

Reconstructing Sino-US Cooperation over North Korea Nuclear Issue

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Since the eruption of North Korea nuclear crisis in early 1993, the past two decades witnessed the ups and downs, on and off, of the negotiation over denuclearization in the Korean Peninsula. However, on the one hand, no long lasting solution has been reached yet so far; on the other hand, North Korea has been investing on and developing its nuclear and missile programs. This article will try to answer the following questions: What is the current status and future of North Korean nuclear issue? What is the difference in China and American policy toward North Korean nuclear issue? How to reconstruct Sino-US cooperation over North Korea nuclear issue?

North Korea Nuclear Program: Current Status and Uncertain Future

Concerns over North Korea's nuclear program include North Korea's stock of plutonium, uranium enrichment program, and the potential to weaponize its nuclear materials.

North Korea's Plutonium

North Korea got its plutonium from the 5MW nuclear reactor from Yongbyon, which reactor was shut down in July 2007 with the presence of IAEA inspectors, and its cooling tower was demolished one year later. In April 2009, immediately after the UN Security Council's condemnation of North Korea's satellite launch, IAEA inspectors were kicked out. Ever since then there is no more verification activities in North Korea. Early this year, North Korea declared that it would restart the 5MW reactor, which means it may be able to produce 6kg plutonium every year if North Korea did restart this reactor.

How much plutonium has been separated in the past remains controversial, and estimates vary much. It is reported that North Korea declared 37kg plutonium in its declaration under the six party talks. ¹According to David Albright from Institute of Science and International Security, "As of February 2007, North Korea has a total estimated plutonium stock of between 46 and 64 kilograms of plutonium, of which about 28-50 kilograms are estimated to be in separated form and usable in nuclear weapons."² According to Dr. Sigfried Hecker's estimate, North Korea may have obtained 24 to 42 kilograms of plutonium, enough for 4 to 8 nuclear warheads, and North Korea is technically capable to restart the 5MW nuclear reactor within six months if they choose to do so.

¹ Warren Strobel, "North Korean nuclear documents challenge CIA assertions," *McClatchy Newspapers*, May 28, 2008.

² David Albright and Paul Brannan, "The North Korean Plutonium Stock, February 2007", <http://www.isis-online.org/publications/dprk/DPRKplutoniumFEB.pdf>.

Because North Korea has conducted three nuclear tests in 2006, 2009, and 2013 respectively, part of its stock of plutonium has been used in these tests.

At this moment, North Korea is building a light water reactor with the capacity of 25 to 30 MW, and if this reactor comes to operation, it has the potential to produce plutonium as well, though not as suitable for nuclear warhead as the plutonium separated from spent fuels from 5MW reactor.

North Korea's Uranium Program

North Korea's uranium program remains a mystery for almost all North Korea observers, and even practitioners. In April 2009, North Korea announced that it would build its own fuel cycle system for the light water reactor, and five months later North Korea declared that major progress had been made in uranium enrichment technology. One year later in November 2010, North Koreans displayed their uranium enrichment facilities in Yongbyon. According to Dr. Hecker, there were about 2000 centrifuges in Yongbyon, and the uranium enrichment program was not the only one judging by the constructing speed of the centrifuge facilities, the advanced level they achieved, and traces of uranium enrichment found in the past. North Korea insists this uranium enrichment program is to produce 3.5% Low Enrichment of Uranium for the light water reactor. However, many American experts believe that the recently disclosed uranium program could be the second route for North Korea to build up its nuclear material stock.

Weaponization

So far, North Korea has tested three nuclear devices, but that does not necessarily mean North Korea has already had nuclear weapons. To weaponize the fissile material and do the test is only the first step; they also need to miniaturize the nuclear device so that it could be mounted onto a delivery system. No doubt, North Korea has mastered the technical capability to weaponize its fissile material; North Korean officials told American expert Selig Harrison that North Korea declared stock of plutonium has "already been weaponized".³ However, whether they have mastered the technical capability to miniaturizing it and fit it onto its missiles remains an open question. Former CIA officer indicated that with the third nuclear test early this year North Korea was moving toward that capability, but now they were not there yet.⁴ Some experts said that North Korea is "very close to being able to put a device on a missile."⁵

North Korea has proven short range missile capability, and that is no secret at all. The question left is that whether they are working on longer range missile as well. In October 2010, North Korea displayed an untested new missile "Musudan" at a parade, which is estimated has a range more than 3000 KMs. North Korea also has road mobile ICBMs called KN-08, which was displayed in April 2012 at the parade in honor of Kim Il Sung's 100th birthday.⁶

³ "Chronology of U.S.-North Korean Nuclear and Missile Diplomacy", <http://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/dprkchron>.

⁴ "Assessing North Korea's Ability to Weaponize as Kim Jong-un Sends Stark Message", http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/world/jan-june13/koreanukes2_04-02.html. April 2, 2013.

⁵ "North Korea's latest nuke stunt signals country closer to missile capability, experts say", <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2013/02/12/experts-say-north-korea-nuclear-test-important-step-towards-weaponization/>. February 12, 2013.

⁶ Markus Schiller, *Characterizing the North Korean Nuclear Missile Threat*, RAND Corporation, 2012, pp.32-34.

Other than Musudan and KN-08, North Korea in the past decade also tested flight of rocket Taepodong II/Unha-2/Unha-3. After several failures, last December North Korea successfully put a satellite into orbit, which was considered as a major breakthrough in its efforts to develop ICBM technology.

North Korea Nuclear Program and Its Future

With regard to North Korea nuclear program development in the past two decades, several points could be made.

First, North Korea has accumulated fissile material enough for several nuclear warheads, and it has mastered the technology to make nuclear bomb. North Koreans talked the talk, and walked the walk. They were trying to convince all countries concerned that they are determined to obtain its nuclear deterrent.

Second, other than obtaining plutonium from the spent fuel of the 5MW nuclear reactor, North Korea is trying the second path to obtain nuclear material, namely, high enriched uranium. If no deal is to be made, North Korea has the potential to build up its fissile material.

Third, if time permits, North Korea has the potential to miniaturize its nuclear device and mount it onto a delivery system, and possibly long range missiles.

China and America's Policy: Convergence and Divergence

North Korea nuclear issue is not only a proliferation concern, but also a regional security concern. Both China and the United States have made commitment in preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and both countries are committed to maintain the peace and stability in the Korean Peninsula. In this sense, China and the United States share common interests in preventing nuclear proliferation, a horizontal one in the Korean Peninsula, and maintaining the stability in Northeast Asia. China and the United States have cooperated in dealing with the challenge from North Korea in the past two decades. In 1990s, China did the job behind scenes, and in the past decade, China hosted the six party talks aiming at denuclearizing the North Korea nuclear program. Other than that, China also supported series of UN Security Council Sanction Resolutions and UN Security Council's Presidential Statement immediately after North Korea did nuclear test or missile test.

Diplomatic efforts made, and diplomatic energy invested, then why North Korea nuclear issue remains major failure for all countries concerned in general, for China and the United States in particular? All countries not only failed in curbing the North Korea nuclear proliferation, but also failed in maintaining the regional stability. The Cheonan Warship incident and the Yeonpyeong Shelling almost brought the Korean Peninsula into a major regional military conflict. North Korea nuclear issue became an irritant issue in Sino-US relations too, as indicated by the disputes over whether US aircraft carrier could enter into the Yellow Sea in June 2010. As argued by Professor Kenneth Lieberthal and Professor Wang Jisi in their article, North Korea became one of the sources of strategic distrust.⁷

⁷ Kenneth Lieberthal and Wang Jisi, *Addressing US-China Strategic Distrust* (Washington, DC: John L. Thornton

The reason for such a diplomatic failure lies in China and the United States' policy difference toward North Korea. First, China and US share common goal in tackling the challenge of North Korea nuclear program, namely denuclearization and stability, but they differ in priority, or sequence in dealing with North Korea nuclear issue. China is committed to the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, but has deep worries of North Korea's domestic instability and its ramification for Northeast Asia. Thus, China tends to emphasize stability over denuclearization. Many officials and scholars in China believe that US tough policy toward North Korea is to maximize the external pressure against North Korea so that North Korea could be brought down, and then the nuclear proliferation challenge could be solved naturally by regime change like what happened in Iraq. Therefore, China tried to maintain a balance between the two policy goals of denuclearization and stability. For the United States, denuclearizing North Korea is the foremost important goal, and if necessary, denuclearization should be pursued at the expense of stability.

Second, China and the United States favor different approaches in dealing with the North Korea nuclear issue. As reflected in China's White Paper on Endeavors for Arms Control, Disarmament and Non-Proliferation, "proliferation of WMD has complicated root causes. In order to prevent their proliferation, an integrated approach must be adopted to address both the symptoms and the root causes." The integrated approach includes building a global security environment of cooperation and mutual trust, resorting to political and diplomatic means (seeking dialogue instead of confrontation, seeking cooperation instead of pressuring) to solve the proliferation problems. China does not think sanctions, or pressure of any kind, will work if the root cause of proliferation is not eliminated. In addition, China emphasizes finding a face-saving approach as well, and does not think public confrontation helpful for nonproliferation efforts.

By contrast, the United States tends to discuss proliferation directly, and does not bother to address the root causes of proliferation. All American officials like to say that all options, including dialogue, negotiations, sanctions, threat of the use of force, and ultimately military strikes, are on the table. For China, a political solution serves as a framework and once that political framework is achieved, a nonproliferation challenge will become a "specific" and "technical" issue to be tackled with easily. That is a "build down" approach. For the United States, only when "specific" and "technical" issues are dealt with successfully, will there be some hope for a political solution. That is "build up" approach. This difference between the approaches of China and the United States is somewhat similar to the difference between traditional Chinese medicine and western medicine. When there is a symptom of illness, a Chinese doctor's diagnosis is that something went wrong with the whole body and the medical prescription usually deals with the whole body rather than the affected part only. The western doctor will address the same symptom differently, usually treating the affected part only with some specific medicine, treatment, or operation if necessary.

Difference in approach matters much more than expected. China argues that bilateral talks between North Korea and the United States are very important for the diplomatic solution of North Korea nuclear issue, while the United States argues that without denuclearization there is no hope for any relaxation of political relations. As a result, North Korea nuclear issue becomes one

China Center at Brookings, 2012) , p.17.

http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2012/3/30%20us%20china%20lieberthal/0330_china_li_eberthal.pdf

sources of finger pointing between China and the United States. China blames the United States continues a rigid, tough policy toward North Korea, while the United States blames China is not willing to exert pressure against North Korea necessary to bring North Korea back to the negotiation table.

Third, North Korea nuclear issue was narrowly defined as a proliferation concern, though it should be understood in the framework of regional security arrangement. In short, China and the United States hold different views of this issue: Is it a North Korea nuclear issue, or is it a Korean Peninsula issue? The Cold War era was officially ended for more than two decades, but the Cold War state in Northeast Asia remains unchanged. In this sense, North Korea nuclear issue is more of a regional security issue rather than a proliferation concern.

If North Korea nuclear issue is framed as a proliferation concern, then six party talks aiming to address this issue turns out to be a platform of 5 to 1 for North Korea, and its legitimate concern will be deliberately ignored. Under such circumstance, it is understandable North Korea would turn on the six party talks when it found its concern was partially addressed, and turn off the six party talks when its concern was not addressed at all.

If North Korea nuclear issue is framed as a regional security issue, then any talks or negotiations should address the bigger issue, such as North Korea's perceived security threat, its desire for any sort of diplomatic relations with the United States, the replacement of armistice agreement with a peace treaty.

The past two decades witnessed the successful negotiations in the first nuclear crisis starting in early 1993 when North Korea's legitimate concern was addressed in the Agreed Framework, and the failed negotiation in the second nuclear crisis starting in late 2002 when not enough attention was paid to North Korea's legitimate concern.

Four, the United States' policy toward North Korea nuclear issue did not respect or address China's concern in the final solution of this issue. Together with North Korea, China fought a war six decades ago against the United States and South Korea to keep US troops away from Chinese border. Ever since then, China maintained a close tie with North Korea. Certainly China has historical, geopolitical, even economic interests in the final solution of North Korea nuclear issue, and any instability in Korean Peninsula might endanger these interests. Most of the time, China's policy in nonproliferation is not to choose one interest against the others, but to balance long-term and short-term national interests. Therefore, it is very important for China and the United States to find a balanced way to address these concerns simultaneously, and it is too idealistic to expect China to echo other countries concerns without reservation.

Reconstructing Sino-US Cooperation over North Korea Nuclear Issue

Then, how to fix the problem and reconstruct Sino-US cooperation over North Korea nuclear issue? A strategic consensus should be agreed upon by both China and the United States. A strategic consensus in North Korea nuclear issue does not necessarily refer to a full agreement upon this issue, but it is very important for both countries to reach consensus on this issue: the common perception of those common interests endangered by crisis, the understanding and respect of the

counterpart's key concerns and policy preferences, and more importantly, the choice of problem frame to manage the crisis.

For China and the United States, neither country wants to see the stalemate in the Korean Peninsula continues, nor they want to see any further challenge from North Korea. Even though China and the United States share the common interests of stability and denuclearization in the Korean Peninsula, the worse scenario might be neither goal could be achieved. In addition, due to the unstated poisonous atmosphere after the United States publicly announced its pivot to Asia policy, China is justified to interpret American military moves in the name of deterring North Korea as activities harming China's security environment, such as its missile defense policy adjustment, its military cooperation with South Korea and Japan. There exists the danger that North Korea nuclear issue might be transformed into a troublesome issue between China and the United States.

The two goals of denuclearization and stability are both important for both countries, and even though China prefers stability to denuclearization and the United States prefers denuclearization to stability, it is not an issue to choose one from two. Both goals could be compatible and mutually enforcing. If both countries half hearted cooperation continues, mutual distrust is likely to be strengthened, and suspicions deepened.

The past decade witnessed the failure of both countries' policy toward North Korea, and the key reason is that China and the United States could not agree on the framework to address North Korea nuclear issue, namely, the policy toward North Korea aims at regime change or regime transformation? To promote regime change proactively may not be U.S. policy at this moment, but Obama Administration's policy seems to wait for North Korea to collapse. China had made efforts in the past, and China is making efforts now to promote regime transformation. Whether it is regime change or regime collapse, the fallout is not in the interests of any country in this region. China does not support such policy, and North Korea will be very reluctant to renounce its nuclear ambition, and there would not be any hope for denuclearization. However, China's effort to promote regime transformation, if without support or cooperation from U.S., is less likely to succeed in near term either.

If the strategic consensus could be reached, China and the United States could reconstruct their cooperation and coordination when addressing the North Korea nuclear challenge. It might be the time for China and the United States to try other alternatives, such as the relaxation of North Korea's external security environment, to promote North Korea's soft landing, in other words, promoting regime transformation rather than regime change or regime collapse.

First, both China and the United States could learn from past nonproliferation issues. Since the end of Cold War, there are several examples of successful and failed diplomatic efforts in curbing the nuclear proliferation. Belarus, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan inherited nuclear weapons when Soviet Union collapsed, with the security guarantee from both the United States and Russia, and economic assistance, these three countries gave up their nuclear weapons, and signed the NPT. South Africa developed nuclear bombs without being found by international community, but with the change of external security environment and the need to get integrated into international community, South Africa voluntarily abandoned its nuclear option. UK and the United States

negotiated away Libya's WMD program. India and Pakistan did nuclear tests in 1998, and both were sanctioned by UN Security Council. They survived from sanctions, and became de facto nuclear weapon states. With a war lasted for ten years, Iraq's WMD program was eliminated with an almost unaffordable price for the United States and for Iraqi people.

In these cases, nuclear proliferation concern could be solved by war with tremendous prices, by the relaxation of external security environment and economic assistance on the one hand, on the other hand, sanction and isolation did not force India and Pakistan gave up their nuclear weapon program. In North Korea nuclear issue, solution by war is a no starter simply because a war is not affordable for all countries concerned, and sanction and isolation did not work in the past either.

North Korea has the incentive to learn from the past as well. After three nuclear tests, several satellite launches, it is further isolated in international society. In late March, North Korea officially unveiled a new strategy of carrying out economic construction and building nuclear armed forces simultaneously,⁸ without the change of its external security environment and integrating into the international community, it is almost mission impossible for North Korea to achieve the twin goals. If North Korea does not come back to the negotiation table, and continue its nuclear program and provocative activities, the pressure it is facing will accumulate furthermore. South Korea is less likely to tolerate another provocation similar to Chenonan Incident or Yeongpyong Shelling. The several cases of successful and failed nonproliferation cases might shed some light for North Korea's future, and it is time to encourage North Korea to follow the example of Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, South Africa, and Libya instead of the example of Iraq, India and Pakistan.

Second, China and the United States should help to nurture an external environment for North Korea's regime transformation. There is internal requirement for opening up and reform, and there is indication that North Korea wants to move toward such direction, such as sending out skilled workers to other countries, rumors of disarming 300 thousand army, the young leader's frequent visit to economic related sites.

For North Korea, two elements could seriously affect their decision to open up and reform, that is, how to maintain domestic stability while opening up and reform, and how to shift focus from developing military to developing economy. China could help North Korea with the first concern by sharing China's experience. However, the second concern can only be addressed by the United States. North Korea insisted that the nuclear issue is the outcome of the U.S. hostile policy toward North Korea, and according to the lengthy memorandum issued by North Korea Foreign Ministry on August 31, the United States' refuses "to recognize the DPRK as a sovereign state with whom it may co-exist in the international community" is hostile policy. If U.S. could provide the hope of establishing diplomatic relations with North Korea, then there is hope of regime transformation.

Third, Other than that, all countries concern should also gather to discuss how to replace the armistice agreement with a peace treaty so that a long lasting solution could be achieved. The key players should include China, the United States, North Korea, and South Korea. Other countries could get involved in this process as well. All four countries could reactivate the four party talks,

⁸ " DPRK unveils twin goals of economic construction, nuclear capability " , March 31, 2013, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/world/2013-03/31/c_132274938.htm

and the six party talk could serve as a broader platform to confirm achievements in four party talks.

Four, it might be a bit later, however, better late than never, experts from both countries should conduct joint review of their countries' policies on the North Korea nuclear issue. The purpose would be to find out where both countries have succeeded or have failed in the past, and to explore the reason behind those successes and failures. Based on that kind of policy review, it would be equally important for experts from both countries to assess jointly each country's respective interests and stakes in a nuclearized or a denuclearized Northeast Asia.

Five, in case North Korea conducts provocative actions in the future, China and the United States should work together and send out the same message to North Korea, leaving no room for North Korea to manipulate differences between China and the United States. Should China be alerted in advance of any possible provocative moves by North Korea, China could use its ties with North Korea to urge it to exercise restraint and prevent it from escalating the fragile situation. Should North Korea initiate any actions which could be viewed as a direct violation of UNSC resolutions and damaging to regional stability, China and the United States should consult closely to figure out a proper response.

Six, both China and the United States could try any form of negotiations that may lead to progress and is conducive to the final solution. Ever since the emergence of the North Korea nuclear crisis, many forms of negotiation have been tried, including bilateral talks, three party talks, four party talks, and six party talks. It is not an issue of choosing one against the other; to solve the proliferation challenge from North Korea, any form of negotiation should be explored. Bilateral negotiation and multilateral negotiation could be mutually reinforcing and complementary. Certainly, the history of negotiation with North Korea indicates the results of neither bilateral negotiation nor multilateral negotiations are sufficient. Bilateral negotiations might be interpreted differently and turn out to be difficult to implement, while negotiations in a multilateral setting might dilute the core issue and make a consensus difficult to achieve. Therefore, in the future it is worthwhile for the United States to address the core issues with North Korea in a bilateral setting, but the achievements should be endorsed in the multilateral setting.

Finally, in case the current situation in the Korean Peninsula goes from bad to worse, it is worthwhile for both China and the United States to further their cooperation under the umbrella of Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism. China and the United States could take measures as required jointly or unilaterally in the following areas: sharing information of nuclear or radiological material smuggling; building up China's capacity to scan or inspect cargos transiting Chinese ports or airports, with technical assistance from the United States; increasing scanning or inspection of particular cargos transiting Chinese territory, waters, or airspace, if authoritative information warrants these actions; conducting dialogues over emergency response to nuclear security dangers in Northeast Asia.