
Chinese Influence on the DPRK Negotiations

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The Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea (DPRK) has long been in the center of global attention due to its development of nuclear weapons and its aggressive posture in international and regional affairs. Much effort has been expended, primarily by the Americans but also by allies of the DPRK, to resolve the nuclear problem and to create a peaceful future in the Korean peninsula. So far, the results have been mediocre and the commitments from DPRK could at best be said to be fluctuating. Despite its isolation, and its social and economic problems, the DPRK continues to disregard negotiations with the U.S. and has, according to the U.S., violated established agreements. It's true that the U.S. policy towards the DPRK has been less than cooperative, which has worried North Korea's Northeast Asian neighbors. Pyongyang's only reliable ally has traditionally been the People Republic of China (PRC), but even the Chinese have recently begun to reevaluate the advantages of supporting Pyongyang. The Chinese support is partly born out of the fear of having U.S. troops at the Chinese–Korean border, but also because a DPRK collapse would, apart from a probable war, create huge waves of refugees.

The Chinese impact on negotiations has been affected by its ambivalence both toward the DPRK and toward the U.S. military position in the Korean peninsula. The Chinese fear that a U.S. intervention would dissolve the DPRK and create a united Korea controlled by the Americans. There is also a strong concern in Beijing over Pyongyang's interest in developing nuclear weapons. Apart from the inherent dangers of Kim Jong-Il being armed with such weapons, his acquisition of them would undoubtedly lead to a popular demand in Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK) to acquire nuclear capabilities, something that would further threaten regional security. This ambivalence, in combination with the potentially severe economic and political consequences of war and refugee flows, makes the Chinese an uncomfortable ally of Pyongyang.

Beijing has been accused by the West of pressuring Pyongyang to take a hard position against the United States, rather than encouraging cooperation. On the other hand Beijing has also been a positive force in urging the North Koreans to communicate with the United States. Thus, it's worth examining what role and impact the PRC has had to date in the negotiations with DPRK, and what role it may play in the future.

Underlying the DPRK's negotiation behavior is its unique combination of Confucianism, a distorted form of Marxist-Leninism, and isolation. The almost total isolation has produced chaos and a surrealistic perception of the world and the DPRK's role in it. Having reached the highest form of political

thought—in accordance with Kim Il-Sung’s teachings—the leaders in Pyongyang have the moral right and obligation to educate lesser people. The system has become impenetrable to criticism, since it is based on what are perceived as scientific truths and on a hierarchical worldview—based on Confucianism—where the leaders cannot be questioned. As a result of its self-chosen isolation and its perception of the external world as an ignorant oddity that’s oblivious to the teachings of Kim Il-Sung, the North Koreans assume that outsiders are inferior and yet they feel vulnerable in an environment they do not understand.

Consequently, Pyongyang’s insistence on bilateral negotiations with the U.S. assumes that the Republic of Korea (ROK) is illegitimate. Pyongyang feels that it is surrounded by the U.S. and its “puppets,” Japan and the ROK, and that it has been abandoned by its only ally, the PRC (which it views as having engaged with the enemy, the U.S.). As we will see, this perception has empirical validity. Pyongyang’s behavior and policy has to be understood within the context of the aforementioned worldview and sense of vulnerability.

The long but increasingly strained Sino-DPRK relationship has very much influenced the impact the Chinese have had on negotiations with the North Koreans. For historical, geographical, ideological, and security reasons the Chinese have an interest in the Korean peninsula, and consider the region to be under their tutelage. Owing to the DPRK’s close proximity to one of the PRC’s industrial centers and owing to the grave security risks a destabilized DPRK would constitute (or even worse, a U.S.-controlled unified Korea), Beijing has opted for a strengthening rather than a weakening of the DPRK. Despite its reluctance to allow a U.S. presence, which would not be acceptable, Beijing has realized that the situation is spiraling downward and the current situation must be stabilized before DPRK either collapses or is attacked by the United States.

The deterioration in the relationship between Beijing and Pyongyang, which has occurred since 1994, has affected Chinese influence on negotiations: both in the way Beijing is indirectly influencing the negotiation strategies used by Pyongyang and in the options available for the U.S. and its allies. But despite the deteriorating relationship, the PRC has been, since 1949, the DPRK’s strongest, and some would say only, supporter. The “lips and teeth” relationship that once existed is gone. This is partly because the fourth generation of leaders in Beijing has very little ideological connection to Pyongyang. But the economic insignificance of the DPRK for the Chinese is also a factor. The DPRK’s dependence on the Chinese, however, is increasing, as their isolation from the international arena grows.

During the 1990s, Beijing influenced negotiations with Pyongyang both as its sole ally and as a major regional power. The Chinese tactic was to refrain from publicly criticizing Pyongyang, since they believed they could control North Korea. Furthermore, the U.S. agenda seemed more threatening than any possible situation in DPRK. China’s avoidance of criticism was perceived by Pyongyang as implicit support, which helped reinforce North Korea’s non-conformist stance. The reality was that Beijing was increasingly worried about the North Korean position and had concluded that the DPRK should not be allowed to develop nuclear weapons.

With Beijing's increased frustration, a retraction of support followed. The Chinese also made an unprecedented attempt to openly involve themselves in the Korean conflict, a move contrary to their traditional approach of working quietly and indirectly. As recognized by the United States in all crises on the Korean peninsula, Beijing's position is essential for success in negotiating with Pyongyang. Thus, a pattern develops: Pyongyang responds to changes only in the Chinese position, and little progress is made as long as Pyongyang's perception is that they have Chinese support. But there has been little communication between Washington and Beijing to negotiate a common ground for their Korean policies. Most Sino-U.S. discussions have been conducted with domestic agendas and bargaining positions in mind, rather than cooperative strategies. So far, discussions have led nowhere, thus allowing Pyongyang to maximize its use of the policy differences and to limit the leverage of the U.S. and its allies.

The failure of Sino-U.S. communications on how to deal with the DPRK is apparent. For example, the two nations have not discussed the possibility and implementation of sanctions. Demands for sanctions against the DPRK have come from many states, especially from the West. Beijing has opposed sanctions while Europe and the U.S. have both indicated an interest in unilateral sanctions against DPRK. But it is highly questionable whether sanctions against the DPRK could be implemented without full Chinese endorsement. The PRC is essential, both as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and as a supplier of DPRK's food and energy. Today 90 percent of North Korean energy needs and 40 percent of its food supply derive from China, providing Beijing with unique leverage.

If the Chinese halted the energy supply, the DPRK economy would be paralyzed in less than six months. Thus, Beijing's possible negotiation leverage over DPRK is significant, even if Kim Jong-Il is irrational enough to disregard his only ally. However, Beijing's traditional position has been that economic development provides a better means of influencing North Korea, while sanctions are viewed as merely a tool of further destabilization on the peninsula. But this position has changed since the 1990s, and Beijing has adopted a more tolerant stance toward sanctions and other coercive methods. But this change has lacked transparency and predictability, which has limited its effect. Beijing has not clearly communicated its intentions to the DPRK, the United States, and its allies, thus allowing Pyongyang to keep maximizing its leverage.

The current conflict between the DPRK and its neighbors began in the early 1990s when Pyongyang decided to accelerate its nuclear program, evading International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) treaty obligations with the excuse that it was not allowed to inspect U.S. facilities in South Korea. This action has been perceived as a response to Beijing's engagement with Washington and Seoul, which in some ways has alienated the DPRK. It's forced the DPRK to question the value of the Chinese security guarantees and its nuclear umbrella.

An escalating brinkmanship game followed, which was orchestrated by the North Koreans. Each time Pyongyang gained a favorable response or concession from the U.S. or the ROK, Pyongyang would then raise its demands. This game culminated on March 12, 1993 when DPRK announced its withdrawal from the Non-Proliferation Treaty. This action has been perceived as a type of nuclear

blackmail, since Pyongyang's main objective is to force as many concessions as possible on its challengers in return for the closure of their nuclear weapons program. Despite these games, Beijing has maintained a low profile. China has wielded its influence through hidden channels, recognizing the danger of forcing the DPRK to negotiate under duress, and China's own problems in handling the post-Cold-War order.

While the North Koreans were left to their own devices, they continued believing that they had Chinese support. The international community appealed to Beijing to pressure the DPRK, and the Chinese did try to convince Pyongyang to change its position. But this met with little success, largely due to the Chinese refusal to consider coercive measures and its fear that a U.S.-centered strategy would allow the Americans to control the Korean peninsula. This gave the DPRK enough leverage to withstand the Chinese pressure.

Prior to 1993, Beijing consistently opposed any political pressure upon the DPRK. But in May 1993 the Chinese abstained rather than block a Security Council Resolution calling for the DPRK to change its position. But in 1994 Beijing signaled that it "would support" sanctions towards DPRK. This was a move from its earlier firm stand that the North Koreans should not be pressured, and was intended to tell the DPRK that if it did not soften its position, full Chinese support should not be expected. During this period, however, there were no communications between Beijing and the other involved parties. This limited the possibility for the different parties to adjust their policies to maintain a united front towards Pyongyang, which used this to optimize its position.

In the negotiations with the North Koreans the Chinese have both helped and hindered. The Chinese role as the facilitator of formal and informal negotiations was considered positive by all concerned parties. Pyongyang did still view the PRC as an ally and its involvement in negotiations made Pyongyang feel confident enough to participate. The Chinese influence was felt, for example, in the 1991 Joint Agreement on the De-Nuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, in the acceptance of IAEA inspections in 1992, and in the four-party talks in 1994 that produced the Geneva Agreed Framework. But at the same time, Beijing's general reluctance to force the North Koreans to participate in formal multilateral negotiations gave Pyongyang the impression that it could continue its brinkmanship. Moreover, since Chinese policy intentions were not transparent, the U.S. and its allies were limited in their ability to convincingly threaten North Korea using more forceful measures.

Between 1994 and 2001, the interaction with the DPRK was focused on engagement and dialogue rather than confrontation, but this conversation was largely uncoordinated, especially between Beijing and Washington. The atmosphere of conciliation changed in 2001 with the election of U.S. President George W. Bush, who openly expressed skepticism toward the DPRK. Bush attacked Kim Jong-Il in person. In June, the U.S. moved away from the comprehensive negotiation approach to an issue-specific one. This was seen by Pyongyang as a hostile unilateral action. The two countries' relations further deteriorated with Bush's "axis of evil" address in January 2002 and with the new National Security Strategy in September 2002, which emphasized pre-emptive strikes on countries developing weapons of mass destruction, and which explicitly

mentioned the DPRK. In October, the tension shifted to a crisis after James Kelly's visit to Pyongyang, when the DPRK reportedly admitted to having a secret uranium enrichment program.

The Chinese became a key player in the 2002 nuclear crisis, as both the U.S. and the DPRK sought backing for their respective positions. Beijing called for both sides to remain calm and exercise flexibility, in an effort to maintain its own maneuvering space. Beijing irritated the U.S. by refusing to publicly pressure the DPRK, opting instead to continue its focus on informal influence. The Chinese in turn were not only frustrated by the Bush approach, which they believed would only aggravate the situation; they also became increasingly frustrated with Pyongyang, which escalated the crisis by restarting the Yongbyon nuclear plant and testing short-range ballistic missiles over the Sea of Japan. In 2003, Beijing increased its pressure on Pyongyang and indicated that if the DPRK did not change its position, then China might support a stronger position on sanctions. At one point, the PRC closed the pipeline supplying oil to the DPRK for three days, due to "technical difficulties," which emphasized the seriousness of the situation.

The Chinese pressure ultimately produced a trilateral meeting held in Beijing on April 23 and 24: a compromise between Pyongyang's preference for bilateral talks and Washington's call for multilateral talks. But this meeting was cancelled after the first day when (according to U.S. reports) Li Gun—the head of the Korean delegation—told James Kelly that the DPRK already had nuclear weapons. This was arguably a diplomatic move made by the North Koreans to show Beijing their frustration over Chinese pressure and over China's engagement with the DPRK's adversaries.

This incident made the PRC move closer to Japan, Russia, the ROK, and the United States. China was now more open in dealing with DPRK, and began to emphasize the importance of multilateral forums. This new multilateral approach was further emphasized after Pyongyang's decision to scrap the Joint Agreement on the De-Nuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, and after North Korea stated its ambition of creating nuclear deterrence. The Chinese did, on August 1, 2003, manage to convince the DPRK to participate in six-way talks in Beijing. This meeting produced a consensus on the need to meet again. It was described by the U.S. State Department as "the beginning of a process." But this was "cancelled" on October 1, 2003 by the DPRK's Deputy Foreign Minister Choe Su Hon in his speech before the UN General Assembly, and the DPRK still refuses to discuss the issue in any multilateral forum.

As we have seen, the negotiations with the DPRK could have been more effective if the policies had been coordinated between the different actors. The PRC is the only actor that has some leverage over DPRK. Without the explicit and direct engagement of the Chinese, there will be little opportunity for resolving the Korean conflict. The lack of Sino-U.S. communications has been an important stumbling block in the negotiation process. Without coordinating the two country's policies, the North Koreans will continue playing them off, against each other. The possible influence of Beijing in the negotiations has so far not been used effectively. For more successful negotiations with the DPRK,

future Chinese participation must be both expanded and coordinated with the agenda of the U.S. and its allies.

The positions of both the PRC and the U.S. must be adjusted to incorporate the legitimate security and political realities of both states. The focus of the Sino-U.S. communication must be on finding common ground. They should emphasize issues such as the de-nuclearization of the DPRK and the region, rather than getting stuck on issues that divide them. The alternatives are only war and human suffering.

This is not to say that the DPRK conflict will be solved if all parties agree on how to proceed. Nevertheless, this is the first road block, which must be removed to allow effective negotiations with the DPRK and to reach a more satisfying solution to the conflict. To make progress, all actors in the region, including the United States, will have to accept the DPRK as a political entity and accept its legitimate security concerns. The vulnerability and isolation of the North Koreans must be taken into account. Unacceptable behavior should not be rewarded and the DPRK should not be handled with silk gloves. But the situation must be de-escalated. In exchange for long-term benefits, the international community might have to be lenient towards DPRK in the short term.

Besides improving communication and coordination between the PRC, the United States, and the latter's allies, the DPRK must also adjust its position if the negotiations are going to be successful. Pyongyang has been non-compliant and thus it must open itself to multilateral negotiations and prove its reliability. Chinese leverage should be used as both a carrot and a stick to encourage Pyongyang's compliance with the negotiated agreements. In the coming years, Beijing must accept its instrumental role and take a firm stand. It must show its willingness to enforce punishments for DPRK non-compliance, and to enhance cooperation and coordination with the U.S. and other parties—in recognition of the need for everyone to look beyond their own national agendas to resolve a possibly devastating crisis.

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