

China's Conflict-Management Approach to the Nuclear Standoff on the Korean Peninsula

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an analysis and assessment of China's conflict-management (CM) approach to the US-DPRK nuclear standoff on the Korean peninsula. Focusing on China's uncharacteristically proactive mediation-as-conflict-management diplomacy in the latest (second) US-DPRK nuclear confrontation (2002–2005), it proceeds in four sections. The first focuses on the global context and conditions that gave rise to CM studies as a new field (or sub-field) of international relations research in the West, as a background for the advent of China's CM diplomacy. The second section argues that three proximate and underlying causes—greater danger, greater stakes, and greater leverage—catapulted Beijing into the *terra incognita* of CM leadership role. The third section examines the shift in China's role as well as the style and substance of this approach. The fourth section critically evaluates the possibilities and limitations of China's conflict-management diplomacy for the resolution of this US-DPRK nuclear standoff. By way of conclusion, I briefly assess future prospects for establishing a more peaceful and prosperous regional order in Northeast Asia either through the ongoing six-party process or through some permanent Northeast Asian security regime coming out of the success or failure of the six-party process in the uncertain years ahead.

Despite the growing importance of China in contemporary international relations and the ongoing debate over the rise of China, Chinese thought and practice in conflict-management diplomacy remains relatively neglected in the new field of conflict-management studies within comparative foreign policy and international-relations research. While China is now more integrated into the global community and exhibits greater levels of cooperative (status quo) behavior than ever before,¹ the premise behind the contending stances toward China of containment, engagement, and constraint (conengagement) is that China is a dissatisfied revisionist (non-status quo) power that operates outside the global community on a range of

¹ For empirical and theoretical analyses along these lines, see Alastair Iain Johnston, "China's International Relations: The Political and Security Dimensions," in Samuel S. Kim, ed., *The International Relations of Northeast Asia* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004), pp. 65-100; Samuel S. Kim, "China's Path to Great Power Status in the Globalization Era," *Asian Perspective* 27: 1 (March 2003): pp. 35-75; *idem* "China in World Politics," in Barry Buzan and Rosemary Foot, eds., *Does China Matter? A Reassessment* (London: Routledge 2004), pp. 37-53.

international rules and norms, thus posing the most critical challenge to the future of regional and global orders.²

The neglect of China in the theory and practice of conflict management (CM) may be due in part to the longstanding conceptual and analytical habit of focusing exclusively on China's conflict behavior. An added factor is the novelty of the conflict-management concept in Chinese foreign policy. The People's Republic of China (PRC) has not been known for self-initiated CM diplomacy in the world's trouble spots. China's uncharacteristically proactive mediation efforts in the second US-DPRK nuclear standoff since early 2003 thus both reflects and initiates significant changes in its foreign-policy thinking and behavior.³ Even in the growing Chinese international-relations (IR) literature, conflict-management research remained barren until the mid-1990s when some forward-thinking IR scholars started picking up the topic of "crisis management theory" (*weiji guanli lun*).⁴

This essay seeks to fill this lacuna by tracking, explaining, and assessing China's CM approach in the second US-DPRK nuclear standoff, as it has been manifest and mutated through the five rounds of the Six-Party Talks from August 2003 to November 2005. 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 peninsular in

² See Alastair Iain Johnston and Robert S. Ross, *Engaging China: The Management of an Emerging Power* (London: Routledge, 1999). Through the prism of "offensive realism," John Mearsheimer pessimistically predicts China's emergence as a regional hegemon in East Asia as the most dangerous scenario the United States might face in the early twenty-first century, warning and prodding Washington to do whatever it can to reverse or slow the rise of China. See John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), pp. 401-02.

³ Tellingly, China has not pursuing such uninvolved diplomacy everywhere. Over the course of the 1990s, the PRC used preventive diplomacy to resolve disputes along its long borders with Russia and the former Soviet republics. In 2001, China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan established the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as the official successor to an informal coordination mechanism in place since the mid-1990s. This was the first Chinese-initiated regional multilateral security forum in East Asia. See Bates Gill, "China's new security multilateralism and its implications for the Asia-Pacific region," in *SIPRI Yearbook 2004: Armament, Disarmament and International Security* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 207-30.

⁴ For a review of Chinese crisis-management literature, often under the general rubric of "global problems" (*quanqiu wenti*), see Alastair Iain Johnston, "The State of International Relations Research in China: Considerations for the Ford Foundation," in The Ford Foundation, *International Relations Studies in China* (The Ford Foundation, 2003), pp. 151-152 and Wang Yizhou, *Dangdai guoji zhengzhi pouxu* [Analysis of contemporary international politics] (Shanghai: People's Publishing House, 1995). It is worth noting in this connection that the March 2005 issue of *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* [World Economy and Politics] published four articles on "crisis management" involving the select cases of militarized disputes and conflicts in which China itself was a party to the conflict, not a third-party mediator (e.g., the Korean War, the Vietnam War, border wars with India, the Soviet Union, the US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, the Sino-American aircraft collision). See Zhang Baijia, "'Kang Mei Yuan Chao' yu 'Yuan Yue Kang Mei'—Zhongguo ruhe yingdui Chaoxian Zhanzheng yu Yuenan Zhanzheng," ['Resist the U.S. to Aid Korea' and 'Aid Vietnam to Resist the U.S.'—How did China Deal with the Korean War and the Vietnam War], *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi*, No. 3 (2005): 8-15; Xu Yan, "Jiefang hou wo guo chuli bianjie chongtu weiji de huigu he zhongjie" [Review and summary of our country's handling of border crises after the Liberation], *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi*, No. 3 (2005): 16-21; Wu Baiyi, "Zhongguo dui 'zha guan' shijian de weiji guanli" [A case study of China's crisis management of the embassy bombing incident], *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi*, No. 3 (2005): 22-29; and Zhang Tuosheng, "Zhong Mei zhuang ji shijian jiqu jingyan jiaoxun" [The Sino-American aircraft collision incident and its lessons], *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi*, No. 3 (2005): 30-36.

particular. In pursuit of these lines of inquiry, this essay proceeds in four sections. The first section focuses on the global context and conditions that gave rise to CM studies as a new field (or sub-field) of IR scholarship in the West. This serves as a background for the rise of China's CM diplomacy. The second section explores the proximate and underlying causes that catapulted Beijing into the *terra incognita* of a CM leadership role. The third section examines the shift in China's conflict-management role as well as the style and substance of this approach. The fourth section critically evaluates the possibilities and limitations of China's conflict-management diplomacy for the resolution of this US-DPRK nuclear standoff. By way of conclusion, I briefly assess future prospects for establishing a more peaceful and prosperous regional order in Northeast Asia either through the ongoing six-party process or else through some institutional offspring that may arise from the success or failure of the six-party process as a permanent Northeast Asian security regime in the uncertain years ahead.

THE RISE OF ARMED CONFLICT AND CONFLICT-MANAGEMENT STUDIES

Despite the end of East-West conflict and superpower rivalry, or perhaps in some ways because of it, the post-Cold War world has experienced an explosion of armed conflict. How to cope with armed conflicts has remained one of the most daunting challenges confronting the peoples and states of the post-Cold War world community, as well as scholars and policymakers. As a result, attention to mediation as conflict management has increased over the past decade, as its practice has grown compared with previous periods.⁵

For analytical purposes, conflict management may be defined narrowly as referring to the regulation, mitigation, and containment of manifest conflicts—that is, as crisis management⁶—or broadly as encompassing the wide spectrum of preventive diplomacy, peacekeeping, peacemaking, peace-enforcing, and post-conflict peace-building strategies in the life cycle of conflict.⁷ The broader synthetic, multidimensional CM approach I adopt in this essay proceeds from the process-oriented definition of conflict as a series of steps from background

⁵ Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson, and Pamela Aall, *Taming Intractable Conflicts: Mediation in the Hardest Cases* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2004), pp. 21-22.

⁶ See Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson, and Pamela Aall, eds., *Turbulent Peace: The Challenges of Managing International Conflict* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2001); Samuel S. Kim and Abraham Kim, "Conflict Management," in *Encyclopedia of Government and Politics*, eds. Mary Hawkesworth and Maurice Kogan, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 980-993; Hugh Miall, Oliver Ramsbotham, and Tom Woodhouse, *Contemporary Conflict Resolution: The Prevention, Management and Transformation of Deadly Conflict* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1999); Jack Levy, "The Causes of War and the Conditions of Peace," *Annual Review of Political Science* 1 (1998): 139-165; Niklas Swanstrom, ed., *Conflict Prevention and Conflict Management in Northeast Asia* (Uppsala, Sweden: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program, 2005).

⁷ Boutros Boutros-Ghali, *An Agenda for Peace: Preventive Diplomacy, Peacemaking and Peace-keeping* (UN Doc. A/47/277 – S/24111, June 17, 1992); *Supplement to An Agenda for Peace: Position Paper of the Secretary-General on the Occasion of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the United Nations* (UN Doc. A/50/60 – A/1995/1, January 3, 1995); Roger E. Kanet and Edward A. Kolodziej, eds., *Coping with Conflict after the Cold War* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

conditions through the occurrence and evolution of militarized disputes to the outbreak of international war.

Conflict management is not concerned with normal conflict and competition in international politics, nor does it seek to eliminate or permanently resolve all conflicts, a task that would be at once impossible and undesirable. CM is all about seeking means of transforming potentially violent conflicts into peaceful processes and mechanisms of international relations. This is an unending challenge as the old forms, sources, and locales of conflict are replaced or overlaid by new ones.

The relevance and utility of a CM approach⁸—both in general and in looking at China's CM diplomacy in recent years—requires dispelling at the outset several heroic but misconceived assumptions that stand in the way of inquiry. The first of these assumptions is that all conflicts are inherently bad or dangerous and as such should be eliminated or resolved once and for all. Second, it has often been assumed that there is a single-level or single-factor solution to all armed conflicts or security dilemmas. To say that there is no single all-encompassing cause of conflict is to say that rarely does a single factor at any given level determine the way a country's foreign policy is conceived and implemented, and that there is therefore no single CM solution. And the third erroneous assumption is that diagnosis and prescription are always matched. Generally, all human relations may be seen as interlaced with the two closely related processes of conflict and cooperation; only a small percentage of conflicts escalate to violence or war.⁹ Thus we are interested in analyzing and managing only those potentially violence-prone conflicts.

A glance through the literature suggests how our perceptions of sources of international conflict and our responses to it have changed over the past decade. The study of international conflict is adjusting, as it must, to the changing realities on the ground. Indeed, the sudden explosion of armed conflict in the early 1990s seemed ready-made for serving as the chief catalyst for several important shifts—partial paradigm shifts—in the study of international conflict.

First, there has been a shift away from conventional concerns about great-power wars and superpower rivalry toward a greater focus on intrastate conflicts and state-making identity wars. Second, there has been a move away from systemic-level variables toward dyadic-level interaction variables. New research projects at the dyadic level on enduring rivalries, strategic

⁸ For a more detailed analysis of the conflict-management approach, see Kim and Kim, "Conflict Management."

⁹ It should not be assumed that all deadly conflicts are inevitable or necessarily escalate from one step to the next. Among the 827 conflicts for the period 1815-1976, there was less than a 10% probability of conflict escalation. See Zeev Maoz, *Paths to Conflict: International Dispute Initiation, 1818-1976* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1982), pp. 62, 68.

bargaining, territorial contiguity, and economic and security interdependence have generated much stronger and more policy-relevant empirical findings than those for systemic patterns or national-level behavior.¹⁰ Third, there has been a shift toward a more dynamic and process-oriented conceptualization of international conflict. Fourth, there has been a shift from monocausal or single-factor explanations to a multifaceted and multidimensional approach to conflict analysis and management. Armed conflict in the post–Cold War world is too complex and diverse a phenomenon to lend itself to a single parsimonious monocausal theory.

Fifth and finally, there is growing recognition that conflict prevention—“preventive diplomacy” in UN parlance—is about moving the focus of attention and action to early “upstream” stages in the life cycle of conflict. This is seen as the most cost-effective way to prevent disputes from arising in the first place or, failing that, to prevent existing disputes from escalating into lethal armed conflicts. Despite the near-universal agreement about the cost-effectiveness of conflict prevention, the actual or imagined costs of seriously addressing the structural causes of conflicts are believed too high to be paid in the present while the peace dividends remain too uncertain and too distant in the future. This is a sure recipe for rhetorical commotion without actual forward movement. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan likened the collective conflict-management system to a volunteer fire department: “Every time there is a fire, we must first find fire engines and the funds to run them before we can start dousing any flames. The present system relies almost entirely on last minute, ad hoc arrangements that guarantee delay with respect to the provision of civilian personnel even more so than military.”

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¹⁰ Miall et al., *Contemporary Conflict Resolution*; John Vasquez, “Distinguishing Rivals That Go to War from Those That Do Not: A Quantitative Comparative Case Study of the Two Paths to War,” *International Studies Quarterly* 40 (1996): 531-558; Levy, “The Causes of War and the Conditions of Peace.”

¹¹ Kofi Annan, *We The Peoples: The Role of the United Nations in the 21st Century* (New York: UN Department of Public Information, 2000), p. 49.

CATALYSTS FOR CHINA'S CONFLICT-MANAGEMENT DIPLOMACY

What explains the contrast between China's proactive CM 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, North Korean responses, China's own enhanced geopolitical and economic leverage, the steady rise of regional and global multilateralism in Chinese foreign-policy thinking and behavior, and the creeping unilateralism under the Clinton administration that then turned into rampant runaway unilateralism under the Bush administration. In short, the unique confluence of both proximate and underlying factors—greater danger, greater stakes, and greater leverage— explains why Beijing was spurred into action in early 2003.

Greater Danger

In 1992 the Chinese government, by recognizing and establishing diplomatic relations with the Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea), changed its two-Koreas policy from *de facto* to *de jure* status.¹² While this change was arguably the most significant reorientation of post-Cold War Chinese foreign policy in the Northeast Asian region, it did not signal a greater Chinese conflict-management role in regional or global politics. China's hands-off approach was demonstrated particularly 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."¹³ This "who me?" posture reflected a cost-benefit calculus intended to keep the PRC out of harm's way while still holding both Pyongyang and Seoul within its Sinocentric circle of influence in East Asia.

Even after Pyongyang allegedly confessed to U.S. officials in October 2002 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 dramatically in the heat of the second US-DPRK nuclear confrontation in early 2003, when Beijing launched an unprecedented flurry of mediation diplomacy.

So the spur to action on Beijing's part was not so much North Korea's nuclear program per se as much as the growing danger that Pyongyang could become the next target on the

¹² For a detailed analysis, see Samuel S. Kim, "The Making of China's Korea Policy in the Era of Reform," in David M. Lampton, ed., *The Making of Chinese Foreign and Security Policy in the Era of Reform* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 371-408.

¹³ "U.S.-DPRK Meeting Welcomed," *Beijing Review* (May 17—23, 1993), p.7

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 another war in China’s strategic backyard—have served as the most decisive proximate catalyst for Beijing’s hands-on CM diplomacy.

The arrival of the Bush administration initiated a sudden, radical fundamentalist reorientation of the U.S. foreign-policy establishment. This and the impending Iraq War, which was inextricably lined to the Bush Doctrine, sounded the alarm in both Beijing and Pyongyang.¹⁴ Rhetoric hostile to 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. After inauguration, Bush declared in his 2002 State of the Union Address that the DPRK was a charter member of the “Axis of Evil,” upgrading North Korea’s identity from rogue state to evil state.¹⁵ China 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.”¹⁶

In addition to Bush’s evil-state rhetoric, administration hawks have actively increased 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 posture was an explicit contradiction of the US-DPRK Agreed Framework, which stipulates “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 also the U.S. pursuit of new small, “usable” nuclear weapons were blows to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty regime.

The U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq beginning in March 2003 signaled to Beijing and Pyongyang that the changes in Washington were more than just rhetorical or doctrinal. As it became clear that the United States was looking for regime change in North Korea as well, the sense of urgency increased. China learned in April 2003 that Defense Secretary Donald

¹⁴ For a wide-ranging discussion and debate on the new neo-conservative fundamentalism that is both cause and manifestation of the Bush Doctrine, see G. John Ikenberry, “The End of the Neo-conservative Moment,” *Survival*, vol. 46, no. 1 (Spring 2004), pp. 7-22; Robert Jervis, “Understanding the Bush Doctrine,” *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 118, no. 3 (Fall 2003), pp. 365-388; and Mel Gurtov and Peter Van Ness, eds., *Confronting the Bush Doctrine: Critical Views from the Asia-Pacific* (London and New York: Routledge 2005).

¹⁵ For trenchant critiques of the rogue-state strategy in American foreign policy, see Robert Litwak, “What’s in a Name? The Changing Foreign Policy Lexicon,” *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 54, no. 2 (Spring 2001), pp. 375-92; Robert Litwak, *Rogue States and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); Roland Bleiker, “A Rogue is a Rogue is a Rogue: US Foreign Policy and the Korean Nuclear Crisis,” *International Affairs* 79:4 (2003): 719-37.

¹⁶ Kong Quan, February 5, 2002 (Foreign Ministry briefing) as cited in Wu, “What China Whispers to North Korea,” p. 40.

Rumsfeld had circulated a memorandum proposing that the United States work in alliance with China to isolate the North Korean regime and bring about its collapse.¹⁷ The Chinese did not appreciate being incorporated into this imperialistic plan. The following month revealed further evidence of the aggressiveness of Bush Administration policy toward North Korea policy. First the Pentagon's Operations Plan 5030 described a variety of harassment and intimidation strategies that could be applied against North Korea, and then the eleven-nation Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI)¹⁸ established coordinated interception of cargo shipments for inspection, with the possibility of an air and naval blockade/sanctions regime.¹⁹

The DPRK response accelerated the escalation of tensions as China looked on. In November 2002 the United States announced its decision to halt shipments of heavy fuel oil to North Korea, and Pyongyang reacted by announcing that it would reactivate a nuclear power program at Yongbyon—a program 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. The following month Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld warned North Korea not to try to take advantage of the U.S. preoccupation with Iraq, declaring that the United States was able and willing to fight and win two wars at the same time if necessary.²⁰ Continuing the downward spiral, the DPRK expelled the remaining IAEA inspectors from the country, stated its intent to restart a nuclear processing plant, and then announced on January 10, 2003, its withdrawal from the NPT effective as of the following day.

With the growing behavior and rhetoric of war in the United States at that time, China feared that instability could result from the cycle of mutual provocation, and it was alarmed by the possibility that either side could take military action. On the one hand, U.S. could recklessly attempt to resolve the North Korean nuclear challenge through military means *a la* Iraq. On the other hand, North Korea could decide 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 interlocutors seem to have concluded that Beijing's top priority was to prevent Pyongyang from going nuclear at any cost or by any means, a mistaken

¹⁷ David E. Sanger, "Aftereffects: Nuclear Standoff, Administration Divided Over North Korea," *New York Times*, April 21, 2003, p. 15; and David Rennie, "Rumsfeld Calls for Regime Change in North Korea," *Daily Telegraph* (London), April 22, 2003.

¹⁸ Japan was the one and only Asian country in the eleven-nation PSI grouping.

¹⁹ Bruce B. Auster and Kevin Whitelaw, "Upping the Ante for Kim Jong Il: Pentagon Plan 5030, a New Blueprint for Facing Down North Korea," *U.S. News and World Report*, July 21, 2003, p. 21.

²⁰ Anwar Iqbal, "Rumsfeld Warns N. Korea: U.S. Can Fight," United Press International, December 23, 2002.

conclusion based on some of China's hard-line pundits (e.g., Shi Yinghong, Shen Jiru, and Wang Zhongwen).²¹ Although Beijing's 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 all related, the greatest priority has remained "no war." 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. In short, growing fears at the potential for aggressive 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 kind of force-multiplier in catapulting Beijing into hands-on CM diplomacy.

Greater Stakes

While swings in U.S. foreign policy have provided proximate causes for China's proactive CM 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 be understood in the larger context of its grand strategic goals. At domestic, regional, and global levels, China pursues three overarching goals: economic development and the creation of a "well-off society" (*xiaokang shehui*), external security in the region, and cultivation of a new identity as a responsible great power.²² After spending the 1990s advancing these goals, China wants to protect the gains it has made. Currently the dominant threat to the challenge of maintaining regional stability—a stability that is an essential prerequisite to the establishment of a stable, orderly, and healthy society—is the possibility of a dangerous confrontation between a next-door neighbor and the global hegemon.

While distance may have allowed China the luxury of remaining relatively detached in the Balkans or the Middle East, the US-DPRK confrontation over nuclear weapons endangers China's very image. It threatens to undermine China's new international stature and also to weaken the domestic political claims of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as the leader of a resurgent China. A solution imposed by the Washington, furthermore, would change the military

²¹ Shi Yinghong, "How to Understand and Deal with the DPRK Nuclear Crisis," *Ta Kung Pao* (Hong Kong) January 15, 2003, A11, trans in FBIS-CHI-2003-0115, January 16, 2003; Shen Jiru, "Weihe DongBeiYa anquan de dangwu zhili" [The urgent task of preserving peace in Northeast Asia], *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* [World Economy and Politics], No. 9 (2003): 53-58; and Wang Zhongwen, "Y xin shijiao shenshi Chaoxian wenti yu DongBeiYa xingshi" [Using new visual angles to examine the North Korean problem and Northeast Asian situation], *Zhanlue yu Guanli* [Strategy and Management], No. 4 (2004): 92-94.

²² For analysis along these lines, see Wang Yizhou, "Mianxiang ershi shiji de Zhongguo waijiao: sanzong xuqiu de xunqiu jiqi pingheng (China's Diplomacy for the Twenty-First Century: Seeking and Balancing Three Demands)," *Zhanlue yu guanli* [Strategy and Management], no. 6 (1999), pp. 18-27.

situation so as to constitute major geostrategic gains for the United States at the expense of China. Beijing has strong incentives, therefore, to prevent any military resolution of a Korean crisis or conflict.²³ However, China's policy shift, abrupt as it may seem, must be understood in the context of China's changing role in world politics and its chosen identity as a responsible great power. The implications of these dynamics reach much further than the immediate crisis on the Korean peninsula.

Greater Leverage

Compared to the early 1990s, China has recently found itself in a much-changed geopolitical and geo-economic situation, with far greater resource leverage. In the first US-DPRK nuclear confrontation of 1993–1994, soon after China's switch from a pro-DPRK policy to a two-Koreas policy in 1992, Sino-DPRK relations were in a state of disarray and Sino-American relations were also shaky, due to the Tiananmen incident. Thus Beijing commanded little geopolitical or geo-economic leverage with either the United States or North Korea in the first crisis. This state of affairs persisted until the late 1990s when Beijing and Pyongyang began to reconcile even as China was rapidly emerging as an economic force to be reckoned with both on the world stage and in the regional arena.

Beijing's assumption of a proactive conflict-management role in mediating a highly sensitive and volatile regional dispute in its strategic backyard reflects and effects first a departure from the risk-averse, passive, "who me?" stand it took in the first US-DPRK nuclear standoff and second the greater confidence and leverage with which the new leader—President Hu Jintao—has taken command of a more multilateral Chinese diplomacy in Northeast Asia. So China's proactive mediation-as-conflict-management 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, its own enhanced geopolitical and economic factors, and the changing strategic priorities and calculus of the new leadership.

INSTRUMENTS OF CHINA'S CONFLICT-MANAGEMENT DIPLOMACY

Although it has defined its CM role as "active mediation," China has in fact assumed the multiple and mutually complementary roles of initiator, host, facilitator, prodder, consensus-builder, go-between, broker, and deal-maker in the on-again, off-again six-party process. Alternatively, China's mediation diplomacy could be broadly defined to refer to and subsume all of these *modi operandi*. As noted earlier, in the heat of the second US-DPRK nuclear

²³ Avery Goldstein, "Across the Yalu: China's Interests and the Korean Peninsula in a Changing World," paper presented for "New Directions in Chinese Foreign Policy, A Conference in Honor of Allen S. Whiting," Fairbank Center for East Asian Research, Harvard University, November 8-9, 2002.

confrontation Beijing launched an unprecedented flurry of mediation diplomacy to render assistance in the quest for a negotiated solution when Washington and Pyongyang could not find one by themselves. Mediation is typically undertaken for a range of motives, and in the Chinese case the motive was a confluence of greater danger, greater stakes, and greater leverage, with the key objective of preventing the US-DPRK nuclear conflict from escalating to military violence. The intractable conflict in the Middle East illustrates “how mediation-as-conflict-management serves the interests of both a powerful third-party actor and the direct parties to the conflict.”²⁴

With its conflict-management resources, both diplomatic and economic, China has clearly made a heavy investment in forwarding the six-party process toward a negotiated solution or at the very least in averting its collapse. China’s mediation-cum-CM diplomacy required from the very beginning shuttle/visitation diplomacy—and aid diplomacy—to bring the DPRK to a negotiating table in Beijing. From early 2003 to late 2005, senior Chinese officials have stepped up shuttle/visitation diplomacy on a quarterly basis. Moreover, these visits have been conducted at levels senior enough to require meetings with Chairman Kim Jong Il, serving notice to Washington that direct interaction with the Chairman is the shortest way toward progress in the six-party process. The Chinese are reported to have made an exceptional effort in the fourth round of talks—the most important and extended round to date—mobilizing a professional work force of about two hundred experts from nine departments or bureaus in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. These diplomats all spent day and night working on successive drafts of a joint statement of principles, pulling together the lowest common denominator among views laid out by the six parties in the behind-the-scenes negotiations, which included an unprecedented half-dozen bilateral meetings between U.S. and DPRK diplomats.²⁵

The first few months of 2003—in the heat of the second US-DPRK nuclear standoff—were busy with long-distance telephone calls between President George W. Bush and President Jiang Zemin in January as well as between President Bush and President Hu Jintao immediately following Hu’s succession to the PRC presidency in March. Chinese officials reportedly met with North Korean officials many times and passed over fifty messages back and forth between Pyongyang and Washington.²⁶ 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.

²⁴ Crocker, Hampson, and Aall, *Taming Intractable Conflicts*, p. 31.

²⁵ See Edward Cody, “China Tries to Advance N. Korea Nuclear Talks,” *The Washington Post*, July 31, 2005, A23 and “China Show Off Newfound Partnership at Six-Party Talks,” *The Korea Herald*, August 5, 2005.

²⁶ John Pomfret, “China Urges N. Korea Dialogue,” *The Washington Post*, April 4, 2003, p. A16.

Such talks were indeed hosted in Beijing in April 2003, amid Chinese hopes that this would help prevent the US-DPRK nuclear standoff from spiraling out of control.

The inconclusive ending of the trilateral talks had the effect of accelerating China's conflict-management shuttle diplomacy: Beijing dispatched Deputy Foreign Minister Dai Bingguo, who among all Chinese officials is said to have had the most meetings and is also the closest to Kim Jong Il, to Pyongyang to jumpstart multilateral talks on the North Korean nuclear issue. Dai carried President Hu's letter that reportedly promised that China would be willing to (1) help resolve the crisis by mediating and facilitating negotiations with the greatest sincerity; (2) increase the amount of economic aid to the DPRK; and (3) 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 proposal to reopen talks with the United States in a "multilateral" setting, but he also insisted that one-on-one negotiation was his ultimate bottom line.²⁷ These efforts by the Chinese led to the first round of Six-Party Talks, held in Beijing in August 2003, as the beginning of the six-party process.

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 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.²⁸

It took much additional cajoling and aid from China—including an offer of new economic aid and energy assistance totaling around \$50 million—to secure Pyongyang's return to a second round of Six-Party Talks in February 2004.²⁹ 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"), which was presented at the second round of talks, seemed ready made for this purpose. The United States claimed somewhat extravagantly after the talks that all parties except North Korea

²⁷ 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.

²⁸ "Chinese vice-foreign minister holds press conference after six-way talks," BBC Morning International Reports, August 30, 2003, and Wang Te-chun, "Special Dispatch: The DPRK Nuclear Crisis Puts China's Security to the Test," *Ta Kung Pao* (Hong Kong), January 14, 2003, translated in FBIS-CHI-2003-0114.

²⁹ Edward Cody and Anthony Faiola, "N. Korea's Kim Reportedly in China for Talks," *Washington Post*, April 20, 2004, p. 13; and Ralph A. Cossa, "CVID, WMD, and Elections Galore," *Comparative Connections*, vol. 6, no. 1 (April 2004), p. 1, available at <http://www.csis.org/pacfor/cc/0401Q.pdf>.

were in agreement on CVID.³⁰ Pyongyang, in response to Washington's CVID stand, embarrassed China at the end of the talks by attempting to make last-minute changes that ended up scuttling what was to be the first joint communiqué of the talks. A tentative Chairman's Statement by the Chinese had to serve in lieu of the joint communiqué.³¹

With much patience and tenacity, Chinese diplomats continued to pursue hands-on CM diplomacy to keep the Six-Party Talks from collapsing and to arrange a third round in June 2004. This time the United States brought to the table a concrete but highly conditional proposal that would permit third parties to provide to the DPRK economic incentives for nuclear disarmament. North Korea, for its part, proposed the removal of the American sanctions and blockade against it, in addition to energy assistance. Despite these new developments in the negotiations, again no substantive progress was made and again a Chairman's Statement was issued in lieu of a joint statement.

Beijing's "bi-multilateral" shuttle diplomacy continued unabated, even though Pyongyang refused to attend a fourth round of talks in September 2004. 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. The North Korean and Chinese representatives agreed in principle that the Six-Party Talks still remained the best way to reach a solution to the nuclear issue. Pyongyang stalled, however, first in hopes that John Kerry might win election in the United States and allow direct bilateral negotiations, and then waiting for the second-term Bush administration to come to a more flexible and accommodating position, even as North Korea continued to seek Chinese support.³²

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."³³ Beijing responded with a series of intensive "bi-

³⁰ Reporting on the talks to the U.S. Congress, Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly said, "Our goal—complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement of North Korean nuclear programs—has been dubbed 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>.

³¹ 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>

³² See Anne Wu, "What China Whispers to North Korea," *The Washington Quarterly* vol. 28, no. 2 (Spring 2005), pp. 39-44.

³³ 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).

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 hard-line stand. 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.”³⁴

Beijing persisted by pursuing a two-sided mediation diplomacy. On one side China sustained its shuttle diplomacy with North Korea by sending senior party official Wang Jiaru to Pyongyang in mid-February 2005—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 March and April. On the other side Beijing resisted pressure from Washington to impose economic sanctions on Pyongyang, while Seoul stepped in to support Beijing’s mediation diplomacy. A combination of Chinese 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 opening 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.³⁵

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 trap of mutual US-DPRK creation. This was particularly important in the wake of the Bush administration characterization of Kim Jong Il as a “tyrant” and Condoleeza Rice’s labeling of North Korea as an “outpost of tyranny.” Beijing, Seoul, and Moscow have been prodding the Bush administration to stop using this kind of language and to map out detailed economic and security incentives as quid pro quo

³⁴ Cited in Dafna Linzer, “U.S. Says China Should Prod N. Korea on Talks,” *The Washington Post* June 24, 2005, A26.

³⁵ 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.

for North Korea's nuclear disarmament. Indeed, the implicit withdrawal of vilifying rhetoric was important in Pyongyang, as made evident in an official statement of the DPRK Ministry of Foreign Affairs: ". . . the U.S. side at the contact made between the heads of both delegations in Beijing Saturday clarified that it would recognize the DPRK as a sovereign state, not to invade it and hold bilateral talks within the framework of the six-party talks and the DPRK side interpreted it as a retraction of its remark designating the former as an 'outpost of tyranny' and decided to return to the six-party talks."³⁶

The "words for words" and "action for action" approach that North Korea advocated as its negotiating stance and that China implied as group consensus in the Chairman's statement at the end of the third round of talks also 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 fourth round of 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.

AN ASSESSMENT OF CHINA'S CM DIPLOMACY

Just as there are many causes of intractable conflicts, so also are there many conditions for effective mediation-as-conflict-management. In order to be effective, mediators must understand themselves (i.e., their motives, resources, domestic politics, and limitations) in order to avoid exporting their own confusion or incompetence into the conflict arenas in which they work. Mediators must also know and understand the parties to the conflict as well as the issues at stake. It has been suggested that the first priority in working toward a negotiated solution is hammering out a general statement or declaration of principles rather than directly tackling the core security issues at stake.³⁷

³⁶ "Spokesman for DPRK Foreign Ministry on Contact between Heads of DPRK and US Delegations," Korean Central News Agency, July 10, 2005.

³⁷ For a more detailed discussion along these lines, see Crocker, Hampson and Aall, *Taming Intractable Conflicts*.

Assessment of the effectiveness of China's mediation-as-conflict-management in the second US-DPRK nuclear standoff therefore requires an understanding of China's own characterization of its role. Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Wang Yi has described its role as "active mediation" in the following terms: "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."³⁸ 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.³⁹

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 of Principles.

Mediation-as-conflict-management is an intrinsically triangular diplomatic process since the parties to the conflict seek to position themselves in reference both to each other and to the mediator, while the mediator seeks to guide them both toward a negotiated solution that neither is able to make alone, or to persuade them to engage in direct, bilateral negotiation.⁴⁰ Viewed in this light, 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. Indeed, the greatest challenge for Beijing's mediation-as-conflict-management diplomacy is how to navigate between a rock and a hard place: between allied abandonment, with the potential for instability or even collapse in North Korea, and allied entrapment, with the danger of being caught in conflict escalation 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 a neighboring socialist ally and China's largest trading partner. In early 2003 before the first round of six-party talks, one senior official acknowledged, "We generally only

³⁸ "Wang Yi Explains PRC Stand on DPRK Nuclear Issue in Interview with Reporters," Xinhua, June 22, 2004 in FBIS-CHI-2004-0622.

³⁹ See "Progress Made in Five Aspects in Six-Party Talks," *People's Daily Online*, June 27, 2004; http://english1.peopledaily.com.cn/20040627/eng20040627_147667.html

⁴⁰ Crocker, Hampsen and Aall, *Taming Intractable Conflicts*, p. 23.

propose things that we are sure will be accepted.”⁴¹ As the six-party process got underway, Beijing shifted its diplomatic vehicle into high gear, reaching full intensity and mobilization at the crucial fourth round of talks. However, mutual hostility and enmity between George W. Bush and Kim Jong Il is such that it would take new leadership in one or both of the two countries to bring them to a new, constructive starting point.⁴²

The Pyongyang Factor

Despite the challenges involved, throughout the second nuclear standoff the United States has had unrealistically high expectations that China would join the Bush administration’s “tailored containment” and push the North Korean regime toward nuclear dismantlement. But Beijing’s leverage in Pyongyang is not as great as some U.S. foreign policymakers and pundits believe. Nonetheless Chinese diplomats have indeed managed, by tempting the North Koreans with many kinds of aid, to influence behavior coming out of Pyongyang. First, China brought the DPRK to the Six-Party Talks, overcoming North Korea’s principled insistence on direct bilateral negotiation with the United States, or at least altering that stand. This was made possible by a “*qiutong cuny*” formula (seeking common ground while preserving differences) of allowing “bilateral talks within the six-party talks framework” for the much-delayed and much-awaited fourth round of talks.

Chinese diplomats are reported to have played a key behind-the-scenes CM 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 (July 26-August 7, September 13-September 19), compared to three to four days for the first three rounds of talks. China may also have played a critical backstage role in persuading Pyongyang not to undertake any further provocative rhetoric or action. Despite press reports based on U.S. government sources to the effect that North Korea was actively preparing a nuclear test, Pyongyang has neither carried out nuclear testing nor 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.

⁴¹ Quoted in John Pomfret and Glenn Kessler, “China’s Reluctance Irks U.S.” *Washington Post*, February 4, 2003, p. 20.

⁴² During an interview with Bob Woodward, Bush is said to have jumped out of his seat declaring: “I loathe Kim Jong Il! I have a visceral reaction to this guy, because he is starving his people.” Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), p. 340. Vice President Dick Cheney shares and amplifies Bush’s bashing of Kim Jong Il, saying that America “does not negotiate with evil, we defeat it.” The well-informed *New Yorker* reporter Seymour Hersch quoted an administration insider on Kim Jong Il: “Bush and Cheney want that guy’s head on a platter. Don’t be distracted by all this talk about negotiations. There will be negotiations, but they have a plan, and they are going to get this guy after Iraq. He’s their version of Hitler.” Seymour M. Hersch, “The Cold Test: What the Administration Knew About Pakistan and the North Korean Nuclear Program,” *The New Yorker*, January 27, 2003, p. 47.

That said, however, China's application of leverage through aid is a double-edged sword. In the past the PRC viewed aid as a natural part of its fraternal relationship with the DPRK, but now the Chinese government views aid as a pragmatic means to prevent the collapse of the regime in Pyongyang and to bolster its bilateral relations with the DPRK. A strengthened relationship is a necessary prerequisite for coaxing out of Kim Jong Il whatever concessions possible 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."⁴³

Pyongyang is well aware that aid from China is in the latter's own self-interest, and so China does not receive as much North Korean gratitude as it would like nor wield as much leverage as Washington would like to believe. As one senior Chinese leader pointed out to a visiting American delegation, in the context opposing 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."⁴⁴ So Beijing is understandably cautious, afraid that withholding too much aid could provoke or cause collapse in the DPRK, which would lead to a plethora of destabilizing social, economic, and political consequences.

The Washington Factor

While China's influence in North Korea somewhat limited, Beijing still has a far greater ability to effect change in Pyongyang than in Washington. One constraint on China's leverage over Washington is its 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. The U.S. trade deficit with China grew to \$162 billion in 2004 and is now projected to reach \$200 billion for 2005, the largest bilateral trade deficit in U.S. history. This relationship is critical to China's accelerated march to the promised land of great powerdom, and the United States holds this over China's head as it pressures Beijing to apply pressure to Pyongyang. The Bush

⁴³ Wu, "What China Whispers to North Korea," p. 43.

⁴⁴ Quoted in David M. Lampton and Richard Daniel Ewing, *The U.S.-China Relationship Facing International Security Crises: Three Case Studies in Post 9/11 Bilateral Relations* (Washington, D.C.: The Nixon Center, 2004), p. 70.

administration repeatedly warned in May and June 2005 that there could be serious consequences for U.S.-Chinese relations if Beijing does not take more punitive action against North Korea. These consequences would not be limited to the political arena but would spill over into economics as well. The fact that the United States “is currently the only country with the capacity and the ambition to exercise global primacy” means that it is the only country “that can exert the greatest strategic pressure on China,” according to Wang Jisi, Dean of the School of International Studies at Peking University. Wang adds that “China’s political, economic, social, and diplomatic influences on the United States are far smaller than the United States’s influences on China.”⁴⁵

The other key constraint on China’s influence over U.S. policy is the inflexibility of the American CVID stance. The stubborn U.S. insistence on CVID, albeit slightly modified for tactical reasons at the fourth round of talks, reflects a fundamentalist quest for absolute security. It is the product of a Manichean worldview that makes judgments about good and bad, with no shades of gray. Viewed 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.”⁴⁶ No lesser realist than Henry Kissinger spotlighted the basic flaw in any quest for absolute security: “The desire of one power for absolute security means the absolute insecurity for all the others.”⁴⁷

In the context of the ongoing six-party process, China has striven to keep Washington faithful to the principle of “action for action,” but its leverage in this attempt ranges from modest to virtually nil. In fact the Bush administration, while dropping the CVID mantra since the fourth round of talks, 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 benign intentions. With its situation in Iraq becoming more and more of a quagmire, the United States cannot afford a disaster in Northeast

⁴⁵ Wang Jisi, “China’s Search for Stability with America,” *Foreign Affairs* 84:3 (September/October 2005), pp. 39-48; quotes at pp. 39, 47

⁴⁶ Gavan McCormack, *Target North Korea: Pushing North Korea to the Brink of Nuclear Catastrophe* (New York: Nation Books, 2004), p. 150. For a detailed analysis of American nuclear hegemony in Korea, see Peter Hayes, “American Nuclear Hegemony in Korea,” *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 25, no. 4 (December 1988), pp. 351-364.

⁴⁷ Quoted in David C. Hendrickson, “Toward Universal Empire: The Dangerous Quest for Absolute Security,” *World Policy Journal* 19: 3 (Fall 2002), 9.

Asia, and this fact increases both North Korean and Chinese bargaining leverage in trying to chart a non-violent course with the United States.

Above all, Beijing was the primary mover and linchpin of the six-party process to achieve a “*qjutong 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 phase of the fourth round of talks. By September 17, 2005, China’s fifth and final draft of a possible Joint Statement became acceptable to all five parties other than the United States, thus reaching a breakthrough or breaking point in Beijing’s CM efforts.

Why then did the Bush administration agree to sign on the Chinese draft of a Joint Statement despite the vehement opposition to any mention of a peaceful nuclear program during the first five days of the second phase of the fourth round of talks? Here is a list of reasons that fall into the category the Chinese call “*Huo bu dan xing*” (“misfortunes never come singly”):

- (1) There was no viable alternative given the failure of the policy of “tailored containment” in the past five years;
- (2) China successfully mobilized of “the coalition of the willing” in support of its *qjutong cunyi* Joint Statement, especially on the provision of a peaceful nuclear program (light-water reactor), with three in favor (China, South Korea, Russia), one opposed (the United States), and one abstaining or split in its position between the two (Japan), creating an 3½ and 1½ situation (3 to 1, or perhaps 3.5 to 1.5 with Japan on the sidelines or close to U.S. oppositional stand);
- (3) China boxed the United States into a corner with an “yes or no” choice, forcing it to accept or else be blamed by the world community for the collapse of the critical fourth round of talks and presumably the failure of the six-party process for good;
- (4) The Americans felt they could accept the Chinese draft of a Joint Statement subject to Washington’s later backtracking via its selective and self-serving interpretations.

Sensing that the second-term Bush administration was suffering from multiple and multiplying disasters at home and abroad—a deepening quagmire in Iraq, another nuclear standoff with Iran, Hurricane Katrina, and a falling approval rating—Beijing increased pressure on Washington to either sign or else take responsibility for a breakdown in the Six-Party Talks. After two days of internal debates President Bush gave the go-ahead on Sunday evening

(September 18) to sign the Chinese-drafted joint statement. Had he decided to let the deal fall through, according to participants in the second session of the fourth round of talks (September 13-19), China was prepared to blame the United States for missing a chance to bring a diplomatic end to the confrontation.⁴⁸ Paradoxically, to paraphrase Mao's famous statement, China's leverage grows from the barrel of America's self-inflicted troubles. As Wang Jisi aptly put it, "So long as the United States' image remains tainted, China will have greater leverage in multilateral settings."⁴⁹

This explains Washington's reluctant and almost forced acceptance of the September 19 Joint Statement and the not-so-surprising return to a trashing the North Korean position, now in the form of a "five step" roadmap proposal that was unveiled at the fifth round of talks (November 9-November 11, 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 phased manner in line with the principle of 'commitment for commitment, action for action'."

In short, China has come to a point in its conflict-management mediation that it feels it can challenge the Bush administration openly. First, Beijing is taking advantage of the global wave of anti-Americanism (or anti-Bushism) and of widespread disbelief in U.S. intelligence about weapons of mass destruction, 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 incremental "peace by pieces" approach or the mutually reciprocal "words for words" and "action for action" approach. Finally, Beijing's open challenge reflects its concern that the Six-Party Talks could collapse if the CVID formula were not dismantled at least in part.

The Seoul Factor

An unexpected source of enhancing Beijing's leverage over Washington, almost doubling it, is Seoul. It is abundantly 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

⁴⁸ Joseph Kahn and David E. Sanger, "U.S.-Korean Deal on Arms Leaves Key Points Open," *New York Times*, September 20, 2005.

⁴⁹ Wang "China's Search for Stability with America," p. 43.

and 2003). The “special allied relationship” between the United States and the ROK has been most threatened by a lack of agreement on the nature of the North Korean threat and on what constitutes an appropriate conflict-management approach.

In March 2005 President Roh publicly declared, “Our citizens will not become embroiled in Northeast Asian conflicts without our consent.”⁵⁰ In another speech the same month, Roh warned that Seoul may not side with the United States and Japan against China and North Korea.⁵¹ President Roh, while criticizing the traditional idea that Seoul should seek triangular security cooperation with Washington and Tokyo, asserted in a recent interview with a local Internet newspaper that South Korea needs a multiparty security regime that would include China, not contain it, in the interests of a lasting peace on the Korean peninsula and in Northeast Asia.⁵² The Roh government’s position on the North Korean nuclear crisis is far closer to that of China than that of the United States. Just as Beijing is having to cope with twin security dilemmas of one kind (wanting neither allied abandonment nor allied entrapment), Seoul is experiencing twin security dilemmas of another kind. While no longer fearing allied abandonment of its own security interests in Washington’s pursuit of a separate deal with Pyongyang, Seoul’s main security dilemma is now centered on allied entrapment in the Bush administration’s evil-state strangulation strategy sucking South Korea into a military conflict escalation of not its own making.

In a summit meeting in Seoul in mid-November 2005, President Roh Moo-hyun and Chinese President Hu Jintao said cooperation between South Korea and China had entered “a new stage” and agreed to set up a hotline between the two countries’ foreign ministers, to establish a regular discussion channel between vice foreign ministers, to expand military cooperation, and to double bilateral trade to US\$200 billion by 2012. The latest move by Seoul to build closer security and economic ties with Beijing is reported to leave U.S. officials and some South Korean officials nervous.⁵³ As the fourth round of Six-Party Talks approached in mid-2005, the complementarity in Chinese and South Korean interests and approaches to a negotiated solution was critical new development that greatly enhanced and facilitated Beijing’s CM leverage over Pyongyang and Washington.⁵⁴

⁵¹ “Roh Hints at New East Asian Order,” Digital Chosun Ilbo, Mar. 22, 2005, online at <http://english.chosun.com/egi-bin/printNews?id=200503220024>, accessed Mar. 23, 2005.

⁵² Ryu Jin, “Roh Seeks N-E Asian Security Regime,” *The Korea Times*, October 21, 2005.

⁵³ “Korea-China Cooperation ‘Reaches New Stage,’” *Chosun Ilbo*, November 16, 2005.

⁵⁴ Scott Snyder, “China-Korea Relations: Six-Party Success and China’s Peninsular Diplomacy,” *Comparative Connections* Vol. 7, No. 3 (October 2005), pp. 111-112.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

During the first nuclear standoff between the DPRK and the United States more than a decade ago, few would have predicted that China would play a proactive conflict-management role in another nuclear standoff on the Korean peninsula. Yet the “intermestic” factors—greater danger, greater stakes, and greater leverage—coalesced in such a way in that Beijing did indeed take an unprecedented mediation role in trying to resolve the second nuclear standoff. China thus finds both Washington and Pyongyang looking to it for a way out of the trap they have made for themselves. Pushed by the North Koreans for more and more aid and by the United States for unilateral nuclear dismantlement in Pyongyang, China has dealt deftly with these twin pressures. Beijing came up with face-saving exits from reckless rhetoric and uncompromising stands, and it put forth as group consensus North Korea’s “commitment for commitment” and “action for action” position, as embodied in the September 19, 2005 Joint Statement of Principles—already dubbed as the Beijing Accord. China has forged functional “peace by pieces” pathways toward a working peace system on the Korean peninsula.

For both principled and pragmatic reasons, Beijing rejected the sanctions approach, despite constant pressure from Washington. The conflict-management mediation role that Beijing has played in the second nuclear standoff has been in its own geopolitical interests, but China has made it clear to the other parties that the process is in the common interest of all the parties involved. While providing the diplomatic and economic support to the DPRK that was necessary to infuse Kim Jong Il with enough confidence not to disengage from the six-party process, China has also made it clear to Washington, Seoul, Moscow, and Tokyo that that the peaceful coexistence of the two Korean states on the peninsula is now in the common interest of all, in the face of the alternative of having to cope with the turmoil and chaos that would follow a system collapse in Pyongyang.

Any fair security framework must address the legitimate concerns and interests of all its members. Common security takes on special significance and urgency in the context of the divided Korean peninsula, given its position as a sensitive flashpoint and strategic pivot.⁵⁵ In this environment, as elsewhere, true humanism (and common sense) recognizes the ineluctable truth that there has never been and never can be *absolute* security in human life. The pursuit of absolute national security through the Bush Doctrine of “preemptive war”—in fact, “preventive war” with no standing in international law—can only strengthen North Korea’s resolve to retain

⁵⁵ For a more thorough statement of these ideas, see Samuel S. Kim, “The U.S.-DPRK Nuclear Standoff.” For another application of a common-security approach in the Korean case, see Samuel S. Kim, “The Two Koreas and World Order,” in Young Whan Kihl, ed., *Korea and the World: Beyond the Cold War* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1994), pp. 29–65, especially 56–59; Mel Gurtov, “Common Security in North Korea: Quest for a New Paradigm in Inter-Korean Relations,” *Asian Survey*, vol. 42, no. 3 (May/June 2002), pp. 397–418.

nuclear weapons as a fungible instrument of regime survival, even transitioning Pyongyang's leadership into more irreversible nuclear directions. The quest for absolute security is a sure recipe for nuclear proliferation.

The common-security approach breaks away from the vicious and deadly logic of interactive security dilemmas and the dynamics of self-fulfilling prophecies via their impact upon the behavior of other states. The issue of North Korea's nuclear program cannot be settled without addressing the country's legitimate security needs and fears in strategically and economically credible ways, that is, with the right mix of security assurances and economic benefits. These have become Pyongyang's bottom line and were also been embodied in the Beijing Accord, albeit in ambiguous terms. Only by taking steps to revive this notion of common security can US-DPRK relations come to rest at a more stable, safe, and sane equilibrium.

As the common-security approach relies on recognizing the interrelations and interdependencies among countries, the Bush administration must step back and reassess the moral and practical implications of its foreign-policy commandment "do as I say, not as I do" when it comes to the subject of nuclear weapons. In place of this unidirectional posturing, the United States must apply a simultaneous and synergistic approach—the functional "peace by pieces" approach⁵⁶—that will allow China's conflict-management efforts to aid in the resolution of the conflict and to move beyond its role as firefighter.

In fact, the ongoing six-party process offers an opportunity to produce something larger than mere resolution of the specific issue of North Korea's nuclear program. Not only is regional and global multilateralism now an integral part of China's new security concept, it is also a useful instrument for Chinese conflict-management diplomacy. Therefore we should seize the twin historical opportunities of China's rising multilateralism and the six-party process in the interests of forming and institutionalizing a truly Northeast Asian security regime, as many of Chinese analysts have suggested, by forwarding greater institutionalization of the six-party process. The Northeast Asian states need to expand multilateral dialogue and economic integration in the interests of order-building and problem-solving. The US-DPRK standoff risks derailing burgeoning Northeast Asian regionalism, yet it is this very regionalism that will help prevent future spirals like that which has characterized both nuclear standoffs between the United States and North Korea.

⁵⁶ For the most authoritative exposition of "classical functionalism" along this line, see David Mitrany, *A Working Peace System* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1966).