Ending North Korea’s Nuclear Ambitions: The Need for Stronger Chinese Action

Hui Zhang

North Korea has recently taken a series of provocative steps to challenge the international community. These steps include test-launching a long-range rocket, walking away from the six-party talks and all disarmament agreements, kicking out international inspectors from its nuclear facilities, conducting an underground nuclear test May 25—a more powerful blast than the one conducted in 2006—testing a half-dozen short-range missiles, and announcing it had resumed plutonium production and started a program to enrich uranium. Pyongyang reportedly also is preparing a long-range missile test and a third nuclear test. If unchecked, North Korea will surely increase the quantity and quality of its arsenal. Even worse, once Pyongyang has more than enough weapons for its deterrent, it might be tempted to sell the surplus. The longer the crisis lasts, the more nuclear capable North Korea will become and the more difficult it will be to roll back Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions.

China, North Korea's most important ally and trade partner, has joined the rest of the international community in responding to the North Korean actions. Beijing has indicated, however, that it wants a balanced approach and does not want to push Pyongyang much harder. Nevertheless, China can and should do more to press its neighbor. North Korea's recent series of actions threatens China's national interests as well as those of the United States and countries in Northeast Asia.

It is important to have realistic expectations for changes in China’s approach. Beijing can be expected to support modest UN sanctions against North Korea, as it did in response to the first nuclear test, but it probably will respond less strongly than the United States, Japan, and South Korea would hope. Beijing probably will maintain that any harsh measures should be directed toward facilitating talks over denuclearization but should not destabilize the North Korean regime.

On the other hand, Beijing must recognize that its modest approach, as the past several years have demonstrated, has not successfully constrained Pyongyang's nuclear development. Pyongyang proceeded with its two nuclear tests and has again boycotted the six-party talks. The May test has exacerbated the tense situation on the Korean peninsula and has destroyed regional stability. These results do not serve Beijing's major interest: a nuclear-free and stable Korean peninsula. If Beijing continues to allow Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions to go unchecked, Pyongyang will put Beijing in an embarrassing position, open it to more international pressure, and ultimately pose great risks to China's national interests.

China's Interests

Hours after North Korea's most recent nuclear test, the Chinese Foreign Ministry issued a statement strongly denouncing it:

On 25 May 2009, the DPRK [Democratic People's Republic of Korea] conducted another nuclear test in disregard for the common opposition of the international community. The Chinese Government is firmly opposed to this act.... To bring about denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, oppose nuclear proliferation and safeguard peace and stability in Northeast Asia is the firm and consistent stand of the Chinese Government. China strongly urges the DPRK to honor its commitment to denuclearization, stop relevant moves that may further worsen the situation and return to the Six-
Beijing issued a similar statement in response to Pyongyang's first nuclear test in 2006, condemning the blast as brazen. China's response this time was even stronger. According to media reports, Beijing was informed by Pyongyang less than half an hour in advance of the explosion and was greatly angered and offended by the test because it blatantly disregarded China's calls for denuclearization. Even cautious high-level Chinese officials, including Vice President Xi Jinping and Minister of National Defense Liang Guanglie, have made harsh statements in opposition to Pyongyang's nuclear test. Moreover, Beijing has reportedly canceled some previously scheduled high-level visits to Pyongyang.

China's strategic plan through 2020 is focused on economic development and "building a well-off society in an all-round way," which requires a stable international environment, particularly among neighboring countries. A nuclear North Korea would stimulate a regional nuclear arms race and undermine regional stability. North Korea's nuclear and missile development provides a pretext for Japan to accelerate deployment of a joint U.S.-Japanese missile defense shield, which could mitigate China's nuclear deterrent. Moreover, a worsening crisis would generate a massive flow of North Korean refugees headed for China.

To bolster its image as a responsible stakeholder in the international community, China should show its willingness to contribute to international nonproliferation efforts. Accepting a nuclear North Korea would set a bad precedent both for the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) regime-from which North Korea has withdrawn—and other countries with nuclear ambitions.

North Korea has long been a thorn in China's side. Pyongyang played a game of brinkmanship between Beijing and Moscow for several decades during the Cold War. Further nuclear and missile development would add a dangerous new element, allowing North Korea's strategic nuclear-strike capability to cover all of China. Thus, China, in the long term if not the near term, faces huge risks from a nuclear North Korea.

**Beijing's Leverage**

Among the interested players in the North Korean nuclear issue, China has the most significant economic and political leverage over the North Korean regime. China has been a close ally of North Korea over the past 50 years, with a friendship cemented in blood during the Korean War. Also, China is North Korea's largest trading partner, reportedly supplying North Korea with up to 90 percent of its oil imports and about 45 percent of its subsistence-level food supplies. Moreover, cross-border trade in 2008 was reportedly about $2.7 billion, an increase of about 40 percent from 2007.

Since April 2003, China has hosted one trilateral negotiation and six rounds of the six-party talks. During these negotiations, China has acted not only as a host, but also as a mediator and constructive participant. China's major role in negotiations, as former Vice Foreign Minister Wang Yi, the head of the Chinese delegation to the first three rounds of the six-party talks, emphasized, "is contributing to peace and talks" (quan he cu tan). China, according to official statements, hopes the parties to the talks will take actions to build trust, reduce suspicions, enhance consensus, and promote cooperation in order to create a win-win situation.

In particular, China's role became even more proactive in the fourth round of the talks, leading to the breakthrough agreement on a joint statement of principles. During the fourth round, China not only tabled five drafts of the joint statement but also took a "reject/accept" approach to push the United States to accept the joint statement. Beijing also reportedly has lured Pyongyang to each round of the six-party talks with tens of millions of dollars in incentives. U.S. officials have praised China's active role in the talks, saying it has helped U.S.-Chinese relations.

Although Beijing is shifting from its traditional low-profile role in the affairs of the Korean peninsula toward a more active and constructive role in defusing the nuclear crisis, Beijing's leverage on Pyongyang is constrained by two main factors. First, Beijing believes the nuclear crisis is mainly the business of Washington and Pyongyang and, as such, is dependent on the political will of those two
players. Second, to maintain regional stability, Beijing's bottom line is that war on the Korean peninsula and an abrupt collapse of the Kim Jong Il regime must be avoided at all costs. Beijing has called on "all parties concerned to respond in a cool-headed and appropriate manner and persist in seeking a peaceful solution through consultation and dialogue."[6]

Yet, Beijing's relatively passive, noninterventionist diplomacy has not helped with its top priority: regional stability, to which the continuing North Korean nuclear crisis poses a huge threat.

**More Pressure Needed**

Because Beijing has the most leverage on Pyongyang, Beijing is facing great pressure from the international community, particularly Washington and Tokyo. Some Western officials and scholars complain that Beijing's cautious approach to Pyongyang has not constrained North Korea's nuclear development. North Korea has proceeded with its nuclear tests and, since April 14, has boycotted the six-party talks hosted by Beijing since 2003. These actions have called into question Chinese leadership in the region.

Beijing is also facing great pressure on the domestic front. The nuclear test has prompted a strong reaction from the Chinese public. More and more Chinese citizens are angered by North Korea's repeated escalation of the crisis and its imperviousness to Beijing's demands for denuclearization. They believe that North Korea is doing great damage to the peace of Northeast Asia, and many worry that Beijing could be dragged into another Korean war by Pyongyang's rash actions.

According to some recent surveys in China, more than two-thirds of respondents believe Beijing should take stronger actions to constrain Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions, including cutting economic aid and applying UN sanctions. They consider North Korea a liability that, if unchecked, will create trouble for China's economic and security interests. Many Chinese believe that the concepts of North Korea as a buffer zone and the "lips to China's teeth" are no longer relevant or salient. Beyond concerns about a nuclear North Korea's impact on the stability of China's security environment, they also worry that a nuclear North Korea would pose a huge environmental threat to China's northeastern provinces. Much of the Chinese public fears that an accident from a nuclear test or weapon would cause heavy radioactive contamination in that region.

Recently, the Chinese media have begun to criticize Pyongyang openly for its nuclear program. For instance, *Global Times*, published by the government-run *People's Daily* newspaper, ran a June 3 editorial entitled "North Korea Should Not Offend the Chinese People." The editorial said, "The Chinese people's impression of North Korea is at the lowest level in history.... North Korea should understand that offending the Chinese people is shaking and destroying the foundation of the bilateral relationship. The changing attitude of the Chinese people toward North Korea will surely affect the government's policy toward North Korea."[7]

A majority of the public and many experts in China have called on Beijing to adjust its policy on North Korea. Although it may be difficult for Beijing to disregard this appeal, it can be expected that Beijing's position toward Pyongyang will not change significantly in the near future. If Beijing were to make any changes, it would take cautious and gradual steps. Beijing may wish to retain close ties to Pyongyang in order to gain more leverage over it. Also, although Beijing would be willing to strengthen its relationship with other parties in negotiations over the nuclear issue, it is not willing to take sides between Pyongyang and Washington.

China supports new, tightened UN sanctions on North Korea for its nuclear test, but it has had to figure out its own appropriate response to Pyongyang. Whether it acts through the United Nations or on its own, Beijing has to strike a balance between being tough enough to teach Pyongyang a lesson and not pushing Pyongyang toward an extreme reaction or even regime collapse. At the same time, Beijing must also meet the demands of Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul in pushing toward a denuclearized and stable peninsula. This overall effort would be a big challenge to China's diplomatic acuity and wisdom.

South Korea and Japan have affirmed that they would not tolerate a nuclear North Korea. Thus, a similar affirmation by China would push North Korea to think twice before continuing its nuclear
Ending North Korea's Nuclear Ambitions: The Need for Stronger Chinese Action
Published on Arms Control Association (https://www.armscontrol.org)

program. China should deliver a clear message to Pyongyang: nuclear weapons are not in North Korea's long-term national security interest. Nuclear weapons will generate increasing international pressure and economic sanctions that will further devastate the already poor North Korean economy.

Beijing's control of energy aid to Pyongyang could be crucial in pushing Pyongyang to denuclearize. Recent history suggests that such an approach could be effective. China reportedly shut off an oil pipeline to North Korea for three days in March 2003 due to "technical difficulties." China's move was widely interpreted as an exercise of its economic leverage to pressure Pyongyang to attend a trilateral meeting held in Beijing in April 2003.

As it pushes Pyongyang, Beijing should maintain its bottom line, which is to avoid war on the Korean peninsula and an abrupt collapse of the Kim regime. One concern is that a U.S. military strike on North Korea could spark a full-scale war that would inevitably harm China's economic development. A U.S. strike could also force Beijing into an embarrassing position because the 1961 Sino-Korean Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance obliges China to provide military aid to North Korea in the event of war. Furthermore, the fall of the Kim government could lead to sudden Korean unification and an uncertain geopolitical realignment, including the prospect of U.S. troops at China's border.

Beijing should be able to adjust its pressure on Pyongyang with a wide range of approaches, broadening its current "pure carrot" approach to include curbs on oil supplies and other exports. It is in Beijing's interests, however, to ensure that the pressure it applies on North Korea is just a means toward denuclearization and not regime change or collapse.

**U.S.-Chinese Coordination**

Given that Washington holds what Pyongyang covets most-diplomatic normalization and security guarantees-Beijing should privately persuade Washington to engage in bilateral dialogue with Pyongyang under the auspices of the six-party talks and put on the bargaining table a reasonable offer in exchange for Pyongyang's denuclearization. Such an offer should include robust security guarantees, normalization of relations, and economic aid. Any resolution of the nuclear impasse has to address the reasonable security concerns of North Korea. Pyongyang has often said that its nuclear ambitions are driven solely by the U.S. military threat. Thus, Pyongyang would most likely give up its nuclear program if it could get reliable security assurances in addition to economic and political benefits. Without Washington's cooperation, Pyongyang will undoubtedly continue to escalate the crisis, and Beijing's influence on Pyongyang could be expected to produce only limited success. Eventually, regardless of Pyongyang's intentions, if Beijing and Washington cannot tolerate a nuclear-armed North Korea, Washington must make a serious offer to the North Koreans. Then, Beijing can press Pyongyang to accept such an offer by maximizing its leverage. This would be the most feasible way toward denuclearization of the Korean peninsula.

It should be not difficult for Washington to satisfy Pyongyang's needs. Washington should recognize the importance of regime survival and the need for economic reform in North Korea. Given the long history of mutual mistrust, Washington may not be sure about Pyongyang's real strategic intentions, but the United States should take a chance by starting serious talks with North Korea. Washington's offer should include normalization and economic aid, including energy, following a principle of quid pro quo.

In practice, what North Korea could potentially offer in a negotiation are pledges that, once implemented, are difficult to reverse because they involve physical hardware or infrastructure. Such steps include dismantling known facilities for plutonium production and other processes relevant to a nuclear weapons program, surrendering all plutonium produced in the past, and ending its uranium-enrichment and long-range missile programs. Offers the United States could make, including normalization and pledges of nonaggression and nonintervention, would be easier to reverse if North Korea did not follow its commitment to nuclear disarmament. Thus, any breakthroughs in the negotiations over North Korea's nuclear program would likely have to start with Washington taking the first step.

It is possible that, as Pyongyang has recently said, it will not accept any deal that requires it to give
Ending North Korea's Nuclear Ambitions: The Need for Stronger Chinese Action
Published on Arms Control Association (https://www.armscontrol.org)

up its nuclear program. If so, Beijing's control of aid to Pyongyang could be crucial in pushing Pyongyang to make its final decision on denuclearization. Because North Korea has very limited energy resources, long-term sustainable economic advancement depends on Pyongyang opening its doors to the international community, especially to foreign investment, trade, and aid from China, South Korea, and Japan. South Korea and Japan have affirmed that they would not tolerate a nuclear North Korea. Thus, an affirmation that Beijing would give no support to a nuclear North Korea would force Pyongyang to think seriously about its nuclear ambitions.

Finally, Beijing may show a greater willingness to press Pyongyang if Washington also addresses China's concerns, including U.S. missile defense and space weapons programs,[8] U.S.-Japanese missile defense cooperation, U.S. missile defense sales to Taiwan, and the deployment of U.S. military forces in the Korean peninsula if the North Korean regime collapses. Ultimately, if Washington can clearly demonstrate to Beijing that its long-term strategic intentions in the region would not constrain China, it could receive greater support from Beijing in negotiating with Pyongyang. Some in China are concerned that once the North Korean nuclear issue is resolved, Washington will focus its efforts on containing China. In addition, some suspect that Washington really has no desire for North Korean denuclearization and merely cares about the issue of nuclear transfer from North Korea. They think a nuclear North Korea could provide a pretext for Washington to strengthen its military ties with allies in the region, thereby constraining China.

A Denuclearization Road Map

Given the long history of mistrust and animosity between Washington and Pyongyang, North Korean denuclearization will not be achieved in one step. A road map is needed that links North Korean denuclearization with the gradual delivery of concrete benefits, including security assurances, diplomatic normalization, economic reform, and Northeast Asian security cooperation. In practice, the joint statement of September 19, 2005, already provided the foundation for a "verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in a peaceful manner,"[9] in which North Korea committed to denuclearization in return for a set of security and economic benefits. The six parties agreed to take coordinated steps to implement the statement in a phased manner, "commitment for commitment, action for action."[10] The United States and North Korea have had very different timelines, however, and the sequencing of actions for the denuclearization process has not been well coordinated. North Korea and the United States are wary of giving the other side something valuable at an early stage in the process.

To address that obstacle, China should act as a mediator and play a more proactive and constructive role by offering its own road map for North Korean denuclearization. That detailed road map should include a timetable and delineate the reciprocal actions each side should carry out at certain stages. For each stage, the road map should clearly establish what North Korea should pledge to do, what inspection and verification provisions should be taken, and what benefits North Korea would receive regarding security assurances and economic aid. To promote North Korean denuclearization, China could play a number of active roles. For example, China, alone or together with Russia, could provide North Korea with some kind of security guarantee to reduce its security concerns. China could also help settle some of the disputes between Pyongyang and Washington during the verification stages. In addition, China could monitor and press both parties to implement faithfully their pledges at each stage.

The following is a road map describing three stages toward North Korean denuclearization: the first stage would focus on refreezing and disabling plutonium production; the second stage would involve dismantlement and decommissioning of all plutonium programs; and the third stage would entail the dismantlement of the highly enriched uranium (HEU) program. Each stage should be completed with adequate transparency and verification measures. At the outset, the six parties would agree to a joint statement of specific commitments under the road map. For example, North Korea would commit to abandon all of its nuclear programs (plutonium and HEU programs) and return to the NPT and to International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards. North Korea would also pledge not to transfer any nuclear weapons, fissile material, or knowledge during the implementation of the three stages. The United States and others would pledge to respect Pyongyang's sovereignty, normalize their diplomatic relations with North Korea, negotiate a peace treaty on the Korean peninsula, and pursue a mechanism for Northeast Asian security cooperation. The United States and other countries
should also commit to provide North Korea with economic cooperation and energy assistance, adding specific pledges to the general principles articulated in the 2005 joint statement.

**First Stage:** As a first step to revive the six-party talks quickly, the United States should commit to having direct bilateral talks with North Korea for diplomatic normalization at an early stage under the six-party talks. Meanwhile, China should press North Korea to return to the six-party talks. All parties should reaffirm their commitment to the 2005 joint statement and the 2007 agreement on disablement. While North Korea is disabling its plutonium-production facilities and freezing its HEU program, the United States and other parties should take reciprocal actions, including security assurances and energy aid. The United States should affirm its commitment of security assurances to North Korea by respecting Pyongyang's sovereignty, not seeking a regime change, and formally stating it had no intention to attack or invade. North Korea, South Korea, and the United States should negotiate a trilateral peace treaty. The need for such a treaty is now particularly urgent because North Korea has withdrawn from the 1953 armistice treaty that ended the Korean War.

At that point in the road map, the United States would begin to take steps to lift economic sanctions, establish a liaison office, and assure economic cooperation between North and South Korea, as well as between North Korea and Japan. All relevant parties would resume energy aid to North Korea at the earliest possible time. To jump-start a new round of the six-party talks, Washington would send a prominent figure—a former president or other high-level official—to visit Pyongyang to help break the ice.

**Second Stage:** The second stage would include two phases to dismantle North Korea's plutonium program. In the first phase, North Korea would dismantle all of its plutonium-production facilities as a step toward a long-term decommissioning program. To reciprocate Pyongyang's cooperation in this phase, the United States and others would provide further security and economic benefits, including the replacement of U.S. liaison offices with an embassy and the establishment of full diplomatic relations. Meanwhile, Japan would normalize its relations with North Korea after resolving the remaining abductee issues. Finally, in order to get to full normalization with Washington, Pyongyang would agree to a treaty ending its development of long-range missiles and halting all exports of missiles and missile technology.

After Pyongyang and Washington established normalized relations, Pyongyang would move quickly to the second phase: dismantling its plutonium weapons and all facilities associated with the weaponization program, as well as surrendering all of its plutonium.

It should be noted that the key to denuclearizing North Korea is the timing of normalization. Although Washington made an offer of normalization in the 2005 joint statement, it made the offer subject to the two countries' "respective bilateral policies." According to Washington, there will be a long road to normalizing relations with Pyongyang. That road will include not only denuclearization, but also discussions on human rights, biological and chemical weapons, ballistic missile programs, conventional weapons proliferation, and terrorism and other illicit activities. Pyongyang, however, wants normalization at a much earlier stage, before dismantling its nuclear program.

North Korea will not dismantle its nuclear program before receiving tangible security assurances, in particular, normalized relations with Washington. The only leverage that Kim Jong Il possesses is his threat to go nuclear. Therefore, Pyongyang fears that once it dismantles its nuclear weapons, there will be no deterrent against a U.S. military strike. Washington, however, as the world's pre-eminent military superpower, would have considerable strategic flexibility. If the United States provided North Korea with security assurances in return for denuclearization and North Korea then reneged on its commitment, the United States would not have lost much. Such a scenario could be frustrating and embarrassing for the United States, but that country's security would not be at risk. In contrast, if North Korea gave up its nuclear program and the United States later reneged on its security assurances, perhaps even by supporting or participating in an invasion, North Korea's very existence could be seen as being put at risk.

**Third Stage:** In the last stage, North Korea would complete dismantlement of its HEU program. The level of verification required for the HEU program depends on the status of the program, such as whether or not it has produced HEU. Its status could be somewhere between the research and
Ending North Korea's Nuclear Ambitions: The Need for Stronger Chinese Action
Published on Arms Control Association (https://www.armscontrol.org)

Ending North Korea's Nuclear Ambitions: The Need for Stronger Chinese Action
Published on Arms Control Association (https://www.armscontrol.org)

development level and pursuit of the capability to construct a pilot experimental facility. If Pyongyang is only at the beginning of a uranium-enrichment program, as it indicated June 13, North Korea could be years away from producing enough HEU for one bomb.

Beyond denuclearization, North Korea would also sign and implement the Chemical Weapons Convention and the Biological Weapons Convention. Furthermore, the United States, China, and other relevant parties would negotiate a permanent peace regime in Northeast Asia. Such an agreement would play a major role in liberating the Korean peninsula from its Cold War quagmire and going to the root of the North Korean nuclear issue.

Pyongyang would need to cut its conventional forces gradually to achieve parity with South Korean and U.S. forces. That step would facilitate North Korean economic reform by significantly reducing the economic burden on the country of maintaining such a large military. Particularly valuable encouragement for North Korean force reductions would come from the removal of U.S. troops from the South. Furthermore, all other interested and involved parties would help the two Koreas pursue gradual integration toward unification. During this third stage, other countries would continue to aid North Korea's economic reform, help North Korea improve human rights, and provide funds and technologies for the modernization of its economic infrastructure.

Conclusion

A nuclear North Korea would put China's national interests at great risk. Beijing can increase pressure on Pyongyang, using positive inducements and punitive measures. The chances are low, however, that Beijing will radically adjust its North Korea policy, at least for the near future. Beijing will continue to maintain its bottom-line approach, avoiding war on the Korean peninsula and an abrupt collapse of the Kim regime. From China's perspective, these scenarios must be avoided at all costs because they are contrary to China's primary interest in a stable environment.

Given that Washington holds what Pyongyang desires most (security guarantees), Beijing should persuade Washington to engage in bilateral dialogue with Pyongyang. China should push the United States to put reasonable offers on the bargaining table, including robust security guarantees, normalization of relations, and economic aid. At that point, China could maximize its leverage and press North Korea to accept the terms offered. This strategy may be the only way to roll back Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions.

This strategy may not work. Pyongyang may decide not to give up its nuclear program for any sort of deal. Yet, if all of North Korea's neighbors, including China and the United States, make it clear that they will never tolerate a nuclear-armed North Korea and that international isolation therefore will inexorably continue, Pyongyang may decide to give up its nuclear ambitions. Pyongyang will not yield to a purely "stick" approach, however, and eventually a desperate and nuclear North Korea may take actions that are in no one's interests.

To achieve a stable and denuclearized Korean peninsula, all parties concerned must come back to the negotiating table. In particular, Beijing must press Pyongyang to return to the six-party talks as soon as possible. Given that Washington and Pyongyang deeply mistrust each other and neither side wants to go first, China, as a mediator, should play a more proactive and constructive role by offering its own road map for North Korean denuclearization. The six-party talks espoused a general principle of "commitment for commitment, action for action" as a means to denuclearization, but there were no specific timelines or sequencing of actions in the denuclearization process.

The three-stage road map detailed above should fill this gap and satisfy the principal goals of all the parties involved. Pressing for a road map is a step that holds few risks for China and could contribute greatly to resolving the long-standing international stalemate with North Korea. That success, in turn, would help China achieve its chief priority: a stable and a denuclearized Korean peninsula.
Hui Zhang is leading a research initiative on China’s nuclear policies for Harvard University's Project on Managing the Atom in the John F. Kennedy School of Government. He is a physicist and a specialist in nuclear arms control and Chinese nuclear policy issues.

ENDNOTES


5. See, for example, the declaration by Vice Foreign Minister Wu Dawei, who served as chairman of the fourth round of the talks and head of the Chinese delegation, on the adoption of the joint statement at the fourth round six-party talks, held in Beijing on September 19, 2005.


10. Ibid.

11. Just before the second nuclear crisis in October 2002, Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi visited Pyongyang in September 2002 in an effort to speed up Japanese-North Korean diplomatic normalization. Kim Jong Il made a surprise admission during this trip that North Korea had abducted Japanese citizens in the 1970s and 1980s. Since then, the abductee issue has been a key obstacle to normalized relations between the two countries.