



## A Chinese View of the North Korean Nuclear Crisis

Pan Zhenqiang

### Summary

*Despite strong global opposition, North Korea is the only country in the world that has conducted nuclear weapon tests in the 21st century. China remains a decisive force to stabilize the situation in the region, and perhaps the only actor able to bring all the parties concerned back to the negotiation table. But China's role cannot replace the obligations of other important parties, particularly North Korea and the United States. The nuclear crisis is in essence a bilateral dispute between these two countries and both need to display strong political will to negotiate a peaceful solution. The ball is really in the US court. Unfortunately, the incoming Trump administration in 2017 is believed to be a wild card in this respect.*

1. Ever since the world entered its new millennium, the acquisition of a nuclear weapons capability by North Korea has given rise to one of the worst nuclear proliferation crises in the history of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Despite the strong opposition of the international community, North Korea is the only country in the world that has conducted nuclear weapon tests in the 21st century – and to date it has conducted five tests. It is also illegally developing a long-range missile capability. Whether the nuclear crisis is to be resolved could become one of the defining factors in the shaping of the future security landscape of Northeast Asia, and the Korean Peninsula in particular. The present paper provides a Chinese perspective on the historical as well as current strategic context in which this issue arose, and a series of related questions, including how it should be best addressed, the role China plays, and the inherent constraining fac-

tors in its efforts of denuclearization on the peninsula. The paper concludes with a brief discussion on the future prospect of the nuclear issue on the peninsula.

### Historical Background

2. North Korea has a long history of ambition for nuclear weapons. The road to that end has had many ups and downs depending on the evolution of the international and domestic situation it was confronted with. Pyongyang started a nuclear program in the early 1960s with a small research reactor of 5 megawatts (MW) at Yongbyon, capable of producing weapon-grade plutonium. In the 1980s, however, the severe energy shortage in North Korea led to its reluctant agreement to import nuclear reactors and oil from the then-Soviet Union, with a condition that Pyongyang must sign the NPT. After a few years' hesitation, Pyongyang did so in 1985, but most probably reserving its nuclear option in secret. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fast subsequent change of the security environment around North Korea in the post-Cold War era, Pyongyang started construction of two reactors, rated at respectively 50MW and 200MW, chiefly by relying on its own technology, apparently in an attempt to accelerate its nuclear weapons program under the guise of the peaceful use of nuclear energy.

3. In 1992, North Korea signed a safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) under heavy international pressure. But the IAEA inspectors soon in the same year discovered discrepancies in Pyongyang's initial report with regard to the amount of plutonium that had been reprocessed in North Korea. Amid demands for special inspec-

tions, North Korea announced withdrawal from the NPT in 1993. Hence a first nuclear crisis emerged in the peninsula. The crisis was resolved in 1994 when the United States and North Korea signed the Agreed Framework at Geneva, under which Pyongyang was committed to return to the NPT, and freeze its plutonium weapons program in exchange for building two proliferation-resistant nuclear reactors and being provided additional heavy oil by the US and its allies. Washington also promised to pursue normalization with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, the formal name of North Korea) as part of the package deal.

4. The deal was no sooner struck than it was demonstrated that the US was unable to deliver on its promise. The Agreed Framework collapsed after George W. Bush became the US president in 2000 and reversed his predecessor's policy of engagement with North Korea. Pyongyang angrily announced its withdrawal from the NPT again, and restarted its frozen plutonium weapons programs. The peninsula witnessed a new round of nuclear crisis. China came up with an offer of a cooperative regional approach by initiating the Six Party Talks in 2003 with the participation of all the major players in Northeast Asia, including North Korea, the United States, the Republic of Korea (ROK, that is South Korea), China, Japan and Russia. This regional mechanism succeeded in reaching a meaningful agreement on 19 September 2005, by which all the six parties were committed to a peaceful resolution of the nuclear crisis in a spirit of equality, mutual respect and mutual compromise. But again, the political rift between the US and the DPRK led to the failure in its implementation. The Six Party Talks had reached an impasse by the end of 2008 and have remained deadlocked till today.

5. At the same time, the nuclear and missiles programs of the DPRK have steadily been progressing. No one knows for sure the exact nuclear capability of Pyongyang today. According to the estimate of US experts, Pyongyang may have accumulated about 50kg of plutonium and be capable of manufacturing a dozen nuclear bombs. North Korea is believed to have some enriched uranium as well. With regard to the missiles capability, the DPRK has various operational versions, ranging from short to intermediate-range ballistic missiles. It has now even focused on developing its own intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), capable

of striking at the US homeland. Although it is generally believed that the DPRK may still be years away from possessing a real nuclear strike capability, it is evident that if its ongoing nuclear programs are allowed to continue unchecked, North Korea will have access to that capability someday in the future.

### The Root Cause of the Nuclear Crisis

6. Many people may ask why North Korea is so stubbornly clinging to its nuclear option despite the heavy international pressure. In China's perspective, like many other cases of regional nuclear proliferation, the nuclear crisis in the DPRK emerged also against a background of regional conflicts and tension. Although the end of the Cold War has brought about dramatic changes in East Asia, the Korean Peninsula has continued to be divided as if still in the Cold War. Military confrontation between the North on the one hand, and the South and the United States on the other, has persisted. More than one million men in arms are still deployed in an area no more than forty miles wide on the either side of the 38th Parallel line, confronting one another. Furthermore, the peninsula has seen a dramatic shift in the balance of forces between the North and the South. While the ROK has become a growing advanced economy with global influence, the DPRK has become virtually a failed state, isolated and desperate for its survival. Against this background, a nuclear option is no doubt a most valued addition to Pyongyang's toolbox to counter the pressure from outside, and win domestic support for regime survival. It is in this sense that it can be argued that the DPRK nuclear issue is profoundly embedded in this background of conflict, and an extension of the hostility between the DPRK on the one hand, and the US and its allies on the other.

7. In China's view, understanding this background could throw much light on the most effective way to resolve the nuclear crisis. Denuclearization in the peninsula is not simply a matter concerning only the business of the DPRK. In other words, in order to persuade the DPRK to abandon all its nuclear weapons programs, efforts should first be made to ameliorate its fears by developing a more relaxed and peaceful environment in the peninsula so as to make Pyongyang feel that there is a better alternative to clinging to the nuclear card for its security. One cannot imagine that North Korea would do so in a highly tense, close-to-war situation. This of course means that the responsi-

bility for the resolution of the nuclear crisis lies as much with the other concerned parties as with North Korea. Each party should do its share to contribute to the eventual solution.

### **China's Role in Resolving the Nuclear Crisis**

8. China has huge stakes in seeing a Korean Peninsula free of nuclear weapons. A nuclear DPRK is evidently against China's core interests. Tensions in the Korean Peninsula will almost surely be perpetuated. The region threatens to be a running sore of political distrust and military confrontation, an unacceptable situation to Beijing as it has long cherished sustained peace and stability in Northeast Asia so as to concentrate on domestic development. A new wave of nuclear proliferation in the region would also be bound to follow as Japan and South Korea, the two major regional US allies, will most probably go nuclear, landing Beijing in a more complicated security environment, almost encircled by nuclear-armed states in its neighbourhood. In short, the North Korea's nuclear crisis is, to China, not only a non-proliferation issue, but also a critical regional security issue in Northeast Asia.

9. In light of China's perception of the nuclear issue, and also out of its own fundamental interests, China's position towards the DPRK's nuclear ambition has been strikingly consistent. It incorporates three major elements: opposing Pyongyang's efforts to acquire nuclear weapons capability; maintaining peace and stability in the peninsula; and resolving the nuclear crisis through peaceful consultation and negotiation. These three major considerations underlie China's all actions towards the nuclear issue. They have never changed.

10. With the evolution of the situation, however, China's policy responses may vary. Generally speaking, Beijing's diplomatic activities since the origin of the nuclear crisis may be divided into three phases, each featuring different characteristics.

11. The first phase (early 1990s–2003), saw the first nuclear crisis in the peninsula. At this time the nuclear crisis evolved around disagreements chiefly between the United States and North Korea. China regarded the issue as primarily a bilateral dispute, and hoped that it could be resolved through bilateral negotiation. China commended the Agreed Framework reached by the two countries in Geneva in

1994. Even as late as 2013, when the agreement had evidently run into a dead end, Beijing still hoped that "it will still work," and that the two parties should continue "to seek a proper solution through dialogue and negotiation."

12. The second phase (2003–12) saw China's growing involvement through sponsoring a regional cooperative platform for the resolution of the nuclear crisis in the Six Party Talks. The transition from a deliberate low profile to proactive participation reflected Beijing's increasing uneasiness over the rising rift between North Korea and the US. The conflicting attitudes towards negotiation of the two sides (Pyongyang wanted a direct negotiation while Washington insisted on a multilateral dialogue) seemed to block any chance for a breakthrough. It was against the background of rising tension and a diplomatic impasse, that China came up with an offer of setting up a multilateral stage to facilitate direct contact between the two parties which skilfully saved face for both sides to resume contact.

13. China first initiated a trilateral talk in Beijing in April 2003, comprising the US, DPRK, and China. It subsequently developed into the Six Party Talks in August the same year, expanding to include ROK, Japan and Russia as the other members of the multilateral dialogue. Although the US and the DPRK are viewed to be the main contenders, the Six Party Talks nevertheless provided a useful multilateral framework for the resolution of the nuclear crisis in a spirit of equality, mutual respect and mutual compromise. To that end, China endeavoured to act as an honest broker and impartial mediator. The Joint Statement reached on 19 September 2005 was hailed as a milestone achievement for the solution of the nuclear issue. Unfortunately owing to the divergent security interests and strategic intentions of various parties, China's regional cooperative approach has not so far helped bring the nuclear crisis to a satisfactory solution. Instead, tension on the peninsula keeps rising.

14. The third phase (2012–present) started at the time Xi Jinping became China's leader. Xi has been pushing for high profile diplomatic role for China to act as a global power on the world stage. China's role in the nuclear crisis on the peninsula has seen some subtle change. Facing a more complicated and unpredictable situation in the peninsula, Beijing seems no longer content with its passive role as a mediator. Rather, it is treating the nuclear issue as a

litmus test for its capability and influence as a rising major power. China seems also to want to use the issue to better protect and expand its own security interests.

15. Beijing has been more forthcoming in its efforts to persuade Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear program. In the face of growing provocations of nuclear and missile tests by Pyongyang, Beijing was most explicit in denouncing its reckless actions, refusing to accept its self-claimed status as a nuclear weapon state, and calling for greater solidarity of the international community to pressurize North Korea to roll back its nuclear program. Beijing has agreed now to impose more stringent economic sanctions against the DPRK for the same purpose.

16. Beijing was also anxious to break up the longstanding stalemate of the Six Party Talks by proposing a dual approach: while the Six Party Talks should resume as soon as possible, a concurrent negotiation can take place on a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula resolving. Beijing hopes that such a dual track approach could provide incentives to both Washington and Pyongyang to come back to the negotiation table.

17. At the same time, while both sides (the US and its allies, and the DPRK) were anxious to flex their military muscles, including nuclear sabre-rattling, Beijing seems more determined to send signals that it would do whatever it takes to maintain peace and stability in the peninsula. Beijing cautioned that it would not allow anybody to foment trouble on its doorstep, urged all the parties involved to refrain from acting to exacerbate the tension on the peninsula, and in particular sabotaging China's rights and interests "with the Korean Peninsula nuclear issue as an excuse." A spokesman from China's defence ministry warned that should that take place, China would not "sit by," and that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) will act to protect China's security interests. To that end, China has reportedly strengthened its military deployment including stationing strategic bombers at the China-DPRK border.

18. China's resolve to safeguard its security interests on the Korean Peninsula finds particular expression in its strong opposition to the proposed deployment of the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) missile defence system in South Korea, which, in its perspective, far exceeds the actual defence needs of the ROK, directly harms the strategic securi-

ty interests of China and perturbs the regional strategic balance. China threatens openly that it would take retaliatory measures to respond should the deployment materialize and thus is willing to take the risk of drastically driving China-ROK relations downwards.

### Inherent Constraining Factors

19. The THAAD case vividly reflects an inherent constraining factor in Beijing's policy towards the peninsula: that is, a serious limit to the scope for cooperation between the major powers in dealing with the DPRK nuclear crisis. As many Chinese believe the THAAD deployment is aimed more at China than the DPRK, they question Washington's real intention in Northeast Asia, wondering if it is serious in addressing the non-proliferation issue, or rather takes containing China as its top priority, and wants to keep the threat to facilitate its 'pivot' to Asia.

20. The THAAD case also brings home difficulties Beijing faces in balancing its relations with the two Koreas, an essential element for the success of China's strategy towards the peninsula. During the mid-1990s and the early 2000s when Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun pursued their sunshine policy towards the North, the two Koreas were in a period of détente, enabling China to maintain cooperation with both sides. It was also the time that the Six Party Talks witnessed impressive progress.

21. But when the regime changed with the conservative Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye as presidents, Seoul inclined increasingly towards Washington, contributing not the least to the deadlock of the Six Party Talks, rising tension on the peninsula and growing strains in China-ROK political relations, despite the fact that the two countries are forming closer economic ties. Beijing has been trying hard to pull Seoul back to the cooperative path again on the North. But the THAAD decision shows the two sides seem growing increasingly apart in terms of security. The present chaotic situation in South Korea as a result of the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye has added further complexity and unpredictability to the situation.

22. In a more fundamental sense, the greatest constraining factor on China's strategy is its long-standing ambivalence towards North Korea. China is now the only power in the world to ensure Pyongyang's survival, providing



more than 80 per cent of the country's badly needed foreign assistance. The historical bond between the two countries, including the memory of the Korean War in 1950s, still exerts a significant psychological influence on the minds of many Chinese which encourages the view that China has a moral obligation to protect the North. More importantly, the geostrategic importance of North Korea to China as a buffer zone against the US military pressure seems still firmly persistent in the perception of Beijing's decision-making circle. This perception has been reinforced by the rise of China-US competition in Northeast Asia in the recent years.

23. Thus for all the strains in relations between China and the DPRK arising from Beijing's firm opposition to Pyongyang's nuclear provocations, China still has to tolerate the extremely depressing nature of the regime in Pyongyang and support its survival. One telling example is Beijing's attitude towards economic sanctions against the DPRK. China increasingly supported sanctions sponsored by the UN Security Council in the hope of shutting down the DPRK nuclear program, but always wanted to soften them to make sure they would not bring down the regime.

24. The perception "China-needs-North-Korea" seems also to be deeply embedded in Pyongyang's security strategy. North Korea has been extremely smart in playing one major power against the other for its own interests since the time of Kim Il-sung. In the post-Cold War period, Pyongyang's evident goal has been normalization of relations with the United States. To that end, the young Kim Jong-un is now taking advantage of China-US rivalry just as his grandfather took advantage of China-Soviet competition.

25. For North Korea this strategy seems to be working remarkably well. It may also explain why Pyongyang can afford to be so defiant, and dares to thumb its nose at the calls of the international community for it to abandon its nuclear capability. Rightly or wrongly, Pyongyang must believe that whatever it did, Beijing would come to its help anyway. Beijing has no doubt deeply sensed the "tail-wagging-the-dog" dilemma, and clearly wants to remedy this seemingly absurd predicament. But unless there is a dramatic change of the geostrategic competition between the major powers in the region, it is highly unlikely that Beijing will completely get out of the power games and be

able to take action on the peninsula for resolving the nuclear crisis free of geopolitical calculations.

## Conclusions

26. China's policy towards the peninsula cannot be said to be very successful in resolving the DPRK nuclear ambition. On the other hand, it remains a decisive force to stabilize the situation in the region and perhaps the only force available that is able to bring all the parties concerned back to the negotiation table for a political solution in the future.

27. But China's role cannot replace the obligations of other important parties, particularly the DPRK and the United States. As mentioned above, the nuclear crisis is in essence a bilateral dispute of these two countries. Unless there is a strong political will from both sides to negotiate a peaceful solution, it is almost hopeless to see a solution in sight. The DPRK has on many occasions declared that it could come back to negotiate "without any prior conditions" whereas the US demanded evidence of the "sincerity" of the North on denuclearization before it agreed to talk. Thus the key lies in whether Washington could change this foot-dragging stance in the foreseeable future. The ball is really in the US court.

28. Unfortunately, the incoming Trump administration in 2017 is believed to be a wild card in this respect. Only time can tell if the new president will largely inherit his predecessor's legacy, or fundamentally change the US security and foreign policy in ways which have direct bearings on the US position on the DPRK nuclear crisis.

29. But one thing can be sure: the future US policy towards the Korean Peninsula will inevitably link up with the US rebalancing to Asia and its China policy in particular. To a certain extent, the temperature of the China-US relations determines that of the DPRK nuclear issue. Only when the two major powers are well on the way of constructive cooperation could we see a better chance of the resolution of the DPRK nuclear ambition.

### The Author

Major-General (ret'd) **PAN ZHENQIANG** joined the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in 1963 and served in the Department of the General Staff for over two decades. After 1986, he was research fellow and director at the Institute of Strategic Studies, PLA National Defense University until his retirement in 2001. He is presently deputy chairman of the China Foundation for International Studies and senior adviser to the China Reform Forum.

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### Contact Us

APLN, East Asia Foundation  
4F, 116 Pirundae-ro  
Jongno-gu, Seoul 03535  
Republic of Korea  
Email: [apln@keaf.org](mailto:apln@keaf.org)  
Tel: +82 2 325 2604-6