



The Korean Nuclear Issue:  
Past, Present, and Future

*A Chinese Perspective*

FU YING

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# The Korean Nuclear Issue: Past, Present, and Future

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The Korean nuclear issue is the most complicated and uncertain factor for Northeast Asian security. It has now become the focus of attention in the Asia Pacific and even the world at large. Now, as the issue continues to heat up, one frequently raised question is: Why can't China take greater responsibility and make North Korea stop its nuclear weapons program?

China started to mediate on the Korean nuclear issue and host talks in 2003, at the United States' sincere request. As a developing country, China upholds its five principles of peaceful coexistence.<sup>1</sup> On the Korean nuclear issue, which has a direct bearing over regional security, China's position is to strongly oppose nuclear proliferation. Upon taking up its role as a mediator, China firmly requested the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, commonly referred to as North Korea) to stop its nuclear weapons development while requesting other concerned parties, especially the U.S., to address the DPRK's legitimate

security concerns. But the deep mistrust between the U.S. and the DPRK made it very hard for any consensus or agreement made during the years of negotiations to be effectively implemented. China had been working hard to play its role both as a mediator and a party to U.N. sanctions, but it did not have the leverage to force either the U.S. or the DPRK to assume their respective responsibilities. Without holding the key to the DPRK's security concerns, China has no leverage to convince this foreign nation to stop its nuclear program. The U.S., which the DPRK sees as the source of threats to its security, has been neither interested nor willing to consider responding to the DPRK's security concerns. As the two sides reached an impasse, the DPRK took the opportunity to move forward with its program and, since 2005, has carried out five nuclear tests and numerous missile tests. In the meantime, the U.N. Security Council has stepped up sanctions, and the U.S. and the Republic of Korea (ROK, commonly referred to as South Korea) have been car-

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<sup>1</sup> This principle was expounded in the Common Program adopted by the First Session of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference on September 29, 1949, as well as the Announcement of the Central Government of the People's Republic of China made by Chairman Mao Zedong at the Proclamation Ceremony Marking the Founding of the People's Republic of China. This agreement stated the five principles as: mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence. For more information, see Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "China's Initiation of the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence," accessed April 12, 2017, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/ziliao\\_665539/3602\\_665543/3604\\_665547/t18053.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/ziliao_665539/3602_665543/3604_665547/t18053.shtml).

rying out heightened military exercises to exert greater military pressure on the DPRK. Consequently, tensions are now running high and the channel for talks is closed, and the situation is increasingly dangerous.

On the international stage, the main players are nation states who enjoy sovereign rights endowed by the U.N. Charter and international law. Powerful states may have greater influence over the international situation, but they should also bear the consequences of what they say or do. Smaller or weaker states may counter or respond to pressure from powerful states, but there is a price to pay for doing so. The international situation often evolves as the result of actions and counteractions by states over specific issues, whereby tension between states can rise and even intensify, leading the situation in an unexpected direction.

That is why China believes that peaceful negotiation is the “Pareto optimal” path.<sup>2</sup> Although it may not meet the optimal demands of any party, it would bring maximal benefits to all parties with minimal cost. This would of course call for all parties, the U.S. included, to take their due responsibilities and make the necessary compromises. The reason that no results have been achieved to date is precisely because of the failure to implement negotiated agreements and the suspension of negotiations.

China remains committed to a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula. It has been and will continue to work to safeguard regional peace and stability. China stands for dialogue as the right route to address the Korean nuclear issue. North and South Korea are geographically connected and both are China’s close neighbors; North Korea, in particular,

shares 1,300 kilometers (808 miles) of common border with China. Any military conflict or disturbance in this region will endanger peace and stability, inflict huge damage to innocent people, and may even escalate tensions beyond control. The international community has witnessed enough bitter outcomes caused by the unwise use of military action over the past decades.

This article intends to revisit the recent history of the Korean nuclear issue, including how the Three-Party Talks evolved to Six-Party Talks and then broke down—a process in which I had been personally involved at its early stage. The goal is for readers to better understand the origin as well as the trajectory of multilateral efforts regarding the Korean nuclear issue: How did things reach this point? How and why were potential moments of successful resolution missed? Hopefully recounting this period of history can be of some guidance for making wiser choices in the future.

As the Chinese saying goes, “He who tied the bell should be the one who unties it.” To open the rusty lock of the Korean nuclear issue, we should look for the right key.

## **The U.S.-DPRK Agreed Framework and the first Korean nuclear crisis**

The year 2003 was a watershed for China’s role in helping address the Korean nuclear issue. Prior to then, the issue was addressed exclusively by the U.S. and the DPRK through bilateral negotiations resulting in the Agreed Framework Between the United States of America and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (hereafter, the U.S.-DPRK Agreed Framework). After 2003, however, an in-

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<sup>2</sup> For more discussion of Pareto Optimality, see John Eatwell et al., eds., *The New Palgrave: A Dictionary of Economics, Volume 3* (London: Macmillan Press, 1987), 811-813.

ternational multilateral settlement mechanism was formed, with China as the main mediator.

My narrative starts from the visit of U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell to China in February 2003. I was present at his meetings as a member of the Chinese receiving team in my capacity at that time as the director-general of the Asian Affairs Department of the Foreign Ministry of China. His visit came at a time of two significant world events. First, on January 10, 2003, North Korea announced its withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), resulting in the second Korean nuclear crisis. Second, tensions were rising in the Gulf region and U.S. military action against Iraq was imminent. U.S. President George W. Bush sent Secretary Powell to China to ask for help on the Korean nuclear issue in order to avoid confronting pressures in the Middle East and East Asia at the same time. Hu Jintao, the vice president of China at the time, met with Secretary Powell and his delegation, who made it quite clear that the U.S. wanted China to mediate on the Korean nuclear issue. Specifically, Powell said that the U.S. could no longer trust North Korea, but it could adopt a multilateral approach to seek solutions and suggested that China invite delegates of the U.S. and North Korea to Beijing for talks.<sup>3</sup>

Secretary Powell's visit to China followed the second Korean nuclear crisis, which was largely due to the fact that the U.S.-DPRK Agreed Framework had not been honored by either side and that the relationship between the U.S. and the DPRK had broken down. When Secretary Powell arrived in Beijing, the Agreed Framework was about to fail to meet its target date of 2003, by which point the U.S. should have replaced the DPRK's graphite-moderated nuclear reactor and related equip-

ment with two 1,000-megawatt light water reactor power plants. North Korea also appeared to fall short of completing all of its commitments in the Agreement. And this was happening against the backdrop of over half a century of ups and downs in the Korean Peninsula and the entangled relationship of the parties concerned. But one thing was clear: As reflected in the name of the U.S.-DPRK Agreed Framework, the U.S. and North Korea were the two protagonists in this phase of history.

To understand the Korean nuclear issue, one needs to trace back to the settlement of the Korean War—a war which in a legal sense has not yet ended.

On July 27, 1953, the Korean Armistice Agreement and the Interim Supplementary Agreement of the Armistice Agreement were signed in Panmunjom between, on one side, the supreme commander of North Korea's Korean People's Army and the commander of the Chinese People's Volunteer Army and, on the other side, the commander-in-chief of the United Nations Command. But these were only armistice agreements, not peace treaties, leaving all sides in a state of truce, which is one of the root causes of prolonged instability on the Korean Peninsula.

After the signing of the Korean Armistice Agreement, the Korean Peninsula remained divided along the 38th parallel north between the ROK in the south and the DPRK in the north. Supporting the South were the Western powers headed by the United States, while the socialist camp led by the former USSR supported the North. The Korean Peninsula became a front of the Cold War, at which the U.S. and the USSR battled for hegemony. Nonetheless, the Peninsula was relatively

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<sup>3</sup> Dai Bingguo, *Zhanlve Duihua: Dai Bingguo Huiyilu* [Strategic Dialogues: Memoir of Dai Bingguo] (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2016), 208.

calm over a period of time as the two superpowers were in relative equilibrium.

However, generally speaking, the military presence on the Peninsula after the war was stronger in the South, as the U.S. preserved its army garrison in South Korea and, starting in 1957, deployed an array of offensive weaponry, including tactical nuclear weapons. In the early 1990s, with the implementation of the U.S.-USSR Nuclear Disarmament Initiative, the U.S. withdrew all of its nuclear weapons from the Peninsula, with its Pacific Headquarters undertaking nuclear protection of South Korea.

In the early period of the Cold War, North Korea believed that it was under tremendous threat and chose to rely on the USSR for security, economic, and energy guarantees and assistance. It also received assistance from the USSR in conducting limited nuclear research. In 1959, North Korea, with the help of the USSR, established the Yongbyon Nuclear Scientific Research Center for the peaceful use of nuclear energy. In 1965, North Korea had its first 2-megawatt small light water reactor, after which the Soviet experts returned home. It may be worth noting that the USSR did not appear to have the intention to help North Korea develop nuclear weapons. While passing on nuclear physics technology, it did not provide uranium enrichment or plutonium production technology.

From the beginning of the 1980s, North Korea started to construct a 5-megawatt natural uranium graphite gas-cooled reactor, which would be able to produce 6 kilograms (13 pounds) of weapons-grade plutonium each year after its completion. From this point, the U.S. started to pay attention to the growth of North Korea's nuclear capabilities. In 1985, the U.S. pressured the USSR

to force North Korea to accede to the NPT. In exchange, the USSR signed an economic, scientific, and technological agreement with North Korea and pledged to provide it with new light water reactors. However, the USSR failed to live up to its obligations in this agreement, and North Korea never performed its duty to accept inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in accordance with NPT requirements.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the decline and disintegration of the USSR and the end of the Cold War broke the balance on the Korean Peninsula. North Korea, having lost its main backer, felt extremely insecure and the whole country fell into a "systematic predicament." Without assistance and support from the USSR, the DPRK's industrial and agricultural production plummeted. In contrast, the economy of South Korea soared in the 1970s, and continued to maintain high growth over quite a number of years.

On September 17, 1991, the United Nations General Assembly unanimously agreed to accept both North Korea and South Korea as members of the U.N. In 1991, when the DPRK-Soviet Union Agreement on Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance expired, Russia, the successor state of the USSR, did not declare an automatic renewal of the treaty (and in 1994 annulled the agreement). Soon after, North Korean President Kim Il-sung visited China and discussed with Chinese leaders the disintegration of the USSR and its consequences. Deng Xiaoping, in his meeting with Kim on October 5, 1991, commented on the current situation and stated that China needed to "mainly observe, hide light and cope with the situation with composure" when dealing with international issues.<sup>4</sup> "To keep a low profile" became an internal guideline for China's

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<sup>4</sup> CCCPC Party Literature Research Office, ed., *Deng Xiaoping Nianpu: 1975-1997* [A Chronicle of Deng Xiaoping's Life: 1975-1997] (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Publishing House, 2004), 1332.

diplomatic behavior. China had broken away from the Soviet Bloc long ago and did not see the end of the Cold War as an event that placed China in a leading position within the so-called socialist camp.

China and South Korea established diplomatic relations in August 1992, but well before then the two countries' exchanges and relations had already grown full-fledged. North Korea was unhappy and disappointed at this development and felt ever more isolated. It halted most high-level exchanges with China until 1999, when Kim Yongnam, president of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly, visited China.

It is perhaps still hard for most people to appreciate how profound the North Koreans' sense of crisis was at that moment. It looks as though the events of the early 1990s deeply upset North Korea and led to its decision to go its own way, including by making the "nuclear choice" as far as its security was concerned. Following the 1988 Seoul Olympics, the USSR/Russia and China decided to improve and develop their relationships with South Korea. In sharp contrast, the U.S., as one of the direct parties to the armistice, took no visible steps to improve relations with North Korea, nor did its ally Japan. The opportunity for cross recognition and simultaneous establishment of diplomatic relations was missed.

Around 1990, the U.S. discovered, through satellite imagery, that North Korea was secretly developing nuclear weapons. The IAEA decided to carry out inspections as required by the NPT. From May 1992 to February 1993, North Korea received six unscheduled inspections by the IAEA but disagreed on the objectives and results of the inspections. In March of the same year, the U.S. and South Korea resumed their joint military exercises, dubbed "Team Spirit," while the IAEA proposed a "special inspection" of North Korea.

Regarding these as a doubling down of pressure, North Korea announced its withdrawal from the NPT, triggering the first Korean nuclear crisis. The IAEA submitted a report on the Korean nuclear issue to the U.N. Security Council that April, and North Korea disregarded U.N. involvement, stating that it was essentially a problem that could only be settled with the United States.

After President Bill Clinton came into office in 1993 and the age of confrontation between the U.S. and Soviet camps ended, the U.S. regarded the proliferation of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction as its most realistic and direct security threat. In this context, resolving the Korean nuclear issue became the Clinton administration's primary concern in Asia and the U.S. started to re-examine the situation on the Korean Peninsula.

For some time, the prevailing approach of the U.S. was to exert pressure and take a hard stand on North Korea. The U.S. Senate adopted a resolution on June 16, 1994, to urge President Clinton toward taking action and getting the U.S. Army ready not only for "deterrence," but also for "repelling an attack from North Korea when necessary." However, after evaluation, the U.S. realized that military action would trigger North Korean attacks on South Korea, which would cause heavy civilian casualties. At this time, former U.S. President Jimmy Carter visited Pyongyang. He met with President Kim Il-sung and confirmed that North Korea was willing to negotiate with the U.S. on the nuclear issue. This development prompted the Clinton administration to change its attitude and reverse its approach in favor of negotiation.

From June 1993, North Korea and the U.S. conducted three rounds of high-level talks in New York and Geneva, which culminated with the two parties finally signing the U.S.-DPRK Agreed

Framework.<sup>5</sup> Its main contents included North Korea's agreement to give up its two graphite-moderated nuclear reactors that were under construction. The U.S. agreed to lead an international consortium to oversee and finance the construction of two 1,000-megawatt light water reactors with a total value of \$4 billion, and to compensate the DPRK for the energy foregone due to the freeze of the graphite-moderated reactors by providing 500,000 tons of heavy fuel oil annually. The whole course of negotiations mentioned above were held directly between North Korea and the U.S.

After the signing of the U.S.-DPRK Agreed Framework, the situation on the Korean Peninsula calmed down. However, the implementation of the agreement was very slow. The U.S. did take the lead in establishing the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO), and some funds were raised internationally to transport heavy fuel oil to North Korea to help overcome the North Korean energy shortage. Over 8,000 spent fuel rods from the Yongbyon reactor were removed and sealed up. But both the planned dismantling of the reactors and the construction of the light water reactors by the U.S., Japan, and South Korea were consistently delayed, and ultimately never carried out.

It can be concluded that, in his first term, President Clinton managed the first North Korean nuclear crisis quite successfully. During his second term, he attempted to thoroughly resolve the nuclear issue by engaging more closely with North Korea. In October 1999, the U.S. released an official report titled "Review of U.S. Policy Toward North Korea: Findings and Recommendations," which mentioned that it was necessary to "adopt a comprehensive and integrated approach

in dealing with the DPRK's nuclear weapons- and ballistic missile-related programs," by relying on bilateral talks as essential means, supplemented by trilateral coordination with Japan and South Korea. However, neither party demonstrated sufficient political will or the ability to execute what was committed, with most of the content in the Agreed Framework left hanging in the air.

Toward the end of the Clinton administration, the door to normalizing relations between the U.S. and North Korea was once again opened slightly. On October 9, 2000, Kim Jong-il's second-in-command, Vice Marshal Jo Myong-rok, visited Washington as a special envoy. And on October 23, U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright started a historic two-day visit to Pyongyang, where she was met by Kim Jong-il himself. She forwarded to the North Korean leaders President Clinton's suggestions about how to improve U.S.-DPRK relations and discussed with the North Korean side the nuclear and missile issue as well as the possibility of removing North Korea from the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism. The discussions also touched on setting up liaison offices and then lifting the offices to the level of diplomatic representatives at a later stage. The two sides had so much agreement that they even discussed the possibility of President Clinton visiting North Korea. After Secretary Albright returned home, the U.S. planned for a visit by President Clinton to North Korea and a possible return visit by Kim Jong-il. However, as the U.S. was already entering presidential elections, the lame duck Clinton administration had no time to realize this vision. In her memoir, Secretary Albright wrote that on the day before she left the White House, President Clinton told her that he wished he had taken up the chance to go to North Korea instead of stay-

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<sup>5</sup> "U.S.-DPRK Agreed Framework," U.S. Department of State, February 15, 2001, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/t/isn/rls/fs/2001/5284.htm>.



ing in Washington to make a final push toward a peace agreement in the Middle East.<sup>6</sup>

Several years later, I discussed this with Secretary Albright, and we agreed that perhaps an important opportunity to resolve the nuclear issue had unfortunately been missed. The Clinton administration had hoped that the new administration could move along with the new situation it had pioneered. However, the 2000 presidential election was won by Republican George W. Bush, who was surrounded by neoconservatives. He had been critical of the U.S.-DPRK Agreed Framework even during his campaign. Moreover, he denounced the policy of engaging North Korea as having helped the regime avoid collapse. American rhetoric about North Korea often confuses “denuclearization” with “regime collapse,” so much so that North Korea could not tell which one was the main target. All of these changes in the U.S. were quite hard for Pyongyang to comprehend. As a result, it could only conclude that the U.S. was not serious about making an agreement in the first place.

The new U.S. administration re-examined its policy toward North Korea, and the Clinton administration’s decision to increase contact was reversed. Eight months later, on September 11, 2001, major terrorist attacks occurred, and soon the U.S. government declared its war on terror.<sup>7</sup> It is worth mentioning that after the 9/11 attacks, the spokesperson of the DPRK Ministry of Foreign Affairs made a statement that the 9/11 attacks were a

“very regretful and tragic incident,” stressing that “as a UN member state, North Korea is opposed to all forms of terrorism... And this stance will remain unchanged.”<sup>8</sup> This gesture by North Korea toward the U.S. was completely different from its past hardline posture, but the gesture was ignored by the Bush administration. In his State of the Union address in January 2002, the U.S. president listed North Korea, along with Iran and Iraq, as one of the three states forming the “axis of evil.”

In October 2002, U.S. intelligence agencies claimed that they had discovered North Korea’s secret nuclear program, and obtained evidence of North Korea’s purchase of such technology and equipment overseas. They also exposed evidence of North Korea’s secret nuclear transaction with Pakistan.<sup>9</sup> James Kelly, U.S. assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, immediately went to Pyongyang. In his talks with Vice Foreign Minister Kang Sok-ju, Kelly presented the evidence of North Korea’s import of materials to be used in uranium enrichment. Kang did not try to conceal anything and admitted that all the alleged dealings were true.<sup>10</sup>

This development shocked Washington: North Korea, having committed to giving up the development of plutonium-based nuclear weapons, was instead secretly developing uranium-based nuclear weapons. The Bush administration deemed North Korea as having violated the U.S.-DPRK Agreed Framework and announced the end of bilateral talks.<sup>11</sup> To

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<sup>6</sup> Madeleine Albright, *Madam Secretary: A Memoir* (New York: Miramax Books, 2003), 508.

<sup>7</sup> “Text: President Bush Addresses the Nation,” *Washington Post*, September 20, 2001, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushaddress\\_092001.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushaddress_092001.html).

<sup>8</sup> “DPRK Stance Towards Terrorist Attacks on U.S.,” Korean Central News Agency, September 12, 2001, <http://kcna.co.jp/item/2001/200109/news09/12.htm#3>.

<sup>9</sup> David Sanger and James Dao, “A Nuclear North Korea: Intelligence; U.S. Says Pakistan Gave Technology to North Korea,” *The New York Times*, October 18, 2002, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/10/18/world/nuclear-north-korea-intelligence-us-says-pakistan-gave-technology-north-korea.html>.

<sup>10</sup> David Sanger, “North Korea Says It Has a Program on Nuclear Arms,” *The New York Times*, October 17, 2002, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/10/17/world/north-korea-says-it-has-a-program-on-nuclear-arms.html>.

<sup>11</sup> George W. Bush, *Decision Points* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2010), 422-426.

North Korea, the U.S. also failed to deliver what it had committed to in the agreement. Thus the relationship broke down, directly leading to the second Korean nuclear crisis.

At about the same time, the U.S. launched the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) with its allies in the East China Sea, the Yellow Sea, and the Indian Ocean.<sup>12</sup> In December, the Spanish navy intercepted the North Korean cargo ship *So San* carrying Scud missiles in the open seas off of the Yemeni coast. The ship was later released after the Yemeni government guaranteed that the missiles would only be used in Yemen and that it would not buy them again. On November 14, the U.S.-led KEDO decided to stop transporting heavy fuel oil to North Korea. This move was regarded by Pyongyang as a violation of the U.S.-DPRK Agreed Framework and, on December 12, North Korea announced that it would restart the nuclear program frozen in accordance with the Agreed Framework. Then on January 10, 2003, North Korea announced its formal withdrawal from the NPT.

As a signatory state to the NPT, China firmly opposed any form of nuclear weapons proliferation and had been consistently advocating for the comprehensive prohibition and thorough destruction of all nuclear weapons as well as for the peaceful resolution of differences through negotiations. Given that the U.S.-DPRK Agreed Framework was not producing results and that the U.S. sent Secretary Powell to China for help—and that a denuclearized Korea was also in the interest of China—the Chinese government, after careful consider-

ation, decided to accept the U.S. request. The plan was to invite the DPRK and the U.S. to hold trilateral talks in China. After Secretary Powell's visit, China sent an envoy to North Korea in the spring of 2003 to consult on the possibility of such talks. The mission was successful, though not without difficulty. The North Korean side finally agreed to attend the trilateral talks. But their basic position remained unchanged: Pyongyang believed that the matter could only be dealt with through direct talks with the U.S., as they believed that the nuclear issue was a response to the U.S. threat to North Korea and therefore must be resolved through direct agreement between the two. China passed this information on to the U.S. side, which insisted it could not talk with North Korea alone, and that any talks must include China. The North Korean and U.S. conditions for the talks were diametrically opposed, but China took the two parties' willingness to talk as important common ground, and persevered in mediating until they finally agreed to come to Beijing to talk. The U.S. and North Korea were also ready to meet each other within the framework of the Three-Party Talks.

On April 22, 2003, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs released the following statement: "China has always advocated the peaceful settlement of the Korean nuclear issue through dialogue. This is also the consensus of related parties and the international community. Based on such a consensus, China has invited the DPRK and the United States to send delegations to hold talks in China."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> "The Proliferation Security Initiative is a global effort that aims to stop trafficking of weapons of mass destruction, their delivery systems, and related materials to and from states and non-state actors of proliferation concern. Launched on May 31, 2003, U.S. involvement in the PSI stems from the U.S. National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction issued in December 2002. That strategy recognizes the need for more robust tools to stop proliferation of WMD around the world, and specifically identifies interdiction as an area where greater focus will be placed." For more information, see U.S. Department of State, "Proliferation Security Initiative," <https://www.state.gov/t/isn/c10390.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> "Waijiaobu: Zhong-Chao-Mei jiang huitan, mianduimian hen zhongyao [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China: China, North Korea, and the U.S. will talk; face-to-face dialogue is important]," Xinhua News Agency, April 22, 2003, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2003-04/22/content\\_844845.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2003-04/22/content_844845.htm).

## **From Three-Party Talks to Six-Party Talks**

China had managed to bring the parties back to the negotiating table. From April 2003 to October 2007, China hosted one round of Three-Party Talks together with representatives from the U.S. and North Korea, and six rounds of Six-Party Talks adding representatives from South Korea, Japan, and Russia. The path was never straightforward, but with negotiations continuing, the Korean nuclear situation was kept under control. The Six-Party Talks produced three documents, including the September 19 Joint Statement (in 2005), the February 13 Joint Document (in 2007), and the October 3 Joint Document (also in 2007)—laying an important political basis for peacefully resolving the Korean nuclear issue through dialogue and negotiation. Regrettably, however, these agreements, which brought about hope for removing the nuclear problem from the Peninsula, were never implemented. The following section will describe how the talks went and how they were disrupted and broke down from time to time, resulting in spiraling tensions.

### ***The Three-Party Talks***

China, North Korea, and the U.S. held talks in Beijing on April 23-25, 2003. As the director-general of the Asian Department of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, I led the Chinese delegation. The North Korean team was led by Ri Gun, deputy director of the American Affairs Department of the Foreign Ministry. The American team was led by James Kelly, assistant secretary of state.

But the talks deadlocked even before they formally began. According to the U.S. side, President

George W. Bush prohibited any member of the U.S. delegation from engaging in any form of a bilateral meeting with the North Korean delegation. The North Korean side wanted to talk with the U.S. delegation, alone.<sup>14</sup> During a banquet hosted by China on the eve of the talks, the North Korean negotiator Ri Gun left his seat and approached James Kelly, sitting on the other side of a round table, and told him bluntly that North Korea had already conducted reprocessing of spent fuel rods. Kelly turned to me looking upset, and even angry, and told me what Ri said. He said that he needed to call Washington for instructions. The next morning the U.S. delegation stated that it would attend the talks only when China was present and that it would not have any separate meeting with the North Korean delegation even under the three-party framework. The DPRK delegation reacted by refusing to attend the talks. After repeated and hard persuasion, China managed to keep the North Korean delegation involved in the talks. But in reality, the so-called Three-Party Talks were no more than separate talks between the Chinese and North Korean delegations, and the Chinese and U.S. delegations.

The attempt to hold the Three-Party Talks was not easy and the result was far from satisfactory. But the fact that North Korea and the U.S. were back to the negotiating table sent the right signals, and the international community saw this as a sign of hope for a diplomatic solution. Tensions started to calm down. North Korea submitted a package plan to give up nuclear development and missile testing in exchange for economic assistance and security guarantees by the U.S., Japan, and South Korea. This plan reflected North Korea's basic thinking and served as the foundation of North Korea's proposals in subsequent rounds of talks.

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<sup>14</sup> Dai Bingguo, 208.

The Three-Party Talks attracted keen attention from South Korea and Japan, and the U.S. requested the expansion of the talks to include its two allies. While China had no problem including South Korea and Japan, it also wanted to bring in Russia, who also had a stake in the issue. There was also growing international interest in the talks. China continued quiet diplomatic efforts to mediate among the parties, traveling and listening widely. North Korea's attitude toward the nuclear issue had been quite consistent. That is, it could no longer trust the U.S., and, in the face of hostile American policy, it needed to develop nuclear weapons to guarantee its own security. China resolutely opposed North Korea's nuclear path. But at the same time, China expressed understanding of North Korea's security concerns and supported multilateral talks for a peaceful settlement. Understanding the seriousness but also the delicate nature of the situation, China was also willing to take up responsibility for arranging and hosting more talks. Since the collapse of the USSR, China had become North Korea's most important partner and donor country. North Korea also recognized that it needed China's cooperation and should respect this friendly neighbor's opinion, and therefore could not easily say no to China's proposal for dialogue. The Bush administration's position was to maintain the military option and base its action on how North Korea behaved in the negotiations. China, while transmitting to the U.S. the opinions of North Korea, also expressed its own clear-cut position: It would oppose any attempt at resorting to military means and instead supported negotiations to find compromise and a peaceful resolution to the nuclear issue.

It was clear that both the U.S. and North Korea had entered the talks with dual tactics: the U.S. could talk but would attack if the talks did not work; North Korea wanted to talk and get results,

but would otherwise develop nuclear weaponry to protect itself from a possible attack. China's strategy was to make every effort to promote negotiations while resolutely cutting off any disruptive attempts made by the other two parties.

I remember during one visit to Washington, the U.S. side stated: "We agree to talk, but the military option is also on the table." The Chinese side disagreed with this and argued that if the U.S. insisted on keeping the military option, North Korea would also keep the nuclear option. In a later meeting in Washington, the U.S. told us that the wording had been adjusted to "The military option is not off the table." It was quite hard to see the difference between the two versions, especially for non-English speakers, but the American side insisted that these were the president's words. I jokingly asked an American colleague: if the military option "is not off the table" and not necessarily on the table, then where could it be? And he said that one could only use one's imagination. When I conveyed this sentence to my North Korean counterpart Ri Gun, he looked at me, eyes wide open, and asked, "Then where is it now?"

In July 2003, Dai Bingguo, who was then the vice foreign minister of China and who had a long association with the North Koreans, visited North Korea after visiting Washington, where he had already received a U.S. commitment not only to restart the talks but also to include the six parties. After lengthy meetings with senior officials in Pyongyang, Dai met Kim Jong-il, who finally agreed. He said: "Since the Chinese comrades said we should attend the talks, then let's give it another try."

After the visit, the U.S. agreed to send a delegation to Beijing for talks as soon as possible. Formality-wise, the U.S. wished that South Korea and Japan could also join in and did not oppose

China's suggestion of bringing in Russia. The U.S. could also agree to hold another round of the Three-Party Talks if North Korea so wished, but those negotiations should be followed immediately by the Six-Party Talks.<sup>15</sup> The Chinese passed the American side's proposal to the North Korean side, which quickly responded that it had no problem with enlarging the talks and suggested that we directly enter into the six-party format.<sup>16</sup>

However, the sensitive nature of the Korean nuclear issue and the sharply opposed positions of North Korea and the U.S. made the specific arrangement of the meetings very difficult. Even the seating plan and meeting arrangements became problems. The Fangfei Yuan Hall at the Diaoyutai State Guest House was chosen as the venue. As the six delegations could not be arranged to sit on two sides of a long table given their delicate relationships, we needed a big hall to arrange the tables into a hexagon, so that each delegation would have its own side of the table.

The most delicate part was how to arrange separate meetings between the North Korean and U.S. delegations. North Korea attached great importance to bilateral contact with the U.S. and its stated condition was that the two delegations must talk separately in a private place. For the U.S., the condition was that the two delegations should not meet "in a separate room," and that the meeting could be held only when the other delegations were present "under the same roof." We finally came up with the idea of setting up some private space for tea breaks at the far corners of the hall, with screens, sofas, and green plants as partitions. One of the corners was specially reserved for potential direct dialogue between the North Korean and U.S. delegations.

Diplomats from the North Korean and the U.S. embassies in Beijing came to see the venue on separate occasions and both gave their approval, thus removing the final barrier. In fact, during the later Six-Party Talks, the U.S.-DPRK dialogues went so deep and became so important that they voluntarily moved the bilateral meetings into a separate room.

### ***The Six-Party Talks***

The first round of the Six-Party Talks was held in Beijing on August 27-29, 2003, and was opened by Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing. Wang Yi, then the vice foreign minister, headed the Chinese delegation. The heads of the other delegations were James Kelly, the U.S. assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs; Kim Yong-il, the DPRK's deputy foreign minister; Alexander Losyukov, the Russian deputy foreign minister; Lee Soo-hyuck, the ROK's deputy minister of foreign affairs and trade; and Mitoji Yabunaka, the director-general for the Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau of Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

North Korea remained firm in sticking to a package settlement of the nuclear issue. It proposed a four-stage resolution, with each stage requiring "simultaneous action" from the United States.

The United States, however, did not accept the whole package and stressed that North Korea should take the first step, and must denuclearize with "complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement" before its security guarantee could be discussed.

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 216-217.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

It is worth mentioning that later that year Libya made an announcement that was likely to have an impact on the future of Six-Party Talks. In December 2003, Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi announced that his country would “thoroughly give up weapons of mass destruction” and accept inspections by the IAEA. Libya handed over all of its nuclear research and development results. The U.S. then lifted its sanctions on Libya as well as its label as a state sponsor of terrorism, and established diplomatic ties. For a time, in the eyes of the Western world, Libya became a poster child for non-proliferation. The U.S. hoped that this would also affect North Korea’s thinking. Whether it did or not, the dramatic developments of the Libyan uprising and its aftermath eight years later very likely made a profound impact on North Korea’s attitude.

When the second round of Six-Party Talks was held in Beijing on February 25-28, 2004,<sup>17</sup> the talks focused on resolving the nuclear issue and the measures to be taken as the first steps. During the talks on how North Korea should denuclearize, the U.S. suggested that Pyongyang should follow Libya’s example: to first give up its nuclear program and then accept inspections by the IAEA. China, Russia, and South Korea were more inclined to advocate for the “Ukraine Model”<sup>18</sup> and stressed that if North Korea took the ini-

tiative to denuclearize, its sovereignty should be respected and its security guaranteed.

The Six-Party Talks issued their first written document, the Chairman’s Statement, in which each party expressed that it was dedicated to the objective of denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and to resolving nuclear issues peacefully through dialogue. All parties also stated that they wished for peaceful coexistence, and they agreed to resort to mutually coordinated measures to address the nuclear issue and other concerns.<sup>19</sup>

From June 23 to 26 of the same year, the third round of the Six-Party Talks was held.<sup>20</sup> The North Koreans still insisted on “freezing for compensation” but for the first time stated that the freeze was for the final purpose of denuclearization. The U.S. also showed some flexibility and proposed a formula for a five-stage denuclearization. Although no substantive agreement was produced, one important consensus reached was the principle of “adopting a progressive method” and a “‘word-to-word’ and ‘action-to-action’ manner” for achieving a solution to the Korean nuclear issue. In other words, the U.S. and North Korea should take steps simultaneously.

China continued with the mediation efforts, and it was not until 13 months later that the fourth

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<sup>17</sup> The heads of the delegations for the second round of the Six-Party Talks were respectively: Wang Yi, vice foreign minister of China; Kim Gye-gwan, North Korean vice foreign minister; James A. Kelly, assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs in the Bush administration; Lee Soo-hyuck, undersecretary of the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade; Mitoji Yabunaka, Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau director-general; and Alexander Losyukov, Russia’s deputy foreign minister.

<sup>18</sup> After the disintegration of the former USSR, Ukraine inherited a large number of Soviet nuclear weapons. In January 1994, Russia, the U.S., and Ukraine reached a trilateral agreement to destroy nuclear weapons within the territory of Ukraine. Ukraine gradually destroyed the launching silos and transported 1,300 nuclear warheads and over 600 cruise missile warheads to Russia. In October 2001, Ukraine officially became a nuclear-free country.

<sup>19</sup> “Full text of Chairman’s Statement of 6-party talks,” *China Daily*, February 29, 2004, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2004-02/29/content\\_310346.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2004-02/29/content_310346.htm).

<sup>20</sup> The heads of the delegations for the third round of the Six-Party Talks were respectively: Wang Yi, vice foreign minister of China; Kim Gye-gwan, North Korean vice foreign minister; James A. Kelly, assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs in the Bush administration; Lee Soo-hyuck, undersecretary of the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade; Mitoji Yabunaka, Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau director-general; and Alexander Losyukov, Russia’s deputy foreign minister.

round of the Six-Party Talks took place. The main reason for the break was that George W. Bush started campaigning for re-election. Wanting to appear as taking a tougher position toward North Korea, he called the North Korean leader a “tyrant” and referred to the country as “a tyranny outpost.” Pyongyang was concerned about the changes in the American attitude. To add to the concern, South Korea admitted in early September 2004 that it had secretly extracted weapons-grade plutonium and enriched uranium materials, and the IAEA took no action against this development. North Korea reacted strongly and, on February 10, 2005, announced that it had already manufactured nuclear weapons and would indefinitely suspend its participation in the Six-Party Talks. This in turn led to the U.S. imposing financial sanctions against North Korea for the first time.

After much coordination, including China’s shuttle diplomacy, the fourth round of Six-Party Talks was held in Beijing and was split into two phases: the first from July 26 to August 7, 2005, and the second from September 13 to 19 of the same year.<sup>21</sup> These lengthy meetings proved to be very fruitful and resulted in the Joint Statement of the Fourth Round of the Six-Party Talks (hereafter, the September 19 Joint Statement). This important document successfully reflected all parties’ concerns. North Korea, for the first time, promised to give up all of its nuclear weapons and its current nuclear program, and South Korea also clearly expressed that it would not develop nuclear weapons. The U.S. agreed to discuss the provi-

sion of light water reactors to North Korea at an appropriate time and, for the first time, together with Japan, promised to take measures to normalize relations with North Korea. Meanwhile, a peace mechanism on the Korean Peninsula was mentioned for the first time.

As a road map for resolving the issue, the September 19 Joint Statement offered a glimmer of hope. But this was clouded by further U.S. financial sanctions against North Korea, which were enacted soon after.

On September 23, 2005, almost at the same time the Six-Party Talks were in progress, the U.S. Treasury Department, without any warning, openly accused the Macao-based Banco Delta Asia (BDA) of money laundering and circulating counterfeit bank notes for several North Korean accounts. The funds, according to the accusation, were used for “supporting terrorism.” On September 9, the U.S. requested that North Korea’s \$25 million in the BDA be frozen. Then, on October 21, the U.S. blacklisted eight North Korean enterprises and froze their U.S. assets. On the surface, the BDA case was not directly related to the Korean nuclear issue, yet it exerted a major impact on the progress of the talks.

The North Korean delegation came as promised to the first stage of the fifth round of the Six-Party Talks in Beijing on November 9-11, 2005.<sup>22</sup> In December, the U.S. implemented another round of financial sanctions against Pyongyang. In the face of increased U.S. sanctions, North Korea

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<sup>21</sup> The heads of the delegations for the fourth round of the Six-Party Talks were respectively: Wu Dawei, vice foreign minister of China; Kim Gye-gwan, vice foreign minister of North Korea; Christopher Hill, U.S. assistant secretary of state; Song Min-soon, undersecretary of the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade; Kenichiro Sasae, Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau director-general; and Alexander Alekseev, Russia’s deputy foreign minister.

<sup>22</sup> The heads of the delegations for the fifth round of the Six-Party Talks were respectively: Wu Dawei, vice foreign minister of China; Kim Gye-gwan, North Korean vice foreign minister; Christopher Hill, U.S. assistant secretary of state; Song Min-soon, undersecretary of the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade; Kenichiro Sasae, director-general of the Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau of the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs; and Alexander Alekseev, Russia’s deputy foreign minister.

publicly stated that it would not return to the Six-Party Talks until the U.S. removed its economic sanctions. But instead of ceasing to impose sanctions, the U.S. Treasury Department stepped up sanctions in April 2006.

This not only put an end to any possible implementation of the agreement achieved by the Six-Party Talks; it practically set off a vicious cycle of sanctions, nuclear test, more sanctions, and another nuclear test, which has since become a familiar pattern. The escalating sanctions by the U.S. did not stop or slow down the pace of North Korea's nuclear weapons program. Pyongyang test fired seven missiles into the Sea of Japan on July 5, 2006, and declared a successful underground nuclear test on October 9.

On October 14, 2006, the U.N. Security Council unanimously approved Resolution 1718, proposed by the U.S.<sup>23</sup> The resolution required all U.N. members to embargo goods related to nuclear weapons and technology, large weapons, and luxury commodities headed for North Korea, while urging Pyongyang to stop its nuclear tests and suspend all actions relating to ballistic missile development.

In October 2006, China, along with other members of the U.N., did not want to give up on the peace process and continued to pursue mediation. North Korea eventually agreed to return to the Six-Party Talks on November 1. During this time, the U.S. Democratic Party had won the midterm congressional elections, forming a majority in both the House and the Senate. So-called neoconservatism ebbed in the U.S., and the Bush administration toned down its tough stance on North Korea.

At the second- and third-stage meetings of the fifth round of Six-Party Talks held in Beijing on December 18-22, 2006, and February 8-13, 2007,<sup>24</sup> a major success was achieved: a joint document entitled Initial Actions for the Implementation of the Joint Statement (hereafter, the February 13 Joint Document). It outlined a number of parallel actions, including North Korea shutting down its nuclear facilities in Yongbyon and declaring and abandoning all nuclear programs. The U.S. and North Korea agreed to hold bilateral talks and the U.S. agreed to remove North Korea from the list of state sponsors of terrorism. North Korea's agreement to declare and end all of its nuclear programs marked an important step forward.

After the signing of the February 13 Joint Document, the situation on the Peninsula improved and North and South Korea resumed ministerial level dialogues. The IAEA director general, Mohamed ElBaradei, headed for North Korea to discuss the details of closing and sealing up the nuclear facilities in Yongbyon. On the same day, the North Korean vice foreign minister, Kim Kye-gwan, paid an "ice-breaking" trip to the U.S. and attended negotiations on normalizing relations between the two countries, the first time such an event had taken place.

However, sanctions on North Korea continued to hinder the implementation of the September 19 Joint Statement and the February 13 Joint Document. North Korea insisted that the prerequisite for shutting down the nuclear facilities in Yongbyon was to lift sanctions, but the U.S. refused.

When the first-stage conference of the sixth round of the Six-Party Talks was held in Beijing

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<sup>23</sup> U.N. Security Council, Resolution 1718, "Non-proliferation/Democratic People's Republic of Korea," October 14, 2006, <http://www.un.org/press/en/2006/sc8853.doc.htm>.

<sup>24</sup> At the second-stage conference of the fifth round of the Six-Party Talks, the undersecretary of the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Chun Yung-woo, replaced Song Min-soon as the head of the South Korean delegation and the Russian ambassador to China, Sergey Razov, replaced Alexander Alekseev as the head of the Russian delegation.



on March 19-22, 2007,<sup>25</sup> the U.S. confirmed that the North Korean funds frozen in the BDA would be transferred to the Bank of China. North Korea promised to use the money for humanitarian purposes and education. Unfortunately, due to some “technical problems,” the money was not deposited into the designated Bank of China account. North Korea took this as a breach of the agreement on the part of the U.S., as Pyongyang had fulfilled its responsibilities while Washington failed to complete its part of the commitment. Therefore, North Korea declared that it “would take no further step” until the BDA problem was solved. When it was eventually resolved on June 25, North Korea resumed its actions to fulfill the February 13 Joint Document. On July 14, with the nuclear facilities shut down, 6,200 tons of heavy oil provided by South Korea arrived in North Korea and IAEA inspectors headed for Yongbyon to supervise and verify the shutdown. Meaningful progress in addressing the Korean nuclear issue had finally been made.

The U.S.-DPRK working group met in Geneva on September 1, 2007, where North Korea explicitly promised that it would declare all of its nuclear programs and “disable nuclear reactors.” The U.S. also promised to remove North Korea from the list of state sponsors of terrorism. Nevertheless, when speaking at the U.N. General Assembly later that month, President Bush referred to North Korea and other countries as “brutal regimes,” indicating that the U.S. still had a very negative attitude toward the North Korean regime.

The second-stage meeting of the sixth round of the Six-Party Talks was held from September

27 to October 3, 2007. It saw the signing of the Second-Phase Actions for the Implementation of the Joint Statement (hereafter, the October 3 Joint Document). The new document focused on “disabling the nuclear reactors” and “declaring all nuclear programs,” required North Korea to disable the 5-megawatt experimental reactor at the Yongbyon Nuclear Scientific Research Center as well as the nuclear fuel reprocessing plant (radio-chemical laboratory) and the nuclear fuel element plant, and obligated Pyongyang to declare the suspension of all of its nuclear programs before the end of 2007. The October 3 Joint Document also required further improvement of bilateral relations between the U.S. and North Korea and between Japan and North Korea. On November 5, work to disable the nuclear facilities began.

Moving into 2008, North Korea started hesitating again. Even as it was honoring its commitments and had completed 75 percent of its nuclear reactor disablement, North Korea did not see corresponding measures being taken by other parties, and the promised heavy oil, equipment, and material assistance had not been supplied. In January, North Korea slowed down the dismantling of its nuclear reactor.

North Korea’s behavior became a new focus of controversy. The points of difference between the U.S. and North Korea were mainly the following: how much plutonium North Korea had, whether North Korea had a uranium enrichment program, and if North Korea was conducting nuclear cooperation with Syria. The debate over these differences became an obstacle and North Korea did

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<sup>25</sup> The heads of the delegations for the sixth round of the Six-Party Talks were respectively: Wu Dawei, vice foreign minister of China; Kim Gye-gwan, North Korean vice foreign minister; Christopher Hill, U.S. assistant secretary of state; Chun Yung-woo, undersecretary of the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade; Kenichiro Sasae, director-general of the Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau of the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs; and Alexander Losyukov, Russia’s deputy foreign minister.

not issue a declaration of its nuclear programs before January 1, 2008, as had been required.

The parties again engaged in new rounds of consultations and the U.S. and North Korea managed to meet in Geneva and Singapore in March and April of 2008. The two countries agreed that North Korea would declare an end to its nuclear program and the U.S. would remove North Korea from the list of state sponsors of terrorism. North Korea duly provided a record of reactor operation in Yongbyon so that the U.S. could calculate the amount of plutonium produced. The U.S. took that act as “a vital step forward.” Accordingly, the U.S. was obliged to remove North Korea from the list of state sponsors of terrorism within 45 days.

But on the very day when North Korea submitted its declaration, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice raised the issue of verification in *The Wall Street Journal* and called for an inspection of North Korea’s declaration.<sup>26</sup> North Korea was strongly opposed to this, arguing that the October 3 Joint Document did not include any clause on verification. As the 45-day limit expired, the U.S. failed to honor its commitment to remove North Korea from the list. On August 11, North Korea declared that it would “suspend the operation of disabling nuclear reactors and would at the same time consider restoring Yongbyon nuclear facilities to the original state.” It also expelled IAEA inspectors. The situation remained tense until early October, when U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill visited North Korea. An agreement was reached, with the U.S. declaring that it would remove North Korea from the list of state sponsors of terrorism. North Korea then expressed willingness to restart the disabling of its reactors and accept verification measures.

It can be concluded that the Six-Party Talks managed to move forward in spite of many difficulties and obstacles and helped to maintain stability on the Peninsula. More importantly, the talks kept all parties moving in the direction of denuclearization and a peaceful settlement of their differences. Unfortunately, this process failed to continue in subsequent years.

### **Escalation and intensification of the Korean nuclear issue from 2009 to the present**

As of March 2017, North Korea had conducted five nuclear tests. The first occurred following the suspension of Six-Party Talks in 2006 due to the BDA issue and U.S. sanctions. The other four tests all occurred after 2009, during which time the Six-Party Talks were completely stalled and a vicious cycle of escalation and intensification took over.

On January 20, 2009, newly-elected U.S. President Barack Obama assumed office. The year before, Lee Myung-bak replaced Roh Moo-hyun as South Korean president and instituted a tougher policy toward North Korea. As in the past, leadership changes brought new uncertainties to the Peninsula.

The new U.S. administration strongly believed that during the later years of the Bush presidency, North Korea had not been honoring its commitments in the various agreements and had been allowed to go too far in cheating and blackmailing the United States. Opposing any U.S.-DPRK deals became the “politically correct” stance in Washington, especially in military circles and on

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<sup>26</sup> Condoleezza Rice, “Diplomacy Is Working on North Korea,” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 26, 2008, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB121443815539505367>.

Capitol Hill. President Obama, who held a liberal worldview, repeatedly emphasized the importance of improving the country's international image during his campaign, and advocated for a "nuclear-free world." After taking office, he prioritized the promotion of international nuclear disarmament and global nuclear security cooperation. This put his administration in an awkward position, as it could neither continue on the path of compromise adopted by the Bush administration in its later years, nor go straight toward a "muscle-flexing" policy path.

In his first inaugural address, President Obama declared to the "enemies of the U.S." that "we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist."<sup>27</sup> That was an impressive statement. At a Senate hearing before taking up the position of secretary of state, Hillary Clinton also indicated that the Obama administration would be more flexible and open in handling the U.S.-DPRK relationship compared to the Bush administration.<sup>28</sup>

However, North Korea did not respond positively to this new gesture and tensions started to escalate following some incidents. In March, North Korea detained two female U.S. journalists who entered DPRK territory without permits while visiting the China-DPRK border area, but later released them into the care of former President Bill Clinton. On April 5, North Korea announced the launching of the experimental communication satellite Kwangmyŏngsŏng-2 and declared its exit from the Six-Party Talks on April 23. On April 25, the DPRK Foreign Ministry announced that it had begun to reprocess spent fuel rods taken from experimental nuclear reactors. On May 25, North Korea conducted its second nuclear test.

Apparently Pyongyang analyzed the situation and decided to take a tougher stance and became more inclined to acquire nuclear capabilities. It is hard to guess what prompted North Korea's shift of stance, whether it was the political changes in South Korea or if it had simply lost confidence in the talks.

On June 12, 2009, the U.N. Security Council unanimously passed Resolution 1874, which "condemned in the strongest terms" the nuclear test conducted by North Korea and demanded that it immediately and fully comply with its obligations under Resolution 1718. It also contained clear provisions banning the import and export of North Korean arms, as well as authorizing the inspection of vessels related to North Korea and/or traveling to or from the country, which was intended to prevent the inflow of foreign funds into North Korea to develop missiles and nuclear weapons.

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao visited Pyongyang on October 4-6, 2009, as part of regular bilateral exchanges. He met Kim Jong-il and discussed the issue with him. Subsequently, tensions started to ease in January 2010 when North Korea expressed a willingness to sign a peace agreement with the U.S. within the six-party framework, on the condition that sanctions be removed prior to the talks. But the U.S. wanted the Six-Party Talks to be resumed first and a peace agreement to be discussed during the talks.

On March 26, 2010, the South Korean warship *Cheonan*, carrying 104 officers and crew onboard, sank in the waters between Baengnyeong Island and Daecheong Island in the Yellow Sea, when an unidentified explosion hit the rear of the ship,

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<sup>27</sup> Barack Obama, "President Barack Obama's Inaugural Address" (speech, Washington, DC, January 21, 2009), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2009/01/21/president-barack-obamas-inaugural-address>.

<sup>28</sup> "Transcript of Hillary Clinton's Confirmation Hearing," Council on Foreign Relations, January 13, 2009, <http://www.cfr.org/elections/transcript-hillary-clintons-confirmation-hearing/p18225>.

causing 46 deaths. The U.S. and South Korea immediately accused North Korea of attacking the warship with a submarine torpedo. Russia participated in the international investigation that followed, while China did not. Although North Korea never acknowledged responsibility, South Korea announced the suspension of trade and exchanges. This undoubtedly increased tension and deepened distrust and antagonism between South Korea and North Korea and between the U.S. and North Korea.

On May 12, North Korea's official newspaper, *Rodong Sinmun*, reported the country's development of nuclear fusion technology. Soon after, following joint talks between the foreign and defense ministers of both South Korea and the U.S., new sanctions were imposed by the U.S. on five entities and three individuals from North Korea on the grounds that they supported the DPRK's attainment of weapons of mass destruction.

China continued to mediate toward resuming the Six-Party Talks and, on March 15, 2011, the DPRK Foreign Ministry agreed to unconditionally rejoin the talks and to include in the discussions the issue of uranium enrichment. In October, North Korea held separate meetings with South Korea, the U.S., and Russia and also expressed willingness to unconditionally return to the Six-Party Talks.

Then on December 17, Kim Jong-il suddenly passed away.

Another important international event occurred in 2011 that is worth mentioning. In February, the Arab Spring spread to Libya, with people taking to the streets against Moammar Gadhafi. The demonstrations soon evolved into civil strife. On March 17, the U.N. Security Council passed Resolution 1973, which authorized the creation of a no-fly zone over Libya. On March 19, France, Brit-

ain, the U.S., and other countries started to conduct air strikes in Libya, which had already given up weapons of mass destruction in 2003. On October 20, Gadhafi fell into the hands of the opposition in Sirte and died in a tragic manner. When speaking to the public for the last time, Gadhafi mentioned that Kim Jong-il must have been looking at him and laughing. Indeed, the DPRK kept a close eye on the situation in Libya. An article published in *Rodong Sinmun* on April 18 said, "In recent years, the tragedies of some countries which renounced the nuclear program half way under the U.S. pressure have clearly confirmed the sensible and correct choice North Korea has made. ... Only by doing so can the national and ethnic autonomy be safeguarded."

Although concerned and wary following the events and aftermath of the Libyan uprising and the Arab Spring, which might have had an impact on its considerations about pursuing the nuclear path, North Korea did not totally give up dialogue. Kim Jong-il remained committed to the "unconditional resumption of the Six-Party Talks" until his death on December 17, 2011. He was succeeded by his youngest son, Kim Jong-un, who initially continued the policy adopted by his father.

North Korea and the U.S. held a third round of high-level talks in Beijing on February 23-24, 2012, as the Six-Party Talks were yet to be restarted. The two sides reaffirmed their commitment to fulfilling the September 19 Joint Statement, stating that the Korean Armistice Agreement was the cornerstone of peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula prior to the signing of a peace accord. They also agreed to simultaneously take confidence-building measures to improve DPRK-U.S. relations.

Subsequently, they separately released the February 29 Agreement (or "Leap Day Agreement").

Although the documents were not identical, there were elements reflecting a basic consensus. Among the key points were: the DPRK should suspend nuclear tests and long-range missile tests as well as uranium enrichment activities, and allow the IAEA to verify and supervise its activities; and the U.S. should not be hostile to the DPRK and should be willing to improve relations and expand exchanges. The U.S. also promised to provide North Korea with 240,000 tons of nutritious food.

Over the coming weeks and months, the two sides made many claims and counterclaims. The essential dispute was whether the agreement included the launching of satellites. North Korea argued that the moratorium on long-range missile tests did not include the launching of satellites. But the U.S. insisted that launching satellites was included. Unfortunately, what exactly was agreed to on this matter remains unclear.

On the morning of April 13, 2012, North Korea launched its first application satellite, Kwangmyŏngsŏng-3, and the U.S. government decided to not deliver food aid as previously agreed. On May 2, the U.N. Security Council's North Korea Sanctions Committee updated the sanctions list, adding three North Korean entities. On May 13, the fifth session of the 12th Supreme People's Meeting of the DPRK amended the country's constitution, declaring in its preface, "Comrade Kim Jong-il has established our motherland as an invincible political and ideological power, a nuclear nation and an unrivaled military power."

On June 18, President Obama accused North Korea of being a continuous threat to the U.S. and declared an extension of sanctions against Pyongyang for another year. On December 12, North Korea announced the successful launch of a second Kwangmyŏngsŏng-3 satellite, which

was widely believed to be a Taepodong-2 missile. On February 12, 2013, North Korea conducted its third nuclear test. On March 7, the U.N. Security Council unanimously passed Resolution 2094, condemning North Korea's third nuclear test and issuing a new round of sanctions. On April 2, the spokesperson for North Korea's Atomic Energy Agency said that the Yongbyon 5-megawatt graphite-moderated reactor, which had been closed and sealed in 2007, would be restarted.

In 2014, after the U.S. and South Korea started the "Key Resolve" joint military exercises on February 24, North Korea repeatedly launched various types of missiles.

On May 20, 2015, North Korea issued a statement, claiming that it has achieved a miniaturized and diversified "nuclear strike capability."

The situation further escalated in 2016. North Korea conducted its fourth nuclear test on January 6. On January 13, South Korean President Park Geun-hye announced at a press conference that the South Korean government would consider the introduction of the missile defense system known as Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD).

On February 7, North Korea announced the launching of a satellite with a long-range rocket. On March 2, the U.N. Security Council unanimously passed Resolution 2270, which in turn initiated a series of new sanctions.

From March to April 2016, the U.S. and South Korea conducted large-scale "Key Resolve" and "Foal Eagle" joint military exercises, involving more than 300,000 South Korean and 17,000 American soldiers with carrier battle groups, strategic bombers, and other strategic weaponry. The scale of these military exercises was larger than ever before in terms of the degree of weap-

ons and the number of participants, and “decapitation strikes” were also included. Almost every year since the 1970s, the U.S. and South Korea have conducted joint military exercises, including “Key Resolve,” “Ulchi Freedom Guardian,” and “Team Spirit.” In recent years, such military exercises have become increasingly large-scale and targeted. North Korea, in response and in preparation, would mobilize its people into a war footing, redeploy military forces, and sometimes even recruit reserves to strengthen the standing army. Understandably, such a practice not only creates tension but also forces North Korea to expend a lot of manpower, materials, and financial resources, which has been a stress on the national economy and people’s livelihoods.

North Korea conducted five more test launches of its Musudan missiles. On June 1, the U.S. Treasury Department designated North Korea “a jurisdiction of primary money laundering concern” and, on July 6, it placed the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un on the sanctions list for the first time. North Korea followed this by firing missiles up to 500 kilometers (311 miles) into the sea throughout July and August.

On August 22, the U.S. and South Korea started their annual “Ulchi-Freedom Guardian” joint military exercises. To protest, North Korea fired a submarine-launched ballistic missile into the eastern waters of the Peninsula on August 24 and three ballistic missiles into the sea on September 5. On September 9, North Korea conducted its fifth nuclear test.

Eighty-two days later, on November 30, the U.N. Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2321 in response to North Korea’s fifth nuclear test. Most noticeably, the resolution imposed a ceiling on coal exports, which had been North Korea’s largest export material. China again called

for the parties to resume dialogue as soon as possible to deal with their differences in a peaceful, diplomatic, and political manner.

Looking back on the eight years of the Obama administration, the U.S. linked the Korean nuclear issue with its disapproval of the North Korean regime. Indeed, the widely reported “brutality of the regime” has been a troubling concern within the international community. The U.S. adopted a policy of “strategic patience,” the essence of which was that no matter how North Korea conducted itself, the U.S. did not give any serious consideration to Pyongyang’s security concerns. If North Korea was willing to negotiate, the U.S. would talk but with no intention to make any progress. If North Korea chose confrontation, the U.S. would intensify sanctions. The ultimate purpose was to see the North Korean regime collapse under constant pressure. The U.S. maintained secret and semi-public bilateral contacts with North Korea in New York, Pyongyang, and Kuala Lumpur, but as long as North Korea refused to abandon its nuclear program, the role of such contacts was limited. So, the reality is that the Obama administration’s *de facto* tough policy concealed by the word “patience” bumped against North Korea’s strong will to possess nuclear power. The two countries reinforced each other in a negative direction, allowing the tense situation to slip into a downward spiral.

As the North Korean nuclear and missile programs continue to make progress, Washington’s “patience” is rapidly running out. Washington is said to be reassessing North Korea’s potential to acquire deterrence against the U.S., and the timeline is believed to be not very long. Moreover, anti-North Korean sentiment is growing in the United States, and all kinds of stories about North Korea, though unverifiable, are spread widely. Capitol Hill had increasingly accused the Obama administration of being weak and incompetent in

dealing with Pyongyang. The Trump administration, after taking office, has treated the Korean nuclear issue as a primary security challenge in Asia. There has also been some news coming out of military and strategic circles about the U.S. working with its allies to fine-tune a targeted strike plan against North Korea. This adds uncertainty, clouding the future of the Peninsula.

One newly added grave concern for China is that on July 8, 2016, the U.S. and South Korea announced the deployment of the THAAD anti-missile system in South Korea. The AN/TPY-2 X-band radar used in the THAAD system is reportedly the largest and most advanced land-based transportable radar, with a range of about 1,200-2,000 kilometers (746-1,243 miles). Its detection distance for medium- and long-range missiles on the ascent stage is over 2,000 kilometers (1,243 miles), and it can precisely calculate the expected impact points of warheads or false warheads from a distance of about 580 kilometers (361 miles).

If deployed in South Korea, even by the most conservative estimates, this radar would radiate through parts of northeastern and northern China as well as the Bohai Sea and Yellow Sea areas, thereby weakening China's strategic deterrent and in turn exacerbating the already asymmetric strategic balance in the region. The U.S. already has strong missile defense systems in the western Pacific. Once the THAAD system is deployed in South Korea and is connected to and shares information with the two X-band radars in Japan and the THAAD system in Guam, it will be perceived as posing an increased threat to China's strategic security.

China is also concerned that the deployment of THAAD in South Korea is only a new start to the U.S. pursuit of zero-sum security in the Asia Pacific. It has been reported that the U.S. is consid-

ering deploying THAAD in Japan and other parts of East Asia. If this becomes reality, China and the U.S. may have to confront more serious challenges regarding the question of strategic balance, which may push the Asia Pacific region into a strategic arms race.

## Conclusion

It remains to be seen where the Korean nuclear issue is heading. There are three possibilities:

First possibility: The vicious cycle of U.S. and U.N. sanctions followed by North Korean nuclear and missile tests goes on until reaching a tipping point. For an isolated and relatively independent country such as North Korea, sanctions may exert huge pressure, but the country can hold up and will not give up nuclear development just because of them. As a matter of fact, North Korea started nuclear testing after sanctions started, and it has conducted five tests against the background of intensified sanctions. So it is not hard to see that this situation could make the issue drag on into a spiral of intensified sanctions and continued nuclear testing until Korean nuclear and missile technologies reach a tipping point. At that point, those who oppose North Korea possessing nuclear weapons would be faced with the hard choice of taking extreme action with unknown consequences, or tolerating it.

This pattern is difficult to change because of two factors: First, North Korea is determined to possess nuclear capabilities in order to ensure its own security. This has been its policy choice, and has been increasingly reinforced over recent years. North Korea has perceived external security pressure and has not been successful at acquiring a security guarantee, despite having attended different forms of peace talks. The events

in other countries like Libya have also affected Pyongyang's thinking. Secondly, the United States is unwilling to make any compromise and refuses to make a deal with North Korea, and this has become a politically correct view, especially in the military and strategic circles. In the meantime, the U.S. is also making use of the tension to invest heavily in strategic deployment and military activities in Northeast Asia and, therefore, cannot focus itself on resolving the nuclear issue. Given its political habits, any adjustment in policy toward North Korea would meet strong resistance. Whether President Donald Trump can free himself from the old inertia and find a way out remains to be seen.

In the U.S., there is often talk about the military option. Every time this is seriously considered, the analysis invariably shows that, given the heavily deployed conventional and strategic weaponry across the Peninsula, military action, big or small, would cause huge civilian casualties and results that are hard to control. Keeping the military option on the table also threatens stability and is a source of mistrust among the countries involved. As the situation gets closer to a tipping point, it is all the more important for the U.S. to carefully calculate its moves and for China and the U.S., as well as other countries concerned, to better coordinate on future steps.

Second possibility: The North Korean regime collapses—which is what the U.S. and the South Korea want the most. The U.S. has long taken a stance of non-recognition and hostility toward North Korea, with regime change as its main goal. This was also one of the fundamental principles of President Obama's policy of strategic patience. To a large extent, the persistence of the U.S. in intensifying sanctions while giving no chance for talks had the intention of pushing North Korea to undergo internal changes. In the U.S., contact and

dialogue with North Korea are often regarded as helping the regime and hindering changes. That is why North Korea firmly believes that the U.S. will not change its hostile policy and, therefore, that it should take a strong position to resist. The reality is that the Korean economy has already passed through its most difficult time. Kim Jong-un, after taking up the mantle as North Korea's top leader, has stabilized the domestic situation. Though North Korea's domestic policy and behavior have caused wide resentment, the expectation of regime collapse as a solution to the Korean nuclear issue may not be realistic in the short term.

Third possibility: Talks and serious negotiations restart, which may ease or even resolve the nuclear issue. Admittedly, this is harder now as mistrust between the U.S. and North Korea has grown deeper over the years, and the ups, downs, and many setbacks throughout multilateral negotiations have undermined the parties' confidence in dialogue. But past experience shows the obvious benefits of talking: First, talks helped stabilize the situation and created conditions for addressing mutual concerns. Second, talking opened the way to reaching various agreements. The September 19 Joint Statement, February 13 Joint Document, and October 3 Joint Document, which were achieved through the Six-Party Talks, represent the maximum consensus among all parties and together provide a roadmap for a political solution to the Korean nuclear issue. The disruption of the talks was due to a failure to implement the agreements, and the nuclear issue has escalated in the absence of talks. It should be noted that, after years of escalation, the ground has shifted and the basis for negotiation has changed significantly since 2003. If talks are resumed, whether all parties can accept such a reality and whether they can restart negotiations without preconditions remains an open question. In other words,



if some parties assume nothing has happened or try to return to the past without considering changes, it will be hard for the new talks to succeed. Currently, one realistic starting point may be a “double suspension.”

As Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi explained at a press conference on March 8, 2017:

To defuse the looming crisis on the Peninsula, China proposes that, as a first step, the DPRK suspend its missile and nuclear activities in exchange for a halting of large-scale U.S.-ROK exercises. This “double suspension” approach can help us break out of the security dilemma and bring the parties back to the table. Then we can follow the dual-track approach of denuclearizing the Peninsula on the one hand and establishing a peace mechanism on the other. Only by addressing the parties’ concerns in a synchronized and reciprocal manner can we find a fundamental solution to lasting peace and stability on the Peninsula.<sup>29</sup>

In other words, China calls for parallel steps to address nuclear and security concerns.

At the most recent China-U.S. summit in Florida and the first round of the China-U.S. Diplomatic and Security Dialogue that was held on the sidelines in April 2017, the two sides had an in-depth exchange of views on the Korean nuclear issue. China reiterated that it is committed to denuclearization, peace, and stability on the Korean Peninsula, as well as a settlement through dialogue and consultation. China also said that it would continue to fully implement the U.N. Security

Council resolutions on North Korea. China further explained to the U.S. side its proposals of “double suspension” and a “dual-track approach of denuclearizing the Peninsula,” stressing its hope to achieve a breakthrough for resuming talks. China also reiterated its opposition to the deployment of the THAAD anti-missile system. During the summit, the two sides confirmed the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula as a common goal, and agreed to keep close communication and coordination on the issue. This gives hope for a better understanding between China, the U.S., and the other parties concerned, and a better future for inclusive security in the Northeast Asia region.

To conclude, China’s interest lies in ensuring a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula, and preventing the disruption of peace and security in Northeast Asia and the whole of the Asia Pacific. China’s responsibility is to play a proactive role in achieving the above objectives through peaceful means, and to help bring about a peace accord, thus creating lasting peace and enabling greater cooperation in the region. China should also be firm in preventing any major turbulence or even conflict on the Peninsula. Only through dialogue can mutual security be achieved. In this way, we may help wrestle the Korean Peninsula out of its current vicious cycle and prevent Northeast Asia from turning into a “Dark Forest.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> “Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, March 8, 2017, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1444204.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1444204.shtml).

<sup>30</sup> See Liu Cixin, *The Dark Forest (Remembrance of Earth’s Past)*, trans. Joel Martinsen (New York: Tor Books, 2016).

## About the Author

FU YING is chairperson of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the National People's Congress of China and chairperson of the Academic Committee of the National Institute of Global Strategy at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. She previously served as China's vice minister of foreign affairs. She has also served as ambassador to the Philippines, Australia, and the United Kingdom. From 2000 to 2003, she was director-general of the Foreign Ministry's Department of Asian Affairs, and in that role she was involved in the multilateral talks that took place over the Korean nuclear issue.

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