

China and the Six-Party Talks: The New Turn to Mediation Diplomacy

Samuel S. Kim, Ph.D.
Columbia University

During more than a half century of its checkered international life, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has not been known for self-initiated mediation diplomacy in the world's trouble spots. Thus, China's uncharacteristically proactive mediation efforts in the second US-DPRK nuclear standoff, both reflects and affects significant changes in its foreign-policy thinking and behavior. Beijing's seemingly abrupt policy shift provides a timely case study for examining its changing role in the shaping of a new international order in East Asia in general and on the Korean peninsula in particular.

In exploring the origins, practice, and implications of China's new hands-on mediation diplomacy, this article proceeds in four parts. The first briefly tracks China's role shift and mediation efforts as made manifest and mutating through the five rounds of the Six-Party Talks from August 2003 to November 2005. The second explains the proximate and underlying causes that catapulted Beijing into active mediation. The third critically assesses the possibilities and limitations of China's influence, especially in Pyongyang and Washington. The article concludes by looking at the North Korean nuclear issue in the context of the asymmetrical triangle of the United States, China, and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and then suggests a set of policy recommendations toward peaceful resolution of the nuclear standoff on the Korean peninsula.

Tracking China's Role Shift

The Chinese government decided in 1992 to change its two-Koreas policy from *de facto* to *de jure* status by recognizing and establishing diplomatic relations with the Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea).¹ This change (arguably the most significant reorientation of post-Cold War Chinese foreign

policy in the Northeast Asian region) did not, however, signal a greater Chinese conflict management role in regional or global politics. This was particularly true in the 1993–94 US-DPRK nuclear standoff, when China played neither mediator nor peacemaker for fear it might get burned if something went wrong. The Chinese repeated the familiar refrain that “the issue was a direct matter between the DPRK and the three sides—the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the United States, and the Republic of Korea.”² This “who me?” posture reflected a cost-benefit calculus intended to keep the PRC out of harm's way while still attempting to hold both Pyongyang and Seoul within its Asiatic circle of influence. In the wake of the 1994 US-DPRK Agreed Framework, China refused to join the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO), the multinational consortium for the implementation of the Agreed Framework. Adhering to the hands-off strategy, China contended, “We can be of greater help being outside than inside the KEDO.”³

Even after Pyongyang's alleged confession to U.S. interlocutors in October 2002 of the existence of a highly enriched uranium (HEU) program, China persisted in its risk-averse posture toward the nuclear issue on the Korean peninsula. All of this changed, and changed dramatically, in the heat of the second US-DPRK nuclear confrontation in early 2003. As if its New Year's resolution had been to see the nuclear standoff through to a peaceful resolution, China launched an unprecedented flurry of mediation diplomacy.

The first few months of 2003 were busy with long-distance telephone calls between President George W. Bush and President Jiang Zemin in January 2003 as well as between President Bush and President Hu Jintao immediately following Hu's succession to the PRC presidency in March 2003. Chinese officials reportedly met with North Korean officials many times and passed over fifty messages back and forth between Pyongyang and Washington.⁴ On March 8–9, 2003, Beijing dispatched its foreign minister and vice premier Qian Qichen to North Korea to meet Kim Jong Il in the interests of kickstarting trilateral peace talks involving Pyongyang, Washington, and Beijing. Such talks were indeed hosted in Beijing in April 2003, amid Chinese hopes

that this would help keep the US-DPRK nuclear standoff from spiraling out of control. The inconclusive ending of trilateral talks had the effect of accelerating China's conflict-management shuttle diplomacy: Beijing dispatched Deputy Foreign Minister Dai Bingguo to Pyongyang, Moscow, and Washington in July to seek what is called in Chinese *qiutong cunyi*, meaning "finding common ground while preserving differences."

Chinese President Hu Jintao is said to have sent Dai to Pyongyang in the official capacity of special envoy to carry a presidential letter to Kim Jong Il.⁵ Hu's letter reportedly made three key promises: (1) China would be willing to help resolve the crisis by mediating and facilitating negotiations with the greatest sincerity; (2) China would be willing to increase the amount of economic aid to the DPRK; and, (3) China would be willing to persuade the United States to make a promise of non-aggression against the DPRK in exchange for the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Kim Jong Il told Dai that he was willing to accept China's viewpoint and proposal to reopen talks with the United States in a "multilateral" setting while also insisting that one-on-one negotiation was his ultimate bottom line.⁶ These behind-the-scenes diplomatic efforts by the Chinese led to the first round of Six-Party Talks, held in Beijing in August 2003.

Following the first round of talks, Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Wang Yi, in his dual capacity as host and chairman of the Chinese delegation, took pains to stress the emergence of a group consensus on four points: (1) that there is the need for a peaceful solution to the nuclear standoff through dialogue; (2) that there is the need for a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula and that the DPRK's security concerns and other concerns should be considered and resolved; (3) that the parties should decide "on an overall plan for solving the nuclear issue in stages and through synchronous or parallel implementation in a just and reasonable manner"; and, (4) that all parties should avoid actions or words that might escalate tensions.⁷

It took much additional Chinese cajoling and aid to secure Pyongyang's consent to return to a second round of Six-Party Talks in February 2004. To obtain North Korean acquiescence to

the talks, China offered new economic aid and energy assistance totaling around \$50 million.⁸ The United States, for its part, seemed to treat the talks as an opportunity to forge the broadest possible Northeast Asian front united against North Korea, and the CVID code ("complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement"), unveiled at the second round of talks, seemed ready made for this purpose. Moreover, Washington would claim somewhat fancifully after the talks that all parties except North Korea were in agreement on CVID.⁹ Not surprisingly, then, the second round of talks ended in embarrassment for China when Pyongyang, as a response to America's CVID stand, attempted to make some last-minute changes to what was to be the first joint communiqué of the talks. After a delay in the closing ceremonies Beijing issued instead a cautious Chairman's Statement in lieu of a televised joint communiqué.¹⁰ Vice Foreign Minister Wang Yi described an "extreme lack of trust" between Washington and Pyongyang, indicating the distance that the parties would have to travel in future talks.¹¹

China's patience and tenacity in pursuing hands-on, mediation diplomacy can be seen in its efforts to keep the Six-Party Talks from collapsing. Before the third round of talks, China repeatedly contacted the parties in a desperate effort to set timetables for both working-level meetings and the plenary talks themselves. In March 2004, Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing visited Pyongyang, and South Korean Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon traveled to Beijing. In April 2004, following lower-level exchanges between China and South Korea as well as North Korea, Kim Jong Il took a secret train trip to Beijing—his third China trip in five years—to hold discussions with top Chinese leaders, including President Hu Jintao, Prime Minister Wen Jiabao, and former president Jiang Zemin. Jiang is said to have told Kim Jong Il that the United States was unlikely to invade the DPRK and that it would therefore be in Pyongyang's interest to alter North Korea's hard-line stance.¹² China's actions at this time were motivated in part by a recognition that the United States was no longer in a position to think or plan seriously about unilateral military action against the DPRK, given America's deepening entrapment and quagmire in Iraq. The arrival of the United States at the third

round of talks with a concrete, albeit highly conditional proposal, according to which the other countries involved could provide positive economic incentives to North Korea in exchange for a nuclear dismantlement, seemed to indicate that China's persistence was paying off to some extent. However, the influence of Chinese criticisms of the U.S. stance was probably secondary to the effects of the deteriorating situation in Iraq and the Bush administration's reluctance to cause a second major foreign-policy embarrassment in a presidential election year.

Alongside a slightly modified stance from the United States, the DPRK proposed a lifting of the American sanctions and blockade against North Korea, in addition to energy assistance of two million kilowatts through the supply of heavy oil and electricity. Beijing's dissatisfaction with the U.S. proposal had much to do with a key provision stating explicitly that even if North Korea agreed to a satisfactory denuclearization agreement with full verification, Washington would not be prepared to normalize relations with Pyongyang. In sharp contrast, the South Korean proposal explicitly envisaged the normalization of U.S. and Japanese relations with the DPRK in tandem with denuclearization.¹³ Despite the promise of progress in the talks stemming from these new lines of "negotiation," in the end "no substantive bargaining" occurred during the three-day talks of June 2004.¹⁴ Again no joint communiqué was issued because of the lack of headway, and again Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Wang Yi issued a Chairman's Statement, in which he said that "the parties stressed the need for a step-by-step process of 'words for words'" and 'action for action' in search for a peaceful solution to the nuclear issue", thus incorporating Pyongyang's negotiating stance, and that they also "agreed in principle to hold the fourth round of the Six-Party Talks in Beijing by the end of September 2004."¹⁵

Later, as Pyongyang refused to attend a fourth round of the Six-Party Talks in September 2004, Beijing's "bi-multilateral" shuttle diplomacy continued unabated. To reenergize the stalled talks, China invited Kim Yong Nam, North Korea's "nominal head of state" and president of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly, to visit China in October 2004. He and the

Chinese representatives agreed in principle that the Six-Party Talks still remained the best available channel to advance a solution to the nuclear issue. Several days later, Secretary of State Colin Powell and Chinese leaders met and also reaffirmed the need for resumption of the Six-Party framework. Despite Beijing's efforts to resuscitate the Six-Party Talks, Pyongyang demurred, holding out for the possibility that an electoral victory by John Kerry in the U.S. presidential race might allow direct bilateral negotiations with the United States. After Bush's reelection Pyongyang continued to stall, hoping and waiting for the second-term Bush administration to come up with a more flexible and accommodating position, even as North Korea continued to seek Chinese support.¹⁶

Caught in diplomatic gridlock and against the backdrop of being labeled as an "outpost of tyranny" by the second-term Bush administration, Pyongyang raised the ante of its own brinkmanship diplomacy with a statement on February 10, 2005, that it had "manufactured nukes for self-defense to cope with the Bush administration's evermore undisguised policy to isolate and stifle the DPRK" and that it was therefore "compelled to suspend participation in the [Six-Party] talks for an indefinite period."¹⁷ Beijing's response came in the form of a series of intensive "bi-multilateral" consultations, and China's shuttle diplomacy with both Koreas reached the highest levels. As messages were exchanged between President Hu Jintao and Chairman Kim Jong Il, a visit by Hu to Pyongyang was scheduled for later in 2005 through an invitation conveyed by DPRK Prime Minister Pak Pong Ju during his March visit to Beijing. Meanwhile there was also an intensification of diplomatic contact between Beijing and Seoul, with South Korea and all other parties looking to Beijing to find a way to reverse the DPRK position on the Six-Party Talks.

The Bush administration, however, began to criticize China publicly for not imposing greater pressure—i.e., economic sanctions—to bring North Korea back to the Six-Party Talks, while the U.S. continued to refuse to modify its own hardline stand. Although Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs James A. Kelly acknowledged before the Senate

Foreign Relations Committee in March 2004 that “achievements from the talks are in no small part due to the extensive efforts of the Chinese . . . and we are extremely grateful for the hard work they have been doing,”¹⁸ Undersecretary of State Robert Joseph issued a warning in June 2005 that if Beijing did not impose more punitive sanctions against North Korea, “there possibly could be very significant consequences for U.S.-Chinese relations.”

Beijing persisted by pursuing a two-handed mediation diplomacy. With one hand China sustained its shuttle diplomacy with North Korea by sending senior party official Wang Jiaru to Pyongyang in mid-February—shortly after the February 10 announcement—and subsequently by hosting DPRK Prime Minister Pak Bong-ju and Vice Foreign Minister Kang Sok Ju for additional consultation in late March and early April. With the other hand Beijing resisted pressure from Washington to impose economic sanctions against Pyongyang. Seoul meanwhile stepped in to do some heavy lifting in support of Beijing’s mediation diplomacy. A combination of Chinese mediation efforts to entice the North Koreans back to a fourth round of talks and an increasing convergence of the positions of Beijing and Seoul played a critical role in laying the basis for resumption of the “New York channel,” a working-level dialogue between U.S. and North Korean officials in New York in May and June 2005, with the United States and the DPRK offering each other assurances designed to end “a war of words” and to lay the groundwork for a return to the negotiation table.¹⁹

On July 9, 2005, North Korea finally agreed to return for a fourth round of the Six-Party Talks later in the month. The DPRK portrayed this decision not a result of Chinese behind-the-scenes pressure but as a result of direct bilateral “negotiation” between Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill of the United States (who replaced James Kelly as America’s top negotiator at the Six-Party Talks) and Kim Kye Gwan of the DPRK.²⁰ In fact, the first indication of Pyongyang’s willingness to return soon to the Six-Party Talks came on June 17, 2005, when Kim Jong Il held rare, five-hour, face-to-face talks with South Korea’s Unification Minister, Chung Dong-young. No date was set at that time.

Tellingly, a few weeks later (July 9, 2005) Kim Kye Gwan conveyed his government’s definitive and date-specific decision to return to the Six-Party Talks in the course of a three-hour dinner meeting with Christopher Hill. The dinner meeting was hosted by the Chinese in Beijing on the eve of a scheduled trip to Pyongyang by Tang Jiaxuan (state counselor and a former foreign minister) as part of Chinese efforts to bridge differences between the United States and the DPRK. However, Washington’s own brinkmanship diplomacy—that it would soon introduce a draft sanctions resolution in the UN Security Council which would corner Beijing in a lose-lose situation—cannot be discounted.

To a certain extent, Pyongyang’s decision to rejoin the Six-Party Talks after a thirteen-month hiatus can be attributed to the synergy of Chinese and South Korean mediation diplomacy that was aimed at providing a face-saving exit from the box of mutual US-DPRK creation. This was particularly important in the wake of the Bush administration’s characterization of Kim Jong Il as a “tyrant” and Condoleezza Rice’s labeling of North Korea as an “outpost of tyranny” during the first month of the Bush administration’s second term. Beijing, Seoul, and Moscow continued prodding the Bush administration to stop using this kind of language and to map out detailed economic and security incentives as quid pro quo for North Korea’s nuclear disarmament. Indeed, the implicit withdrawal of demonizing rhetoric was important in Pyongyang.²¹ The “words for words” and “action for action” approach that North Korea advocated as its negotiating stance and that China interpreted as group consensus in the Chairman’s statement at the end of the third round of talks—and also in the September 19, 2005 Joint Statement—provided an exit with voice for Pyongyang, if not for Washington. China was the most critical factor in achieving a group consensus in the form of the Joint Statement of Principles issued by the participants in the Six-Party Talks process on September 19, 2005, the first-ever successful outcome of the on-again, off-again multilateral dialogue of more than two years. This was a validation of the negotiated approach to the second nuclear standoff on the Korean peninsula that both Pyongyang and Washington have at various times resisted.

In sum, China's mediation diplomacy since early 2003 has been the primary factor facilitating and energizing multilateral dialogues among the Northeast Asian states concerned in the nuclear standoff. Whereas in 1994 China wanted the United States and the DPRK to handle their dispute bilaterally, in 2003 to 2005 China succeeded in drawing North Korea into a unique regional, multilateral setting that Pyongyang—and Beijing—had previously foresworn in a quest for direct bilateral negotiations with the United States.

Explaining China's Role Shift

What explains the contrast between China's proactive mediation diplomacy in 2003 to 2005 and its passive, risk-averse "who me?" stand a decade earlier? There were multiple catalysts for the shift, including regional factors, U.S. strategic and military policy and behavior, Korean responses, geopolitical and economic factors, and the steady rise of regional and global multilateralism in Chinese foreign-policy thinking and behavior in tandem with the rise of creeping unilateralism under the Clinton administration, which then turned into rampant runaway unilateralism under the Bush administration. Moreover, the second US-DPRK nuclear standoff came to China as a clear and present "crisis" that threatened the successful enactment of a new national identity as a responsible great power the Chinese term "crisis" (*weiji*) has a two-sided meaning of not only danger to be avoided (*weixian*) but also an opportunity to be seized (*jihui*).

History and geography have combined to make North Korea a crucial element in China's near-abroad security and domestic stability, particularly in the border areas. Korea's largest diaspora is found in Northeast China, and this region suffers from extremely high rates of unemployment, stagnating state-owned enterprises and industries, and low economic growth.²² In the event of regime collapse or war, North Korean refugees would flood into these Chinese border provinces, complicating the security/stability interdependence of the PRC and the DPRK. While the notion of a nuclear-free Korean peninsula is considered important and desirable by the Chinese leadership, North Korean survival and reform are China's greatest challenge

and prime objectives.²³

So the spur into action on Beijing's part was not so much North Korea's nuclear program per se as the growing danger of Pyongyang becoming the next target on the U.S. hit list. Growing fears at the potential for reckless action by the United States and North Korea as they engage in mutual provocation—which could trigger, either inadvertently or by design, another war in China's strategic backyard—have served as a catalyst for Beijing's hands-on preventive diplomacy.

U.S. policy and behavior have certainly been key factors in China's shift to active mediation diplomacy. Although Sino-U.S. relations *per se* have been generally positive—at least since the resolution of the spy plane incident and the 9/11 terror attacks in 2001—China has watched U.S. defense policy and rhetoric with a wary eye. The arrival of the Bush administration suddenly initiated a radical fundamentalist reorientation of the U.S. foreign-policy establishment; this and the impending Iraq War, which was both a cause and a manifestation of the Bush Doctrine, sounded alarm bells in both Beijing and Pyongyang.²⁴ Policy pronouncements by the Bush administration have served as a kind of force-multiplier that has spurred Beijing into conflict-management activity.

Threatening talk against the DPRK emerged in the United States during the 2000 presidential campaign of George W. Bush, who regularly used the term "rogue state" to refer to North Korea and singled out Kim Jong Il by name in multiple stump speeches. Then as president, in his January 2002 State of the Union Address, Bush declared that the DPRK was a charter member of the "Axis of Evil," appropriating and upgrading North Korea's national identity from rogue state to evil state.²⁵ China promptly issued an early warning within days of the address, declaring prophetically that "consequences will be very serious if [the United States] proceeds with this kind of logic."²⁶

In addition to Bush's demonizing rhetoric, administration hawks have actively augmented the aggressiveness of U.S. military doctrine. The Pentagon's Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) of 2001, for example, called for a paradigm shift from

threat-based to capability-based models, and the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) of 2002 listed China and North Korea as two of seven target countries. The NPR explicitly contradicted the US-DPRK Agreed Framework, which stipulates that “the United States will provide formal assurances to the DPRK, against the threat or use of nuclear weapons by the United States.” The NPR and the U.S. pursuit of new small, “usable” nuclear weapons were blows to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty regime, and they go a long way toward explaining Pyongyang’s persistent demand for a non-aggression treaty or a security-assurance pledge in legally binding form.

The U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq beginning in March 2003 signaled to the Chinese and to the North Koreans that the changes in Washington were more than just rhetorical or doctrinal. China officially opposed the war in Iraq and has called for a return to diplomatic solutions throughout the conflict, but its criticisms have been reserved and far from belligerent. Shi Yinhong, the director of the Center for American Studies at Renmin (People’s) University in Beijing and a well-known commentator on U.S.-China relations, observed that the Iraq War enabled the Chinese government to overcome fragmentation and an internal “stalemate in the Chinese position”: “Now there is some recognition of a possible time-sequence in the U.S. approach to North Korea, and that has created a sense of urgency in China,” along with a determination to figure out the most efficient path for protecting regional stability.²⁷

This sense of urgency increased as it became clear that the United States was looking for regime change in North Korea. First, news leaked out in April 2003 that Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld had circulated a memorandum proposing that the United States ally itself with China to isolate and bring about a collapse of the North Korean regime.²⁸ The Chinese did not appreciate being incorporated into the U.S. imperial plan. Nor were they encouraged by the zero-sum footing taken by the United States during the Three-Party Talks in Beijing in April 2003. It took the Chinese little time to realize that the CVID mantra is a regime-change strategy in all but name. It is ready-made for dismantling not only the North Korean regime but also

the Clinton administration’s Perry process, which had managed to ease tensions between the United States and North Korea amidst Republican charges of appeasement.²⁹

Further evidence of the aggressiveness of North Korea policy in the Bush White House came in May 2003. First, the Pentagon’s Operations Plan 5030 was released, describing a variety of harassment and intimidation strategies that could be applied against North Korea. Then the eleven-nation Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI)³⁰ established coordinated interception of cargo shipments for inspection and the possibility of an air and naval blockade/sanctions regime.³¹

As China looked on, the DPRK response continued the escalation of tensions. Four weeks after the United States announced its decision to halt shipments of heavy fuel oil to North Korea on November 14, 2002, Pyongyang reacted that it would reactivate a nuclear power program at Yongbyon that had been suspended under the 1994 US-DPRK Agreed Framework, and then it started dismantling International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) monitoring equipment at the Yongbyon nuclear facilities. In December (2002), Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld warned North Korea not to try to take advantage of U.S. preoccupation with Iraq, since the United States was able and willing to fight and win two wars at the same time if necessary.³² To intensify and accelerate this downward spiral, the DPRK expelled the remaining IAEA inspectors from the country, noted its intent to restart a nuclear processing plant, and then announced on January 10, 2003, its withdrawal from the NPT effective as of January 11th.

It is clear that South Korean support for the Bush administration’s North Korea policy has flagged substantially, partly due to Seoul’s interest in maintaining constructive and fruitful relations with a rising China and partly due to the transformation of Seoul’s approach to North Korea, catalyzed by a “regime change” in South Korean domestic politics (i.e., the Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations in 1998 and 2003). In March 2005 President Roh publicly declared, “Our citizens will not become embroiled in Northeast Asian conflicts without our consent.” In another speech the same month, Roh

warned that Seoul will not necessarily side with the United States and Japan against China and North Korea.³³ While expressing negative views about the traditional idea that Seoul should seek triangular security cooperation with Washington and Tokyo, President Roh said in a recent interview with a local Internet newsarticle that South Korea needs a multiparty security regime that would include, not contain, China for lasting peace on the Korean peninsula and in Northeast Asia.³⁴ The Roh government's position on dealing with the North Korean nuclear crisis is far closer to Beijing's than Washington's.

China also found itself in a changed geopolitical and geo-economic situation in 2002–2003. With China's switch from a pro-DPRK policy to a two-Koreas policy, Sino-DPRK relations were in a state of disarray in 1993–1994. Sino-American relations were also rocky at the time due to fallout from the Tiananmen incident. Beijing commanded little geopolitical or geo-economic leverage with either the United States or North Korea. This state of affairs persisted until the late 1990s when Beijing and Pyongyang began to mend fences and as China was emerging almost overnight as the world's fastest growing economy and the world's third-largest trading nation.

Ironically, given the fact that China was considered a military threat in the U.S. Nuclear Posture Review of 2002, China's greatest power gains have been not military but economic. While swings in U.S. foreign policy have provided proximate causes for China's proactive preventive/mediation diplomacy, China's concern over regional destabilization is motivated to no small degree by an underlying cause: the combination of economic and political gains that it made in the past decade and the clear and continuing threat to them.

China's Korea policy must also be understood in the larger context of its grand strategic goals. Domestic, regional, and global levels interact as China pursues three overarching demands and goals: economic development and the creation of a "well-off society" (*xiaokang shehui*), external near-abroad security, and cultivation of a newly minted national identity as a responsible great power.³⁵ China spent the 1990s advancing these goals, and it would like to protect the gains it has made.

The dangerous confrontation between the neighbor in Beijing's strategic backyard and the global hegemon is currently the dominant threat to the challenge of maintaining regional stability in the interests of promoting the establishment of a stable, orderly, and healthy society. Unlike in the Balkans or the Middle East, where distance allows China the luxury of remaining relatively detached, the second US-DPRK nuclear confrontation threatens to undermine China's new international stature and also to sully the domestic political claims of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as the leader of a proudly resurgent China. A solution imposed by the United States, furthermore, would result in a changed military situation that would constitute major geostrategic gains for Washington at Beijing's expense. Beijing has strong incentives, therefore, to head off military resolution of any Korean crisis or conflict.³⁶

With the growing rhetoric and actions of war in the United States in late 2002 and early 2003, China feared the instability that could result from the vicious cycle of mutual provocation. China was alarmed by the possibility of military action from either side. On the one hand, there was a potential for U.S. recklessness in an attempt to resolve the North Korean nuclear challenge through military means in the manner of Iraq. On the other hand, North Korea could calculate that lashing out (to preempt America's preemptive strike, as it were) would be a rational course of action in the interests of regime survival, even if victory were impossible.

Many American journalists and on-the-fly interlocutors seem to have been misled by some of China's hardline pundits (e.g., Shi Yinghong, Shen Jiru, and Wang Zhongwen) to conclude that Beijing's top priority was to prevent Pyongyang from going nuclear at any cost or by any means. This perception regarding China's primary concerns is mistaken. Although Beijing's negative security wish list with respect to North Korea includes at least five "no's"—no nukes, no refugees, no collapse, no instability, and no war—and although these are mutually interrelated, the greatest priority has remained "no war." In other words, peace and stability on the Korean peninsula, which is a key contributor to peace and stability within China, remains first

and foremost among Chinese strategic concerns.

So China's proactive mediation diplomacy has been shaped by the Northeast Asian regional context, the level of risk inherent in the aggressive Bush Doctrine, reactions in North and South Korea to U.S. policy, geopolitical and economic factors, and strategic assessments and priorities. In short, the unique confluence of both proximate and underlying factors—greater danger, greater leverage, and greater stakes—explains why Beijing was spurred into action in early 2003 and why it assumed the multiple and multitasking roles of host, facilitator, mediator, and arbiter in the process of the Six-Party Talks.

Assessing China's Leverage

Assessment of China's role and influence in the second US-DPRK nuclear standoff requires first an understanding of China's own characterization of its role. Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Wang Yi uses the term "active mediation" and describes it as follows: "Conducting active mediation means continually making positive efforts to promote peace and talks in an objective and just attitude and see to it that all parties will enhance contacts, build trust, seek common grounds while reserving differences, and expand consensus."³⁷ He emphasized that "China is not the dominating factor" and that its role is to propose a middle course when the talks come to a deadlock.³⁸ Among the four tasks that Wang Yi mentions, China has had significant success in enhancing contacts, as evidenced by the achievement of bringing the DPRK back to the Six-Party Talks, especially to the fourth round of talks after the thirteen-month hiatus. Building trust has been more difficult, as would be expected given half-century of enmity and distrust between the United States and North Korea. On the third and fourth tasks, seeking common ground and expanding consensus, China has achieved slow but steady progress that culminated in the September 19, 2005, Joint Statement.

Any third-party mediation between a unilateral America and a unilateral North Korea is bound to be a daunting challenge; it may be doubly so for China. The greatest challenge for Beijing is how to navigate between the Scylla of allied abandonment, with

the potential for instability or even collapse in North Korea, and the Charybdis of allied entrapment, with the danger of being caught in conflict escalation or even a war not of its own making. Furthermore, the conservative nature of Chinese diplomacy makes it difficult for Beijing to play an overly aggressive mediating role in the resolution of any international crisis, let alone one between China's socialist ally and close neighbor on the one hand and the world's lone superpower (and China's largest trading partner) on the other. One senior official acknowledged, "We generally only propose things that we are sure will be accepted."³⁹ Finally, mutual distrust and loathing between George W. Bush and Kim Jong Il is such that it would take new leadership in Washington and/or Pyongyang to bring the two countries to a new, constructive starting point.⁴⁰

Despite the challenges involved, throughout the second nuclear standoff the United States has had high expectations that China would play a decisive role in pushing the North Korean regime toward nuclear dismantlement. But China's leverage in Pyongyang is not as great as some U.S. foreign policymakers and pundits believe, although it is certainly greater there than in Washington. Beijing's mediating role, then, is constrained by high expectations on the part of the United States—expectations directly undercut by the insistence on CVID—and a low level of influence over the Bush administration.

By cajoling and coaxing with many kinds of aid, Beijing has indeed managed to influence behavior coming out of Pyongyang. First, China brought the DPRK to the Six-Party Talks, overcoming or at least altering North Korea's principled stand for direct bilateral negotiation with the United States. Chinese diplomats are reported to have played a key behind-the-scenes mediation role in facilitating the US-DPRK bilateral contacts in May to June 2005 that led to the fourth round of the Six-Party Talks lasting twenty days in two sessions, compared to three to four days for the first three rounds of talks. China may also have played a critical behind-the-scenes role in persuading Pyongyang not to undertake any provocative rhetoric or action. Despite press reports based on U.S. government sources to the effect that North Korea was actively engaged in the preparation of a nuclear test, Pyongyang

has carried out no nuclear testing and has not launched a Taepodong-II missile. China played a further role in downsizing Pyongyang's demand for a non-aggression treaty, a demand that had initially called for a security pledge or guarantee as well as the removal of the DPRK from the U.S. list of terrorist states.

Above all, Beijing was the primary mover and linchpin of the six-party process to achieve an "*qitong cunyi*" agreement, in the form of the Joint Statement of Principles, as a group consensus and a roadmap for future progress. Chinese diplomats are reported to have been even-handed to a fault in producing five successive drafts of a possible joint statement designed to seek common ground—or split the differences—between the U.S. and North Korean positions during the second and final session of the fourth round of talks. By September 18, 2005, China's fifth and final draft of a possible Joint Statement became acceptable to all parties but the United States, reaching a breakthrough or breaking point. One effect has been that the Bush administration was required to accept the Chinese-drafted joint statement as a multilateral consensus agreement lest it be blamed by the world community for the collapse of the six-party process for good. This explains Washington's reluctant and almost forced acceptance of the September 19 Joint Statement and the not-so-surprising return to a trashing of North Korea's "five step" proposal that was unveiled in the fifth round of talks in November 2005. It is worth noting in this connection that the September 19 Joint Statement reflected and embodied many key elements that China had emphasized in the Chairman's Statements of the second and third rounds of talks, including most notably Principle 5, which states that "the six parties agreed to take coordinated steps to implement the aforementioned consensus in a phase manner in line with the principle of 'commitment for commitment, action for action'."

There are several reasons China has come to a point that it feels it can challenge the Bush administration openly. First, Beijing is taking advantage of the global wave of anti-Americanism (more precisely, anti-Bushism) and of widespread disbelief in U.S. intelligence about WMD, both issues related to the Iraq war. Second, China feels increasingly confident that the emerging Northeast Asian coalition of the willing is moving away

from the Bush administration's approach and toward the Chinese "peace by pieces" approach or the incremental and mutually reciprocal "words for words" and "action for action" approach. Finally, Beijing's open challenge reflects China's concern that the Six-Party Talks could collapse if the CVID formula is not dismantled at least in part.

At the third round of Six-Party Talks, the United States appeared to back away somewhat from the CVID mantra, offering the possibility that China, South Korea, Japan, and Russia might be able to send energy supplies to North Korea in exchange for Pyongyang's cooperation. Nonetheless, this highly conditional offer seemed in some ways more like a reworking of CVID than a real departure from it, and the talks ended without any substantial forward movement. Compared to the rigid stand taken a year earlier, however, the third-round offer can be regarded as an indication of Washington's situation-specific and time-specific willingness to diverge from the dead center of CVID. China allowed other parties, especially South Korea and Russia, to do all the heavy lifting in chipping away at the CVID mantra.

For China, the application of leverage through aid is a double-edged sword. In the past China viewed aid as a natural part of its fraternal relationship with the DPRK. Now, however, the Chinese government views aid as a pragmatic means of preventing the collapse of the Pyongyang regime and of strengthening its bilateral relations with the DPRK. A strengthened relationship is a necessary prerequisite for coaxing whatever concessions possible out of Kim Jong Il to support and sustain the Six-Party Talks process. Each year Beijing has become more deeply involved, playing a crucial role in the politics of regime survival by providing more aid in a wider variety of forms. As a former Chinese Foreign Ministry official reminds us, "China rarely uses sanctions in its diplomacy (for both principled and pragmatic reasons), as in most cases employment of such a tool would seem to trample on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. Moreover, understanding the resilience and pride of its hermit neighbor, Beijing doubts the effectiveness of sanctions against North Korea. Whenever any

country or institution has made a threat against it, Pyongyang has always retaliated with still more hawkish rhetoric.”⁴¹

China does not, however, receive as much North Korean gratitude as it would like nor wield as much leverage as Washington would have us believe. Pyongyang knows well that such aid is in China’s own self-interest. As one senior Chinese leader said to a visiting U.S. delegation in the context of expressing China’s opposition to any economic sanctions on North Korea, “We can either send food to North Korea or they will send refugees to us—either way, we feed them. It is more convenient to feed them in North Korea than in China.”⁴² Thus Beijing is cautious to a fault for fear of provoking and/or causing collapse in the North by withholding too much aid, since that event would bring a host of destabilizing social, economic, and political consequences.

While China’s influence in North Korea is limited and constrained, Beijing still has a far greater ability to effect change in Pyongyang than in Washington. One constraint on China’s leverage over Washington is the economic relationship with the United States. The PRC stands in a position of extremely high trade dependency on the United States. Sino-U.S. trade reached \$231.4 billion in 2004, making China the third largest trading partner of the United States, even as the U.S. trade deficit with China grew to \$162 billion in 2004, the largest bilateral trade deficit in U.S. history. This relationship is critical to China’s advance as a world power, and the United States is holding this over China’s head as it pressures Beijing to apply pressure to Pyongyang. The Bush administration repeatedly warned in May and June 2005 that if Beijing does not take more punitive action “there possibly could be very significant consequences for U.S.-Chinese relations.”⁴³ These consequences would not be limited to the political arena, but would spill over into economics as well.

The other key constraint on China’s influence over U.S. policy is the rigidity of the American CVID stance. The stubborn U.S. insistence on CVID as its only “offer” in negotiations is an expression of a fundamentalist quest for absolute security, the product of a Manichean worldview that makes judgments on the good or the bad, with no shades of gray. Seen in the context of

Pyongyang’s historical anxieties, CVID is nothing short of an evil-state strangulation (regime-change) strategy. “While in Washington the North Korean nuclear threat has been a major issue for the past decade,” as Gavan McCormack reminds us, “in Pyongyang the U.S. nuclear threat has been the issue for the past fifty years. North Korea’s uniqueness in the nuclear age lies first of all in the way it has faced and lived under the shadow of nuclear threat for longer than any other nation.”⁴⁴

In the context of the ongoing Six-Party process, too, Chinese leverage in keeping Washington faithful to the principle of “action for action” is virtually nil. In fact, while stopping the use of the CVID mantra since the fourth round of talks, the Bush administration has translated the “action for action” principle into an insistence on North Korean dismantlement action for American words. Put differently, North Korea is asked to give up its nuclear capability in exchange for American good intentions. With its position in Iraq becoming more and more of a quagmire, the United States can hardly afford a disaster in Northeast Asia, a fact that increases both North Korean and Chinese bargaining leverage in trying to chart a non-violent course with the United States.

Besides the challenges of gaining material leverage in Pyongyang, Beijing also faces a normative hurdle: the notion of nuclear fairness and justice. China cannot capture the high ground by pushing too strongly for unilateral nuclear disarmament by its tiny neighbor when it owes much of its own power in world politics to its status as a nuclear-weapons state. And beyond China, if India, Pakistan, and Israel can get away with building a nuclear weapons program by not signing the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), why can North Korea not do the same? So nuclear status serves as another limitation on China’s influence over North Korea, especially on the issue at hand in the nuclear crisis.

Concluding Remarks

Contrary to the conventional realist wisdom, today China behaves as a largely conservative status-quo power, more satisfied with its born-again national status and security than at

any time since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949. A decade ago, as the first nuclear standoff between the United States and the DPRK was being negotiated, few would have predicted the role that China would play in another round of nuclear standoff with the world's lone superpower. Yet "intermestic" factors coalesced in such a way in 2003–2005 that Beijing saw fit to take a large role in trying to resolve the second US-DPRK nuclear standoff. China thus finds itself in the unique position of having both Washington and Pyongyang looking to it for a way out of the box of their mutual creation. Pressed by the North Koreans for more and more aid and by the United States for unilateral nuclear dismantlement in Pyongyang, China has so far dealt deftly with these twin pressures, suggesting face-saving exits from reckless rhetoric and uncompromising stands, and embracing as group consensus North Korea's "words for words" and "action for action" position and the fifth, and final, draft joint statement of principles, as well as functional "peace by pieces" pathways toward a working peace system on the Korean peninsula.

Despite the relentless pressure and warnings from Washington, Beijing rejected the sanctions approach for both principled and pragmatic reasons. For its own geopolitical interests, Beijing has played a constructive mediation role in the second nuclear standoff, not only by providing diplomatic and economic support to the DPRK that was necessary if not sufficient (in Pyongyang's eyes), but also by making it clear to Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo that it is now in the common interest of all to promote the peaceful coexistence of the two Korean states on the peninsula rather than having to cope with the turmoil, chaos, and even massive exodus of refugees that would follow in the wake of system collapse in the North.

However, this unexpected trajectory should alert us to the unpredictable nature of the US-PRC-DPRK triangle, a strategic grouping with three disparate, sometimes fickle actors pursuing strategic interests that are far from ideological or material alignment. The future of China's role in the US-DPRK nuclear standoff and in U.S.-Korea relations in general, therefore, is not predetermined but rather malleable, subject to a host of

intervening variables.

In both the academic world and the policy and punditry world, especially in the Bush administration, there is a tendency to forget that state interests are often in flux, susceptible to self-fulfilling prophecies via their impact upon the behavior of other states. Yet the implications of naming the DPRK as a rogue state or an evil state are profound in both epistemic and policymaking communities. In the policy world, the implications can lead to actions that produce the outcomes they were designed to avoid. Very few mainstream policymakers and on-the-fly pundits bother to make any effort to study the interactive dynamics of security dilemmas—that is, the impact of Washington's rogue-state demonization strategy on the shaping of Pyongyang's security thinking and behavior.⁴⁵ The impact of threat perceptions has been largely obscured by the highly technical, specialized discourse of mainstream "realist" security analysts with their one-sided focus on Pyongyang's intentions and capabilities. This focus leads to the inevitable attribution of responsibility for the current "crisis" solely to North Korean words and deeds.⁴⁶

At a material level, the challenge for the uncertain years ahead lies in seeking greater synergy among many state and non-state actors in order to collaborate for more effective prevention, regulation, and resolution of the simmering nuclear conflict on the Korean peninsula—the strategic vortex of Northeast Asian geopolitics. The states of Northeast Asia must simultaneously expand multilateral dialogues and economic integration as vehicles for order-building and problem-solving. The US-DPRK dispute risks derailing burgeoning regionalism in Northeast Asia, yet it is exactly this regionalism that will help prevent future spirals like that which has marked both standoffs between the United States and North Korea over nuclear weapons.

One component will be recognition of the impact of the peculiar historic and strategic circumstances out of which North Korea's nuclear ambitions have evolved. This is not to justify or rationalize the odious North Korean regime, but it can provide a more realistic point of departure for common-security engagement and resolution of the US-DPRK nuclear standoff.

The United States must recognize the contingencies of security for China and North Korea and must negotiate in good faith toward a common solution, providing common security through the fair exchange of security guarantees for nuclear dismantlement.

Endnotes

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- ² "U.S.-DPRK Meeting Welcomed," *Beijing Review* (May 17—23, 1993), p.7
- ³ Author's interview with Dr. Choi Young-jin, deputy director of the KEDO, New York, April 22, 1998.
- ⁴ John Pomfret, "China Urges N. Korea Dialogue," *The Washington Post*, April 4, 2003, p. A16.
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- ⁶ See Zong Hairen (pseudonym), "Hu Jintao Writes to Kim Jong-il to Open Door to Six-Party Talks," *Hong Kong Hsin Pao* (Hong Kong Economic Journal), August 28, 2003, trans in FBIS-CHI-2003-0828, August 29, 2003.
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by the South Koreans 'CVID,' and that acronym and the important goal it represents has been accepted by all but the North Koreans." James Kelly, "Opening Remarks Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee," March 2, 2004, available at <http://www.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2004/30093.htm>.

- ¹⁰ Scott Snyder, "Can China Unstick the Korean Nuclear Standoff?" *Comparative Connections*, vol. 6, no. 1 (April 2004), p. 98; <http://www.csis.org/pacfor/cc/0401Q.pdf>
- ¹¹ Philip P. Pan, Glenn Kessler, and Fred Barbash, "N. Korea, U.S. 'Difficulties' Remain as Talks End," *Washington Post*, February 28, 2004. Elsewhere the word "extreme" has been translated as "complete"; see BBC News, "No Breakthrough in N. Korea Talks," February 28, 2004; <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/3494790.stm>
- ¹² Audra Ang, "Report: China Urges Softer N. Korea Line," *Washington Post*, April 20, 2004. Others attributed a similar statement to President Hu Jintao; see Ryu Jin, "China Tells NK to Negotiate with U.S.," *The Korea Times*, April 20, 2004.
- ¹³ Selig S. Harrison, "China, North Korea and the United States," Testimony Prepared for a Hearing of the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission on "China's Role in the North Korea Nuclear Crisis," March 10, 2005, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C.
- ¹⁴ Joseph Kahn, "U.S. Reports Scant Progress in Talks with North Korea," *New York Times*, June 26, 2004 and Kyodo News, "N. Korea Asks for Energy Aid Worth 2 Mil. Kilowatts of Electricity," June 24, 2004.
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- ¹⁶ See Anne Wu, "What China Whispers to North Korea," *The Washington Quarterly* vol. 28, no. 2 (Spring 2005), pp. 39-44.
- ¹⁷ For an English text of the DPRK Ministry of Foreign Affairs' statement of February 10, 2005, see KCNA, February 10, 2005, available at <http://www.kcna.co.jp/item/2005/200502/news0211.htm> (accessed July 3, 2005).
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¹⁹ Scott Snyder, Ralph A. Cossa, and Brad Glosserman, "The Six-Party Talks: Developing a Roadmap for Future Progress," *Issues & Insights* 5:8 (August 2005): 7-8.

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