

# DPRK Nuclear Issue in Sino-American Relations: A Chinese Perspective

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Recent half-century history has proven that a stable Sino-U.S. relationship helped to create a favorable environment for concerning countries to form some types of framework to deal with conflicts or crisis happened in Northeast Asia. Positive Sino-American relations contributed considerably to resolving the DPRK's nuclear crisis and greatly fostered the issue to develop toward a peaceful solution. Meanwhile, since the first DPRK's nuclear issue emerged in 1993, sustained cooperation between China and the United States on the nuclear issue has composed to be one of the most important aspects of China-U.S. relations. Therefore, a model of interaction, or even a benign circulation of mutual influence between DPRK's nuclear issue and Sino-American relations emerged and continued to develop.

During the process of dealing with the DPRK's nuclear issue, China's diplomacy has been experiencing a transition from traditional low-key to

aggressively claiming its own material interest. China also showed itself as a responsible power by positively mediating and managing on the nuclear crises. Although direct bilateral talks between the U.S. and DPRK are the main driving force to recent dramatic progress in DPRK's nuclear issue, China's unique roles in organizing, sustaining talks and mediating the stances of key parties are irreplaceable.

### **Chinese Strategic thinking on DPRK**

China's foreign policy including its policy towards DPRK is based mainly on its traditional foreign policy principles and its own strategic interests. Maintaining the traditional friendship with DPRK and safeguarding peace and stability of a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula are the policy goals of China.

### Maintaining traditional friendship with DPRK

DPRK is China's close neighbor, and the two countries have a relation of traditional friendship. China wishes to maintain this friendly relation with DPRK. China has pursued a foreign policy of noninterference and does not interfere in DPRK's internal affairs. China respects DPRK themselves to choose their future and their road of development. Over the past years, China has given strong political support and economic assistance to

DPRK and contributed to the political stability and economic development of DPRK. When former Premier Wen Jiabao visited DPRK in autumn 2009, he remarked that he wished to introduce Chinese experiences drawn from its own economic reform and open-door policy to DPRK. <sup>1</sup>China's rapid economic development offers a lesson to DPRK that a socialist country does not necessarily have to be poor. Although there is little evidence that DPRK has any desire to import the Chinese model, it is true that China hopes to direct Pyongyang's attention back to its economy, and help it finally find its own way to reform its economic and political systems. Chinese leaders have maintained good relations with the leaders of DPRK from old time to the present days. Chinese government has reaffirmed China's determination to promote the traditional friendship between China and DPRK.<sup>2</sup>

China also supports the efforts made by the DPRK to integrate into the international community and improve and finally normalize relations with the United States, Japan, European Union and other countries.<sup>3</sup> It is absolutely in China's interest to remain a friend of DPRK, rather than having a hostile neighbor.

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<sup>1</sup> “吴邦国、温家宝分别会见金正日,” 2010年5月7日,  
[http://www.china.com.cn/policy/txt/2010-05/07/content\\_19991736.htm](http://www.china.com.cn/policy/txt/2010-05/07/content_19991736.htm)。

“Wu Bangguo, Wen Jiabao Fenbie Huijian Jin Zhengri” ,  
“Wu Bangguo and Wen Jiabao Meet Kim Jungil ” May 7, 2010.

<sup>2</sup>Foreign Ministry of China, Hu Jintao Congratulates Kim Jong Un on Becoming Top Military Commander of the DPRK, December 31, 2011.

<http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt/wshd/t893040.htm>.

<sup>3</sup>Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the Inter-Korean Summit 2000/11/15.

Also, the two countries share a similar emotional language and historical memory, so capitalizing on these similarities has always been used to maintain a positive element in the relationship, and also improve public opinion about the other country even when some aspects of the bilateral relationship may be strained.

In China, there are many emotional idioms applied to DPRK. These can be seen in the CCP's condolence letter on Kim Jung-il's death, which praises Kim's great achievements, emphasizes the traditional party friendship between the two nation, and ends with the striking sentence: "The Chinese people will always stand side by side with the DPRK people!"<sup>4</sup> This emotional letter received a very positive response from DPRK leaders and civilians.

### Standing for the maintenance of peace and stability of Korean Peninsula

As a close neighbor of the Korean Peninsula, China has always been devoted to peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. China has all along supported the final realization of peaceful reunification of the two

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<sup>4</sup> CCP Central Committee," CPC Central Committee Sends the Message of Condolence over the Passing Away of Kim Jong I", December 19,2011, <http://www.fmcoprc.gov.mo/eng/news/t889650.htm>.

sides on the Korean Peninsula through dialogue and supported improvement of relations between DPRK and ROK.

While maintaining friendly relations with DPRK, China also has good-neighborly relations with ROK. Since China and ROK upgraded their bilateral relations to "strategic cooperative partnership" in 2008 during President Lee Myung-bak's first visit to China, the two countries have maintained the "healthy, stable and sustained development" of their relations, and enjoyed sound momentum of economic cooperation and trade. China is currently ROK's largest trading partner and ROK is China's third largest.<sup>5</sup>

#### Resolute opposition to DPRK's nuclear and missile tests

China is firmly opposed to DPRK's development of nuclear and missile programs. When DPRK conducted its nuclear tests, missile tests or satellite launching, the Chinese government issued statements expressing its strong opposition and voted in favor of the UN Security Council resolutions and the presidential statements against DPRK.

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<sup>5</sup><http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjb/zzjg/yzs/gjlb/2767/>.

When DPRK made the 4<sup>th</sup> nuclear test and conducted satellite, Chinese agreed to a new UN resolution. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi has called for all sides involved in the Korean Peninsula issue to do what they can to defuse the tension. He says the recent UN Security Council Resolution 2270 is key to the process. "We are communicating with all parties of the Korean Peninsula issue. Resolution 2270 includes measures and necessary sanctions. It also supports the restoration of the Six-Party Talks and the resolution of the problem through political and diplomatic ways. "We think Resolution 2270 needs to be fully and comprehensively implemented.... None of the parties should take any action to worsen the current situation. This has also been included in Resolution 2270."

Fundamentally speaking, although shared interests and common emotional language strengthen and reinforce the bilateral relationship between China and DRPK, DPRK's development of nuclear and missile programs concerns China's political, economic and security interests. China will continue to pursue its policy of standing for the maintenance of peace and stability of the Korean Peninsula, and standing for peaceful solution of DPRK's nuclear and missile issues through dialogue and consultation.

### **Cooperation and differences between China and the United States**

When Chinese new leadership emerged in 2012, there are opportunities for new thinking. President Xi Jinping played a major role in calling for a “new type of major power relationship.” China and the United States share common obligations and interests in achieving a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula, and they have had both good cooperation and major differences in handling DPRK’s nuclear and missile programs.

#### Common grounds and good cooperation

China and the United States share the same goal of achieving a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula and both countries have made joint efforts in persuading DPRK to give up its nuclear and missile programs.

Both China and the United States stand for the maintenance of stability in Korean Peninsula and support the peaceful unification of Korea. China has on a number of occasions reaffirmed its support for the reconciliation process between ROK and DPRK and their final peaceful reunification.<sup>6</sup> The United States has also affirmed its position that “the United States and China share strong determination to maintain peace and stability.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>China-ROK Joint Communiqué, August 25, 2008.  
<http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt/2649/t513632.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> Remarks to the Media on Departure at the Beijing Capital Airport by Kurt M. Campbell, Assistant Secretary, January 4, 2012.  
<http://www.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2012/01/180111.htm>.

China has worked together with the United States in imposing strict export controls and has supported the general goal of the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), initiated by the United States. China and the United States also joined hands in their resolute opposition to the nuclear and missile tests conducted by DPRK, and both countries give strong support to UN Security Council resolutions and have fully implemented them.

#### Different policies towards DPRK

China and the United States have pursued different policies towards DPRK. China has traditional friendship with DPRK and has pursued a consistent policy towards DPRK. The United States has no diplomatic relations with DPRK and has pursued a hostile policy towards DPRK since the Korean War.

China stands for the maintenance of stability of Korean Peninsula and proper solution of DPRK's nuclear and missile issues by diplomatic and peaceful means. Whenever there is a crisis or problem over Korean Peninsula, China tries hard to mediate among the concerned parties, with a view of maintain peace and stability. U.S. policy towards DPRK's nuclear and missile programs, however, has undergone some changes under different administrations after the end of the Cold War. At the



earlier period of time, the United States tried to solve it as a nonproliferation issue. As time goes by, regime change has become the policy goal of the US administrations.

During President George W. Bush's administration, the United States engaged in another major diplomatic initiative by joining the six-party talks. It is clear that Bush administration did not like DPRK and for most of the time pursued a hard-line policy towards DPRK, labeling DPRK as "axis of evil" along with Iraq and Iran. However, the United States actively participated in the six-party talks and held frequent bilateral dialogues with DPRK. Bush administration wanted DPRK to realize a "complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement (CVID)" of both its plutonium program and its uranium enrichment program. Bush administration also made some military threats against DPRK, with an obvious policy goal of regime change.

After coming to office, President Obama made a dramatic shift in its policy towards DPRK in 2009, adopting a much firmer, hard-line policy than originally planned.<sup>8</sup> This position of the United States is sharply in contrast with China's policy to support the maintenance friendly relations with both Koreas.

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<sup>8</sup>Impact of Presidential Elections on DPRK Policy, Bruce Klingner, The Heritage Foundation.

## Different means in addressing DPRK's nuclear and missile issues

While China stands for peaceful solution of DPRK's nuclear and missile issues through consultation and dialogue, the United States has preferred the mean of imposing unilateral sanctions and military deterrence to pressure DPRK to give up its nuclear and missile programs, with an ultimate objective of regime change or regime collapse. The United States believes that if sanctions can be made painful and severe enough, it would be the end of game.

China and the United States have taken different attitudes towards sanction. The United States always intends to push for even harsher sanctions against DPRK. China stands for an appropriate and balanced reaction, and always calls for calm and restraint in international responses, so as to avoid further escalation of situation.<sup>9</sup> China does think the goal of sanction is to push DPRK back to the table.

Managing a two-party relationship is hard, for the third parties can increase complexity and risk. By virtue of respective histories, legacies of the Cold War, each of countries has managed the third parties with

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<sup>9</sup> Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hong Lei's Regular Press Conference on December 14, 2012, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw/s2510/2511/t998567.htm>.

different approaches, that are problematic. DPRK's nuclear test did produce negative influence on Sino-American relations in some ways.

The United States and China from the beginning have some divergence on the DPRK nuclear issue. The nuclear test outstand the difference between the two nations. As a neighbor of the Korean peninsula, China stresses stability and peaceful solution. However, U.S. options contain such as regime change and military strike, especially in the earlier period of the talks. Therefor, although Sino-U.S. relations are kept stable in recent years, the logic of the U.S. policy towards China basically dose not change, which is still “hedge”, or engagement plus containment. Generally speaking, both countries still lack mutual trust towards each other on strategic level, which in turn limits the cooperation between two countries on the DPRK nuclear issue.

### **Conclusion**

The dramatic change in DPRK nuclear issue is brought by the bilateral talks between the two key players, i.e. the U.S. and DPRK. Actually, before the second phase of the sixth round of the six-party talks began, the U.S. and DPRK held talks in Berlin in January, in New York in March. Just at the beginning of this September, the two

countries talked again in the working group meeting. Through these talks, the two countries communicated fully and came to an understanding of each other's position and bottom lines, which laid a solid foundation for recent smooth development in DPRK's nuclear issue. Therefore, the U.S. and DPRK respectively started the first action-to-action step decreed in February 13 joint document.

During the direct talks between DPRK and US, this seems make China, the organizer and mediator. It made US to believe that China still has its unique role in the DPRK nuclear issue. From US perspective, the most important factor to settle the DPRK nuclear issue depends on whether the key players have enough political resolution, but not on diplomatic mediation from the third party. China performed well on its mediating. The six-party talks are still the most important multilateral mechanism to help to resolve the DPRK's nuclear issue.

The Korean-Peninsula nuclear issue is a matter of extreme complexity, with various kinds of questions entangled with each other. At present, disabling DPRK's nuclear facilities and declaring its nuclear programs are the key questions in the DPRK's nuclear issue. These questions are very tough questions and any slight technical neglect could lead to a reverse of the progress on resolving the issue.

How to keep DPRK and the U.S. go under the “action-to-action” model and therefore how to keep present progress go forward is vital to the nuclear issue settlement. China’s roles in organizing, sustaining talks and mediating the stances of key parties are not replaceable. Denuclearization of Korean Peninsula and demonstration of itself as a responsible power is what China has been strived for. Based on the Six-Party Talks, China is exploring a new future multilateral security mechanism in Northeast Asia, which would be extremely important to the peace and stability in the region.

Summarizing from the Sino-American relations perspective: since first emerged in 1993, the DPRK nuclear issue gradually evolved into a key factor in Sino-American relation development. The nuclear crisis then offered a chance for the two countries to improve their relations. Meanwhile, positive Sino-American relations are crucial to peace and stability in Northeast Asia region. A stable China-U.S. relationship helped to create a favorable environment for concerning countries to form some types of framework to deal with conflicts or crisis happened in the region. It is proven that positive Sino-U.S. relations contributed considerably to resolving Korean Peninsula nuclear issue and it greatly fostered the issue to develop toward a peaceful solution. Since the second DPRK’s nuclear crisis in 2002, a model of interaction between DPRK’s nuclear issue and

Sino-American relations formed. That is: cooperation on the DPRK nuclear issue became an important aspect of Sino-American relations. A benign circulation of mutual influence emerged between Sino-American relations and the DPRK's nuclear issue.

Currently, bilateral talks between the two countries became a driving force to resolve the DPRK's nuclear issue. Under this new situation, the basic cooperation on the DPRK nuclear issue between China and the U.S. should not be changed. America still needs mediation and cooperation from China on this extremely complicated issue. China still wants to realize its goal of denuclearizing Korean Peninsula and maintaining the peace and stability in Northeast region. China and U.S have common interest on keeping Korean Peninsula nuclear free which is crucial to both countries' national interests. The two nations not only had close cooperation in the past on the DPRK nuclear issue. But they in reality have much broader foundations, independent to the cooperation on DPRK nuclear issue, to maintain Sino-American relationships. Concerning about the different approaching toward the issue, it is of vital importance for the United States to change its hostile policy to DPRK and help DPRK feel secured and safe to abandon its nuclear and missile programs. We expect some new policies, creative ideas and positive moves by the leaders of both countries in dealing with DPRK's nuclear and missile issues.

