Navigating Turbulence: China’s Approach to North Korea’s Nuclear Tests

By Wang Junsheng

Chinese leaders were as surprised as anyone that North Korea conducted two nuclear tests last year — the first since 2013 and two of only five since the first in 2006. As Pyongyang’s only steadfast ally, Beijing has struggled with how to persuade North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons program while continuing to ensure the stability and survival of its neighbor.

This year’s tests have changed the dynamics of denuclearization efforts and also severely strained relations between Seoul and Beijing, which had been improving. Wang Junsheng outlines the depths of China’s concerns and how they might be addressed.

ALTHOUGH North Korea watchers had since 2013 been expecting another nuclear test, when Pyongyang actually carried out its fourth and fifth tests last year — on January 6 and September 9 — many countries, China included, were still caught by surprise. For China, which had been calling for resumption of the Six-Party Talks, the renewed demonstration of North Korea’s determination to possess nuclear weapons put it in an awkward position. While China remains committed to its friendship with North Korea, it fundamentally opposes a nuclear North Korea, and denuclearization remains a high priority. This is due to the threat that North Korea’s nuclear weapons pose to regional stability and the uncertainty that undermines China’s national interests. As such, China supported UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2270 and UNSCR 2321 imposing unprecedented sanctions on North Korea.

China stands by its actions in the immediate aftermath of the nuclear test, but there were some unanticipated outcomes. China has since drawn important lessons from how it handled the situation. This particularly applies to how China relates to South Korea in better balancing its own national interests with high expectations from Seoul. China has also proposed a new dual-track mechanism to stimulate parallel dialogues to pursue a peace treaty and denuclearization simultaneously. Despite the proposal’s unfavorable reception, including by the United States, the dual-track mechanism remains China’s primary strategy for dealing with the North Korean nuclear issue for the foreseeable future.

CHINA’S ASSESSMENT OF REGIONAL STABILITY

After North Korea claimed that it had successfully carried out its first hydrogen bomb test on Jan. 6, 2016, Beijing immediately expressed concern and called for the Six-Party Talks to resume in order to resolve the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula. By China’s assessment, this fourth nuclear test indicated North Korea’s national resolve to pursue its nuclear strategy, which was included for the first time in the country’s revised constitution in 2012.

Yet China interprets this as a misjudgment on Pyongyang’s part about its own strengths and its delusion that the international community will eventually accept its “rightful” possession of nuclear weapons. After Pyongyang conducted several rocket launches in 2012 and a third underground nuclear test in 2013 in order to convince the international community to recognize it as a legitimate nuclear power, the country pursued active diplomacy to expand friendly ties with countries inside and outside the region over the course of the following two years. China recognizes that it is highly unlikely that the international community will accommodate Pyongyang’s nuclear arsenal, but North Korean diplomats nevertheless continue to work at convincing the world otherwise.

The international community shares a consensus on the illegality of North Korea’s nuclear weapons. But China and the US still have big differences on how to resolve the problem, which are likely to continue into the administration of President Donald Trump. South Korea, meanwhile, has been in a national political crisis because of a scandal involving Soon-sil Choi, a close friend and confidante of President Park Geun-hye, who was recently impeached and has been forced out of office, triggering elections for a new president in May. As a result, the future direction of South Korea’s policy toward North Korea is uncertain. All of these factors will prolong the nuclear problem.

China, on the other hand, attempted to improve relations with North Korea in 2015, most notably by the visit of Politburo Standing Committee member Liu Yunshan to Pyongyang in October of that year. However, it was again a misjudgment on Pyongyang’s part to interpret China’s goodwill as tolerance for yet more nuclear provocations. The latest tests pose a serious threat to China and the entire Northeast Asian region. They have set in motion a new vicious cycle on the Korean Peninsula by prompting South Korea to take a tougher military stance, including further strengthening the decision to deploy the US Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system. It has also encouraged the US to enhance its regional military presence, and Japan to claim that it would expedite its “defense-oriented” military development. Should tensions on the Korean Peninsula continue to escalate, Beijing could suffer the most collateral damage. The disorder generated on the Korean Peninsula would then further complicate the relationship between China and North Korea. That relationship, in China’s view, plays a key role in safeguarding the national interests of both China and North Korea, as well as ensuring regional peace and stability.

As a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, China has always been opposed to North Korea’s nuclear program and has consistently urged Pyongyang to honor its commitment to denuclearization. Therefore, for China, the priority after the fourth and fifth
nuclear tests was to support the Security Council's decision to exact consequences for Pyongyang's violation of various UN resolutions. China has also sought to carefully guard against any potential intervention by Washington and Seoul, in case either used the opportunity to attack North Korea or undermine Kim Jong Un's leadership. China was particularly concerned that the US and South Korea could attempt to raise tensions along the 38th Parallel in order to justify an invasion of North Korea.

In China's view, all four parties—North Korea, the US, South Korea, and Japan—have responsibility for tensions on the peninsula. While North Korea cannot be exonerated, the hostile policies of the other three countries over the past six decades—such as military and political pressure on Pyongyang and Seoul's increasing desire to absorb North Korea as a way to achieve unification of the country—drive North Korea's sense of greater insecurity.

Therefore, as a responsible major power in the region, China defines its role and responsibility in terms of alleviating North Korea's vulnerability and insecurity through a stable relationship with Pyongyang, in light of the imbalance in the geopolitical situation, and to encourage all parties to exercise restraint.

**CHINA'S SUPPORT FOR THE UN RESOLUTIONS**

There is widespread confusion and skepticism surrounding China's decision to support UNSCR 2270, adopted on March 2, 2016, due to China's long and special relationship with North Korea. US and South Korean scholars seem to believe that China mainly had two strategic motivations in supporting the resolution: to leverage sanctions on North Korea as a bargaining chip for mitigating mounting pressures in the South China Sea and to negotiate and prevent the deployment of THAAD in South Korea. These views are not shared in the Chinese policy community. Chinese analysts do not deny that the issue of THAAD complicated China's decision-making, but rather it made China more hesitant to support the resolution. In other words, THAAD played a negative role in enlisting China's support for UNSCR 2270.

China adopted UNSCR 2270 for two main reasons. The first is China's genuine desire to punish North Korea and to send clear signals to Pyongyang about the unacceptability of its nuclear program. Since Kim Jong Un took office, the strategic divergence between China and North Korea has deepened, especially over the nuclear issue. In 2015, China worked hard to improve the bilateral relationship, even dispatching Liu Yunshan to attend the 70th anniversary of the ruling Workers' Party of Korea in October 2015. However, the North Korean leader's unfriendly attitude and behavior disappointed China. Two nuclear tests and more than 20 missile tests since the beginning of 2016 further revealed Kim Jong Un's reckless and dangerous policies. This finally pushed China to its limit, causing it to seek strong punishment for North Korea instead of demonstrating further tolerance.

The second reason behind China's support of UNSCR 2270 and UNSCR 2321 is its growing sense under President Xi Jinping of its international responsibility as a great power. Since Xi took office, he has pursued “great-power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics” in order to achieve the Chinese dream of national rejuvenation and to build a community of common destiny. From China's perspective, providing public goods to the international community is a key way to build China's image and credibility as a great power.

China has achieved much on the economic front through the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the “One Belt, One Road” Initiative. Yet security is also a fundamental public good. Since North Korea's nuclear tests disturb regional security, China has a responsibility to support harsh sanctions. China does not see the sanctions as an end in themselves, but rather as the means by which to press North Korea to return to the negotiating table to achieve denuclearization. Meanwhile, China hopes the sanctions will delay further development of North Korea's nuclear capabilities.

**STUMBLING IN REACTION**

The fourth nuclear test took its biggest toll on China's relationship with South Korea. Under President Park Geun-hye and President Xi Jinping, Sino-South Korea relations had improved to an unprecedented level. In reflecting on the events following the test, China has since learned the following lessons on how to better protect its relationship with South Korea from the repercussions of North Korea's actions:

First, the government reaction in South Korea raised an entirely new issue compared to the previous three nuclear tests. However, China miscalculated the frustration that this delay would cause the South Korean government. China should have considered Park's need to have a conversation with Xi immediately following the nuclear test in order to respond to domestic pressures to strengthen its alliance with the US and trilateral security co-operation with the US and Japan. Without China on her side, Park was pushed by pro-US forces in South Korea to deploy THAAD.

Second, China's diplomacy with South Korea should have been more subtle and considerate. China summoned the ambassadors of both South Korea and North Korea on the same day, February 7, 2016, in order to lodge protests over the deployment of THAAD and the nuclear test, respectively. This created an impression that the two issues carried the same weight, and therefore China was punishing both Koreas equally. South Korea responded by summoning the Chinese ambassador over his “THAAD speech” on February 24. It may have been more appropriate for China to...
have clearly distinguished its reactions to two very different events, or at least not to have summoned both ambassadors on the same day.

LESSONS FOR SOUTH KOREA

China also has suggestions for South Korea on how to better handle the situation as the country most concerned and China’s most important partner in managing this crisis. South Korea must understand that the current situation on the peninsula has profound historical and geopolitical origins. The US involvement is greatly disturbing to China. Therefore, in the event of any North Korean nuclear test, China will always require a significant amount of time to assess the situation, collect intelligence and thoroughly deliberate over many factors, such as Washington’s potential reactions and Pyongyang’s political situation. More patience on Seoul’s part in this regard would be greatly appreciated.

China also believes that the South Korean government could have better guided public opinion in the country. Before Park’s presidency, Sino-South Korean relations were largely transactional, based on practical business relations. Only after Park’s inauguration did the two countries begin to put greater efforts into developing positive perceptions about the other domestically. Following a crisis, public displays of suspicion, anger and disappointment between the two top leaders only serve to undermine public support for better co-operation.

Most importantly, South Korea must better understand China’s critical national interests and concerns. Punishing it for North Korea’s nuclear test will not bring Beijing closer to Seoul; it will only push Beijing further away. Park announced soon after the nuclear test that her government would consider the deployment of THAAD. To China, this indicated a potential readjustment of the regional strategic structure and a possible trigger for another arms race in East Asia. China firmly believes that Seoul’s growing favorability toward THAAD coincides with Washington’s strategic ambition to contain China in the region.

‘AN ASIAN NATO’

The THAAD system, if deployed in South Korea, would unequivocally have a negative impact on regional security. Most immediately, it would increase tensions between the two Koreas. Second, it would upset the delicate military power balance in the region, causing other countries to boost their capabilities to restore the balance. This is particularly true because Japan also expressed interest in the THAAD system, leading to Chinese fears of an “Asian NATO.” If these developments indeed evolve toward such a model, China will face more challenges as Japan is unleashed and empowered. In China’s view, for Seoul to assist in the US “containment” strategy is not in line with positive developments in other aspects of bilateral relations between Beijing and Seoul. For China, South Korea should consider the safety and interests of other countries, as well as the peace and stability of the whole region, when seeking its own safety.

Some South Korean officials and experts cite national security concerns to justify the deployment of THAAD. That argument is hardly acceptable to China, because the geographical proximity between South Korea and North Korea does not justify a highly advanced system like THAAD that operates at high altitudes. China cannot help but ask how such a system can be appropriate, given the fact that Seoul is only 40 kilometers from the land border with the North and thus Pyongyang does not even need long-range missiles to attack South Korea.

Therefore, unless South Korea can press a convincing argument, China will continue to regard the deployment of THAAD as serving US interests. These include strategic deterrence against China and Russia, alienation of China-South Korea relations and enhancement of its own alliance system as well as trilateral military coordination with Japan and South Korea. As Beijing continues to discourage South Korea from deploying THAAD, South Korea must at least understand that deployment will take its toll on relations with China for years to come.

The collapse of the North Korean regime is not an agenda that China can or will support. In the case of regime collapse, China would be at the forefront in dealing with the crisis, managing border security, refugee inflows, humanitarian concerns and potential loose weapons of mass destruction.
implementation of sanctions is a pragmatic move to punish Pyongyang, but in ways that would not cause internal instability.

Western analysts and media have often deliberately misinterpreted China’s policies or North Korea’s dissatisfaction with Beijing in order to cause discord in Sino-North Korean ties. This rhetoric particularly boomed after Xi took office. Yet the nature and essence of Beijing-Pyongyang ties have not changed. There is no fundamental dispute between Beijing and Pyongyang except for their differences regarding North Korea’s nuclear development.

China has a good record with regard to implementation of UN sanctions on North Korea. For example, after the UN passed Resolution 2094 in March 2013, in the wake of North Korea’s third nuclear test, China pursued a comprehensive list of financial sanctions and embargos. From China’s perspective, the purpose and wisdom of these engagements so soon after the passing of a sanctions resolution is highly questionable. These visits have increased China’s skepticism about the sincerity of the US, South Korea and Japan regarding the sanctions and raised questions about their kind of signals those countries were trying to send to the North Korean government.

On one hand, the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula is the product of Pyongyang’s misguided security policy, based on an outdated Cold War mentality. On the other hand, the continued security pressure of the US-South Korea military alliance has exacerbated Pyongyang’s insecurity and its Cold War mindset, therefore contributing to the heightened tensions on the Peninsula. So, to settle the nuclear issue once and for all, the relevant countries must help North Korea correct its erroneous security policy, not only by imposing sanctions but also by addressing its foremost security concerns.

A DUAL-TRACK APPROACH

Addressing North Korea’s security concerns requires dialogue. China has consistently argued that the Six-Party Talks have proven to be the most viable platform for resolving the nuclear issue, and so concerned countries should create favorable conditions for its revival. However, understanding the current constraints and obstacles for the resumption of the Six-Party Talks, China has instead proposed a dual-track approach, by which parties can simultaneously pursue parallel discussions on a peace mechanism to gradually eliminate the remnants of the Cold War on the Korean Peninsula and achieve North Korea’s denuclearization. The peace mechanism would serve to transfer the 1953 Korean War armistice to a permanent peace and security mechanism.

One possibility for realizing this is four-party talks among China, the US, South Korea and North Korea, on replacing the armistice with a peace treaty. At the same time, the Six-Party Talks should be resumed to dissuade Pyongyang of its nuclear ambitions. The Four-Party Talks certainly could not avoid the issue of North Korea’s denuclearization, but neither should it be treated as a priority. The US and South Korea would not want to send an unwanted signal to the international community by recognizing North Korea as a legitimate nuclear power, which is in line with China’s long-time position on this issue.

On North Korea’s part, it seems that Pyongyang has no intention to commit to denuclearization unless it considers that its national interests are being met. Pyongyang understands that its nuclear program will never be accepted by the international community, and that it has led to severe economic sanctions and political isolation. But while the door to voluntarily relinquishing nuclear weapons may be tightly closed, it is not locked, if the international community can address the fundamental national security concerns. Therefore, if North Korea is indeed interested in a peace mechanism, it must understand that the peace-treaty talks cannot be opened before it commits to denuclearization as the country’s final goal.

STRUGGLE THROUGH TURBULENCE

The Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia today are in their most unstable stage since the end of the Cold War. North Korea has repeatedly conducted nuclear tests and launched satellites. Its relations with China have deteriorated. South Korea has sought to pursue THAAD while advancing friendly ties with China. China has protested that the behavior of both North Korea and South Korea is damaging China’s interests. The US has made strategic advances in moving forward with the deployment of THAAD, as well as carrying out joint military exercises in China’s immediate periphery. Japan has exploited opportunities to improve ties and promote security cooperation with South Korea. All these developments have caused great distress and created dilemmas for China.

China will deal with the Korean Peninsula through the lens of its own national interests. Peace and stability are China’s core interests with war or instability in its immediate periphery. China’s dream for national rejuvenation would be just that, a dream. Therefore, China will urge North Korea toward a soft landing, and it will demand that South Korea adopt a more neutral position between China and the US. China is serious about its proposed dual-track approach and will continue to press North Korea on its commitment to denuclearization and try to work with the relevant countries on the details of this proposal. Concessions from all related parties are necessary for this dialogue to occur. If each party is not willing to make its fair share of compromises, there is no hope that issues on the Korean Peninsula can be resolved.

The future of the Korean Peninsula is closely associated with China’s own foreign-policy strategy. Given the importance of the region to its national security, China will not allow any country to move things in a direction that is harmful for China. The deadline today essentially originates from the fact that China has strong will but not the ability to solve the problem, while the US has the ability but not the will. As China’s national power rises, its ability to shape events on the Korean Peninsula is also growing. In another five to 10 years, China’s role on the Korean Peninsula could be significantly different. Until then, China’s policy toward North Korea and the entire Korean Peninsula will be to continue to struggle through turbulence.

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