The North Korean Nuclear Issue and China’s Strategic Choice

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North Korea conducted its fourth nuclear detonation and launched the long-range rocket on February 2016, which escalated the crisis. North Korea’s behavior has given rise to intense reaction of Northeast Asian countries. Moreover, the United States, South Korea, and Japan are going to be tougher, which give China sharply pressure. On February 12, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi stressed in the interview with Reuters that China’s policy would be increasingly attentive on the regional nuclear issue and guided by three principles. He remarked that “First, the Korean Peninsula cannot be nuclearized. This applies to the North and South. Second, there is no military solution to this issue. If there is a war or turbulence it is not acceptable for China. Third, China will not allow its legitimate interests including in national security interests to be undermined.” Overall, the foreign minister Wang Yi has put forward three basic principles, but it requires China to answer how to make a proper policy in this framework. What China should do to ease the current crisis? This article will discuss the problem and its related issues.

Rising Challenges to China

When tracing the whole process of North Korea nuclear issue, it is not difficult to find out that North Korea’s fourth nuclear test would be inevitable. In order to pursue its security interests, North Korea chose the particular time to test the bomb after accurate calculation and careful weighed up the pros and cons. North Korea’s nuclear test produced a series of chain reactions, which had a profound influence on the foreign policy of the United States, North Korea, and Japan. It also threatened China’s national security and poses serious challenge to China’s foreign policy.

Firstly, the fourth nuclear test threatened China’s national security. China is the country with the largest number of nuclear neighbors. Neighboring countries have nuclear weapons have already formed a huge security threat to China. According to this common sense, a North Korea with nuclear weapons is harmful to China’s

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national security. North Korea conducted four nuclear tests in 2006, 2009, 2013, and 2016, and it has made some breakthroughs in nuclear weapons technology, which means that despite facing economic sanctions and export control, North Korea still made considerable progress in hoarding and refining nuclear materials, development and deployment of strategic missiles, miniaturization of nuclear weapons and the seeking of the survivable strategic deterrent force.\(^1\) Since North Korea launched the fourth nuclear test, U.S. strategic scholars have concerned that North Korea was developing and deploying nuclear bombs that could strike the United States. Until now, North Korea hasn’t yet achieved this goal.\(^2\) The progress of North Korea’s nuclear technology and missile technology will definitely impact the regional order, but technology is not the whole picture of the North Korean nuclear issue. We need to return to the nuclear issue itself. Besides, North Korea’s nuclear technology is not mature. The potential risk of nuclear leakage to China’s national security can’t be ignored. China must seriously assess the security level of North Korea’s nuclear facilities which close to China’s border.

Secondly, America’s strategic adjustments, especially the military deployment, will give pressures to China. Although there are some disputes in the past, China and the United States have a good record of cooperation on this issue in the multilateral platforms like the Six-Party Talks and the United Nations. However, in order to the regime survival, North Korea is actively using the strategic competition between China and the United States in East Asia.\(^3\) Under the carefully designed foreign policy by North Korea, China and the United States have the possibility to have much more disputes on the North Korea nuclear issue. According to American strategists, pessimistic arguments are rising. The discussion about whether the United States should strike the North Korea, how to change the regime, or will the North Korea’ regime collapse increased rapidly.\(^4\) Meanwhile, the United States has strengthened its


military deployment in Northeast Asia. After the nuclear test, the United States shipped the aircraft carrier John C. Stennis from the third fleet to the seventh fleet, and deployed 14 F-22 stealth fighters in Japan. Besides, the United States also sent the first airborne Special Forces, 75th Ranger Regiment, B52 bomber and nuclear-powered submarine “North Carolina” to cooperate with South Korea launching a number of joint military training and exercise to deter North Korea.

Thirdly, the strategic trust between China and South Korea are shirking. Since Park Geun-hye took office, China and South Korea have enhanced the strategic trust by strengthening cooperation in areas of economic, political and security. For instance, South Korea did not accept the request of the United States to deploy the THAAD system in South Korea, nor did it follow the instructions of the United States to boycott the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, which has a basic respect for China’s interests and concerns. Park Geun-hye also attended the Chinese military parade in spite of the external pressure. However, after North Korea’s fourth nuclear test, China and South Korea had a huge dispute on how to deal with North Korea issue. South Korea urges China to take a hard line to punish North Korea. China supports UN Security Council to adopt new resolutions and lets North Korea pay the necessary price for its behaviors. However, Chinese government insists that sanctions are not the ends and the peninsula nuclear issue should be dragged back to the track of negotiations in the final analysis. Subsequently, the United States and South Korea issued a joint statement on February 7, confirmed that the United States would deploy the THAAD system in South Korea. On February 12, Reuters in Munich interviewed Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi. Wang Yi pointed out that the THAAD deployed by the United States would directly harm China’s strategic security interests. When South Korea decided to deploy the THAAD system and the X-band radar associated with the THAAD system has a radius that goes far beyond the Korean Peninsula, which will threaten to China. It can significantly improve the United States reconnaissance capability of China’s strategic missile and pose a serious threat to China’s national security. The relationship between China and South Korea tend to

② More details about the technical analysis, please see Wu Riqiang, “Hanguo gaokong fandao dui woguo anquan de yingxiang (Impact of South Korea’s High Altitude Anti Missile on China’s Security),” Tencent Net,
deteriorate after South Korea decided to deploy THAAD. Strategic trust between two countries has also shrunk seriously. This just shows the significance of the DPRK in the relationship between China and South Korea. Sino-ROK relations are likely to deteriorate if the North Korean nuclear issue is not handled appropriately.

Fourthly, Japan finds the excuse to strengthen its arms. After North Korea’s nuclear test, Abe Shinzo strongly condemned North Korea. He said the nuclear test was a major threat to Japan’s security. Therefore, Japan began to accelerate the construction of its own missile defense system and strengthened the coordination with the United States and South Korea on regional security. These three countries held Vice Foreign Minister level talks in February 16 to coordinate the position to DPRK, and unanimously agreed to promote the United States to carry out tough sanctions against North Korea. North Korea’s nuclear test also prompted the ROK-Japan relations. It is possible to drive military cooperation between the two countries.\(^1\) The loose ROK-Japan relations have been a concern of the United States. Once the relations improved, it will undoubtedly be welcomed by the United States. However, this will give great pressure to China.

The Fourth North Korea nuclear crisis shows several trends. North Korea plays the role as a trigger. Its nuclear test directly leads to the tension in East Asia. And the linkage effect between different topics of the North Korean nuclear issue appeared. The re-escalating North Korea nuclear issue is hitting China’s diplomatic efforts in recent years, including the Sino-ROK relations and Sino-US cooperation on the nuclear issue. Moreover, the situation in East Asia is changing fast. The strategic posture that China and South Korea jointly cope with Japan is likely to change. The improvement of relationship between Japan and South Korea should draw China’s attention. If we observe North Korea’s behavior carefully, it seems that North Korea is using the chaotic situation to improve its extreme external situation.

**Why North Korea so Provocative?**
The North Korea is provocative. The root lies in its sense of regime insecurity which


has domestic reasons. However, one key reason is that the hostility and sanctions from the United States had posed a direct threat to North Korea’s regime survival.

Firstly, North Korea regards regime survival as its priority. North Korea had the plan to nuclear weapons, especially after the Cold War when North Korea lost the crucial ally of the Soviet Union. The dramatically increased external pressure became a trigger for North Korea to restart its nuclear weapons program. In March 1993, North Korea withdrew from the nuclear non-proliferation treaty and the United States imposed sanctions against it. Since the 21st century, the economic sanctions against North Korea tend to be more severe. On the one hand, the United States sanctioned North Korea through its Ministry of Finance. On February 19, President Obama signed a bill to punish North Korea, aimed at strengthening sanctions against North Korea. On the other hand, every time North Korea tested the nuclear bomb, the United States will promote the Security Council of the United Nations to adopt new sanctions. Actually, economic sanctions are ineffective to prevent North Korea from developing nuclear weapons.① However, North Korea’s national economy was deteriorated under economic sanctions, which seriously threatened the stability of its regime.

Secondly, North Korea will keep on implementing the Songun politics to maintain the regime survival. After the Cold War, Kim Jong-il put forward the Songun politics based on the Juche idea. Kim Jong-il tried to put the troops in the country’s top priority in order to stabilize the regime.② The core of the Songun politics is the development of nuclear weapons. Although Kim Jong-un implemented new economic policy after came to power, and he revived North Korea’s economy through the reform of agricultural system and solve the food crisis. However, North Korea still continues the Songun politics which means there is no big adjustment of North Korea’s policy overall and it will hardly have any changes in the future.

Thirdly, North Korea is hard to open to the outside world. Maintaining regime survival is the fundamental driving force for North Korea to make decision. North Korea is bound to achieve this goal through a series of policies.③ In short, these


limited means include not only the social aspects, but also the institutional level, which makes the society more conservative and occlusive. North Korean leaders deeply know that unity is the necessity for North Korea’s survival. The North Korea elites also know that internal, not external, is the greatest threats. Now, opening to the outside world is contradicted with the stability of the North Korea. Therefore, resisting reform may be the most effective approach to maintain stability.

The hostility and sanctions of the United States made North Korea’s regime face serious challenges. The development of nuclear weapons became an inevitable and logical choice for North Korea. Some scholars believe that Kim Jong-un’s foreign policy will be more unpredictable. In fact, if we regard North Korea’s regime security as a starting point, combing the mechanism of its foreign policy, we can find that the DPRK’s foreign policy has distinctive features and rules.

North Korea’s foreign policy is full of instrumental rationality which reflected in two aspects. On the one hand, North Korea pursues the maximized interests for regime security. North Korea often negotiates and bluffs at the same time to avoid the use of force from the United States and to earn economic assistance from other countries. On the other hand, North Korea often does not obey international rules and break former promise. If the rules are favorable, North Korea tends to abide by the treaty; as long as the rules are useless, the North Korea will withdraw from the treaty or ignore it. So North Korea’s instrumental rationality reduces the reputation.

North Korea’s foreign policy also has the feature of adventurism. It repeatedly challenged the bottom line of other countries. The foreign policy looks like disorganized, but it is not. If explore North Korea’s foreign policy carefully, we will find that almost all North Korea’s policies have the same strategic goal, which is trying to achieve reconciliation with the United States through coercive diplomacy. More specifically, North Korea mainly adopts the following means: imposing strategic pressure on the relevant countries through nuclear tests, the launch of missiles or rockets; escalating tensions in the region through the bluff; prying great power relations through hedging.

North Korea will show its permanent nuclear power status to the world through the


\(\text{② Bruce Klingner, “North Korea Heading for the Abyss,” The Washington Quarterly, Vol.37, No.3 (Fall 2014), pp. 169-182.}\)

\(\text{③ Narushige Michishita, “Playing the Same Game: North Korea’s Coercive Attempt at U.S. Reconciliation, The Washington Quarterly, Vol.32, No.4 (October 2009), pp. 139-152.}\)
launch of a satellite, nuclear test and test-firing of submarine in the future. North Korea not only seeks the status of nuclear power in the long run, but also uses nuclear weapon as a valuable chip to achieve a similar nuclear reconciliation between the United States and India. Finally, North Korea wants the assurance from the United States. So we can find the core issue, which the North Korea is uncontrollable like runaway horse. The main challenge is how China and US to stop a runaway horse.

**A Silver Lining for China**

North Korea nuclear issue comes to a deadlock at present. As a stakeholder, how should China ease the crisis? In fact, foreign minister Wang Yi has proposed a framework to solve the North Korea nuclear issue. China has some choices under this framework to maintain flexibility. This requires China to focus on the following points. First, China needs a new strategic thinking to try new means. Second, China’s focus shouldn’t be restricted to the crisis itself, but should co-ordinate the security situation in the Asia Pacific Region. Third, strategic means and strategic objectives must be matched. Fourth, strategic signal should be clear.

China plays a complicated role in the North Korea nuclear issue: both stakeholders and coordinator. China should not only maintain the traditional friendship with North Korea, but also take South Korea and the United states into concerns. Therefore, China not only needs to be a balancer, but also to be the constitutor of agenda. Solving the nuclear issue needs diplomatic skills. To achieve this goal, China needs to deal with two kinds of diplomatic strategy, namely to appease both North Korea and US-ROK-Japan by persuading each other. Which side will China placate first depends on the specific situation. But for China itself, it is more crucial to reassure North Korea. To ease North Korea nuclear crisis and persuade the United States, South Korea and Japan by appeasing North Korea, China needs to have institutional influence and bargaining influence.

China should have institutional influence to appease North Korea. China and North Korea signed *Sino-North Korean Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty* in July 11, 1961; the two countries became alliance. In international relations, the alliance aims to respond to external threats jointly, it is a kind of institutional

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arrangement actually. During the cold war, the alliance between China and North Korea played a positive role in maintaining the peace. However, after the cold war, with the impact of the changed international situation and the North Korea nuclear crisis, the bilateral relations between China and the DPRK have been loosened. It has a negative effect on the security of the two countries. Therefore, the loose Sino-DPRK relationship is one of the most important reasons for the crisis in the peninsula after the cold war. According to Thomas Christensen’s study on the alliance politics in East Asia, it is more difficult to deal with alliances which lack cohesion. If the allies are unable to act in concert, one will often involve in profitless regional conflicts. According to this logic, the Sino-DPRK relations need to be rebound. The re-institutionalization of the alliance between the two countries is the key to solve the North Korea issue. The re-institutionalization can be divided in two steps.

In the first step, the two countries can establish a new security framework according to the reality. That is to say, China can’t go in extremely and abandon North Korea; China also can’t ignore the environment changes to maintain the status quo. China and North Korea should enhance the relations. This needs to adjust some of the existed principles. One is China and North Korea may consider revising *Sino-North Korean Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty*. The treaty as an institutional guarantee for the security relationship between China and North Korea needs to be adjusted in accordance with the reality. The purpose is to clarify the rights and obligations of the two countries in the alliance; namely, the two countries should shoulder the rights and undertake obligations at the same time. The other is China can consider to deal with Sino-DPRK relations in the normal state relations, which requires reducing ideological factors. This can help China become more rational dealing with Sino-DPRK relations.

In the Second step, China should reshape North Korea’s foreign policy patterns through the reward and punishment mechanism. Especially in asymmetric alliance likes China and DPRK, the reward and punishment mechanism becomes particularly important. If North Korea obeys the rules, China should provide the public goods and safety assurance. If North Korea breaks the rules, China can persuade North Korea to change behavior through sanctions and other means. How to use power to influence

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other countries is an important part of China’s foreign policy. Overall, the power strategy of China usually focuses on attraction, while lacks compulsion.① Actually, the willingness of China to use coercive power is still to be improved. Specifically, besides conduct economic sanctions under the guidance of the United Nations Security Council resolutions, China can also promote the DPRK return to the track of negotiations through unilateral sanctions.

China should also have bargaining power to persuade the United States, South Korea and Japan. China also lacks influence on these countries on the North Korea nuclear issue. Therefore, China needs to enhance its ability in the negotiations in order to persuade the United States easing the external pressure on North Korea and provide proper safety and comfort feeling to North Korea. This is particularly important to ease the crisis. So China needs to enhance the bargaining power which depends on two aspects. One is China’s own power and influence, which means China, as a great power, needs to have the shaping capability in foreign policy. Another China’s influence comes from bargaining chips which gained by shaping North Korea’s behaviors. China reassures North Korea through institutional influence, once DPRK’s behavior patterns have changed, China will get a good reputation on the nuclear issue, which will help China persuade the United States, South Korea and Japan. The first aspect makes China able to persuade North Korea, the second aspect needs China push North Korea change first.

It should be pointed out that, China can persuade the United States, South Korea, and Japan through a variety of platforms. As in the multilateral platform, the six party talks is the only multilateral security mechanism to resolve the North Korea nuclear issue at present. However, North Korea currently refuses to return to the six party talks, which makes the talks stalled. As the host, China should continue to push each side back to the track of the six party talks. The six party talks is an important platform, however, it is not the only one for China.② China has other choices in multilateral ways. At the bilateral, Chinese choices are more diverse. It is a more pragmatic choice to remain flexible channels of communication with the United States, South Korea, and Japan. China tries to display influence to them in multilateral ways.

and bilateral negotiations, aiming to achieve the following goals. First, persuading the United States to abandon the “strategic patience” strategy, and actively communicate with North Korea on the multilateral platform to reduce each other’s strategic misperception. Second, promoting U.S., South Korea, and Japan to take responsibilities, rather than shifting them. Third, urging the United States and other countries to stop threat to North Korea by the theory of regime collapse. Fourth, persuading U.S. and other countries to consider the reasonable security requirements from North Korea and provide a sense of security to them. If above four aspects can be achieved, we can ease the crisis from the U.S. side.

The easing of the North Korea nuclear crisis will be a downward spiral no matter which side will be persuaded first. This is also matching he logic of crisis management and control. One of the key links in prompting the involved countries into the track of benign interaction and gradually reduces the intensity of the crisis. There is no denying that this choice still can’t ensure North Korea’s denuclearization. The ultimately denuclearization depends on specific historical conditions, the courage of politicians and the rivalry between those countries. Crisis de-escalation is the precondition of denuclearization.

China needs to do something before the situation gets out of control, to ease current crisis, to achieve denuclearization finally, to maintain peace and stability in Northeast Asia. What the United States should do in the future? The US should reduce the security pressure and give North Korea the proper degree of comfort feeling which will ease the crisis; shoulder more responsibilities; and consider about North Korea’s proper request.