



China's North Korea Policy Triumph: Lessons for Managing Ties with Taiwan

by Bonnie S. Glaser

Beijing has shown great diplomatic dexterity in handling the North Korea nuclear weapons issue. As host of the six-party talks, the Chinese have played the role of broker and conciliator, working assiduously to narrow differences among the parties and find areas of consensus. As a consequence of its diplomatic efforts, China has won the praise of all the participants in the six party talks, and has enhanced its regional and global image as a responsible player in the community of nations.

By contrast, in dealing with Taiwan, Beijing's approach has been devoid of diplomatic deftness. The ineffectiveness of China's policies toward Taiwan is increasingly apparent. In recent years, support for independence on the island has grown, not diminished. Contrary to Chinese hopes, economic integration of the two sides of the Strait has not promoted a desire among the majority of the Taiwan people to merge with the mainland politically. China has successfully thwarted Taiwan's efforts to participate in a host of regional and international organizations, but at the cost of alienating the people of Taiwan whose hearts and minds the Chinese seek to win over.

China's unrelenting military buildup has not deterred Taipei from pursuing policies that Beijing finds objectionable and has not dissuaded the Taiwan people from casting their votes in favor of a president that China has castigated and refused to deal with. Beijing's unbending position that cross-Strait dialogue can only be resumed once Taiwan accepts its "one China" principle has met with staunch resistance in Taiwan.

If China can apply some of the skillfulness toward Taiwan that it has demonstrated in managing the North Korean nuclear challenge, perhaps the impasse in cross-Strait relations can be broken. A few suggestions follow.

Dangling carrots to Pyongyang, rather than brandishing sticks, has been Beijing's preferred *modus operandi*. China has provided North Korea with considerable economic aid as an incentive to remain engaged in the six-party process and has urged the U.S. and other parties to provide enticements to North Korea to disarm. In dealing with Taipei, however, China has demonstrated a propensity for toughness and has offered few, if any, positive inducements. Moreover, Chinese leaders have harshly criticized the United States for extolling the commitments made by Taiwan's President Chen Shui-bian in his May 2004 inaugural address to revise the ROC constitution according to rules set out in the existing constitution and its amendments, and to exclude sensitive issues from the current round of constitutional revision. The notion of rewarding Kim Jong-Il for good behavior makes sense to Beijing, but praising Chen for adopting a conciliatory stance is deemed deplorable

because it will ostensibly embolden him to press forward toward independence.

Based on North Korea's objections, the Chinese urged Washington prior to the last round of six-party talks to modify its stance that North Korea agree to the complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement (CVID) of its nuclear programs. Insisting on the phrase, the Chinese argued, would inhibit any progress and could even torpedo the talks. The Bush administration agreed to drop the term, while not abandoning its objectives. In dealing with Taiwan, Beijing has stuck to its demand that Taipei accept the "one China" principle, bequeath sovereignty to China, and agree to unification based on a formula of "one country, two systems." This is an offer that has fallen on deaf ears in Taiwan. Like the U.S., China should show tactical flexibility and modify its proposal so that at a minimum, cross-Strait talks can get underway.

A core component of China's approach to resolving the North Korea nuclear weapons issue is its contention that Pyongyang's feeling of insecurity is an obstacle to progress. Beijing has encouraged all parties, but the U.S. in particular, to provide security assurances so that North Korean leaders can be confident that if they agree to give up their nuclear deterrent, they will not be the target of military attack. Similar logic could be applied to Taiwan. An insecure Taiwan that is threatened with military coercion and squeezed diplomatically is fearful of engaging with Beijing. China's growing offensive military capabilities against the island have generated interest in Taiwan in procuring weapons to strike targets on the mainland as part of a retaliatory strategy or to degrade the PLA's capacity to sustain an attack. China's interests would be better served by implementing confidence-building measures and declaring that it will refrain from using force except under the sole circumstance that Taiwan declares juridical independence.

Although Beijing has embraced the six-party talks process, it continues to hold that the crux of the North Korean nuclear weapons problem is the mutual hostility between Pyongyang and Washington. To ease their suspicions and build trust, China seizes every opportunity to get U.S. and North Korean negotiators to talk bilaterally. It is no secret that the nub of the cross-Strait deadlock is also a lack of trust. In the absence of dialogue, it is hard to envisage how a settlement can be reached.

China's approach to Taiwan is out of step with its increasingly sophisticated, confident, and skillful diplomatic practices on a rapidly expanding list of regional and international issues. By contrast, Chinese policies toward Taiwan are ham-handed, unimaginative, and counterproductive. Beijing should update its approach to

Taiwan based on lessons drawn from its diplomatic success in shepherding the six-party talks.

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