the US and the ROK. The threat of nuclear confrontation comes more from military actions against the North than from a suicidal attack by the latter.⁷⁵ One conventional argument is that a nuclear North Korea would stimulate Japan to go nuclear. Beijing sees Japan already at the nuclear threshold. The difference brought about by Pyongyang’s nuclear initiative is more in form than in substance.⁷⁶ Yet a unified nuclear Korea close to China may galvanise Japan to accelerate its process of “normalisation” and seek tightened military ties with the US. Certainly a nuclear free peninsula is an unshakable goal but the matter is not as urgent to Beijing as to the US.⁷⁷

China has tried hard to convince the US that its North Korea policy should not be built upon the presumption that Kim’s regime would collapse soon. Beijing and Washington may share the prognosis that the DPRK faces a long-term crisis that may lead to gradual collapse. Yet Beijing always believes that it is naive to think that

⁷³ “Kim Jong-Il promised not to turn his back on DPRK-China friendship”, *Chosun Ibo*, 1 February 2008.

⁷⁴ This has been clearly explained by former US chief negotiator James Kelly in “Fact Sheet”, by James Kelly and Victor Cha, *PacNet Newsletter*, no. 18, 13 March 2008.

⁷⁵ Li Kaisheng, “A quantitative analysis on Chinese influence on Korean nuclear standoff”, *World Economics and Politics*, No. 320, April 2007, p. 50.

⁷⁶ It is well known that Japan can develop nuclear weapons in a short period of time. Garret Glaser, “Chinese Apprehension about the Revitalization of the US-Japan Alliance”, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 37, no. 4, 1997. The Chinese view, see Li Jian & Li Yulin, “Japan: nuclear weapons within easy reach”, *Neibucanque*, No. 40, 2005, pp.39-40.

⁷⁷ Colonel Wang Yisheng’s paper to workshop *Security Cooperation and the Tension in the Korean Peninsula*, organised by the Ninth Institute, Beijing, November 2007.

economic crisis would trigger the fall of the regime.⁷⁸ Pyongyang's fundamental weakness is that the whole system hinges on the health of one person. In 2001 when Kim Jong-Il had a serious car accident, the sign of such an eventuality loomed but Kim recovered remarkably. Although his walk was not steady when he greeted ROK president Roh Moo-hyun in October 2007, it is still premature to base any serious policies on his quick departure.⁷⁹ Formulating crisis management plans and preparing to cope with the DPRK on a long-term basis underlined Beijing's strategy that Bush began to share in his last years in office but Obama has other ideas. Beijing's logic is that if the DPRK will not fall soon it is highly risky for Washington to implement a DPRK policy primarily centered on military-pressure.

The US' active participation in the SPT before the North's 2010 adventurism reflected Washington's position that a negotiated solution was for the time being the only feasible way to resolve the nuclear standoff. But US-DPRK mistrust prevented a road-map from being drawn up easily. For instance, Bush's "axis of evil" rhetoric was said to be more an expression of indignation than a practical policy.⁸⁰ Yet this could hardly convince the North that naturally linked the indictment to continued intrusion of US military aircraft into its air space, about 160 to 170 times a month, in 2007. In February 2008 the sorties reached over 200, sliding back to 170 in March. To Pyongyang the purpose of the intrusion was clear: to identify key targets for a strike.⁸¹ With profound US-DPRK ideological clash, North Koreans logically believe that one US administration's security guarantee may not be honoured by another. The form of negotiation, bilateral or multilateral, may not matter so long as the US offers a legal commitment to Kim's regime. Pyongyang's security concern is something that cannot be circumvented.⁸² Chinese analysts pointed out the different interpretation of the 17 February 2006 resolution by the US and North Korea. According to the formula of "promise for promise and action for action", Pyongyang ceased Plutonium production

⁷⁸ The view of Chinese delegates to the international conference on Northeast Security in Fudan University, Shanghai, 14-16 December 2006.

⁷⁹ The car accident was revealed by major general Lu Guangye, China's former military attaché to Tokyo and Pyongyang, the Roundtable Talk in Asia-Australia Institute, Sydney. 24 July 2003.

⁸⁰ James Kelly's talk in Phoenix TV.

⁸¹ This unconfirmed monthly report is by North Korea's *Central News Agency* in the end of each month and is carried in newspapers in China and South Korea. *Daily Affairs*, 30 September 2007. Also MARPAC'S INDO-Pacific Intelligence Brief, Canadian Navy, 30 April 2008.

⁸² Remarks by Chinese foreign minister Li Zhaoxin in Seoul on 16 August 2003. *Global Times*, 18 August 2003, p. 24.

in exchange for its removal from the list of countries sponsoring terrorism. The discrepancy has become a deadlock for further actions by the DPRK. China's persuasion of the US to remove the North from the terrorist list finally paid off as the North destroyed the cooling tower of its Yongbyon base. Yet neither side agreed to move a step further. Beijing hoped to see US reciprocity of issuing a written security guarantee for Pyongyang to declare its uranium stock.⁸³ In a way the key to the success of the SPT is dependent on America's domestic politics. A written security guarantee is the minimum to satisfy Kim, as it is harder to be negated in the future. It matches the demand on the DPRK's complete, irreversible and verifiable denuclearisation. Now it seems that such a goal has become unattainable.

The nature and functions of the SPT

The function of the SPT process lies in its collective pressure on the party violating the joint agreement.⁸⁴ In organising the SPT Beijing conveyed a message to the US that the US had wielded enough stick. It was necessary for it to extend the carrot more. For some time the SPT was more about pursuing talks as a way of crisis management than seeking a resolution until the 9/19 Accord was reached in the fourth round on 19 September 2004. Pyongyang reiterated its commitment of denuclearisation. The successful September meeting in 2007 drew a roadmap for an eventual solution that could accommodate both Pyongyang's "simultaneous principle" and US demand for "disabling/inspection first". It paved the way for all the parties to seek common ground, the guideline set by Chinese State Councilor Tang Jiaxuan for the SPT at its inception.⁸⁵ The DPRK's promise to disable its nuclear facilities was the result of the hard work by all participants, and especially the result of Washington's new thinking on the issue, which, due to Chinese persuasion, finally agreed to talk directly with Pyongyang on the bilateral basis.

One of China's designs for the SPT is to meet the DPRK's request in way that the participants would collectively assure Pyongyang's security needs once it terminates its nuclear programme. At the same time the collective efforts would raise the level of

⁸³ Oral sources from Beijing's North Korea specialists, Beijing September 2010.

⁸⁴ The talk between Wang Yi, Chinese deputy foreign minister with his Russian counter-part in Moscow on 13 August 2003. During the talk the two diplomats discussed the possibility of China and Russia providing additional guarantee to make up what the US could not commit itself. *Global Times*, 15 August 2003.

⁸⁵ "Tang sets the goal for the SPT", *Global Times*, 3 September 2003, p. 16.

pressure on North Korea, as the parties are chief states to provide economic assistance and hold the key to its long term survival. The US was also helped by the SPT whose multilateral security pledge to Pyongyang, not a US unilateral one as requested by the North, would shield the White House from domestic outcry. Secondly until recently Washington had taken a firm position that it would not negotiate with the DPRK directly. The SPT has provided a face-saving mechanism for the US which has engaged the DPRK in the Forum on a bilateral basis. The private meetings between US and DPRK representatives were the key to the progress made so far, and the current suspension of the bilateral contact certainly helped worsen the situation in the Peninsula. This underlined the reason why Beijing issued an urgent call to hold heads of delegation meetings in November 2010.⁸⁶

One basic principle of the SPT is that no party should take actions to worsen the existing tension in the peninsula. Although not legally binding, this principle is mostly applicable to Pyongyang, and to a degree, to Washington as well. For the former, this meant that no new nuclear programme should be mounted. Beijing's harsh reaction to the North's nuclear test reflects its indignation at Pyongyang's deliberate violation of this commonly agreed rules of the game. For the latter, this may have the effect of pursuing Washington not to disrupt the denuclearisation process with unilateral measures. This is why Beijing criticised America's heavy-handedness in freezing Kim Jong-II's bank account in Macau in 2006 as being unnecessary and unconstructive. This Chinese objective was then positively shared by Russia and South Korea. Then the Chinese asked the US delegates a sharp question: which was your priority, denuclearising the North or embarrassing Kim Jong-II?⁸⁷

After North Korea's nuclear test the SPT was tasked with a new function: to determine whether Pyongyang should be punished according to UN Resolution 1718. The Chinese clearly told Pyongyang that whether or not it would return to the Talks would be interpreted as its continued commitment to denuclearisation or its refusal to

⁸⁶ Wu Dawei, head of Chinese delegation to the SPT called an emergency meeting of the heads of SPT in order to ease tension after the Yeonyeong shelling, *The New China News Agency*, 29 November 2010.

⁸⁷ Talk with Chinese diplomats in Beijing, December 2007.

cooperate with the other SPT partners.⁸⁸ This new function underlined the fact that so far there has not been real Chinese punishing action against Pyongyang since the test, as Pyongyang indeed returned to the Forum later. After declaring permanent withdrawal from the talks in 2009, the North announced again that it would return to the SPT unconditionally in late 2010, after Dai Bangguo's visit to Pyongyang. To Beijing at this conjuncture it matters more for the SPT to be kept alive than to have it deliver denuclearization.

The Zig-zag course

To the Chinese analysts the SPT alone is inadequate to bring about the real outcome. The ultimate success is dependent on whether the two core players, Pyongyang and Washington, can normalise their relations, the most effective encouragement for the DPRK to take the decisive move of denuclearisation. Yet since it is hard to imagine that the US would give up its regime-change strategy against the DPRK altogether, Pyongyang may retain its nuclear option or a proportion of nuclear fuel, even though it disabled its Yongbyon facilities.⁸⁹ Other parties also pursue different priorities in the SPT that have further obstructed its already slow progress. For instance, Japan demands the SPT process be linked to the abduction issue. It put a lot of pressure on the US not to remove North Korea from the list of countries sponsoring terrorism if the kidnapping impasse was not resolved to its satisfaction.⁹⁰

Both China and the US have stressed peaceful means to phase out Pyongyang's nuclear programme. Yet in Beijing's hierarchy of missions for the SPT, denuclearisation is secondary to war avoidance. Beijing is serious about Pyongyang's warning that anything short of a negotiated settlement would escalate the nuclear

⁸⁸ Both Chinese Ambassador Wang Guangya and British ambassador Jones Parry saw DPRK's participation in the Talks as sufficient compliance to this end. See Julia Choi and Karin Lee, *North Korea: Economic Sanctions and US Department of Treasure Actions*, Washington: The National Committee on North Korea, p. 19, 18 October 2006.

⁸⁹ Even after Pyongyang disabled its nuclear facilities, Chinese nuclear experts still believed that it would keep nuclear materials, declared or otherwise. See Liu Gongliang, "Comments on the Goal of Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula", paper to *The Fifth Security and Cooperation in Northeast Asia & Pugwash Workshop on North-East Asian Security*, Beijing, 2 September 2007.

⁹⁰ Hill made it clear that the US negotiation team had to consider Japanese position very seriously. It would rather accept the failure of the SPT than losing Japan, his Sydney talk with us June 2008.

tension to the point of war, which would be disastrous for China.⁹¹ So the means is as important as the end. In contrast emphasis on war aversion may contravene Washington's top priority regarding the goals of the SPT, namely, the North must remain nuclear free. US leaders may see military option as a non-option when it entered the SPT in 2003 but preparation for preemptive strikes has never ceased, and may eventually become something doable and applicable, if the mechanism of the SPT fails, or Pyongyang is thrown into chaos.⁹² Maximising pressure is indispensable to bring Pyongyang to come to terms with reality that no state in Asia wants to see a nuclear DPRK. Inevitably this can be realised only through maintaining a level of military threat. So for the US surgical strikes against the DPRK's nuclear facilities cannot be ruled out.⁹³

The sequence of priorities has profound impact on the fate of the SPT. The principle of war avoidance is sensible and welcomed by Japan, Russia and South Korea. Yet this may have helped Pyongyang's stalling tactics.⁹⁴ Moreover, the emphasis on peaceful means propelled Beijing to echo Pyongyang's security concerns. As a result, Beijing regarded a formal US security guarantee not only necessary but essential for an ultimate resolution. Yet this is the last thing that any incumbent US leader will deliver. Last but not least a peaceful solution would logically have China in favour of the DPRK's emphasis on a phased and parallel process leading to a balanced settlement: Pyongyang's disabling its Yongbyon facilities in exchange for other parties' energy aid; full declaration of its nuclear material for removal of it from the US list of states sponsoring terrorism, and complete denuclearisation in parallel to the normalised US-DPRK relations plus enough compensation. This may be done through an interim phase of freezing. Ultimately denuclearization would result a North/South peace deal and US-DPRK diplomatic relations. Clearly in this road map there was a big gap between the US agenda of containment against the North and what Pyongyang was willing to do.

⁹¹ Jin Canrong's talk with *Focus of Today* (A CCTV Current Affairs Programme), 26 February 2005.

⁹² In February 2003 Bush informed Jiang Zeming that if negotiation could not denuclearise North Korea he would use air strike to destroy its nuclear facilities. See his autobiography, *Decision Points*, 2011. Condoleezza Rice made it clear in March 2005 that it was about time to consider other options to deal with North Korea. *Washington Files*, 23 March 2005.

⁹³ "To forestall or prevent such hostile acts by our adversaries, the US will, if necessary, act preemptively", *National Security Strategy*, September 2002.

⁹⁴ Masako Ikegami, "Anatomy of North Korean Nuclear Crisis", *PRIME*, No. 19, 2004.

The US had somewhat tolerated Pyongyang's stalling method. In comparison Iran was a more urgent challenge for the moment. More fundamentally, if any solution to the nuclear standoff was linked to US security guarantee and economic aid to the DPRK, it would be politically incorrect and ideologically unacceptable in domestic politics. The White House needed time to weigh its options. Some Chinese diplomats saw US move to freeze the DPRK's account in Banco Delta Bank in Macau in November 2005 from this angle.⁹⁵

It is still not clear how the sudden change of minds occurred in both capitals that resulted in independent bilateral talks outside the SPT. In 2007/2008 Bush went the additional length to construct a positive environment for progress in the SPT. He wrote a personal letter to Kim Jong-Il, addressing him as Excellency. Hill defined the concert of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra in Pyongyang as carefully arranged show of good-will of the US.⁹⁶ Speculatively there could be many explanations. Kim Jong-Il was influenced by considerations of political succession, troubled economic reforms, the US election year and rising displeasure with China. He was eager to see an early rapprochement with the US as the break point for the DPRK to end its international isolation. If the nuclear test was actually Kim's hard ball to force the US to respond to his call for bilateral contact quickly, he was relatively successful, as after the test the US-DPRK talks were conducted more vigorously for a while.⁹⁷ Despite strong resistance at home, Ambassador Hill took decisive steps to engage with Pyongyang to clear the way for the positive results in the September round of the SPT in 2007.⁹⁸ It is doubtful whether sanctions would quicken the regime collapse but if China and South Korea tighten their aid programmes, the DPRK's future will become more precarious. North Korea is in an unprecedented economic crisis. For instance, most of its power stations were either closed or operating limited hours. This was behind Kim Jong-il's concessions in the Talks in 2007, such as declaring all its

⁹⁵ Li Kaisheng, p. 50.

⁹⁶ "Hill: the concert of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra a show of good-will of the US", *Chosun Ibo*, 23 February 2008.

⁹⁷ "Responding to North Korea's Nuclear Challenge", special report of the Council on Foreign Relations. Washington DC, 2003.

⁹⁸ Hill's talk in US Sydney General Consulate, in June 2008.

nuclear programmes before the end of the year and terminating them eventually. In fact Pyongyang is no longer financially capable of running the Yongbyon facilities.⁹⁹

The SPT is dead, long live the SPT?

On 30 September 2007 China drafted a resolution for the sixth round of the SPT that marked the stage from action to action finally getting off the ground. The US removed the DPRK from the list of terrorist states after disabling Yongbyon. The international community hailed the visible progress in the talks. For a while the whole issue seemed to be reduced to that of how to deal with some 50 kilograms of nuclear fuel that the DPRK had extracted from Yongbyon.¹⁰⁰ However, heavy doubt remained whether the agreement could be implemented to the satisfaction of other five parties. PLA researchers demanded that these plans should include nuclear materials production, nuclear weapons programmes and nuclear test programmes. Since these are inter-related to each other, they had to be declared together.¹⁰¹ Here registration of nuclear materials is particularly difficult, as there is no transparency whatsoever on this issue. For instance, Pyongyang announced it had a uranium programme but later denied that it had produced uranium,¹⁰² and announced again in 2010 that it would reinstate uranium enrichment programmes.

From the very beginning the SPT has been a fragile process whose sudden demise remains a constant possibility. Pyongyang has been in and out of the talk a number of times. Total denuclearisation is out of the question because it would wash away the North's expensive efforts of three decades and deprive it of an effective weapon to deal with a regime change war. And all nuclear materials and programmes are under the military's control. Denuclearisation may hurt Kim's key constituency. Clearly Kim has never been serious about denuclearisation. In addition the fate of the talks is subject to many external factors, or put in another way the overall environment in which the SPT is conducted. Under Roh the Sunshine Policy eased the tension in the Peninsula and created necessary preconditions for Kim to come to terms with the demands from other parties in the talks. However, as far as Pyongyang is concerned,

⁹⁹ Oral sources from PLA researchers on North Korean nuclear programme in Beijing, 2004.

¹⁰⁰ Hill's talk in Sydney, June 2008.

¹⁰¹ Liu Gongliang, p. 3.

¹⁰² This was made public by the spokesman of North Korea foreign ministry on 28 March 2008. *CCTV* 29 March 2008.

Lee Myung-bak's hostility and enhanced US-ROK military exercises ended the possibility of any further progress in reconciliation between the two Koreas. Moreover, there is little doubt that the North was cheating on its nuclear programmes and materials, as seen from ROK perspective. After all that happened in 2010 in the Peninsula the inherently shaky common ground on which the SPT was premised was fundamentally eroded. For instance, the primary driving force for the SPT had been the consensus of the five parties that the military option was a non-option for the denuclearisation. Then Pyongyang was in a position to bargain. Now that this foundation has been decisively undermined, the US and its allies are exploring other means to disarm Pyongyang. The rules of the game have changed completely.

Kim Jong-Il's visit to Beijing in May: the SPT again?

Beijing's effort to restore the SPT process has been its primary design to repair the damage to stability in the Peninsula. The further suspension of the SPT may save the Kim hereditary succession a catch-22 dilemma: denuclearization causes disgruntlement from the KPA, the primary power base of Kim Jong-un but Pyongyang's failure to honor its SPT promises would attract heightened pressure from other parties in the Talk, especially China. And China's displeasure would not be helpful to Kim's dynastic transfer of power. The boycott of the SPT by Seoul gives Pyongyang a badly need excuse to stall the process. Although Beijing sees the fact that Kim Jong-il would never allow complete denuclearization to take place, the SPT as a mechanism of crisis management should not demise.¹⁰³ As no party was ready for war due to the nuclear issue, a multilateral security forum, even in the form of being a talk shop, has its values if no better alternative can be found. So the means is as important as the end.

During Kim Jong-il's latest trip to China in 20-26 May 2011, Beijing has exercised subtle pressure on Kim for the purpose, including linking support to Kim Jong-un to this denuclearisation. As far as Beijing is concerned the success of Hu-Kim summit

¹⁰³ Shao Feng, "The prospects of DPRK nuclear standoff and Northeast Asian security mechanism", *World Economics and Politics*, No. 325, September 2007, p. 12.

could be measured by Kim's stated commitment to return to the SPT at an early date. In official occasions Kim reiterated a non-nuclear stance repeatedly.¹⁰⁴

This is a package of four major themes Beijing set for Kim's visit: increased economic aid (promised fund increased from \$US 100 million to 300 million), expressed support for Kim's succession plan, the North's denuclearization and resumption of the SPT, and Beijing's assistance for North Korea in revitalizing its economy through a catered cluster of reform programs. China has purposefully connected the four with a thread of economic and political aid (more monetary assistance and vocal support to Kim Jong-un). While the other three are routine and long-term based, North Korea's return to the SPT was considered as immediate and relatively easy to be realized.¹⁰⁵ In fact Beijing's consent for Kim Jong-il's May trip to China at this sensitive moment was linked to his promised return to the SPT and denuclearization. Wen Jiabao made some surprise remarks in Tokyo on 22 May 2011 that Pyongyang had to show some sincerity in denuclearization before the SPT was resumed.¹⁰⁶

Coping with the Prospects of A Second Korean War

The Korean crisis in 2010 deepened China's DPRK dilemma in that it happened at a time the North was in trouble of an unprecedented scale. At the same time the emergin strategic bipolar realignment between China and the US was also intensified in the year when the US "return to Asia" under a new strategy of "constraining China through regional countries", to use Nye's prescription, was to pick sides in the disputes between China and its neighbours. And this bipolar realignment sudden reveals Pyongyang's new value of a bargain chip for China in East Asia's geopolitics and major power rivalry. Certainly there is a danger of using the DPRK vis-à-vis the enhanced US-ROK-Japan trilateral security arrangement but it is an element in Beijing's rationality of its neutrality.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ A summary of Chinese media coverage of Kim's trip to China, sources from the CCTV, the *Xinhua News Agency*, *Ta Kong Pao* (Hong Kong) and *Phoenix TV* news and current affairs.

¹⁰⁵ Information to me from Beijing's North Korea specialists on 2 June 2011.

¹⁰⁶ Wen's talk in the trilateral annual meeting between China, Japan and South Korea on 22 May 2011, *Xinhua News Agency* and also *Phoenix TV Focus on the News of the day*, 23 May 2011.

¹⁰⁷ You Ji "Meeting the Challenge of Asia's Changing Security Environment: China's Response to the New Threats", in Eiichi Katahara & others (eds.), *Security Outlook of the Asia Pacific Countries and Its Implications for the Defense Sector*", Tokyo: National Institute for Defense Studies, 2011.

Beijing's rationality in propping up North Korea

Specifically China's current DPRK dilemma is twofold: maintain the status quo through helping the North's survival; and cope with the enhanced US-ROC alliance since the Cheonan Incident has helped bring the US military to get close to China. Beijing's biggest dilemma is to prop up a regime it does not like at all. It is caught in the cross fire between the two Koreas and is a victim of Pyongyang's provocations but has to swallow the bitter pill. Despite Lee Myung-bak's personal plea for Beijing to take a fair stance on the Yeonyeong incident, Beijing has been muted on the shelling, although Chinese security experts criticised Pyongyang for causing civilian casualties.¹⁰⁸ China simply called both sides to be calm and de-escalate the tension. This non-differentiated treatment of the responsibilities of the confrontation is not acceptable to Seoul. In fact the Cheonan and Yeonyeong events substantially narrowed Chinese choice in interacting with both Koreas. Pyongyang strongly resisted Beijing's interference when it planned adventurism. The ROK brought the US navy in the Yellow Sea, which exerted profound military and domestic impact on Chinese strategic thinking.¹⁰⁹ The carrier group's combat zone of the exercise is only 170 KM away from Chinese territories. Its 1,000km striking distance brings Beijing well under a direct attack, and its spy planes J-STARSs not only monitored North Korea's troop movements but also China's.

The question then is why Beijing has taken a "neutral stance" to the clash, which amounts to rendering support to the DPRK which was widely blamed for causing the trouble. Chinese analysts do not see the North's provocations the way they were depicted in the West. To many Chinese, Russians and South Koreans the North's part in the Cheonan Incident was not proven beyond reasonable doubt.¹¹⁰ For instance, the alleged torpedo that sank the ROK's warship was larger than the tube in the North's mini-submarine. This reminded people of the OJ Simpson's case that the key

¹⁰⁸ Shen Dingli, "Ending the Tension", www.china.org, November 27, 2010.

¹⁰⁹ General Ma Xiaotian, deputy chief of general staff, voiced PLA view on the drills several times with the wording such as "China would be firmly opposed to such exercises at the country's door-step. "It would be an act happening at a wrong time and in wrong place. His remarks in the *Shangri-la Dialogue* in Singapore in May 2010.

¹¹⁰ It is interesting to note even some Japanese analysts saw Seoul's accusation based on scant evidence. See for instance, Tanaka Sakai, "The Japanese-China Conflict: the Senkaku/Diaoyutai Islands Clash", *Global Research*, 6 October 2010.

evidence, the glove, did not fit with his hand.¹¹¹ Even though Beijing saw the logic in the North's involvement, the sinking was not an isolated act but one in a series of active-reactive retaliations in disputed waters. And the Yeonyeong shelling was Pyongyang's response to repeated war games at its door-steps. It was disproportionate but happened in a context.¹¹²

However, the rationality above is not the primary key to understanding Beijing's "neutrality". The key is its genuine worry of the DPRK's survival. China's immediate logic of security interests in Korea would have pitted it against the North's adventurism. Put in another way Beijing knows clearly that its "neutrality" was a bad choice but under the circumstances other choices may be worse, if these contributed to Pyongyang's collapse. China, as with other regional states, is not ready to cope with the fall-out of a major crisis in the Peninsula. The DPRK is at its most precarious period of time: domestically the failed financial reform in 2010 deepened its economic crisis. The on-going succession issue may trigger fragmentation of the political system, as Kim Jong-II's divide-and-rule mechanism causes inevitable elite power struggle. Externally, Pyongyang faces mounting security pressure, as Washington and Seoul start to contemplate military option to solve the DPRK challenge, reflected by the idea that denuclearising North Korea is possible only through regime change, not negotiations. Preserving the DPRK from collapse serves Beijing's overall security needs. In dealing with a US-led encirclement effort against China,¹¹³ North Korea could be used to counter balance the effort. Neutrality is thus a means to an end not the end in itself. Although the price thus paid is very high, it is still the lesser of the two evils.

The enhanced US-ROK military alliance in 2010 indirectly posed a security challenge to Beijing's vital interests on two fronts: the mounting prospects of war in the Peninsula; and as an integral part of the US-led collective hedging measures against China's rise. Washington and Seoul used to share China's strategic objectives in the Peninsula: war aversion. Toward the late 1990s the US had come to a conclusion that

¹¹¹ Oral sources with a Chinese defense expert in Singapore, December 2010.

¹¹² Shen Dingli, November 27, 2010.

¹¹³ On this encirclement, see, John Garver and Feiling Wang, "China's Anti-Encirclement Struggle", *Asian Security*, Vol. 6, No. 3, 2010.

military option was non-option in dealing with Pyongyang.¹¹⁴ This understanding underlined America's entry into the SPT in 2003. Yet Lee Myung-bak has pursued a pressure-oriented DPRK policy through terminating the "Sun-shine policy". Now military pressure has again been considered useful to break the deadlock and is being translated into practical policies.¹¹⁵ For instance, the endless military drills can entrap Pyongyang to take silly actions that can justify the military option as a solution. Lee's Liberation Day Address on 15 August 2010 sanctioned a new unification model beyond "crisis management", which means comprehensive preparation for sudden collapse of the DPRK now. For this he proposed serious study of a reunification tax to get financially ready for absorbing the North, with a sum of \$US 2.14 trillion in three decades.¹¹⁶ Militarily this year's Ulchi Freedom Guardian joint US-ROK Exercise was not only the largest in scale but with a specific goal of dealing with an all-out North-South war.¹¹⁷ The exploration of bringing down Pyongyang through military tension is at odds with long-time Beijing-Washington-Seoul joint effort of achieving a "soft-landing" as a way of reunification in the Peninsula. The immediate tripartite tacit agreement on war avoidance in the Peninsula seems to have been broken.

Beijing has long worried that forward US military presence in the Sino-Korean border areas would open a new direction of battle against China should a coastal war erupt in the Taiwan direction.¹¹⁸ This time the US not only has dispatched an aircraft carrier but also nuclear submarines to China's proximity. Chinese analysts saw this as intimidation of the PLA, although rhetorically directed against Pyongyang. The act was out of proportion and may hurt Beijing's willingness to cooperate with the US in reining in North Korea.¹¹⁹ Logically the war exercises could be interpreted as an answer to the question whether a military option against the DPRK is now seen as a potential option. In a way the PLA would regard it as repetition of the US sending

¹¹⁴ Former DoD secretary William Perry's speech to the specialist workshop *Military Alliance in the Post-Cold War Era* in Tokyo, 2-6 December 1998. I and other participants asked him this question on the military option, as he just fulfilled Clinton's request to review US Korea policy.

¹¹⁵ Tim Beal, "Korean Brinkmanship, American Provocation, and the Road to War: the Manufacturing of a Crisis", *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, Vol. 8, Issue 51 No. 1, December 2010.

¹¹⁶ "Lee Lays Out 3-Stage Master Plan for Reunification", *The Chosun Ilbo*, 16 August 2010.

¹¹⁷ "Sudden Reunification "would cost \$2.1 Trillion", *The Chosun Ilbo*, 16 August 2010.

¹¹⁸ Shen Dingli: "North Korea's Strategic Significance to China", *China Security*, Autumn 2006, pp. 19-34.

¹¹⁹ "中國明確反對美韓黃海軍演" (China firmly opposed US-ROK naval drills in the Yellow Sea), 大公報 (*To Kung Pao*), 2 July 2010.

aircraft carriers to the Taiwan Strait in 1996, an event that only stimulated the PLA to accelerate its military build up in response to the new security environment.

The PLA has been called to better prepare for any worst case scenarios in the worsening North-South confrontation: small or large scale armed clashes with possible use of nuclear weapons, the North's regime collapse due to the failed succession, waves of refugees and escalation of a nuclear crisis.¹²⁰ The heightened tension in the Peninsula has led to new counter measures by the PLA, including the unprecedented number of live fire joint military exercises in the Yellow Sea; the strengthening of the 16th Group Army with anti-nuclear and chemical warfare units; planned imposition of the border no-entry zone in case of need; and troop reinforcement in Northeast China. Yet what is not in the plan is any pre-emptive action, as the action guidance is mainly responsive.

Chinese Influence on the DPRK

China is under new pressure to rein in Pyongyang. This raises an old question of how much influence Beijing has on the DPRK. Given China's substantial economic aid to the DPRK, which includes 70% of all food aid and up to 80% of its energy needs,¹²¹ its influence is logically considerable. More concretely this amounts to one million tons of grain and 0.5 million tons of heavy oil, constituting over half of China's entire foreign aid.¹²² Yet using economic aid to change North Korea's behavior is a one-off and irreversible weapon, as it is linked to the DPRK's survival. Because of its serious nature if China suspends aid and causes a grave crisis in the country, China would replace the US as Pyongyang's number one enemy. In a way punishing Pyongyang through cutting aid may mean China punishing itself. China would rather prefer to reserve the punitive rights than using it.

Fundamentally what emboldens Kim Jong-Il is his understanding that none of his neighbours has the stomach for war. Although Washington weighs a military solution

¹²⁰ "The signals conveyed by inspections of CMC leaders" (军委领导战区调研传递重要信息), *Wen Huibao* (文汇报), 29 June 2010.

¹²¹ Ether Pan, "The China-North Korea Relationship", *Council on Foreign Relations Brief Paper*, 11 July, 2006.

¹²² Y.W. Kihl & H.N. Kim, *North Korea: the Politics of Survival*, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2006, p. 197.

vis-à-vis Pyongyang, it is still highly reluctant to use force, which is opposed not only by China but also by its ally, the ROK and probably Japan. Yet this confused signal of war avoidance on the one hand and heightened military pressure on the other partially becomes the stimulant for Pyongyang to make provocations short of real war actions. Under the circumstances what Beijing can do against this brinkmanship from both sides is limited. In early June 1999 Kim Yong-nam, the DPRK's deputy chief of the state, visited Beijing. When he was received by Jiang Zemin, he formally raised a request for Chinese support to "teach the South a lesson", referring to the North's planned action of retaliation against the South's navy in the disputed area in the Western Sea. Jiang categorically refused the plea on the spot. Just a week after Kim Yong-nam returned to Pyongyang, the first serious armed clash took place and this alarmed the Chinese. In the subsequent meetings between senior officers, the two sides reached an agreement that the North had to notify China about any military actions vis-à-vis the ROK.¹²³ It is obvious that Pyongyang did not even bother to consider informing Beijing prior to the actions it took in 2010. And its adventurism put Beijing in an awkward position afterwards. This effectively showed the level of influence Beijing has had on the North if the former continues to be bound to the idea of war aversion. However, if one analysed the softening of the North's provocations vis-à-vis the ROK, such as making no military move against the latter's retaliatory artillery drill in the Yeoncheon Island, one could detect the Chinese influence, although it is not clear what concrete measures Beijing had used to pressure Pyongyang in December 2010. Moreover, despite the influence China has over the DPRK, it has no control over US/ROK actions against the North, i.e., through sanctions and war exercises. Therefore, Beijing is not in a strong position to prevent the North's response to US/ROK pressure, which is sometimes in the form of provocations.

Conclusion

Beijing's Korean policy is ad hoc due very much to the unpredictability of Kim Jong-Il. It has to readjust its approach constantly. But on the whole its emphasis on maintaining the status-quo, war aversion and Pyongyang's regime survival has

¹²³ Speech by a senior researcher of the Beijing Institute of Contemporary International Relations at the specialist workshop *The PRC at Fifty: Towards a Responsible Power*, Australian National University, Canberra, 29 October 1999.

remained unchanged and will remain so in the foreseeable future, unless the failed succession in Pyongyang or large-scale armed reaction from the US and its allies force substantial policy alteration in Beijing. However, Beijing is facing a major challenge in carrying out this status quo-centered guidance which is defined by two key elements: North Korea free of nuclear weapons and the US refraining itself from launching any regime-change war against Pyongyang. Although a sensible approach, the challenge comes from two fronts: the DPRK will cling to its nuclear power; and the US and its allies will be more inclined to unseat the Kim dynasty after the Cheonan and Yeonyeong events, most likely through armed confrontation. Beijing's choices will become increasingly narrower and harder in the years to come. It is high time for Beijing to review its overall DPRK strategy.

In addition Beijing also faces a huge dilemma in regard to its handling of the DPRK. Pyongyang violates almost all China's vital national interests but it has to prop it up at all cost. This underlined Beijing's so-called "neutrality" after the two armed clashes in the Peninsula in 2010, and it risked isolation in the region. However, China's response may be self-hurting but seen from a bigger picture it may be rational and sensible. Clearly it was a bad choice but other choices may be worse in terms of unwanted consequences due to the fallout from a sudden collapse of the DPRK regime. Therefore, China had to stick to its current passive DPRK policy, while creating conditions and making preparation for any future change, gradual or sudden. There is no doubt that Sino-DPRK relations are in flux. Sooner rather than later Beijing has to formulate an alternative vis-à-vis Pyongyang and it is actually in search of a better option.

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