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BEIJING AND PYONGYANG: A "SPECIAL FRIENDSHIP" FACING THE FINAL CURTAIN

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China has been widely perceived as North Korea's "only ally" and economic lifeline and so China has long been expected to play a "key and unique" role in resolving the North Korean nuclear issue. However, North Korea conducted nuclear tests despite China's opposition. From 2006 to 2016, North Korea conducted four nuclear tests and launched four satellites with ballistic missile technology. China has been criticized for failing to exert much pressure on North Korea and China's policy was often blamed as a "failure". In the wake of North Korea's fourth nuclear test, China approved the strongest UNSC Resolution yet (2270). China's tough stance indicated its changing policy in recent years and will have significant impact on China-North Korea relations.

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I. Changes in China's North Korea Policy

China's North Korea policy shifted to tough and even coercive after China recognized the threatening implications of North Korea's increasing nuclear capability. Chinese President Xi Jinping and officials' criticism of North Korea has become unusually public and straightforward. China has turned to harsh economic sanctions and more coordination with South Korea. In the meantime, China attempted to redefine the bilateral relationship from "alliance" to "normal state-to-state relationship".

Denuclearization First

China has pursued dual goals of stability and denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula. Since North Korea's third nuclear test in February 2013, China harshened the tone and wording of public criticism over North Korea and exerted unprecedented pressure to make denuclearization a priority goal. On several important occasions, China forcefully pressed North Korean compliance with its denuclearization commitment. When President Xi Jinping met with North Korean special envoy Choe Ryong-hae in May 2013, he struck a stern tone and put the goal of denuclearization ahead of stability. When President Xi met with President Obama at Sunnylands later, he reiterated the same position. When Vice President Li Yuanchao led a delegation to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Korean War Armistice agreement in July 2013, he also emphasized denuclearization during his meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. China's changes were widely reported and perceived as positive by concerned parties. When President Xi paid a state visit to the U.S. in September 2015, he called for "complete and verifiable denuclearization" and said that: "pertinent U.N. Security Council resolutions should be implemented in full".¹ China increased diplomatic pressure after North Korea's fourth nuclear test in January 2016. Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi repeatedly affirmed that "the Korean Peninsula cannot be nuclearized, no matter whether the nuclear weapons are self-made or imported and deployed".² He used the expression that China "does NOT recognize the DPRK as a nuclear weapon state" after his meeting with U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry in February 2016,³ conveying China's strongest opposition yet to North Korea.

¹ "Remarks by President Obama and President Xi of the People's Republic of China in Joint Press Conference," Sept.25, 2015. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/25/remarks-president-obama-and-president-xi-peoples-republic-china-joint>.

² "Wang Yi Gives Exclusive Interview to Reuters on Syrian Issue and Korean Peninsula Nuclear Issue," Feb.13, 2016. http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/wjbz_663308/activities_663312/t1340523.shtml.

³ "Remarks With Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi", Feb.23, 2016. <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2016/02/253164.htm>.

China shifted to a tougher stance on North Korea's satellite launch. When North Korea launched a satellite in April 2009, instead of explicit objection, China recognized that satellite launching was related to the right to peaceful use of outer space and different from missile launching and nuclear tests. However, when North Korea announced another satellite launch in March 2012, China's objection became apparent. The then vice foreign minister Zhang Zhijun summoned the North Korean ambassador and urged the DPRK to refrain from aggravating tension. China supported the UN Security Council and issued a presidential statement strongly condemning the launch, making no attempt to defend Pyongyang's "peaceful use of outer space" as it did in 2009. China chose to take harsher measures after the North Korean satellite launch in December 2012. For the first time, China agreed to adopt the UN Resolution instead of making a presidential statement to condemn North Korea's launch. With a travel ban and asset freeze on some North Korean personnel and enterprises, UNSC Resolution 2087 imposed new sanctions for its satellite launch.

China shifted to issuing thinly veiled rebukes to North Korea's repeated brinkmanship. While North Korea issued belligerent statements throughout spring 2013 in response to UNSC Resolution 2094, Beijing embarked on a "noticeably different course"⁴. China put "increasing and visible pressure"⁵ on the North to rein in its provocative actions as well as its blustery rhetoric about nuclear war. In April 2013, in President Xi's address at the BoAo Forum for Asia, he warned that: "no one should be allowed to throw a region and even the whole world into chaos for selfish gains." It was a slap at the parties who were responsible for the rising tension on the Peninsula, but widely interpreted as a reprimand to North Korea. It was unprecedented for a Chinese president to talk about the regional situation in such a straightforward way.

Tightening Economic Sanctions

China has been opposed to economic sanctions in international relations all along.⁶ China strongly disagreed with the view that squeezing Pyongyang would produce compliance and capitulation and maintained that sanctions could cause North Korea to become more aggressive and unpredictable.⁷ However, frustrated by the effects of available "carrots", China chose to use "sticks" to curb North Korea's repeated provocations.

⁴ Alan D. Romberg, "The Sunnylands Summit: Keeping North Korea in Perspective," June 14, 2013,

<http://38north.org/2013/06/aromberg061413/>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Kong Quan's Regular Press Conference, March 27, 2003.

⁷ Bonnie S. Glaser and Wang Liang: "North Korea: The Beginning of a China-U.S. Partnership?" *Washington Quarterly*; Summer, 2008, p.174.

After Pyongyang's third nuclear test, the Chinese government issued a public statement to implement UN sanctions, in contrast to tacit implementation in the past. In May 2013, major Chinese banks closed North Korean Foreign Trade Bank accounts and stopped all business dealings with several other North Korean banks. The central government instructed local governments to implement Resolution 2094, which led to more rigorous inspections of North Korea-bound cargo. In September 2013, China's Commerce Ministry and other three ministries jointly declared a list of items prohibited from export to North Korea. For the first time, China issued a comprehensive export control list targeted at a specific country.

China had resisted linking the nuclear issue with its normal bilateral trade relationship with North Korea. Although Washington had demanded it before, Beijing was not expected to do anything as drastic as cutting trade ties. In 2016, however, North Korea's January nuclear test and February satellite launch prompted China to take unprecedented steps to block the flow of physical resources and money for North Korea's nuclear development. Ultimately, China began to translate Pyongyang's economic dependence on it into leverage. In April 2016, China's Commerce Ministry listed new restrictions on trade with North Korea. Notably, the new document completely bans imports of North Korean gold, titanium, vanadium, and rare earths and China's exports of rocket fuel. In 2014, Pyongyang's trade with China comprised nearly \$7 billion out of an estimated total of \$7.6 billion in total North Korean foreign trade. Since China accounts for 90 percent of North Korea's foreign trade,⁸ China's trade embargo is a sign of fundamental change in its policy towards the North. China itself not only seriously implemented UNSC Resolution 2270, but also asked other parties to fully implement it.

Tilt to South Korea

China has long maintained a balanced policy between the two Koreas. Under President Xi's leadership, China's policy has tilted toward South Korea. Where high-level contacts are concerned, after Vice President Li Yuanhao's visit to Pyongyang in 2013, high-level exchanges between China and North Korea halted until Liu Yunshan, a member of the Chinese Communist Party's Politburo Standing Committee, visited Pyongyang in October 2015 to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the Worker's Party foundation. Yet China's re-engagement efforts broke down after the North Korean band, Moranbong, cancelled a Beijing performance in December 2015 and the North's fourth nuclear test. President Xi has held no summit meeting with Kim Jong-un. In contrast, President Xi Jinping met with

⁸ Ruediger Frank, "North Korea's Foreign Trade," Oct. 22, 2015, <http://38north.org/2015/10/rfrank102215/>.

South Korean president Park Geun-hye on the sidelines of the Nuclear Security Summit in April 2016, the seventh time they have met. President Xi visited South Korea in July 2014, marking the first time that a Chinese leader visited Seoul without having first visited Pyongyang. Hailed by the ROK, the visit constituted a “monumental snub”⁹ to the DPRK.

As for political and security ties, China and North Korea held deputy-ministerial level strategic dialogues in 2013 and 2014, nuclear envoys exchanged visits and Foreign Minister Wang Yi met briefly with his North Korean counterpart on the sidelines of the ASEAN Regional Forum. In the meantime, China’s political and security ties with South Korea steadily improved. China’s strategic dialogue with South Korea reached a higher level than it did with the North. Chinese state councilor Yang Jiechi initiated the first strategic dialogue with his South Korean counterpart in November 2013. On the nuclear issue, both maintained close coordination at various levels and shared broad consensus. President Xi called President Park in early February 2016, the Chinese President’s first phone call to a South Korean counterpart regarding the North’s nuclear testing. They proposed cooperation at the regional and global levels, The Chinese and ROK navies held their first joint anti-piracy drills in the Gulf of Aden in November 2015.

On the economic side, China and South Korea share more interests than China has with the North. Between 2000 and 2013, the volume of China’s trade with North Korea increased 22.8% annually.¹⁰ Bilateral trade was worth \$6.56 billion in 2013, the highest point ever.¹¹ In contrast, China’s trade with South Korea amounted to \$274.2 billion in 2013,¹² 40 times more than its trade with North Korea. China’s investment in the South is also much larger than in the North. China and South Korea formally concluded a bilateral free trade agreement (FTA), a milestone in bilateral ties. Furthermore, China strengthened financial cooperation with South Korea: the latter joined China’s Asia Investment and Infrastructure Bank (AIIB) and sought to link AIIB to its own initiative, the Northeast Asian Development Bank. On China’s One Belt and One Road Initiative and South Korea’s Eurasia Initiative, both supported each other’s grand designs.

⁹ Ted Carpenter, “China Courts South Korea: Opportunities and Risks for the United States,” *China-US Focus*, July 16, 2014, <http://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/china-courts-south-korea-opportunities-and-risks-for-the-united-states>.

¹⁰ “Fact Sheet: China and DPRK Economic and Trade Relations” July 10, 2014, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cekp/chn/cxgk/cxjj/t718090.htm>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² “Fact Sheet: China and ROK Economic and Trade Cooperation,” August 26, 2014, <http://yzs.mofcom.gov.cn/article/t/201408/20140800710691.shtml>.

Redefining the China-North Korea Relationship

China and North Korea forged a “blood alliance” during the Korean War. In the 1990s, China de-emphasized ideological bonds and attempted to build relations on the past while preparing for the future. Entering the 21st century, China redefined the bilateral relationship from alliance to a “normal state-to-state” relationship. In recent years, Chinese officials highlighted the term “normal state-to-state” relationship to describe the nature of bilateral ties.

North Korea’s third nuclear test prompted China to address the “normal state-to-state” relationship more seriously. About the impact of Resolution 2094 on the bilateral relationship, a Foreign Ministry spokeswoman reaffirmed that both are normal state-to-state relationships. China strongly objected to North Korea’s nuclear test and stuck to denuclearization.¹³ Foreign Minister Wang Yi re-addressed the whole relationship at his annual press conference. On the question of whether China sees the DPRK as an ally, and would fight the United States and assist the DPRK as it did during the Korean War should war ever break out again on the Korean Peninsula, he said that China and the DPRK “enjoy a normal state-to-state relationship built on a deep tradition of friendship”; “China both values friendship and stands on principle”; “we have an unwavering commitment to the denuclearization of the Peninsula and we will not accommodate the DPRK’s pursuit of nuclear and missile programs”.¹⁴

The redefinition of bilateral relationship implicitly denied North Korea as an ally. The 1961 Sino-North Korean Treaty stipulates that China is obliged to intervene against unprovoked aggression, but this should not be interpreted as Beijing supporting whatever Pyongyang does. If conflict is initiated by Pyongyang, Beijing will be ambiguous about its treaty obligation. Should China and North Korea’s relationship become “normal state-to-state”, bilateral economic cooperation will follow market economy mechanisms, resulting in fewer “friendship” projects.

II. Factors behind Changes

The ongoing changes in China’s North Korea policy indicate the deepening strategic divergences between both sides, the rising influence of China’s domestic debate on foreign policy, North Korea’s mishandled China policy and China’s embrace of an international regime.

¹³ Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Hua Chunying’s Regular Press Conference, March 8, 2013.

¹⁴ “Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press,” March 8, 2016, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1346238.shtml.

Security Interest

North Korea's growing operational and retaliatory nuclear capability was used as excuse for the U.S. to expand its Pacific presence, missile defense buildup and alliance cooperation. The spiraling military development threatened China's security interests.

In the wake of North Korea's third nuclear test, the U.S. mobilized strategic weaponry such as B52 bombers, B2 bombers, F22 fighter planes and an aircraft carrier to the Korean peninsula, deployed a THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) battery to Guam in April 2013, announced deployment of more X-band radar in Japan and activated 14 additional ground-based midcourse interceptors in Alaska. The U.S. and South Korea held massive joint exercises each year, issued "Tailored Deterrence Strategy" against North Korean threats, delayed the transition of wartime operational control (OPCON). In addition, the U.S. supported Japan's lifting of the ban on collective right of defense and approved new bilateral guidelines for defense cooperation in April 2015. The U.S. pushed trilateral cooperation with South Korea and Japan at various levels. They held a trilateral summit on the sidelines of the Nuclear Security Summit, trilateral ministerial-level meetings on the sidelines of the ASEAN Regional Forum and Shangri-La Dialogue. They enhanced cooperation in the framework of the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), held joint drills and signed a trilateral information-sharing agreement in December 2014. Their cooperation expanded from the North Korean issue to anti-terrorism, anti-piracy, humanitarian relief, maritime security and cyber security. The anti-missile defense deployment and alliance cooperation boosted U.S. standing in Northeast Asia, contributed to the Obama administration's "Rebalance" policy towards Asia Pacific and could contain China's influence in the context of Sino-US competition.

North Korea's fourth nuclear test exacerbated China's security environment. China had objected to the U.S.-initiated deployment of the THAAD system in South Korea, since the system's X-band radar looks deeply into China and could threaten the reliability of China's nuclear second-strike capability. However, North Korea's nuclear test broke the stalemate. The U.S. and South Korea seized the opportunity to justify the deployment of THAAD. Both began official discussions in February 2016. China underscored its grave concerns about the possible development, warning that it will "directly damage China's strategic security interests".¹⁵ North Korea's fourth nuclear test also undermined Sino-South Korean relations. Backing away from diplomacy balanced

¹⁵ "Wang Yi Gives Exclusive Interview to Reuters on Syrian Issue and Korean Peninsula Nuclear Issue," Feb.13, 2016.

between the U.S. and China, President Park Geun-hye decided to introduce THAAD. As a result of South Korea's shift to the U.S., the warming Sino-South Korea political relationship suddenly lost momentum. The nuclear test also created a new opportunity for South Korea to improve its relationship with Japan, entangling state-to-state relations in Northeast Asia.

North Korea's effort to build a larger nuclear arsenal and more capable missile delivery systems presents a serious challenge to China's security. Pyongyang's current stockpile, estimated to consist of 10-16 weapons, could reach as many as 100 weapons with very limited qualitative improvements.¹⁶ North Korea also develops intercontinental ballistic missiles and sea-based cruise and ballistic missiles. With the expansion and modernization of North Korea's nuclear and missile program, China would face the risk of a regional arms build-up and stronger American military presence in the region.

Domestic Debate

China carried out reforms and an open-door policy in the late 1970s, integrated into the international system and developed relations with all countries. In contrast, North Korea rejected a market economy and adhered to political dogmatism. The loosening of social, economic and ideological bonds had become so evident that North Korea's nuclear tests and other provocations ignited far-reaching anti-North Korea sentiment among China's population and the elites. While the decision-making process in Chinese foreign policy involved more actors and voices, China's North Korea policy came under intense criticism.

The DPRK's second nuclear test elicited public division and more vibrant debate on North Korea policy. Within the policy community, "strategists" focused on the overall strategic mapping of China's global interests and shared U.S. perceptions of North Korea. Zhang Liangui, an influential expert on North Korea, argued that China was the immediate victim of North Korea's nuclear testing, which put Chinese citizens at risk given the test location's proximity to the border. He suggested that China should use its leverage to change North Korea's behavior.¹⁷ "Traditionalists" advocated the continuation of substantial political and economic support for North Korea. They remained deeply mistrustful of the West and believed that the U.S. presented the largest potential challenge to Chinese

¹⁶ Joel Wit and Sun Young Ahn, *North Korea's Nuclear Futures: Technology and Strategy*, US-South Korea Institute at SAIS, 2015, pp.7-8.

¹⁷ International Crisis Group, "Shades of Red: China's Debate over North Korea," *Asia Report*, No.179, November 2009, p.5.

national interests; they insisted that North Korea is a strategic asset, not a strategic liability.¹⁸

North Korea's third nuclear test prompted unprecedented debate that revealed China's even deeper disillusionment with North Korea. Two rounds of debates occurred in spring 2013 and late 2014. Deng Yuwen, a former editor of *Study Times*, a newspaper of the Central Party School, argued that China should "abandon" North Korea for its erratic and arrogant behavior. His major points were: a state-to-state relationship should not be built on ideology; geopolitical theory exaggerates North Korea's importance; North Korea will not carry out open-door policy and will cease to exist sooner or later; North Korea is increasingly alienated from China; China should be wary of North Korean blackmail.¹⁹ In the end of 2014, Wang Hongguang, a retired lieutenant general, suggested that China object to North Korean provocations. He argued that North Korea's political system had no common ground with China; North Korea's importance to China was reduced due to the advent of cyber warfare; the Sino-North Korea relationship is based on respective national interest rather than on a comradely relationship rooted in socialist parties; if North Korea provokes a war, China should not assist it.²⁰ The "abandonment" school argues that North Korea is not a buffer state for China; North Korea relies on China rather than vice-versa; to maintain its international image, China should not support North Korea. Others defended China's policy and blamed the failure of U.S. policy. They argued that the North Korean nuclear issue should not be the reason for abandonment; it would be unwise and mistaken to neglect North Korea's strategic importance; China should not cut friendship bonds with North Korea just because it chose a different development road; the frictions, contradictions and discords between both sides are normal in state relations; abandoning North Korea will be catastrophic for China.²¹ The public debate, especially the views of the "abandonment" school, appeared in the state-run newspaper for the first time and was interpreted as the signal that changes were underway in China's policy.

North Korea's fourth nuclear test did not prompt as heated a debate as before, but harsh criticism and condemnation dominated. Under such domestic circumstances, China undoubtedly adjusted its policy. Noticeably, the changes in China's North Korea policy are consistent with changes in

¹⁸ Ibid, p.7.

¹⁹ Deng Yuwen, "China Should Abandon North Korea," *Financial Times*, Feb. 27, 2013.

²⁰ Wang Hongguang, "China need not Assist North Korea should War break out," *Global Times*, Dec. 1, 2014.

²¹ Li Dunqiu, "China should not abandon the 65-year Partner North Korea," *Global Times*, Nov.27, 2014; Cao Shigong, "Those Criticizing North Korea's Ungratefulness Lose the Full Picture", *Global Times*, Dec.2, 2014.

its entire foreign policy. China has become more resolute in upholding its national interests and more impatient with North Korea's repeated provocations.

The North Korea factor

North Korea has not shown much respect for China's national interests despite huge Chinese aid. It walked out on Six-Party Talks and conducted nuclear tests regardless of China's objection. It took advantage of Chinese fears of domestic instability and strategic mistrust of the United States and thought it was adept at pushing and pulling China to serve its brinkmanship. Unfortunately, North Korea underestimated the fast-changing mood in China.

Kim Jong-un's leadership and policy disappointed China. Unlike his grandfather Kim Il-sung and father Kim Jong-il, Kim Jong-un never lived in China or had close private relationships with Chinese leaders. Whether he recognizes the importance of China or understands sophisticated statecraft remains unclear. Judging from North Korea's behavior, Kim Jong-un has been most impudent. He endorsed the third nuclear test and tacitly attacked China for adopting UN resolutions. Kim Jong-un's execution of his uncle Jang Song-taek worsened China-North Korea relations. China pledged to expand investment in Special Economic Zones (SEZ) on the border after Jang's 2012 mid-August visit to Beijing, but North Korea's nuclear test and the Jang Song-taek execution reminded China how cruel the young leader was and how risky to invest in North Korea.

The latest event that infuriated China happened in early 2016. For the first time, North Korea did not inform China before its nuclear test. Moreover, on the same day that China's special representative for Korean Peninsula affairs, Wu Dawei, arrived in Pyongyang, North Korea announced the news of a satellite launch. The U.S. State Department official in charge of East Asian affairs, Daniel Russel, said the planned launch "would be an unmistakable slap in the face" to China although he did not name China explicitly.²² North Korea launched its satellite on February 7, 2016, the eve of Chinese New Year. The timing of the launch was so bad that it was interpreted as intentional. It was no surprise that China's social media were flooded with anger at North Korea and satirical jokes about Kim Jong-un abound on the Chinese Internet. Before the satellite launch, China still backed "patience and dialogue" with North

²² Chico Harlan and Brian Murphy, "North Korea announces plan to launch rocket carrying observation satellite," *Washington Post*, Feb. 2, 2016.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/north-korea-claims-rocket-launch-readied-to-carry-observation-satellite/2016/02/02/2a8949ae-c9d0-11e5-ae11-57b6aeab993f_story.html.

Korea and made little progress in consultations about new resolutions with the U.S.. North Korea's satellite launch helped rid China of hesitation. China quickly supported the adoption of Resolution 2270.

International Regime

The North Korean nuclear issue has long been defined as a test for China's attitude towards the international system. China usually sees the issue in a bilateral and regional context and worries that North Korea's nuclear ambition potentially triggers South Korea and Japan to pursue their own nuclear programs and military buildup. With China's evolving role in the international system, it also defines the issue in a global context, linking the issue to safeguarding the international nonproliferation regime.

China's attitude towards the existing international system has evolved. Frustrated by some unreasonable rules made by Western countries, China advocated building a new international political and economic order. Deepening interdependence and integration into the world transformed it from revolutionary to reformer and China shifted to reforming the unfair and unreasonable part of the international system. Against this broad backdrop, China took more proactive measures to boost the current international regime.

Under President Xi's leadership, China has attached more importance to supporting the nonproliferation regime. China and the U.S. deepened cooperation on nonproliferation and counter-proliferation issues within the U.S.-China Nonproliferation Joint Working Group, which held its inaugural meeting in Beijing in November 2014. During President Xi's visit to the U.S. in September 2015, he approved firmly upholding the international nuclear nonproliferation regime, and welcomed the Joint Plan of Action regarding the Iranian nuclear issue.²³ During Foreign Minister Wang Yi's visit to the U.S. in February 2016, he reaffirmed China's intention to uphold the international nuclear nonproliferation regime. In sum, China's North Korea policy shift is consistent with its changing attitude to the international regime.

III. Implications of Changes

Against the decades of Chinese support for North Korea, China's recent policy changes are dramatic, profound, armed with the "teeth" of the strongest sanctions, and will have implications for their bilateral relationship and regional security. China has shown as much flexibility as it can, but some basic goals and principles must remain intact.

²³ "Remarks by President Obama and President Xi of the People's Republic of China in Joint Press Conference", <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/25/remarks-president-obama-and-president-xi-peoples-republic-china-joint>.

No regime change

Chinese policy changes mainly aim to constrain North Korea's activities, pressing it to abandon nuclear weapons. However, China wants to abandon neither the entire relationship nor the regime.. Beijing still supplies North Korean energy needs and humanitarian aid, which are critical to the North's economic and social stability. Beijing still encourages Pyongyang to adopt an open-door policy and improve people's living standards.

Nor does China want regime change. Should China want the regime to fall, it doesn't need to play around with sanctions. China could just cut off energy supplies and food deliveries or end all trade with Pyongyang, but China has not chosen to do so. On the enforcement of sanctions, Beijing is still opposed to restricting the flow of non-military goods to North Korea. The latest Commerce Ministry's announcement has important exceptions. Under one exception, imports of North Korea's mineral resources are permitted if the trade is "determined to be completely for the purpose of the people's livelihood" and does not generate revenue for North Korea's nuclear and missile programs, or other activities blacklisted by UN sanctions.²⁴

China would not bring down the North Korean regime for many reasons. In reality, North Korea remains an important neighbor on China's border. If China tightens the squeeze on Pyongyang, an unchecked exodus of hungry refugees will cross the Yalu River and the resulting instability could spill over into bordering Chinese territories. A unified, U.S.-aligned Korean Peninsula would emerge and host American troops on China's doorstep. Along with the process, regional economic and political effects would be severe. The current regime is problematic, but the alternative seems worse.

Peaceful resolution

As far as it is concerned, China's changing approaches exclude military means. No war and no chaos remain China's long-standing insistence. Should war break out on the Korean Peninsula again, sad history would repeat itself.

China has never approved military means to achieve denuclearization. In the early 1990s, China objected to the Clinton administration's plan to launch preemptive strikes against North Korean nuclear facilities. Though infuriated by Kim Jong-un's provocations, China rejected the

²⁴ "Announcement on North Korea embargo list," April 5, 2016, <http://www.mofcom.gov.cn/article/b/c/201604/20160401289770.shtml>

military option and accused the U.S. of escalating the tension by mobilizing military resources. China insists that: “there is no military solution to this issue. Otherwise, there will be war and turbulence in the Peninsula, which will not be acceptable for China”.²⁵

China doesn’t exclude peaceful talks as the major policy tool towards solution. While Beijing puts more pressure on Pyongyang, it wants to find a way out rather than leave Pyongyang in despair. Just as Foreign Minister Wang Yi said, “sanctions are not the end. Our purpose should be brought back to the channel of a negotiation-based resolution”,²⁶ “To have blind faith in sanctions and pressure would, in effect, be irresponsible to the future of the Peninsula.”²⁷ China affirmed that: “equal-footed dialogue, consultation and negotiation are the only right way forward”. As the host country, China urged that Six-Party Talks “be resumed as soon as possible. Some dialogue is better than none, and better early than late”.²⁸ Just after North Korea’s fourth nuclear test, China formally put forward a proposal to pursue, in parallel tracks, the denuclearization of the Peninsula and the replacement of the armistice agreement with a peace treaty. Denuclearization is the firm goal of the international community, while replacing the armistice is a legitimate concern of the DPRK. Regrettably, South Korea and other pertinent parties refused China’s proposal. South Korea prefers to overwhelm the North and bring down the regime as soon as possible. North Korea, angered with China’s adoption of Resolution 2270, rejected the proposal too.

Not the same side with the U.S. and South Korea

No matter how policy changes, China cannot see eye to eye with the U.S. and its allies. In terms of denuclearization, China, the U.S. and South Korea share the same interests and have made joint efforts. China-U.S. cooperation is important to maintain stability on the Korean peninsula and prevent the situation from getting out of control, but evidence of a widening gap between both sides is growing. Besides the growing strategic rivalry, the differences between China and the U.S. on the method for achieving denuclearization and stability have deepened. On the resumption of Six-Party Talks, the U.S. asked North Korea to do something very serious, yet the U.S. government sustains its “Strategic Patience” policy and won’t make even a symbolic move like stopping military drills. There was no sign of lessening the gap between concerned

²⁵ “Wang Yi Gives Exclusive Interview to Reuters on Syrian Issue and Korean Peninsula Nuclear Issue,” Feb.13, 2016.

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ “Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press,” March 8, 2016.

²⁸ “Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press,” March 8, 2014, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cegv/eng/bjzl/t1136602.htm>

parties, although China has made unremitted efforts.

The U.S. complained that China's policy change was not a change in overall strategy toward Pyongyang. It pointed out the loopholes in Beijing's implementation of finance sanctions, said it scrutinized the shipments to North Korea in an episodic rather than systemic manner and continued to account for the North's food and fuel imports, while trade volume continues to grow. On Resolution 2270, China draws the line between "livelihood" and "non-livelihood" purposes, which is questioned by the U.S. side.

China has no common ground with the U.S. and South Korea on regime change. The U.S. and South Korea want to realize denuclearization even at the cost of overthrowing Kim Jong-un's regime. China did not join their human rights offensive, and opposed their allegations at UN Security Council discussions about North Korean human rights. In the end game of the Korean Peninsula, China will not be swayed by Seoul's logic on Korean reunification as long as South Korea stays allied with the United States.

IV. Future Prospects

Looking ahead at whether China's North Korea policy will evolve, it is tempting to conclude that the dilemma will continue. Just as one high-level Chinese diplomat said, "Our mindset has changed, but the length of our border has not".²⁹ China still walks a tightrope. China pursues multiple goals, but it is always difficult to balance these contradictory goals. Just as an American expert said, "Beijing's approach was a synthesis of these contradictions. It supported stronger sanctions against North Korea because of the nuclear test, but celebrated the anniversary and cultivated the likely new leader".³⁰

China stuck to denuclearization of the peninsula, but China alone cannot resolve the North Korean nuclear issue. Beijing does not have the kind of influence where it can tell the North Korean leader what to do. The tortuous process towards denuclearization in the past 20 years showed that it was not an easy goal. The North Korean nuclear issue is related to Cold War structure, peace regime building, and normalization between North Korean and other parties. The fates of Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein and Libyan leader Gaddafi made North Korea more determined than ever to acquire nuclear weapons. Without addressing North Korea's concerns, denuclearization cannot be realized. To achieve the goal, all pertinent parties should make joint efforts and bear joint responsibility. The U.S.

²⁹ International Crisis Group, "Shades of Red: China's Debate over North Korea", *Asia Report*, November 2009, "Executive Summary".

³⁰ R. Stapleton Roy, "Responses to 'The Illogic of China's North Korea Policy'" *PacNet*, June 7, 2012

and other parties should respond to North Korea's long-term call for negotiating other issues, otherwise the hope for denuclearization will fade.

While China and the U.S. still share the same interest in denuclearization, their cooperation will not be as smooth as before. China would not facilitate the U.S. to bring down Kim Jong-un's regime. China and South Korea are developing a solid relationship based on close economic ties, people-to-people exchanges and more political coordination. In the future, China may share more interests with South Korea, and the trend tilting to South Korea may develop to the tipping point that the powerful reasons why China shouldn't "abandon" North Korea will disappear.

China's efforts to build a normal state-to-state relationship may not quickly make progress, since North Korea is such an abnormal country. North Korea's attack on China's implementation of Resolution 2270 indicates that an alienated bilateral relationship will continue. But it is early to conclude North Korea's split with China. North Korea's extreme isolation in the international community and heavy reliance on China for its survival will make it hesitant to do so. Furthermore, China and Russia share the same position on the nuclear issue. Russia dumped the North Korean burden in the early 1990s and would not return to the past. North Korea can no longer play off China and Russia to maximize benefits from both sides as it did in the 1960s.

China still values its relationship with North Korea. If North Korea takes significant steps towards denuclearization, it will create the conditions for China and other countries to help North Korea develop its economy. Nuclear weapons alone cannot guarantee regime survival. North Korea should make use of the opportunity of the coming 7th party congress to overhaul its policy.