

INTERNATIONAL AND STRATEGIC STUDIES REPORT



MAY 25, 2017

ISSUE. 49

Institute of International and Strategic Studies, Peking University

Thoughts and Recommendations on China's Policy toward the Korean Peninsula and the North Korean Nuclear Issue

Zhang Tuosheng

**Director of the Foreign Policy Research Center, China Foundation
for International and Strategic Studies, and Council member of the
Institute of International and Strategic Studies, Peking University**

Since the end of Cold War, China's basic position and policies toward the Korean Peninsula and nuclear issue are to break the Cold War pattern, develop economic cooperation, maintain peace and stability; insist on the denuclearization of the Peninsula, solve the nuclear issue through the method of peaceful dialogue, and support the independent and peaceful reunification of the South and North.

To China, the best development prospects for the Korean Peninsula are as follows: Through the Six-party Talks, North Korea gives up its nuclear plan and gains security assurances. It develops normal diplomatic relations with South Korea, the United States, and Japan. The armistice agreement is replaced with a peace treaty in the Korean Peninsula. The strategic partnership between China and South Korea continues to develop. North Korea gradually reforms and opens up, develops the economy, improves people's livelihood, and thoroughly gets rid of the isolation status. The Korean Peninsula finally achieves independent and peaceful unification. The Korean Peninsula develops a long lasting friendly cooperation with China

since its unification. The U.S military force gradually decreases and finally entirely evacuates from the Peninsula.

However, in recent years, with the stagnation of the Six-party Talks and the constant escalation of North Korea nuclear crisis, such prospects are more unlikely to come true. The last conversation of the Six-party Talks happened in December 2008. In the spring of 2009, North Korea announced to permanently withdraw from the Six-party Talks after its second nuclear test. The Six-party Talks has been stagnated for eight years since then. Thus far, through the years of development, the North Korea nuclear crisis has been normalized, and it is approaching the dangerous tipping point, which suggests two meanings: First, North Korea accomplished two bombs combination, completed nuclear weapon, thoroughly crossed the nuclear threshold, and became a true nuclear state, like India, Pakistan, and Israel. Second, North Korea gains the ability to attack the United States through using intercontinental ballistic missiles. The research community of the United States believes it is the issue that will hit the red line of the United States and never be accepted by any American leaders. In 2016, North Korea rushed to accomplish nuclear weapon. The nuclear test had been accelerated greatly, which broke the previous rule of testing nuclear once in nearly every three years. North Korea performed nuclear test twice (called hydrogen bomb) in 2016, and it performed nearly thirty times' missile test in the meantime. The same year, the satellite launch of North Korea finally succeeded after several times' failures. North Korea also successfully conducted the submarine-launched missile test. The United States, South Korea, and Japan reinforced the military deterrence toward North Korea. The Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia had been enveloped in the dark clouds of the military conflict and war. Over the past two years, the increasingly strengthened joint military exercise of the United States and South Korea not only collected various the most advanced strategy and tactical weapons, but also changed to forestall the enemy from defending and counterattacking, which caused the great threat toward North Korea. North Korea's responded by publicly threatened that it might first launch its nuclear to attack the United States and South Korea. As the North Korean nuclear crisis escalates, the two major stakeholders, the United States and North Korea should the bear the greatest responsibility. Their long-term mutual hostility and extreme distrust are the basic reason for the deteriorating situation in the Peninsula. North Korea always believes that the United States is to use military

force to overthrow its regime. Possessing nuclear is the only way to protect its regime, thus North Korea is determined to keep its nuclear. The United States believes that North Korea has no faith at all, and its regime is difficult to maintain in the long run; it may collapse at any time. In such case, the two countries are reluctant to make any substantial concessions. The number of agreements they have reached become difficult to implement, or even will be torn up soon.

However, as the main promoter of the Six-party Talks, China's policy is not successful either, and it is necessary to make a serious review.

China's previous policy mainly suffers three faults: First, it had a vacillating position towards China and North Korea relation; Second, it has failed to well deal with the relation between the denuclearization of the Peninsula and the peace and stability of the Peninsula in line with the overall situation and development of the concrete concrete event; Third, it had always hoped to be and was even satisfied with the role of the mediator and the dialogue platform constructor for the United States and North Korea, but lacked the will of actively promoting the solving of problems and playing a greater role.

In fact, over the last two years, China's relevant policy has been adjusted while confronting the increasingly severe tense of the Korean Peninsula. However, in general, now there still remains great cognitive divergence in China. The progress of the policy adjustment is also slow, which obviously cannot follow the development of the situation.

To better cope with the tension of the Peninsula, protect the national interest of China, on the basis of actively and thoroughly drawing on policy suggestions from various departments and the research community and the public opinion, China should accelerate to enrich and adjust the relevant policy. Following are the specific suggestions:

First, we should complete the transition of China and North Korea relation from special to normal as soon as possible. The purpose that Deng Xiaoping decided to establish the diplomatic relation with South Korea in 1992 was to end and get rid of the Cold War pattern of the Peninsula, and also develop the friendly cooperation between China and North Korea and China and South Korea. This strategic decision opened up the process of the relation change between China and North Korea. However, because of complicated reasons, such change has not been

completed so far. Currently, the Peninsula situation, the China and North Korea relation, and the China and South Korea relation all have changed significantly. Since the establishment of diplomatic relation between China and South Korea, the two countries' relation has undergone earthshaking change. In recent years, the annual trade volume between China and South Korea has far exceeded the total of that between Korea and the United States, as well as Korea and Japan. In 2009, China and South Korea promoted their comprehensive partnership to be strategic partnership. In this context, the early transformation of the China and North Korea relation change will not only contribute to the avoidance of the reappearance and strengthening of the cold war pattern, but also help China take actions according to the rights and wrongs and the national benefit. In this way, we will truly insist on fairness, uphold justice, take supporting or opposing position as the case may be; As a result, we will neither bear and burden nor get involved, thus efficiently protecting our national benefit and take the responsibility as a big country. In March of last year, Foreign Minister Wang Yi clearly pointed out that the relation between China and North Korea is a normal relationship between two countries with a deep friendly tradition when answering the question of the journalists if China and North Korea were allies. This is an important announcement, and the key point is the “normal relationship”, which should be represented specifically in the practical policy.

Second, we should effectively handle the relationship between peace, stability, and denuclearization. Both are the major goals that China is going to fulfill in the Korean Peninsula. Realizing peace and stability is the overall goal. Denuclearization is the necessary content of such overall goal and the required qualification for achieving such overall goal. In the practical process, it depends on the specific situations to rank the two objectives. Since 2009, North Korea has accelerated its nuclear test, which caused severe impact on regional peace and stability over and over again. In this case, China should clearly and firmly treat denuclearization as the first priority so as to send a clear signal to North Korea and the international community, thus strengthening the consensus of the international community and increasing the pressure on North Korea's wrongdoing. Otherwise, peace and stability of the Peninsula would only be farther and farther away from China, and the plight of the situation development deviated from the policy objective will become increasingly prominent. Since 2015, Foreign Minister Wang Yi has repeatedly pointed out that the Peninsula will not be stable, and Northeast Asia

will be difficult to gain peace if the issue of denuclearization is not resolved. At present, it is important to further unify the domestic understanding, firmly insist on the standpoint of this policy, strengthen the consensus and cooperation with the others and maintain peace and stability on the Peninsula through promoting its denuclearization.

Third, we should strive to maintain and make good use of the lever in hands. China's influence on North Korea is not as big as some countries have imagined, but it does have some unique influence and leverage compared with other parties. For example, China has always been the most powerful force that maintains peace and stability of the Peninsula. There are still a relationship between the two parties and the traditional friendship between China and North Korea (although far less than that in the past years); China always advocates peaceful resolution of the nuclear issue through dialogues, and enjoys strong diplomatic capacity among the countries. China is North Korea's main energy and food aid donor, the largest trading partner and partner for economic cooperation and development region; China has a lot of reform and opening experience that can be used for reference by North Korea; China has been implementing the border management policy that benefits North Korea, etc. In the future, China should, based on its own interests and international common interests, try to maintain its influence on North Korea, and take the initiative to use the lever in hands. Through the use of the lever in both ways and clear rewards and punishments, we will strive to generate positive and effective influence on North Korea's behavior patterns and policies. It should be noted that the purpose of the sanctions imposed on North Korea is not to crush it, but to delay the development of North Korean nuclear, and force it to return to the negotiating table. In the current situation, China should focus on seriously and thoroughly implementing the resolutions of the Security Council, and increasing the sanction pressure on North Korea. Domestically, China should severely punish the companies and individuals that violate the export control laws and regulations in the trade toward North Korea.

Fourth, we should make the best effort to promote the early resumption of the North Korean nuclear dialogue. The long-term stagnation of the various related dialogues, including the Six-party Talks, is the main reason that strongly increases the crisis of the North Korean nuclear. Since 2016, China has put forward the new proposals on how to resume and carry out the North Korean nuclear dialogue. Here are the most important two points. First is "parallelly promoting the accomplish of

the Peninsula denuclearization and the Peninsula armistice and peace mechanism”. Second, it reveals the two-step path. That is, first by using “double suspension” (North Korea suspends its nuclear activities, the United States and South Korea suspend large-scale military exercises) to resume the dialogue, and then by following the idea of dual track to start a dialogue, so as to finally find a long and stable policy for the Peninsula. In addition, China also showed that besides the Six-party Talks, it should have a more open-minded attitude toward all bilateral, trilateral, quadrilateral, and quinquelateral dialogues. At present, it is important to turn the above proposals into practical actions. Thus, three kinds of attempts are especially suggested: First by strengthening the dialogue with the United States and taking the initiative to resume the high-level dialogue toward North Korea at the same time. By letting North Korea know the advantages and disadvantages, and by persuading it immediately to stop the actions that are not helpful for a stable situation and return to multilateral dialogues. Second by suggesting all the relevant parties to instantly resume the Six-party Talks on the basis of the “9.19 Joint Statement” spirit. If North Korea refuses to participate, the other parties can firstly resume the meeting in the framework of the Six-party Talks, and reserve a seat for North Korea.

Once the Five-party Talks that under the framework of the Six-party Talks is held, all of these will become essential topics, such as how to strengthen the crisis management of the Peninsula, how to deal with North Korea’s new nuclear test, how to implement the Security Council’s sanctions for North Korea, how to persuade North Korea to return to the negotiating table, how to cope with emergencies in the Peninsula, as well as a package of the schemes of solving the problems of the North Korean nuclear and the Peninsula in the future, etc. Third by convening the Four-party Talks among China, the United States, Russia, and North Korea, or China, the United States, North Korea, and South Korea as the prelude of the resumption of the Six-party Talks.

Fifth, well control the serious divergence on the THAAD issue among China, South Korea, and the United States. In 2016, the United States and South Korea decided to deploy THAAD in Korea. It not only exacerbated the friction between China and the United States, but also caused the serious damage to the China and South Korea relation.

From the current perspective, it is difficult to change the standpoints that the United States and South Korea refuse to stop and withdraw the deployment of THAAD, and China firmly opposes the deployment of THAAD. In order to strengthen the cooperation of dealing with the most urgent North Korean nuclear crisis among the three countries, China should appropriately reduce the heat of the friction of THAAD and use management difference and management crisis as its main treatments. China should not only ensure its adequate and effective counter measures, but also avoid the uncontrolled friction that harms the comprehensive relationship between China and North Korea. It should avoid to obstruct the promotion of the international cooperation of the Peninsula denuclearization. China should carry out necessary conversations with the United States and South Korea, especially the new South Korean government as early as possible. It should also try to make the relation of China and South Korea return to the track of healthy development based on effective divergence control.

Sixth, we must fully prepare for the emergencies that appear in the Korean Peninsula. In view of the constant escalation of the North Korean nuclear crisis and the continued rising risk of the military eruption conflict, while taking efforts for the dialogue, firmly opposing the solution of military force for the North Korean nuclear issue and the occurrence of wars and chaos in the Peninsula, China must have a profound and thorough analysis to the worst prospect that might appear in the Peninsula (including the appearance of large-scale military conflicts and wars, nuclear security or nuclear security crisis, large-scale refugees, etc.). China must make full preparations for politics, economy, military, and diplomacy. Also, it is urgent to determine the bottom line or red line for a number of major issues, develop various action plans and response mechanisms, start the first track or 1.5 track dialogue with the relevant countries, so as to deal with the Peninsula emergency and risk control, establish the Peninsula's bilateral and multilateral military crisis and conflict prevention and control mechanisms, etc. It is an urgent need to carry out the dialogues that respond to emergencies with the relevant countries. It can also be used as one of the most essential methods that forces North Korea to resume the Talks.

Seventh, we should make efforts to appropriately solve the North Korean nuclear issue and use it as an important practice to construct new great-power relations between China and the United States. China and the United States have

great common interests in realizing the denuclearization of the Peninsula, preventing nuclear proliferation, and strengthening nuclear security and nuclear safety. They also have common interests in maintaining peace and stability in the Peninsula. But there is a great divergence on how to realize the above common interests and geopolitics. Confronting the complex relationship that China and the United States have toward the Peninsula, China should proceed from the strategic height in constructing new great-power relations between China and the United States. China should make efforts to cooperate with the United States in the field where the two countries' share common interests. As for the controversy of the path and method between the two countries, it is necessary to decrease the obstruction on the two countries' cooperation as much as possible through dialogue, communication, and coordination. As for the two countries' divergence on the Peninsula's geopolitics, it is necessary to establish an effective risk control mechanism with the United States in the game. It is necessary to firmly avoid the further collusion, conflict, and war in the Korean Peninsula. Recently, whether if we could well deal with the issue of North Korean nuclear is a significant test for the stability between China and the United States and the development of bilateral relations. In the long run, it will be a touchstone for the two countries to build a new great-power relation probe.

In short, in the face of a more tense and complex situation in the Korean Peninsula, China's policy of North Korea nuclear and the Peninsula must keep pace with the times. We should have new ideas and new perspectives; we should combine the domestic interests, the global interests, and the long-term interests of the people in the Peninsula together; we should make basic policies and principles into concrete and powerful actions; we should strive to take the initiative, and avoid to be led by the nose for the other countries' wrongdoings. Only in this way, will China always be invincible.

Edited by Dr. Gui Yongtao and Dr. Lei Shaohua

Tel: 86-10-62756376

Email: iiss@pku.edu.cn

Fax: 86-10-62753063

Web: www.iiss.pku.edu.cn

Address: IISS, Peking University, Beijing, China