



## **China's Dilemma in the Current Korean Crisis** by Yu Bin

As the standoff between Washington and Pyongyang continues, there is an eerie impatience - within the Bush administration and among some major media outlets - not with North Korea, but with China and its perceived inability or unwillingness to pressure its North Korean "comrade."

This attempt to "outsource" the current Korean crisis either by desire or by design misses the root of the problem: the failure by both Washington and Pyongyang to abide by the 1994 Agreed Framework. It also indicates that the U.S. is out of touch with a profoundly changed Northeast Asia where the lines between Cold War friends and foes have blurred. Although Beijing sided with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) during the bloody Korean War (1950-53), it's not in a position to dictate to the DPRK on less sensitive, non-security issues, let alone to be able to switch on or off the current crisis. Moreover, the DPRK has already made clear that any economic sanctions mean war. Although this is directed at the U.S., it also includes others. The DPRK has made clear that it intends only to talk to the U.S. and others should get out of its way.

### **From 'Lips and Teeth' to 'Lip-service'**

The Sino-DPRK alliance was never easy. In the early months of 1950, Kim Il-sung and Stalin worked out a war plan before selling it to Mao Zedong, who had a hard time persuading his colleagues to intervene. Throughout the three-year conflict, China bore the brunt of the war. The postwar DPRK propaganda, however, scarcely credited China's role. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) complete withdrawal from the DPRK in 1958 showed the strain between the two sides. During the 1960s and 1970s, the DPRK maximized its interests by playing China against Russia and vice versa.

Deng Xiaoping's pragmatism in the 1980s further strained ties with the DPRK. First, China moved to "normalize" relations with the South, which yielded more trade and investment. Second, China gradually ended its "friendly" pricing practice with the DPRK.

All the while, China has framed relations with the DPRK within a broader regional environment of peace and stability conducive to China's economic development. As a result, Beijing gradually assumed a more balanced posture in its policies toward the two Koreas and made it public that it opposed sources of instability originating on either side of the demilitarized zone.

By the time Kim Il-sung passed away in 1994, Sino-DPRK ties were considerably weakened. Occasional high-level contacts continue. Trust, which is essential for any

alliance, is gone. If anything, the younger Kim has since the 1980s constantly pruned his regime of anyone with a strong Chinese link. For Beijing, managing relations with the "dear leader" has been a tricky business.

### **To and From Russia, with Love**

Unlike his father who was educated in Manchuria, spoke Chinese, and joined the Chinese Communist Party, Kim Jong-il was born in Russia. Prior to the current crisis with the U.S., Kim seemed obsessed with Russia. The Kim-Putin summit in Vladivostok on Aug. 23, 2002 was the third with Putin; Kim visited Russia twice within a year and received the first ever visit by a Russian president to North Korea in July 2000.

While DPRK-Russia ties were warming up, relations with Beijing were cooling down considerably. Beijing was furious with certain groups and media in Japan and South Korea as they tried to "make" the refugee issue. China also blamed North Korea for failing to prevent its own people from coming to China. Kim's decision to set up a special economic zone across the Yalu River also irritated China.

For these reasons, and others, it is no accident that China voted to support the International Atomic Energy Agency decision to submit the North Korea case to the UN Security Council, while Russia chose to abstain.

### **'To Be or Not To Be'?**

Although both sides still leave the door open for dialogue, the crisis is reminiscent of the 1950s for Beijing, as the 97,000-ton nuclear aircraft carrier the USS Carl Vinson heads for the Far East. Before June 1950, the U.S. first underestimated North Korea by declaring the Korean Peninsula outside the U.S. defense parameter, and then overreacted to the conflict by ignoring China's warning not to cross the 38th Parallel. The Bush administration began by switching off the dialogue pursued by both Clinton and Nobel Peace Prizewinner Kim Dae-jung, and may eventually overcook the situation with a military solution.

This state of affairs presents China with difficult choices. A nuclearized DPRK is a destabilizing factor for China, whose national interests today are far more complicated. In the past few decades, China has become a profoundly conservative nation with a stake in the stability of the peninsula. It became the largest export market for both the Republic of Korea (ROK) and Taiwan in 2002, a year after it joined the World Trade Organization. The same year, China also became the largest recipient of direct foreign investment, taking in some \$50 billion and surpassing the U.S. for the first time in history. The deepening crisis may also lead to a nuclearized Northeast Asia where Japan, South Korea, and even Taiwan are all nuclear capable.

For these reasons, some in China argue for a proactive posture. Shi Yinghong, a prominent analyst in Beijing, believes that the current crisis has fundamentally altered China's strategic environment. In an article in a Hong Kong Chinese daily, a PRC analyst for the first time has publicly blamed the DPRK for starting the ball rolling and for its "extreme rhetoric" and "near extreme behavior." The U.S. is also to blame for its refusal to have a dialogue and to provide a security guarantee for the DPRK. Shi calls for China to exert maximum influence on the DPRK and to coordinate with the U.S., ROK, Japan, and Russia in order to "shield" the DPRK from nuclear weapons.

### **A Cold Day for the PLA**

While Chinese analysts debate strategies, the PLA threw itself into an unusually early large-scale military exercise across the country right after New Year's Day. Various services of the PLA reportedly drilled in complex situations and climates and subzero temperatures.

Unlike the past decade when the PLA usually conducted drills after Chinese New Year in areas across from the Taiwan Strait, the emphasis on cold weather indicates heightened concerns over the ongoing crisis on the Korean Peninsula. In the winter of 1950-51, the PLA's 9th Army Group (150,000 strong) on the eastern front suffered severe frostbite, which disabled 22 percent of its forces and caused some 1,000 deaths. The PLA seems determined to avoid such needless attrition should an intervention become imperative.

The PLA's preparation for the subzero environment does not mean that China has frozen its strategic calculus regarding the current crisis and its likely outcome. Diplomacy always remains the first and most important option.

### **Crisis also Means Opportunities**

The Chinese phrase for "crisis" consists of two characters: "danger" (wei) and "opportunity" (ji). Despite the rapidly shifting geostrategic faultline in Northeast Asia, Beijing continues to believe that there are opportunities for direct talks between Pyongyang and Washington.

China's ultimate goal is the stability of the Korean Peninsula. A non-nuclearized DPRK is critical to this objective. In this respect, Beijing has overlapping interests with the U.S.

What China prefers - together with the ROK, Russia, and Japan - is to manage the crisis rather than turn it into a full-blown conflict through non-diplomatic means. Once it openly sides with the U.S.' "with-us-or-against-us" approach, China will surely lose any ability to persuade the North. And it will have to live with the consequences.

Half a century ago, China sided with its communist allies. The three-year war tested the limits of its cooperation with Russia and the DPRK, as well as the limits of its enmity with the U.S. and ROK. Toward the end of the war, there was even "tacit cooperation" with the U.S. forces to bring the South back to the negotiating table. In its last operation around the

Kumsong-Kumwha area prior to the truce, the Chinese military attacked only ROK units while carefully avoiding U.S. positions.

While Chinese and American forces were able to "collaborate" when they were foes, China's current approach to the Korean crisis has been far more pragmatic and flexible. For Beijing, there are no such things as permanent friends or foes, but only permanent interests.

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