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# FROM MULTILATERALISM TO BILATERALISM

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## *Negotiating the Second North Korean Nuclear Crisis*

*In 2002 the Bush administration branded North Korea as a member of the “axis of evil” and strongly rejected bilateral talks with the country’s political leaders. Yet in 2007, the US reversed its policy of shunning bilateral talks with Pyongyang. This paper will examine key questions regarding the negotiation process that led to the 2007 agreements. Why did US negotiating strategy change, from pushing China to act as a mediator, to holding bilateral talks with Pyongyang? Why did China accept the political burden of hosting the Six-Party Talks? What were North Korean perceptions of the Six-Party Talks and China as a mediator?*

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In October 2002, a nuclear crisis erupted on the Korean peninsula after James Kelly, the Assistant US Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, visited Pyongyang and alleged that the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) had a uranium enrichment program. This was the second North Korean crisis, following the first that occurred in 1993-1994.<sup>1</sup> To resolve the issue, North Korea, China, and the United States held a trilateral discussion in Beijing in April 2003, which led to the first round of Six-Party Talks later in August.<sup>2</sup> However, the Six-Party Talks did not go well because of fundamental disagreements between Washington and Pyongyang. The US insisted that North Korea unconditionally abandon its nuclear program, while North Korea demanded that first the US drop its “vicious, hostile policy.”<sup>3</sup>

On September 19, 2005, the fourth round of Six-Party Talks resulted in a Joint Statement decreeing that North Korea would abandon all existing nuclear weapons and nuclear development programs. However, just after signing the Joint Statement, the US announced that it had taken measures to freeze illegally obtained North Korean funds at Banco Delta Asia (BDA), located in Macau under Chinese sovereignty.<sup>4</sup> North Korea strongly criticized the US and refused to participate in further Six-Party Talks until the BDA issue was resolved, arguing such action demonstrated US hostility.<sup>5</sup> With no significant changes in the American position, North Korea carried out missile and nuclear tests in 2006. The deadlock caused by BDA funds lasted more than a year.

Sixteen months after the 2005 Joint Statement, however, Washington finally held bilateral talks with Pyongyang in January 2007, followed by additional talks in September 2007. Six-Party

Talks resumed in the months following each of these bilateral negotiations, and the parties present reached two important agreements: “Initial Actions for the Implementation of the September 2005 Joint Statement” (February Agreement) and “Second-Phase Actions for the Implementation of the Joint Statement” (October Agreement). In these, North Korea agreed to declare all of its nuclear programs and to disable its Yongbyun nuclear facilities by the end of 2007. In return, the other parties agreed to cooperate by providing energy as well as economic and humanitarian assistance to the DPRK. Given North Korea’s previous missile test in July 2006 and its subsequent nuclear test in October, these agreements signified much-needed progress.

This paper will examine key questions regarding the negotiation process that led to the 2007 agreements: (1) Why did the US negotiating strategy change from pushing China to act as a mediator to holding bilateral talks with Pyongyang? (2) Why did China accept the political burden of hosting the Six-Party Talks? and (3) What were North Korea’s perceptions of the Six-Party Talks and of China as a “mediator”?

### Changes in US Policy towards North Korea

*“I welcome the agreement announced today at the Six-Party Talks in Beijing. Today’s announcement reflects the common commitment of the participants in the Six-Party Talks to realize a Korean Peninsula that is free of nuclear weapons.”<sup>6</sup>*

Exactly three years before making the above statement, President Bush met Democratic challenger John Kerry in a debate and declared that Kerry’s position on negotiations with North

Korea “made me want to scowl.” Bush said that Kerry was advocating a naive and dangerous policy of offering to conduct bilateral negotiations with Pyongyang, in conjunction with the Six-Party Talks on North Korea’s nuclear ambitions. “That’s what President Clinton did,” Bush asserted, “and guess what happened: [Kim Jungil] didn’t honor the agreement.”<sup>7</sup> Yet in 2007, Bush welcomed the October Agreement, as demonstrated in the above statement. In fact, prior to the October agreement, the US and North Korea held bilateral talks in Berlin that led to the “Initial Action Plan” in the February agreement of 2007. The October agreement also resulted from bilateral talks in Geneva in September 2007, which Bush had previously rejected. What instigated this abrupt change in US policy?

### *The Initial Foreign Policy of the Bush Administration*

After the 9/11 attacks and the rise of neo-conservatives (neocons) in the Bush administration, many changes occurred in US foreign policy. The administration declared a “war on terror,” and asserted its right to retaliate with nuclear force even in the case of non-nuclear attacks on US territory and on its allies. Prior to 2001, the American nuclear weapons doctrine had called for using nuclear weapons only in response to a nuclear attack by an enemy. The Bush administration also “ballyhooed the doctrine of ‘preemption’, which all previous presidents had sustained as an option rather than a dogma.”<sup>8</sup> Such rhetoric effectively declared an offensive foreign policy against rogue states. The White House defined rogue states as those that:

*1) brutalize their own people and squander their national resources for the personal gain of the*

*rulers; 2) display no regard for international law, threaten their neighbors, and callously violate international treaties to which they are party; 3) are determined to acquire weapons of mass destruction, ... 4) reject basic human values and hate the United States and everything for which it stands.*<sup>9</sup>

The institution of harsh foreign policy towards North Korea, a country branded part of the “axis of evil” by Bush, seemed inevitable. Not surprisingly, direct talks with Pyongyang became a taboo, especially during Bush’s first term. Neocons, who went as far as to consider regime change against Kim Jungil, distrusted “Clinton-style bilateral talks.”<sup>10</sup> Instead, they believed that the international community had to pressure Pyongyang through the means of multilateral talks. The Bush administration also tried to take North Korea’s nuclear issue to the UN Security Council (UNSC), asserting that North Korea posed a threat not only to the US, but also to the international community. In addition to that rationale, some conservatives in Washington believed it was unlikely that “either China or Russia could long withstand a determined campaign for Security Council action without fatal damage to their own prestige in counter-proliferation policy.”<sup>11</sup> However, contrary to their expectations, China and Russia participated in only two resolutions motivated by the DPRK’s missile and nuclear tests in 2006, and in neither case were they willing to sanction the use of force against North Korea.

The Bush administration also did not want to unilaterally shoulder the political and economic burden of direct negotiations with Pyongyang. As a superpower, the US could lose face and international respect by dealing directly with Kim’s tyrannical regime. Some observers noted that Bush’s personal,

visceral dislike of Kim Jungil might also have been a factor in his decision not to engage Pyongyang in diplomatic talks. In 2002, Bush described Kim as a “pygmy acting like a spoiled child at a dinner table [who was] starving his own people.”<sup>12</sup>

### *Shifts in US Policy*

In late 2006, Washington’s attitude towards North Korea underwent an unexpected change. After witnessing North Korea’s nuclear test, the US decided to initiate bilateral talks—a decision the Bush administration did not want to make and which still frustrates neocons. Three challenges facing the Bush administration prompted this policy change: (1) limitations of unilateral sanctions against North Korea, executed without cooperation from China and Russia, both veto-wielding members of the UNSC, and from South Korea, the North’s second largest trading partner, (2) harsh opinion against failed US foreign policy and the departure of influential neocons from the administration, and (3) desire to achieve a positive outcome in North Korea, differently from in Iraq, during Bush’s last two years in office.

First, Washington encountered limitations in putting pressure on North Korea because South Korea, China, and Russia, all having influence on Pyongyang, were never eager to commit to sanctions initiated by the US. After the adoption of a UNSC resolution on Oct. 15, 2006, Bush sent Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to each of the three countries to persuade them to strictly enforce UN sanctions, but their responses were not resolute enough to satisfy the US.<sup>13</sup> Even as China and Russia agreed on the UN resolutions and reaffirmed their support for the denuclearization of

North Korea, they continued to emphasize “firm and also appropriate actions” and “a strong and cool-headed reaction.”<sup>14</sup> In particular, Russia made its pro-North Korea position evident by sending a special envoy, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Alexander Losyukov, to Pyongyang on October 13, 2006, and by supplying North Koreans with 12,800 tons of grain in humanitarian aid. Russian President Vladimir Putin argued that pressuring North Korea with heavy-handed policies could serve as an obstacle to solving the nuclear problem.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, the Chinese special envoy who had been sent to Washington reportedly urged Secretary Rice to accept bilateral talks in order to solve the BDA problem, and to lift sanctions against North Korea in order to bring it to the table. Although China showed its wrath when it stated that “the DPRK ignored universal opposition of the international community and brazenly conducted the nuclear test,” calling for “the UN’s strong measures against North Korea,” these words did not necessarily mean China would endorse Washington’s heavy-handed policies.<sup>16</sup> Under these political conditions, the US appeared to judge unilateral policy by sanctions and pressure as untenable.<sup>17</sup> Some observers claimed that China would not push North Korea to a desperate situation because of its own interests, even though it had applied some sanctions after the nuclear test.<sup>18</sup> For instance, the Congressional Research Service argued that China views the Korean peninsula as vital to its strategic interests - that Beijing values North Korea as a buffer between democratic South Korea and the US forces stationed there, as a rationale to divert the US and Japanese resources in the Asia Pacific toward dealing with Pyongyang and less focused

on the growing military might of China, and as a destination for Chinese foreign investment and trade.<sup>19</sup> China also had concerns about the North Korean refugee problem, which would only be exacerbated by the collapse of Kim Jungil’s regime. For these reasons, Washington concluded that China would never actively join sanctions against the DPRK, sanctions which would be ineffective without the support of China and Russia.

The South Korean government’s position, which held the North Korean issue as a “national problem” to be dealt with in the framework of its Peace and Prosperity Engagement Policy (or Sunshine Policy), was another obstacle to US sanctions.<sup>20</sup> Seoul’s statement just after the North’s nuclear test contained a warning against the North and no mention of ‘dialogue’, while several within the South Korean government even discussed participation in the US-led Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI).<sup>21</sup> Yet, despite being the biggest benefactor and second largest trading partner of North Korea, South Korea concluded it could do very little. At most, the supply of rice and fertilizer, and the sale of lots in the Gaesung industrial complex in North Korea could be suspended. Notwithstanding the UN resolution and criticism of South Korea’s diplomatic failures, Seoul still did not wish to fundamentally change its Sunshine Policy because it believed that it had substantially improved relations between the two Koreas. It also maintained the view that the US had partly incited the nuclear test by failing to adhere to prior agreements. These sentiments can be inferred from high-ranking officials’ comments. Lee Jongsuk, Minister of Unification, argued, “I can’t agree that the North conducted the test because of the

Sunshine Policy,” and that “the Mount Geumgang tour and Gaesung industrial complex, projects in the Engagement Policy, should be excluded from the sanctions category.”<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile, Prime Minister Han Myungsook said, “I think the US’ unilateral sanctions and consistent financial pressure may have been a factor in the incident.”<sup>23</sup> Against this backdrop, Secretary Rice failed to achieve concrete results when she visited South Korea with the purpose of calling for the implementation of the UN resolution. Although Rice pressed Seoul to participate in PSI and indicated funds from the Gaesung and Geumgang projects could be used for producing WMD, South Korea ultimately avoided giving a direct response.<sup>24</sup> Foreign Minister Ban Kimoon defended the South Korean position, along with explanation provided by South Korean President Roh Moo Hyun, and stated at a joint conference that “The Gaesung industrial complex is efficient in reforming and opening North Korea, and the Mount Geumgang tour is also largely significant. I believe the US is also well aware of this.”<sup>25</sup> At the time, the *New York Times*, pointing out South Korea’s decision not to join the PSI, reported “fresh doubts about Washington’s drive to punish the North for its nuclear test.”<sup>26</sup>

Secondly, the Bush administration needed to make a breakthrough with the North Korean issue amid rising criticisms of US foreign policy during the November 2006 mid-term elections. American citizens and the Democratic Party demanded “a comprehensive review of American policy toward North Korea.”<sup>27</sup> The Iraqi quagmire, the Middle East crisis surrounding Israel, and Iran’s nuclear program seemed to make Washington think twice about their stance on North Korea.<sup>28</sup> The reduced

influence of neocons caused by their departure from the administration, most prominently symbolized by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld’s resignation, was also an important factor. However, not all hardliners walked out of the Bush administration. Vice President Dick Cheney, a key figure among neocons, still had tremendous influence over foreign policy in the White House. The BDA issue, which was still in question, was raised three days after the September Joint Statement in 2005, and an alleged nuclear trade connection between Syria and North Korea was brought up after the October Agreement in 2007.<sup>29</sup> These incidents suggested a continued struggle between neocons and moderates in the White House. What is more, advice from former officials with neocon beliefs never stopped. For instance, John Bolton, an arms control official during Bush’s first term and later the US Ambassador to the UN, raised the contention that the October Agreement “violates the basic Reagan arms-control lesson of ‘trust but verify’ . . . [it] is potentially very embarrassing to the Bush administration.”<sup>30</sup> However, Bush gave credit to Rice concerning the North Korean issue, in spite of criticism from the neocons.

Finally, with the clock running out on Bush’s presidency, the Bush administration, bogged down with the Iraqi quagmire, wanted to achieve positive results at least in North Korea if not in Iraq. The US had to take into account voices against US foreign policy not only from domestic critics, but also from the international community. The *New York Times* reported, “For Mr. Bush, bogged down in Iraq, his authority undercut by the November elections, any chance to show progress in peacefully disarming a country that detonated a nuclear test just four

months ago could no longer be passed up.”<sup>31</sup>

For these reasons, Bush entered a new phase of diplomacy in order to resolve the deadlock over North Korea. From Bush’s initial comment about ending the Korean War during the US-South Korea Summit in November 2006 to the February Agreement achieved in bilateral talks in Berlin to the October Agreement following face-to-face talks in Geneva, it can be seen that US policy has certainly changed. Moreover, it seems to have started working. The *Washington Post* describes the current “awkward” phase of the Bush administration as follows:

*US officials have suggested that Chinese pressure on North Korea after its nuclear test a year ago had changed the dynamics of the negotiations. But Asian diplomats say Bush’s shift is what helped break the deadlock. A Chinese official said this week that China’s role was minimal compared with the US decision to finally engage in bilateral talks.*<sup>32</sup>

It is ironic that no party wants to take credit for the progress in the Six-Party Talks.

### China Decides to Host the Six-Party Talks

#### *The Process of Trilateral and Six Party Talks*

After the second nuclear crisis, Washington and Pyongyang continuously confronted each other over the form of talks that would take place between them.<sup>33</sup> Colin Powell, then Secretary of State, visited China in February 2003 and persuaded President Hu Jintao to pressure Pyongyang to accept multilateral talks. China had previously urged the US to accept bilateral talks; the first nuclear crisis had been resolved bilaterally, and China felt that the US and North Korea were still the key players in resolving the problem.

On March 7th, 2003, after Secretary Powell’s

visit, the US repeated its position to China. The US affirmed that it would reject direct talks with North Korea and called on China to persuade Pyongyang to go along with the US. According to the *New York Times*, the very next day China pressured Kim Jungil to accept multilateral talks and dispatched high-ranking Chinese official State Councilor Qian Qichen to Pyongyang. For a short period during the same month, China also stopped oil shipments to North Korea to signal its seriousness.<sup>34</sup>

Finally, trilateral talks were opened as a preliminary step towards multilateral talks. In the talks, China withdrew its initial position, saying that the important thing was not the form of the talks but the content. Furthermore, China attached a condition to hosting negotiations: that informal bilateral talks between Washington and Pyongyang be held under the umbrella of the multilateral forum. It was a compromise to meet conflicting demands from the US and North Korea. The *Washington Post* reported that the US reluctantly accepted informal one-on-one talks with North Korea during the Six-Party Talks because of China’s insistence. Despite this effort, however, China still heard complaints from Pyongyang that it stood entirely on the US side.<sup>35</sup>

#### *Why Did China Accept the Political Burden of Hosting the Six-Party Talks?*

We can conjecture three reasons for China’s decision to accept the political burden of hosting the complex and potentially risky Six-Party Talks: (1) Washington’s pressure on Beijing, (2) China’s calculated strategy to improve relations with the US, and (3) China’s desire to improve its image in the international community.

To the Bush administration, China was perceived as “the most efficient conduit” because it had the most powerful leverage over North Korea.<sup>36</sup> Washington consistently pushed Beijing to draw Pyongyang into multilateral talks.<sup>37</sup> The Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, said of the effort, “Beijing’s decision to engage full-time with the Korean conundrum has come only after Washington’s tough, credible insistence that if North Korea’s nuclear weapons development cannot be ended peacefully, other methods will be used.”<sup>38</sup> What the other methods would be was open to interpretation. Donald Rumsfeld claimed in 2003 that it implied diplomatic pressure to change Kim’s regime, not a military solution.<sup>39</sup> However, many people, especially South Koreans, interpreted it to mean the use of military force. South Korean President Roh Moo Hyun, who was deeply concerned about the possibility of US attacks against North Korea, said, “Nobody can force us again to endure the hardships of war. We already suffered through the Korean War and achieved present day South Korea from its ashes. I believe the US will respect the reality of the situation.”<sup>40</sup> After Bush’s September 2002 announcement of the Doctrine of Pre-emptive Strikes against the “axis of evil,” a close adviser to Roh told Bush administration officials that if the US attacked North Korea over South Korean objections, it would destroy the alliance between the US and South Korea.<sup>41</sup>

China made several considerations in gauging its potential gains and losses. Its main concern was the political burden it would have to bear in case of failure. Victor D. Cha, former Director for Asian Affairs at the National Security Council, pointed out, “China’s reputation depends on its ability

to bring about nuclear disarmament in North Korea.”<sup>42</sup> Despite the risk, however, China still decided to make its debut as a mediator in this highly unpredictable situation. Three motivations guided China’s strategic calculus.

First of all, there was no excuse for China to refuse requests from the US to act as a mediator, as it had repeatedly declared support for a “denuclearized Korean peninsula.” It could not bypass debates between Washington and Pyongyang because of its perceived political and economic stature, and declining to mediate the conflict would have been incongruent with its long-held stance of opposing North Korea’s nuclear development.

Secondly, Beijing needed to improve its relations with the US. The two had been alienated over issues such as the “friendly fire incident” in the Chinese embassy in 1999, the US Missile Defense (MD) plan, and the US reconnaissance plane incident in 2001. Yet America remained China’s largest trading partner and an important factor in Chinese economic development. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, China also came to see the “war on terror” as an opportunity to collaborate with the US. China could build a positive relationship with the US by joining “war on terror” policies, and at the same time, use such policies to solve domestic conflicts caused by separatism, such as the Tibetan and Uighur desire for national self-determination.<sup>43</sup> In this context, Beijing was able to transform unwanted pressure from the US regarding the Six-Party Talks into a well-timed opportunity to make a placatory gesture.

Finally, Beijing had an Achilles’ heel over human rights violations, exemplified by the Tiananmen crackdown in 1989. At present, China

is investing significant resources into improving its national image by, for example, hosting the 2008 Olympics and 2010 World Expo. Although hosting talks concerning North Korea's nuclear ambitions had risks, it also had the potential to benefit China's image as a significant and responsible member of the international community. Meanwhile, some Chinese analysts predicted that the Six-Party Talks could function significantly to resolve contradictions between existing and newly formed security regimes, drawing established bilateral alliances such as the US-Japan and US-South Korea alliances into a new multi-security regime.<sup>44</sup>

#### *Special Envoy Diplomacy*

China's favorite method of communication with Pyongyang is through "special envoy diplomacy." Dai Bingguo, Vice Foreign Minister of China, visited Kim Jungil as a special envoy from President Hu Jintao and persuaded Pyongyang to join the multilateral talks in July 2003. Kim Jungil agreed to attend on the condition that Russia be included as a member. The second phase of Six-Party Talks were held just after Wang Jiarui, head of the Chinese Communist Party's International Department, went to Pyongyang as a special envoy in 2004. In February 2005, Wang traveled again to Pyongyang to probe Kim's intentions after North Korea announced it would acquire nuclear weapons and that it would leave the Six-Party Talks indefinitely. In July 2005, President Hu sent Tang Jiaxuan, Chinese State Councilor, to see Kim Jungil, a visit which became a stepping stone towards reaching the September Joint Statement.

After the DPRK's nuclear test, Tang visited Bush on October 12, 2006, and seven days later

met with Kim Jungil. Tang returned to Hu with a statement from Kim, "We have no plans for additional nuclear tests, [and] are willing to return to Six-Party Talks on the condition that financial problems be solved."<sup>45</sup> Reportedly, Pyongyang and Beijing made a deal that China would try to persuade the US to accept Kim Jungil's demands in return for North Korea's return to the Talks. The demands included ending the BDA problem, lifting UN sanctions, and resolving the nuclear problem through the Six-Party Talks.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, Pyongyang and Beijing agreed on expansion of aid from China, and on close cooperation with each other.<sup>47</sup>

#### North Korea's Perception of the Talks

##### *Why Did North Korea Accept Multilateral Talks?*

Prior to the 2003 trilateral talks, North Korea insisted that negotiations over its nuclear program only take place with the US, and not on a multilateral basis. A spokesman for the DPRK Ministry of Foreign Affairs argued, "China will play a role as the host giving the place for the talks, and fundamental issues concerning the nuclear problem will be solved only with the US."<sup>48</sup> North Korea's basic position was that it had a legitimate right to develop nuclear weapons because of the nuclear threat posed by the US.<sup>49</sup> As a result, discussion of the nuclear issue could only be had with the United States. Meanwhile, the DPRK's reason for denying multilateral talks, namely, "internationalization of the North Korean issue," appeared to be related to the Iraq War. Around the time of the Iraq invasion, North Korea repeatedly insisted that they would "never follow any decision of the United Nations Security Council," and maintained that even if

they did “sincerely respond to the disarmament demand by accepting so-called *inspection* from the US, it would not prevent a war, but rather spark it.”<sup>50</sup> In short, after observing the collapse of Saddam Hussein’s regime, Pyongyang concluded that the US could take steps to justify reinforcing sanctions against the North, and eventually induce the collapse of Kim’s regime via the UNSC or multilateral pressure.

Nevertheless, North Korea participated in the multilateral talks that it had strongly denounced. Why did it do so? We can consider three factors: (1) pressure from China, (2) emergent perception of the Iraqi situation, and (3) deep doubts about the US government’s real intentions. Pyongyang seemed to face heavy pressure from China, although the diplomatic rhetoric was concerned with “mediation.” When the second nuclear crisis occurred, it was reported that China warned Kim Jungil, “even if there is an attack from the US because of the nuclear arsenal development, China will not help or intervene like it did in the Korean War.”<sup>51</sup> China further clarified that it would continue to keep 1961 mutual defense treaty obligations, but that it did not guarantee automatic intervention in any war caused by North Korea’s nuclear issue. Often, China went as far as to mention that the treaty was nothing but a scrap of paper.<sup>52</sup> Since the 1990s, Beijing has insisted that security by military alliance is an outdated Cold War concept. Instead, it has emphasized “cooperative security” as an alternative, focusing on preventive diplomacy and trust building. Regarding the nuclear test, China’s UN ambassador, Wang Guangya, commented, “for bad behavior in this world no one is going to protect them,” which implied a weakening relationship

between the two countries.<sup>53</sup> China’s pressure on North Korea did not end at the level of rhetoric or mere intimidation—it put real sanctions on the DPRK, which depended on China for most of its fuel and food imports.<sup>54</sup>

Moreover, Kim Jungil appeared to change his mind after watching Iraq’s regime collapse in only three weeks. Pyongyang’s final acceptance of multilateral talks seemed to come from the judgment, “time is not on our side anymore.”<sup>55</sup> Go Yuhwan, a professor at Dongguk University in Seoul, said, “although the North used a brinkmanship strategy—the withdrawal from NPT in January 2003—expecting one-on-one talks with the US before the Iraq War, Washington’s response was cold.”<sup>56</sup> Therefore, North Korea, which had a genuine fear of “the US threat,” participated in the multilateral talks, expecting Washington to solve the nuclear problem through diplomatic means.

Lastly, North Korea, denounced as part of the “axis of evil,” seemed to accept the multilateral discussions as a channel for determining the US’s real intentions. In this regard, Alexandre Y. Mansourov, a former Russian diplomat in Pyongyang, described Kim’s intentions:

*Here is Kim Jung-il’s game plan in Beijing. Treat the Chinese intermediaries as a pro-American party at the talks, which should be viewed as a two against one boxing match. Give both, the PRC and the United States, advance notice about pending initiation of reprocessing operations. Tie down Washington at the negotiation table and buy time for military build-up at home. Watch for the talks as an early warning about possible American’s attacks. Last, frame the United States in a way delegitimizing any US unilateral military action against the North in the eyes of the international community.<sup>57</sup>*

### North Korea's Recognition of China as "Mediator"

As Mansourov mentioned above, North Korea had reason to think of China as a pro-American party, since over the past decade, China, which arguably possesses the second largest economy in the world, consistently refused to provide its North Korean ally with more than subsistence level aid designed primarily to keep Kim Jungil's regime alive but on a very tight leash.<sup>58</sup> Igor Rogachov, a member of the Council of Federation of the Federal Assembly of Russia, said, "China accepted the US's demand as an international principle and this destroyed Beijing-Pyongyang relations. And the Chinese policy to make the best use of the US also accelerated the alienated relationship."<sup>59</sup> In this regard, a US Congressional Research Service report described the discord between China and North Korea as more severe than ever before:

*Several issues have arisen to cause friction in the Sino-North Korean relationship. These include: Chinese exasperation at the DPRK's failure to reform its economy; Pyongyang's prevarication over the nuclear and peace treaty issues; the nuclear standoff with the United States and Pyongyang's possession of nuclear weapons; Growing economic and political rapport between Pyongyang and Taipei; The North Korean refugee problem on the China-DPRK border; and Pyongyang's missile testing prompting Japan to acquire a Theater Missile Defense system.<sup>60</sup>*

In this context, China's positions—"no protection from an attack by the US" and "denuclearization of the Korean peninsula"—seemed to signal a betrayal of the China-North Korea alliance formed after the Korean War. In the eyes of Pyongyang, "not rejecting the US" or "standing on the US's side" could all be understood

as an act of treachery. North Korea's unhappiness with China was expressed in critical comments such as, "Some dishonest forces in the international community are joining the US in its moves to increase pressure upon the DPRK over the nuclear issue."<sup>61</sup> Baek Namsoon, the DPRK's Minister of Foreign Affairs, also revealed a strong distrust of China, saying, "We could not give a signal for the missile test in advance to China, which is a partner of the US."<sup>62</sup>

Nevertheless, it still remains in question whether the Chinese position was sincere or not. "No protection" could have been a bargaining strategy intended to pressure Pyongyang, while "denuclearization" might have only been a rhetorical or placatory gesture toward the international community benefiting China's national image. Only Kim Jungil may know whether Beijing used its position as a bargaining chip or not.

It was, however, difficult for North Korea to ignore China's demands because its economy depends so heavily upon China.<sup>63</sup> Therefore, North Korea took advantage of its position by persuading the US *through* China. It was an application of the Korean maxim, "if you can't avoid it use it." Pyongyang finally accepted multilateral talks on the condition of having bilateral talks (formal and informal private discussions) with the US. It was a compromise with the US through China. When the US and North Korea once again collided over the BDA issue, China mediated between Washington and Pyongyang in order to resolve the standoff. China arranged a secret meeting in Beijing on October 31, 2006, which led to the second phase of the fifth round of Six-Party

Talks in December 2006.<sup>64</sup> Pyongyang seemed to appropriately respond to the Chinese “carrot and stick” strategy, and also to play the nuclear game with the US by using its alliance relationship with China.<sup>65</sup> Meanwhile, North Korea demonstrated its displeasure with China by notifying China only twenty minutes before the October 2006 nuclear test, while it gave Russia a two-hour notice.<sup>66</sup> Gordon Flake, Executive Director at the Mansfield Center for Pacific Affairs, explained:

*This nuclear test's target was not the US, but China and South Korea. Washington already thought that the North had nuclear weapons. The nations that showed the strongest stance against nuclear weapons were China and South Korea. The strategy that North Korea used was to pressure the two countries and expect them to persuade the US to relax the sanctions.*<sup>67</sup>

### Conclusion

US policy towards North Korea had been controlled by hard-liners and was aimed at making Kim's regime collapse, which would remove another member of the “axis of evil.” However, amidst a miserable defeat in mid-term elections, demand for a review of foreign policy, a weakening of neocons' power, the Iraqi quagmire, a swing of pendulum against Bush's “go-it-alone” style, and non-cooperation from neighboring countries all triggered a change in the Bush administration's policy.<sup>68</sup> So far the change seems to have been in the direction of progress.

Witnessing the collapse of Iraq, Pyongyang, which seemed genuinely afraid of US attacks, ultimately came to the multilateral table. It was led by China's implicit and explicit pressure, anxiety over Washington's intentions, and the necessity of achieving a diplomatic resolution. As a result, North

Korea expected sanctions would be lifted, that it would be removed from the list of State Sponsors of Terrorism, and that normal relations with the US would be established. North Korea used Chinese influence directly and indirectly toward achieving these goals. Undoubtedly, the Bush administration's political difficulties made these goals more feasible for Pyongyang. The new phase of diplomacy between Washington and Pyongyang is a dramatic departure from the situation of only two years ago in which North Korea conducted a nuclear test. The Chinese participated in multilateral talks as a host and mediator for the sake of improving its relationship with the US as well as its international image and political influence. China now appears to enjoy the position of a responsible member of the international community.

As of the end of 2007, the North Korean nuclear negotiations have shown some progress. The question that remains is in which direction and for how long disagreements will continue. Nobody knows whether the Joint Agreement of the Six-Party Talks will follow the suit of the second Agreed Framework, which failed in the end. In fact, the crux of the problem lies in the lack of trust between the US and North Korea. The key to a complete, successful resolution to the nuclear issue lies in substantial actions rather than words. When the US guarantees the security of North Korea, and in turn, North Korea abandons its nuclear program, a dangerous and tedious game of chicken will finally come to an end.



## ENDNOTES

- 1 The Clinton administration considered a preemptive strike against North Korea in the Pyongyang area where the nuclear facilities were located, but it was stopped by former President Jimmy Carter, who went to Pyongyang and met with President Kim Il-Sung in 1994. The US and North Korea signed the "The Agreed Framework" in October 1994, and agreed to freeze the development of nuclear facilities in exchange for economic assistance. Joel S. Wit, Daniel B. Poneman and Rovert Gallucci, *Going Critical: The First North Korean Nuclear Crisis* (Brookings Institution Press, 2004).
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