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North Korea: The Beginning of a China-U.S. Partnership?

"This whole six-party process has done more to bring the U.S. and China together than any other process I'm aware of," stated Christopher Hill, assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs and the top U.S. negotiator at the six-party talks, after agreement was reached on the February 13, 2007, action plan on North Korean nuclear disarmament.[1] This remark, one of numerous accolades by U.S. officials praising Beijing for its cooperation on the North Korean nuclear issue, was undoubtedly partly intended to encourage China to use its influence over North Korea to further the process of denuclearization. Yet, there is little question that successful cooperation on the North Korean nuclear crisis has provided a boost to the U.S.-Chinese relationship.

The threat posed by North Korea's nuclear programs presented a rare strategic opportunity for close U.S.-Chinese cooperation that would prove to be the first successful comprehensive collaboration on an international security issue of critical importance to both countries since the collapse of the Soviet Union.[2] Determined that the North Korean nuclear issue should be addressed multilaterally rather than bilaterally, the Bush administration sought to involve China from the inception of the second North Korean nuclear crisis in the fall of 2002.

Initially, China preferred to remain uninvolved. Beijing did not view the situation as an opportunity to strengthen ties with the United States or enhance its role in Northeast Asia. Worried by the unraveling of the Agreed Framework, a bilateral accord signed by Washington and Pyongyang in October 1994 to prevent North Korea from developing nuclear weapons, the Chinese urged the United States to resolve the tense situation through bilateral

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dialogue with North Korea. Eventually, however, China judged the risks of inaction to exceed the costs of initiating a multilateral dialogue process.

Over time, China's role in the process evolved from a passive onlooker to a reticent host and finally to "chief mediator" and "honest broker."[3] Today, although the crisis is far from resolved and the realization of denuclearization is uncertain, an examination of the process from the onset of the crisis in 2002 to the February 2007 agreement offers a useful lens through which to examine U.S.-Chinese cooperation on a critical security issue and its impact on the broader bilateral relationship. It also provides a test of Beijing's willingness to take up former deputy secretary of state Robert Zoellick's challenge "to become a responsible stakeholder" in the international system.[4]

An Unstable Start

U.S.-Chinese relations had gotten off to a rocky start under the Bush administration, facing an early crisis when a Chinese fighter jet and a U.S. reconnaissance plane collided in the waters over the South China Sea on April 1, 2001. A Chinese pilot died, and the U.S. aircrew was detained for 11 days, providing a sobering lesson to both countries about the perils of an antagonistic U.S.-Chinese relationship.

By the end of the year, terrorism had emerged as the most immediate and dangerous security challenge to the United States, and the Bush administration relegated its concerns about potential threats from China to the back burner. President George W. Bush's campaign rhetoric, which portrayed China as a "strategic competitor," was discarded in favor of a policy seeking "a constructive relationship with a changing China," as enunciated in the 2002 National Security Strategy.[5] Beijing seized on the opportunity presented by the September 11 terrorist attacks to bandwagon with Washington in the U.S.-led global war on terrorism and improve the bilateral relationship.[6]

Nevertheless, distrust and suspicion persisted in both countries. Skeptics in the United States argued that due to enduring sources of tension rooted in "ideological differences and shifting of power relations," the convergence of U.S. and Chinese interests and policies on counterterrorism was only temporary.[7] Similarly, Chinese strategists continued to view the Bush administration as resolved to impede China's rise to great-power status and portrayed U.S. military operations on China's periphery as part of a broader strategy of "containment" or "encirclement."[8] It was in this complex atmosphere of strengthened official cooperation against a backdrop of continuing mutual suspicion that the North Korean nuclear crisis unfolded when James Kelly, Hill's predecessor, was dispatched to Pyongyang in October 2002 to confront North Korean officials about a covert uranium-enrichment program.

Getting China Involved: Trilateral Talks and the Six-Party Talks

The Bush administration resolved to adopt a different approach toward the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) than the Clinton administration had pursued. Judging that the United States lacked sufficient leverage bilaterally to compel North Korea to abandon its nuclear programs, Washington opted for a multilateral strategy that would enable regional actors with a stake in realizing a denuclearized Korean peninsula to pool their leverage. A multilateral approach especially appealed to then–national security adviser Condoleezza Rice, who had a personal interest in promoting the establishment of multilateral security institutions in Asia.[9] The U.S. decision to deal with the North Korean nuclear challenge multilaterally provided an exceptional opportunity for China further to bolster ties with the United States. One analyst later contended that the North Korean nuclear crisis was "a gift from [North Korean leader] Kim Jong-il" to advance U.S.-Chinese cooperation.[10]

> **The North Korea crisis was a gift to advance U.S.-Chinese cooperation.**

Beijing was reluctant to join in a multilateral effort to persuade North Korea to give up its nuclear ambitions. First, it was uncertain whether Washington's accusations that North Korea was seeking to produce highly enriched uranium were valid. Second, the Chinese believed that North Korea intended to use its nuclear programs as a bargaining chip to obtain concessions from the United States, and therefore a bilateral U.S.–North Korean solution was feasible. Third, the Bush administration's disdain toward Pyongyang and Kim led many Chinese officials and analysts to suspect that Washington's main objective was to depose Kim by any means necessary, including using military force.[11] If this were true, Beijing did not want publicly to rally behind the United States in putting pressure on Pyongyang, a long-standing Chinese ally. Finally, China was leery of assuming an active diplomatic role, which was contrary to Deng Xiaoping's enduring guideline to assume a low profile in the international arena—a tenet increasingly subject to debate but still largely observed by Beijing.

The North Korean nuclear issue was at the top of the agenda when Bush received President Jiang Zemin at his Crawford, Texas, ranch in October 2002, when he pressed the Chinese president to use his country's leverage over North Korea to further the goal of denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. Jiang, noting only that "China does not associate itself with North Korea's nuclear program," insisted that the problem was a bilateral issue between the United States and North Korea.[12] Common ground was reached, however,

on the goal of achieving a denuclearized Korean peninsula through peaceful means. At a joint press conference following the Crawford summit, Bush declared that "[w]e agreed that peace and stability in Northeast Asia must be maintained. Both sides will continue to work towards a nuclear-weapons-free Korean Peninsula and a peaceful resolution of this issue."[13] According to a former senior National Security Council official, Bush would subsequently often refer to this agreement as the "Crawford consensus"—the starting point for cooperation between the United States and China on the North Korean nuclear issue.

Cooperation on the nuclear issue was not inevitable.

Yet, the Crawford consensus did not map out specific actions the two countries would take to attain their shared goal, and differences were apparent. Whereas Bush saw the crisis as "a chance for the United States and China to work very closely together to achieve that vision of a nuclear weapons–free peninsula," Jiang only pledged cautiously to "continue to consult on this issue and work together to ensure a peaceful resolution of the problem."[14]

China's resistance to becoming enmeshed in the North Korean nuclear issue remained firm through the end of 2002. Chinese analysts blamed Washington's hard-line policy toward Pyongyang for causing the crisis.[15] In November 2002, Jiang told a visiting senior U.S. delegation led by former secretary of defense William Perry that "the tense relationship between the United States and North Korea was caused by the United States, and the crisis should be resolved by direct bilateral talks between those two countries."[16]

China's strategic calculus began to change in early 2003 with developments in the nuclear crisis and persistent U.S. pressure. North Korea's provocative actions—reactivation of its five–megawatt electric nuclear reactor in Yongbyon, withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and expulsion of the International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors—worried Beijing. Due primarily to U.S. intransigence, the Chinese saw their original plan of promoting direct talks between the United States and North Korea failing.

Fear of U.S. military action against North Korea also played a role in China's strategic rethinking. The United States' new military preemption doctrine, articulated in the National Security Strategy released in September 2002, was put into action as the United States prepared to invade Iraq in early 2003. The Chinese worried that success in Iraq would strengthen the hand of those in the Bush administration who advocated launching a military strike on the nuclear complex at Yongbyon, triggering anarchy in North Korea and sending a flood of refugees into northeastern China.

Steps to beef up U.S. military forces in the Pacific, including the deployment of 24 B-1 and B-52 bombers to Guam, further rattled Beijing.[17] Keen to avoid getting dragged into another Korean conflict at all costs, some Chinese analysts suggested that Beijing should seek to excise the mutual assistance clause from the 1961 Sino–North Korean Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance, which obliges China to defend North Korea against an unprovoked aggression. According to one Chinese expert, Beijing asked North Korea to revise the treaty, but Pyongyang refused.[18]

Desire to avoid a setback in U.S.-Chinese relations also factored into Beijing's reassessment. Preserving stable ties with Washington was a top priority. Improvement in relations with the Bush administration had been hard won and to some extent remained tenuous because exchanges between the U.S. and Chinese militaries were still frozen and U.S. intentions toward Taiwan remained unclear. Beijing had carefully averted a confrontation with Washington in the UN Security Council over the Iraq war and hoped to avoid a setback in relations over divergent approaches to resolving the North Korean nuclear issue.

The critical change in China's stance came when Secretary of State Colin Powell visited Beijing in late February 2003. Powell conveyed Bush's determination to resolve the North Korea nuclear crisis diplomatically but insisted that this could only be achieved multilaterally. Jiang was persuaded that the United States would not bend in its opposition to bilateral U.S.–North Korean talks. After Powell's visit, Beijing quietly dispatched then–vice premier Qian Qichen as a special envoy to Pyongyang in an effort to persuade Kim to participate in multilateral talks. China also shut down its pipeline from the Daqing oil field in northeastern China to North Korea for three days in early March, ostensibly for "technical maintenance" shortly after Pyongyang test-fired a missile into waters between the Korean peninsula and Japan.

The combination of persuasion and pressure produced positive results in April 2003, when North Korea agreed to hold a trilateral meeting with the United States and China in Beijing. U.S. officials spoke highly of China's conduct at the trilateral discussions. Following the talks, Bush personally expressed his appreciation for China's positive efforts in a phone call to President Hu Jintao.[19] Although the trilateral talks did not produce anything substantial, they marked the beginning of arduous negotiations that would require frequent consultations and coordination between Beijing and Washington. In July, Bush displayed his satisfaction with China's moves by taking the unusual step of welcoming Dai Bingguo in the Oval Office. Although a minister by rank, Dai holds the title of executive vice minister of foreign affairs, a relatively low post in China's decisionmaking bureaucracy.

Washington's refusal to concede to Pyongyang's demands for bilateral contacts within the trilateral talks stymied Chinese efforts to resolve the crisis.

The trilateral talks made no headway, but the multilateral approach was sustained with the launching of six-party talks, adding Japan, Russia, and South Korea, in August 2003. China continued to play an intermediary role and convinced North Korea to stay in the negotiations through its shuttle diplomacy and timely promises of economic assistance. Beijing also persuaded the United States to initiate bilateral discussions with the North Koreans within the six-party framework. After the first round of talks, the U.S. delegation, headed by Kelly, voiced appreciation for China's efforts as the host. According to a U.S. official, Beijing was particularly helpful in arranging two informal bilateral sessions between the U.S. and North Korean delegations "in a way that was not awkward" for either side.[20]

China does not object to applying political pressure on North Korea…

In early September, Powell described U.S.-Chinese relations as "the best they have been since President [Richard] Nixon's first visit" to China in 1972.[21] Powell welcomed the emergence of a "strong, peaceful, and prosperous China" and expressed U.S. interest in a "constructive relationship with that China." Citing the Korean peninsula as an example where U.S. and Chinese interests overlap, he maintained that the United States had transformed "our common interests with China into solid and productive cooperation over the challenges posed by North Korea." Once again, Powell conveyed U.S. appreciation for "the leadership role that the Chinese have played in trying to find a solution to this problem."

The next three rounds of six-party talks, from September 2003 to July 2005, produced little progress. The gap was not narrowed between U.S. insistence on complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement of all nuclear activity in North Korea as a precondition for providing rewards to Pyongyang and North Korea's demand for a deal that frontloaded economic aid and security guarantees. During this period, Beijing walked a fine line as an intermediary between Washington and Pyongyang. Beijing repeatedly prodded Washington to adopt a more flexible and practical attitude and offer more concessions in the negotiations. China's frustration with U.S. intransigence was occasionally aired publicly, as when Vice Foreign Minister Wang Yi, head of the Chinese negotiating team, in September 2003 publicly labeled U.S. policy the "main obstacle" to reaching a breakthrough in negotiations.[22]

Beijing also openly expressed skepticism about the purported U.S. evidence that North Korea was pursuing a uranium-enrichment program, which had sparked the nuclear crisis. Deputy Foreign Minister Zhou Wenzhong of China told a *New York Times* reporter, "So far, the United States has not presented convincing evidence of the uranium program. We don't know whether it ex-

ists."[23] At the same time, however, China remained firmly committed to the goal of removing nuclear weapons from the Korean peninsula and through various channels conveyed to the North Koreans "the benefits and possible costs of different policies" so that they could "realize what they should do and need to do."[24] According to a Chinese Foreign Ministry official, "Hu Jintao let Kim Jong-il know that the six-party talks must go forward."[25]

The Bush administration, although grateful for China's helpful role, became impatient with the lack of progress and urged Beijing to apply greater pressure on North Korea. Internal deliberations focused on how to "incentivize" China to use its leverage, but progress was stalled by divisions at high levels in the administration on policy toward North Korea as well as by the deterioration of the situation in Iraq.[26] With no good alternatives, the United States continued to rely heavily on Beijing to manage the North Korean nuclear issue, and U.S.-Chinese cooperation predominated over friction.

...yet it strongly opposes imposing economic sanctions.

In Beijing, pressure started to build for tangible progress in the six-party talks lest the process backslide or even collapse. As early as the end of the second round, Chinese analysts cautioned that the negotiations could not proceed for long in the absence of concrete results.[27] China realized that it had a major stake in the negotiations and worried that if the talks failed, its international prestige could be tarnished. Moreover, a breakdown in negotiations would likely result in a U.S. push for more coercive measures to squeeze North Korea, steps that China hoped to forestall.

When the fourth round of talks convened in September 2005, China assumed a more assertive role in forging a compromise between the United States and North Korea. Beijing drafted a carefully worded agreement that took into account the fundamental concerns of Washington as well as those of Pyongyang and presented the document as a fait accompli.[28] According to a Chinese Foreign Ministry official involved in the negotiations, "We realized that any wording changes would open up a Pandora's box."[29] The Chinese made clear that if the United States refused to sign, Washington would have to assume responsibility for a breakdown in the talks.

The United States and North Korea grudgingly yielded, and a joint statement was released in which North Korea agreed to abandon all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs and the United States affirmed that it had no intention to attack or invade North Korea with nuclear or conventional weapons. China, Japan, Russia, South Korea, and the United States agreed to provide energy assistance to Pyongyang, and the United States and Japan agreed to take steps to normalize relations with North Korea. All parties

agreed to discuss the provision of light-water reactors to North Korea at "an appropriate time."[30] All parties accepted the principle of "words for words and action for action."

Even though the agreement lacked specificity, and Washington and Pyongyang soon seized on its ambiguity to start another round of disagreement, the joint statement was the first of its kind reached at the six-party talks and laid the foundation for the Initial Actions Statement in 2007. On a brief visit to Beijing in November 2005, Bush publicly thanked China for "taking the lead" in the negotiations with North Korea.[31] He later told the press that the United States had a "good, vibrant, strong," and "important" relationship with China and underscored that "the fact that China and the United States can work on this issue as equal partners is important for the stability of this region and the world."[32]

Several lessons can be applied to other instances of potential cooperation.

The six-party process stalled for the remainder of 2005 and 2006 due to Pyongyang's objection to the U.S. Department of the Treasury's designation of Banco Delta Asia in Macau as a "primary money laundering concern" under Section 311 of the U.S. PATRIOT Act, which froze some $24 million in North Korean funds. Although no diplomatic progress was achieved on the multilateral front, Beijing's efforts to prod Kim to refrain from further provocative actions continued, as did cooperation between Beijing and Washington. Hu visited Pyongyang in late 2005 and hosted Kim in January 2006 for a tour of China's booming, high-tech southeast. North Korea was a key topic at the Hu-Bush summit in April 2006, which resulted in the dispatch of State Councilor Tang Jiaxuan to Pyongyang in an attempt to inject new momentum into the six-party talks.

The two countries stood even closer after North Korea escalated the crisis by launching a volley of seven ballistic missiles on July 4, 2006, and testing a nuclear device on October 9. North Korea's defiance in conducting the nuclear test caught China by surprise, and Beijing responded angrily. China's Foreign Ministry issued an unusually strongly worded statement demonstrating its displeasure, stating that Pyongyang had "defied the universal opposition of international society and flagrantly conducted the nuclear test."[33] Hu apparently personally proposed use of the term "flagrantly," previously employed to signal a high degree of Chinese anger after the 1999 accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade and Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi of Japan's visits to the Yasukuni Shrine.[34]

Bush and Hu conferred by phone on how to respond to North Korea's nuclear test, and within days, Beijing sent Tang to Washington for further

consultations. China also joined the United States and other members of the Security Council in voting to condemn North Korea's actions under UN Security Council Resolutions 1695 (July 15, 2006) and 1718 (October 14, 2006). In the latter resolution, China for the first time voted with the other UN Security Council members to impose limited trade and travel sanctions on North Korea.

The next leap forward of the six-party talks came at the third phase of the fifth round of talks in Beijing in February 2007. The evident failure of U.S. policy enabled Hill to successfully press for approval to engage North Korea directly.[35] After a closed-door talk between Hill and his North Korean counterpart, Kim Kye-gwan, in Berlin in mid-January, the six parties reconvened in Beijing. The meeting produced the February 13 agreement, which detailed an action plan to implement the September 2005 joint statement. Hill privately credited Vice Foreign Minister Wu Dawei of China with bridging differences between Washington and Pyongyang to enable concurrence on the action plan.[36]

Finding Common Ground amid Divergent Perspectives

Cooperation between the United States and China on the North Korean nuclear issue was not inevitable. In fact, the two countries' perspectives on North Korea and their preferred responses to Pyongyang's pursuit of a nuclear deterrent diverged substantially. For the United States, a nuclear North Korea was unacceptable. It posed a direct threat to U.S. allies South Korea and Japan and possibly even to the United States, pending North Korean development of longer-range missiles. The possibility of proliferation of plutonium to terrorist groups or rogue states also made tolerating a nuclear North Korea impossible. Bush's personal antipathy for Kim and the regime's human rights violations was an additional factor shaping U.S. policy.

Squeezing North Korea was central to the Bush administration's strategy. Depriving Pyongyang of badly needed oil would leave the regime with fewer options and create circumstances in which Kim might conclude that heading down the nuclear path was a dead end. Some Bush administration officials, including the president himself, may have even hoped that sanctions would dislodge Kim from power. To inflict pain on North Korea, cooperation from China, as the source of as much as 90 percent of North Korea's oil supplies, was obviously essential.

China, on the other hand, had been an ally of North Korea for more than a half century and long ago concluded that propping up the regime in Pyongyang through regular infusions of oil and food aid was a small price to pay for ensuring a stable nation on its northeastern border. Since Beijing embarked

on a policy of economic reform and opening up to the outside world in 1979, Chinese sympathy and ideological identification with North Korea waned considerably. Pyongyang's failure to implement economic reforms has been a growing source of frustration for China and its at times unpredictable foreign policy has been a cause of irritation. Nevertheless, preserving amicable ties with North Korea remains an important Chinese foreign policy objective.

China shares the U.S. objective of achieving a nuclear weapons–free Korean peninsula not because it worries that North Korea would use nuclear weapons against China but because of the possible responses of other powers to Pyongyang's nuclear gambit. In addition to the possibility of a U.S. conventional strike on North Korea that would likely create chaos that could spill over into China, a chain reaction could ensue with Japan, South Korea, and even Taiwan pursuing their own nuclear weapons. Whereas China could plausibly adapt to a nuclear Japan, the development of nuclear weapons by Taiwan has long been a formal *casus belli* for the Chinese leadership and thus would pose very high costs to China, including a likely military confrontation with the United States.

Cooperation requires a sufficient overlap of interests, but not full convergence.

The Chinese also worry that a nuclear North Korea could be the death knell for the NPT, resulting in the uncontrolled spread of nuclear weapons in volatile regions such as the Middle East. Any of the above scenarios would undermine China's peaceful security environment that is necessary for its continued economic growth, which is in turn imperative for the sustained legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party.

China does not object to applying political pressure on North Korea and indeed is willing to do so unilaterally, albeit without public fanfare. Yet, it strongly opposes imposing economic sanctions on North Korea for a number of reasons.[37] First, withholding fuel and food aid could trigger instability and even regime collapse in North Korea, which could lead to the dreaded flood of refugees into China. Second, economic sanctions would damage the embryonic process of market reform in North Korea and would inflict the most harm on the most vulnerable segment of its population that resides in the rural areas, not the military or the urban elite. Third, Beijing strongly disagrees with the view that squeezing Pyongyang will produce compliance and capitulation. Instead, China maintains that sanctions could cause North Korea to become more aggressive and unpredictable. Fourth, the Chinese fear that participating in comprehensive sanctions would harm Chinese–North Korean ties irreparably and result in the ultimate loss of Chinese leverage over Pyongyang.

Beijing's unprecedented support for targeted sanctions under Resolution 1718, following North Korea's October 2006 nuclear test, reflected Hu's judgment that Kim's defiance of China's counsel and interests warranted a harsh response. A Chinese Foreign Ministry official privately admitted that relying solely on persuasion and positive inducements to secure North Korea's cooperation had proven to be a failed policy. In the new situation after the test, the official suggested that efforts to promote dialogue must be combined with pressure. To be effective, "the two wheels must work together."[38]

China's goal, however, was not to aggravate Chinese–North Korean relations, but rather to strengthen them, albeit on Chinese terms. By issuing a tough statement condemning the DPRK's actions and quickly supporting Resolution 1718, Beijing hoped that Kim would recognize the risks of alienating China and thus refrain from taking further actions that challenged Chinese interests in preserving peace and stability on the peninsula.

Skeptics in the United States and in China had argued that differing U.S. and Chinese priorities and interests created insurmountable obstacles to the two countries working together successfully to persuade North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons.[39] Rebutting the doubters, Powell noted in a September 2003 speech:

> American and Chinese interests in Korea may not overlap completely, but they do so considerably. Neither side wishes to see nuclear weapons developed and deployed by the North Koreans on the Peninsula. Neither side enjoys the specter of the chronicled debacle that is the North Korean economy. Neither side has any interest in a worsening refugee crisis on China's border. Neither side relishes a North Korean regime that runs drugs and weapons, and that counterfeits currencies, or that engages in the periodic extortion of its neighbors though brinksmanship military conduct. Neither side, to be sure, has any interest in another Korean war.[40]

Presidential Communication Holds the Key

U.S. and Chinese officials credit presidential communication and credibility with enabling Washington and Beijing to overcome divergences in approaches and mutual suspicions and to surmount problems at various junctures in the six-party talks process. According to a senior Chinese official, "Faced with North Korea's nuclear issue, we communicated at the highest level. In this case, we can claim real strategic cooperation. We were able to do this because our interests overlap."[41] This view was echoed by a senior U.S. official who asserted, "Presidential communications are critical.... If the two presidents are in sync, then the relationship works. If they are not in sync, the relationship

can't rise above all the problems that we know so well."[42] Bush's proven credibility to carry through on his December 2003 promise to oppose the efforts of President Chen Shui-bian of Taiwan unilaterally to change the status quo in the Taiwan Strait likely made it easier for Hu to strengthen cooperation with the United States on North Korea.

Bush has utilized the presidential hotline to break logjams in the negotiations and to promote common responses to North Korean moves such as missile tests and its explosion of a nuclear device. From the beginning of the renewed nuclear crisis in 2002 to the February 2007 agreement, the U.S. and Chinese presidents held at least 13 telephone conversations specifically focusing on the issue of North Korea. They also met nine times in bilateral summits and on the margins of multilateral meetings during which the North Korean issue was discussed.[43]

The April 2006 Bush-Hu summit in particular marked a major step forward in promoting mutual confidence. At a White House lunch, Bush spontaneously switched seats to sit next to Hu, which contravened usual White House protocol. With only translators present, the two presidents had an intimate talk about the future of the Korean peninsula. A senior official characterized the episode as a "breakthrough in trust between the two presidents."[44]

Communication has also been effective at lower levels. From October 2002 to February 2007, the Chinese foreign minister and the U.S. secretary of state reportedly held 13 meetings and 32 phone conversations focusing primarily on North Korea.[45] In addition, the heads of the U.S. and Chinese delegations to the six-party talks shuttled across the Pacific frequently to consult with each other as well as with their counterparts from other countries involved in the negotiations. Through this process, according to Hill, the United States and China have been able to synchronize goals, strategies, and tactics in the negotiation process.[46]

Lessons for Future Chinese-U.S. Cooperation

Progress achieved thus far toward the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula is due in large part to Chinese-U.S. cooperation. Absent U.S. willingness to negotiate bilaterally with North Korea prior to January 2007, Beijing's role was central in bringing the Americans and North Koreans to the negotiating table and mediating between the two nations at crucial junctures.

Ironically, the shift in U.S. policy to allow for greater U.S.–North Korean bilateral discussions is now being greeted with ambivalence from China. On one hand, the opening of bilateral communication channels holds out the promise of further progress toward denuclearization and reduces the danger of a U.S. preemptive strike on North Korea and its attendant consequences.

On the other hand, direct U.S.–North Korean engagement may reduce the importance of the six-party talks and potentially marginalize China's role. An abrupt transformation of U.S.-DPRK relations could even come at the expense of Chinese security interests, some Chinese fear, if Washington opts to acquiesce to the nuclear status of North Korea (as it did with India) and even seeks to use closer U.S.–North Korean ties to further encircle China and constrain its emergence as a potential challenge to U.S. preeminence in the Asia-Pacific region.

The experience of U.S.-Chinese collaboration on the North Korean nuclear issue offers several lessons that can be applied to other instances of potential cooperation. First, cooperation between the United States and China on a critical security issue requires a sufficient overlap of interests, but not full convergence. If the two countries can agree on the ends, then there is a greater possibility that they can manage their differences on the means.

China and the U.S. continue to disagree on the efficacy of economic sanctions.

Second, for the time being, Beijing remains reluctant to get overly involved in resolving regional and international security disputes. It prefers to focus its efforts on domestic economic construction and avoid the risks of excessive entanglement in contentious security problems outside its borders. China will only opt to take action if the issue directly affects its national security interests and the cost of inaction is calculated to be greater than the cost of cooperating.

Third, China and the United States continue to have substantial disagreements on the efficacy of economic sanctions but may find common ground in some instances. Beijing will selectively apply pressure on states both through unilateral means and support for targeted sanctions agreed on by members of the UN Security Council to induce compliance with international agreements. China believes that limited pressure sends a useful political signal that may compel the target country to reconsider its policies, especially if combined with inducements and opportunities for progress through dialogue. China continues to oppose harsh sanctions that are aimed at forcing changes in policy by inflicting injury to a country's economic development and the livelihood of the people.

Fourth, lack of mutual trust and suspicion of each other's long-term intentions continue to hamper U.S.-Chinese security cooperation. This can be ameliorated to some extent through frequent and frank presidential communication that establishes mutual credibility, as well as effective working-level coordination that translates understanding between leaders into specific actions.

China will be a bigger player in regional and global issues in the future, and Chinese-U.S. cooperation will be increasingly necessary to address current and emerging security problems. In addition to North Korea, Beijing has already contributed in important ways, both positive and negative, to efforts to settle the conflict in Sudan, resolve the Iranian nuclear challenge, and promote reconciliation and democracy in Burma. Engaging China in sustained dialogue about the intersection of U.S. and Chinese interests in the international system will be essential. The Senior Dialogue between the U.S. deputy secretary of state and China's executive vice foreign minister, initiated under the Bush administration, is an important mechanism designed to advance such discussions. In addition, future U.S. presidents will need to attach high priority to establishing effective and candid presidential communication that facilitates mutual trust.

Notes

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