

How Not To Be Abandoned by China: North Korea's Nuclear Brinkmanship Revisited*

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Whatever motivations lie behind North Korea's nuclear and missile programs, North Korea has been aware that further nuclear and missile tests would incur increasingly harsh international sanctions. In order to survive the sanctions, North Korea needs to entrap China to its side, for the North Korean economy is highly dependent upon China. In this context, this article argues that North Korea intentionally increases the level of its nuclear and missile threat in order to entrap China (thus, reducing its fear of being abandoned by China). That is, North Korea has elaborated its coercive diplomacy in order to press China to show a strong commitment to their mutual alliance. In order to develop the above argument, this article proceeds as follows. First, as an analytical framework, it applies Glenn Snyder's concept of the linkage between the alliance game and adversary game to the trilateral relationship among the United States (along with South Korea), China and North Korea. Second, it provides an overview of Sino–North Korean relations from 2006 up to the present, attempting to analyze North Korea's brinkmanship. Thirdly, it concludes with some policy implications for future trilateral relations, one of which is that China should seriously discuss North Korea contingency plans with the United States and South Korea in order to develop an effective strategy to curb North Korea's military adventurism. Paradoxically, this would lead to North Korea's fully considering China's position.

Keywords: North Korea, North Korea–China Relations, Brinkmanship, Alliance Security Dilemma, Korean Peninsula

* Jae Jeok Park's work was supported by Hankuk University of Foreign Studies Research Fund of 2017.

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Introduction

North Korea has so far conducted five nuclear tests. They embarrassed China, as North Korea has proceeded despite China's strong opposition. For example, unlike in the case of the previous three nuclear tests, North Korea did not give China advance notice before it conducted its fourth nuclear test on January 6, 2016. Moreover, though Wu Dawei, China's special representative for Korean Peninsula Affairs, made a visit to Pyongyang in order to dissuade North Korea from launching a long-range missile, North Korea test-fired a Kwangmyungsong-4 on February 7, only three days after Wu's return to Beijing. Also, North Korea conducted its fifth nuclear test on September 9, only a few days after China hosted the G20 summit. It was the first time that China had hosted it, and the Chinese government made an effort to use it as an occasion to boost its people's national pride. In addition, North Korea's fifth test embarrassed China, as China had been vehemently criticizing an agreement between South Korea and the United States on July 8, 2016, over the deployment of the Theater High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in South Korea. North Korea's fifth nuclear test helped conservative forces in South Korea reinforce their claim that the THAAD deployment is needed to defend against the ever-growing North Korean nuclear and missile threat, contrary to the Chinese assertion that it is an instrument for China containment.

North Korea claims that it has been developing unconventional military capabilities as a deterrent against the military threat posed by the United States and South Korea. From North Korea's perspective, no state, including China, should infringe upon North Korea's sovereign right to possess weapons for self-defense. Despite North Korea's assertion, it is puzzling that Pyongyang has been conducting nuclear and missile tests without fully considering China's position in terms of the timing and threat level of the tests. This is puzzling, because China's participation in the UN-led sanctions is critical to implementing the sanctions effectively. As North Korea has furthered its nuclear development since 2006, when it conducted its first nuclear test, UN sanctions on North Korea have become harsher and harsher. Nevertheless, despite China's strong criticism, North Korea has been escalating its nuclear brinkmanship at the risk of provoking China's increased commitment to the sanctions.

Bilateral trade volume between North Korea and China accounts for about 90 percent of North Korea's overall trade.¹ Currently, thousands of North Korean workers are working in China. Their partially-confiscated wages have become one of North Korea's main sources of foreign revenue. In addition to the legal trade between the two states, illegal smuggling through border cities between the two states may account for 50 percent of the actual trade between North Korea and China.² Under such circumstances, if China were to implement UN-led sanctions in a strict manner, the North Korean economy would be seriously damaged to the extent that North Korea would be forced to worry about its own survival. This being the case, then, why has North Korea been unnecessarily provoking China?

Indeed, as North Korea has increased the number of its nuclear and missile tests, the relationship between China and North Korea has deteriorated further. To a China that

is attempting to expand its political and security influence in the region in a way that is commensurate with its rapid economic rise, North Korea's military adventurism has become a burden. China claims that it can create a new great power relationship with the United States, for which China hopes to create an image of a responsible great power. If this is to occur, such a China should not stand behind North Korea's rogue behaviors. For example, after North Korea's third nuclear test in 2013, China minimized political and military exchanges with North Korea, which included a significant reduction of mutual visits between high-ranking officers. Also, after North Korea's fourth nuclear test in January 2016, China participated in the until-then harshest economic sanctions the UN had ever imposed against a single state. In response to these developments, North Korea labeled China a "detested enemy" and was reported to have urged its people to "crush China's pressuring schemes with the force of a nuclear storm."³ Likewise, after North Korea's fifth nuclear test in September 2016, the UN reinforced the economic sanctions against North Korea by passing Resolution 2321, which include reducing North Korea's coal exports by 60 percent. As a way of implementing the Resolution, China announced on February 18, 2017, that it would not import North Korean coal until the end of 2017. Upon such a development, North Korea condemned China for "dancing with the United States without any principle," though China termed itself a great power.⁴

Given that North Korea exhibits behaviors that disrespect China's opposition to North Korean nuclear and missile tests, has China's stance not been a factor in North Korea's deciding on the timing and threat level of the tests? In other words, does China have any real leverage in curbing North Korea's military adventurism?

In order to address these questions, this article approaches Sino-North Korean relations from the angles of not only the "alliance game" between the two states but also their individual "adversary game" with their mutual enemy, the United States. For example, given that China's top priority with regard to the Korean Peninsula is the peninsula's stability, if North Korea increases the threat level by conducting nuclear and missiles tests, China will respond by lowering its commitment in the "alliance game" with the challenger to the desired stability, North Korea, while assuming a conciliatory stance toward the United States in the "adversary game." Yet, as North Korea heightens the threat level, the United States and South Korea would respond to it accordingly, increasing the level of their strategic military preparedness. For instance, the United States and South Korea would conduct large scale military exercises, bringing U.S. strategic assets to the West Sea or the East Sea. Should this occur, China would perceive the United States (along with South Korea) as a greater challenger to the stability of the peninsula than North Korea. As a result, China would restore its estranged political and military relationship with North Korea, thereby increasing its commitment to the alliance with North Korea in the alliance game. At the same time, China would stand firmly against the United States in the adversary game, for example, by not fully participating in UN sanctions or, if participating, implementing the sanctions only superficially.

Considering the interaction between the alliance game and adversary game, North Korea, which has been developing nuclear and missile capabilities as a deterrent or offensive means against the United States and South Korea, intentionally increases the

level of its nuclear and missile threat in order to entrap China (thus, reducing its fear of being abandoned by China). In order to develop the above argument, this article proceeds as follows. First, as an analytical framework, it applies Glenn Snyder's concept of the linkage between the alliance game and adversary game to the trilateral relationship among the United States (along with South Korea), China and North Korea. Second, it provides an overview of Sino–North Korean relations from 2006 up to the present. The period is divided into two parts: (1) from 2006 until before North Korea conducted the third nuclear test in 2013, and (2) from North Korea's third nuclear test up to the present. The first one falls roughly into the Hu Jintao–Kim Jong Il period, and the second one into the Xi Jinping–Kim Jong Un period. Thirdly, it concludes with some policy implications for future trilateral relations among the United States (along with South Korea), North Korea, and China.

Alliance Game vs. Adversary Game: North Korea, China and the United States

This article approaches North Korea's nuclear brinkmanship not only in the bilateral context between North Korea and the United States (along with South Korea), but also from the angle of trilateral relations that involve China as a third party. In general, the literature on the role of a third party in crisis bargaining has focused on the idea that a third party influences the bargaining process as an observer, a conciliator, a mediator, an arbitrator, an adjudicator, an enforcer or an interventionist.⁵ In contrast, this article examines how a state interacts with its adversary within and in response to the regional security environment to produce a favorable outcome in its relationship with the third party.

Many analyses of the trilateral relations among the United States, China and North Korea have adopted Lowell Dittmer's concept of a "strategic triangle."⁶ Dittmer identifies three pattern dynamics of trilateral relations, *namely the ménage à trois*, the stable marriage and the romantic triangle, and claims that "the relationship between any two will be affected by each player's relationship to the third."⁷ Though his claim is valid, Dittmer's three pattern dynamics are not directly applicable in the Northeast Asian setting. That is because, unlike Dittmer's assumption in conceptualizing the "strategic triangle," power capabilities among North Korea, the United States, and China are asymmetrical and, moreover, China and North Korea are allies. That is, Dittmer's three pattern dynamics do not cover a type in which two asymmetrical allies engage or confront with their common enemy to produce a bargaining outcome that is more to their advantage in their alliance relationship.

In that sense, Glenn Snyder's research on the interaction between the alliance game and adversary game provides a more useful framework. Snyder claims that a state under alliance simultaneously carries out not only an alliance game with its allies but also an adversary game with a competing state.⁸ First, he defines a fear of "entrapment" as "being dragged into a conflict over an ally's interests that one does

not share,” and “abandonment” as “being deserted.”⁹ Then, he argues that, after an alliance has formed, the partners fear both entrapment and abandonment. If an ally makes a strong commitment to the alliance, its fear of abandonment lessens while the fear of entrapment increases. If the ally makes a weak or vague commitment, the fear of entrapment lessens, but the fear of abandonment increases. He identifies this dynamic as the “alliance security dilemma.” Second, Snyder argues that, with an intention of influencing the behavior of its ally, a state can use its relations with their common enemy. Snyder simplifies the strategic choices an ally can make in its adversary game to two: conciliation and firmness. If a state does not want to be entrapped in a war between its ally and their common enemy, the state will take a conciliatory stance toward the enemy in the adversarial game in order to constrain its ally’s aggressive military posture toward the common enemy.

Snyder’s framework is applicable in analyzing the trilateral relations among North Korea, the United States, and China in that North Korea and China have been allies since 1961. China began the alliance with North Korea in the hopes of having North Korea on its side in the context of the looming Sino–Russo ideological conflict in the 1960s. North Korea is China’s sole ally, as is China to North Korea, since North Korea and Russia discontinued their alliance relationship in 1996. Both North Korea and China perceive the United States as their common enemy. It is true that it has been controversial whether the two states still maintain an alliance relationship. China and South Korea have been increasing economic and political interactions with each other, while China and North Korea have been engaged in a serious dispute over North Korea’s nuclear and missile development. Nevertheless, it has still been widely speculated that China would intervene to help North Korea in the case that any other state were to attack North Korea, which is the primary purpose of an alliance.

Adopting Snyder’s framework, North Korea and China can be seen as interacting with each other in the alliance game, while they engage, respectively, in the adversary game with the United States at the same time. In the case of the alliance game between North Korea and China, there exists an asymmetry in their fear of entrapment and abandonment. China, superior to North Korea in terms of military capabilities, has a relatively low fear of being deserted by North Korea when it is in conflict with a third party. In contrast, China has a high fear of entrapment into an unwanted war in which North Korea might become involved. The reason China has a high fear of entrapment is that China perceives North Korea to be an asset that serves as a strategic buffer between the United States (along with South Korea) and China. Thus, if North Korea is involved in a war, China would be dragged into that war to preserve its strategic asset.

In contrast, North Korea has a higher fear of being abandoned by China than of being entrapped in an unwanted war in which China might become engaged. North Korea is well aware that China hopes to retain it as a strategic asset; but at the same time North Korea worries that China can behave in ways that are at odds with North Korea’s security interests if China finds it to be conducive to its larger security interests in dealing with the United States.

Victor Cha claims that an alliance security dilemma arises when there are

symmetrical fears of abandonment and entrapment between allies, while a conflict occurs when there are asymmetrical structures of abandonment and entrapment.¹⁰ For example, in order to reduce the fear of entrapment in the alliance game with North Korea, China could make a low commitment to the alliance, which would result in the estrangement of political and military relations between the two allies.

Such a conflict becomes more intensified as China and North Korea engage in adversary games with their common enemy, the United States, with the intention of reducing fears of entrapment or abandonment from one another. In its adversary game with the United States, China can either conciliate with the United States (along with South Korea) or stand firm against the United States. The modes of the former option include seriously participating in and implementing harsh UN-led sanctions, increasing its security relationship with South Korea, and expressing strong opposition to North Korean nuclear development. On the other hand, the modes of the latter option include only passively participating in and implementing UN-led sanctions against North Korea, decreasing security cooperation with South Korea, and warning against U.S.-led military exercises against North Korea by expressing its determined position supporting peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. Indeed, China has been maintaining three principles in relation to Korean Peninsula issues: Peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, a nuclear weapons-free peninsula, and resolution of the Korean Peninsula issues through dialogue and negotiations. Though China participates in the sanctions against North Korea in order to induce North Korea to give up its nuclear ambitions (the second principle), China retains the first and third principles because it does not want the North Korean regime to collapse.¹¹

Given these two options, China will take conciliatory policies toward the United States in the adversary game to reduce its fear of entrapment if North Korea initiates aggressive military confrontations with the United States, which will, in turn, make North Korea harbor a higher fear of abandonment. China would do so because North Korea's military adventurism becomes a burden on China. North Korea's nuclear development in China's backyard tarnishes China's image as a great power, not to mention China's concern over a nuclear accident near its border areas with North Korea. Also, the advancement of North Korea's nuclear program can be used as a justification for the United States to strengthen the U.S.-South Korea and the U.S.-Japan alliances, paving the road to the creation of a U.S.-South Korea-Japan virtual alliance relationship. From the Chinese perspective, the strengthened U.S.-led alliance network would be used to contain China in the context of an intensified Sino-U.S. strategic competition.¹²

However, if North Korea increases the threat level to the extent that the United States (along with South Korea) mobilizes its strategic assets to respond to the threat, China would stand firm against the United States in the adversary game at the same time as increasing its commitment to North Korea (such as restoring estranged Sino-North Korea relations) in the alliance game. China would do so because, as mentioned earlier, North Korea is an asset for China that serves as a strategic buffer.

Being aware of China's strategic choices in the adversary game, North Korea would also attempt to manage its intra-alliance relationship with China via its own adversary

game with the United States. Whenever North Korea conducts major nuclear and missile tests, North Korea would escalate the threat level to the point at which the United States (along with South Korea) would be forced to respond militarily. Upon a U.S. response such as bringing in aircraft carriers and B-52 and B-2 bombers near the peninsula, North Korea would expect China to identify the United States, not as a defender, but as a challenger to the stability of the region. Once China perceives the United States (and not North Korea) as a challenger, China would stand firm against the United States and strengthen its commitments to the alliance with North Korea.

Of course, this alliance game between the two sides may no longer persist if China decides to abandon North Korea for fear of being entrapped into any conflicts with the United States. Indeed, the *Global Times* [Huanqiu Shibao], a daily Chinese newspaper under the control of the Communist party, has warned North Korea that China's patronage may be revoked should Pyongyang conduct further coercive diplomacy such as a sixth nuclear test or military provocation against U.S. territory. China has signaled that it may not only cut off its provision of crude oil but also even remain neutral to a U.S. surgical strike on the North's nuclear facilities.¹³ However, owing to North Korea's geopolitical significance as China's buffer zone, it does not mean that China will fundamentally abandon the North. This is the reason why the *Global Times* has signaled at the same time that China will militarily intervene in the case of an attempt to "collapse" the North Korean regime by the United States. Put simply, the stability of North Korea is of primary interest to China no matter how much it dislikes the Kim Jong Un regime.¹⁴

In conclusion, North Korea resorts to brinkmanship through escalating the level of nuclear and missile threats in order to entrap China to serve its interests on peninsula issues. To emphasize, this article does not assert that North Korea is developing its nuclear and missile capabilities simply to entrap China. The deterrent or offensive targets of the North Korean WMD are the United States, South Korea and Japan. Rather, this article claims that, when North Korea tests nuclear weapons and/or missiles, it unnecessarily escalates the level of military tension in a way China opposes in order to entrap China to its side. The following chapters examine the above arguments with respect to Sino–North Korea relations since 2006, when North Korea conducted its first nuclear test.

The Hu Jintao–Kim Jong Il Period

During the Hu Jintao–Kim Jong Il period, North Korea conducted two nuclear tests. From the perspective of an alliance game, in the two cases alike, North Korea's brinkmanship against the United States turned out to be effective in obtaining China's alliance commitment.

The background of North Korea's first nuclear test in October 2006 traces back to September 2005 when Washington imposed financial sanctions on account of the North's counterfeiting and laundering U.S. dollars. The United States pressed Banco Delta Asia (BDA), a bank in Macao, to freeze North Korean assets lest they be a channel

for North Korean illegal financial activities.¹⁵ In the beginning of the sanctions period, North Korea expected China to mediate the financial issue in the latter's game with the United States. In the summit with Hu Jintao on January 17, 2006, Kim Jong Il demanded that China help overcome a recent difficulty in the Six-Party Talks, presumably the U.S. financial sanctions towards North Korea.¹⁶ Nevertheless, China did not move actively to persuade the United States to resolve the problem. Far from that, in his April 20 summit with George W. Bush, Hu Jintao emphasized that the two sides had common strategic interests and responsibilities to attain peace regionally and internationally and to push for the process of the Six-Party Talks.¹⁷

China even appeared to support the U.S. financial measures in spite of the adversary game with the United States. It seems clear that BDA's freeze on North Korean accounts was tacitly approved by Beijing in that the President of BDA, Stanley Au, is a committee member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference.¹⁸ There is no doubt that China's move was an act of betrayal from Pyongyang's perspective.¹⁹

Under the strained relations with China, North Korea carried out its long-range missile test in July 2006. In the beginning, China's response to the North's missile brinkmanship looked uncompromising. China advocated UN Security Council Resolution 1695 and did not hide its willingness to cooperate with the United States on the North Korean issue. Washington welcomed such a firm stance on China's part as evidence of a responsible stakeholder.²⁰ However, as the United States beefed up its military posture against North Korea, Beijing began to restore Sino-North Korea relations in the alliance game. That is, in response to the U.S.-Australia military exercise in which B52 and B2 bombers were mobilized for bombing imaginary nuclear facilities, an air-to-air missile exercise over the West Sea of the Korean Peninsula, and an annual U.S.-South Korean joint military drill Eulji Focus, China revealed its intention to stabilize its relations with North Korea. On September 27, in his meeting with the North Korean military delegation, the Chinese Ministry of Defense Chao Gangquan reaffirmed the friendship between the two countries.²¹

Moreover, even after North Korea's nuclear test on October 9, China was not willing to fully estrange North Korea. Beijing persuaded Pyongyang to return to the multilateral talks by dispatching Tang Jiaxuan to North Korea on October 19, 2006, and confirmed that China's assistance to North Korea would not face any changes in the future. The People's Liberation Army also embarked on its military drills in the border area of North Korea as a balancing measure to a full-scale joint military exercise between the United States and South Korea.²²

Pyongyang had little reason to respond negatively to such Chinese moves in the alliance game. In the meeting with Tang Jiaxuan, Kim Jong Il signaled that North Korea would not carry out a second nuclear test and would return to the Six-Party Talks that had been halted since November 2005.²³ As a result, during the second and third sessions of the fifth round of the Six-Party Talks, respectively held in December 2006 and in February 2007, the states concerned succeeded in producing an agreement on February 13, 2007, which reconfirmed the pact of September 19, 2005.

According to the February agreement in 2007, North Korea would shut down its

Yongbyon nuclear reactor in July in exchange for heavy oil. North Korea also submitted its declaration of nuclear activities and symbolically destroyed a water cooling tower at the Yongbyon nuclear facility in June 2008. In return, Washington removed North Korea from its list of countries sponsoring terrorism on October 11.²⁴ However, Pyongyang appeared at this point to await the incoming Obama administration which, they believed, would have a more conciliatory policy than the conservative Bush administration.²⁵ Within this context, Pyongyang began to slow the process of implementing the agreement. Pyongyang strongly rejected Washington's demand that the verification protocol include nuclear sampling, because they claimed it would threaten North Korean sovereignty. As a result, the Six-Party Talks from December 8 to 11 in 2008 ended without any constructive results.²⁶

To Pyongyang's dismay, however, the Obama administration did not signal any positive changes in the United States' North Korea policy. When then-Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton took her inaugural trip to East Asia, she repeated a principal North Korea policy in line with that of the former Bush government: a complete and verifiable denuclearization, resumption of the Six-Party Talks, and no more provocative actions such as long-range missile tests.²⁷

To reverse this situation, North Korea once again engaged in nuclear brinkmanship. Pyongyang had signaled the possibility of launching a long-range missile beginning in early February 2009. On March 24, North Korea also threatened that it would not participate in future Six-Party Talks in the event that the United States and other participants placed sanctions in response to the missile launch.²⁸ North Korea eventually launched the long-range missile on April 5. In response to the UN Security Council Presidential statement of April 14 condemning North Korea, North Korea declared its withdrawal from the Six-Party Talks and the resumption of its frozen nuclear activities.²⁹ North Korea's second nuclear test on May 26, 2009 was carried out within this context.

Once again, China was not willing to isolate North Korea. Notwithstanding the passage of the UN Security Council Resolution 1874 of June 12 condemning the North's nuclear test, China made it clear that North Korea's sovereignty as a UN member should be respected and that the nuclear issue should be resolved peacefully through dialogue.³⁰ China also made an effort to engage North Korea by rejecting the Five-Party Talks suggested by South Korea which would exclude North Korea in the adversary game.³¹

As the United States and South Korea strengthened their cooperation against North Korea, China's moves to assure Pyongyang in the alliance game became clearer. In mid-October, the United States and South Korea displayed their combined military posture in the West Sea by mobilizing the aircraft carrier USS George Washington. China harshly criticized this as a threatening behavior endangering the security of Northeast Asia in the adversary game.³² At the same time China capitalized on its high-level diplomacy to confirm its relations with North Korea in the alliance game. During his visit to North Korea from October 4 to October 6, Prime Minister Wen Jiabao promised a massive economic aid package to the North as a reward for its return to the Six-Party Talks. Particularly, in his meeting with Kim Jong Il, Wen emphasized the importance of the friendship between the two countries from "generation to generation."³³ This can be

interpreted as China's support of North Korea's power succession from Kim Jong Il to his son Kim Jong Un. The fact that Kim Jong Il visited China two times in 2010 implies that Pyongyang was satisfied with China's commitment to the bilateral alliance.

The Xi Jinping–Kim Jong Un period

On February 12, 2013, North Korea carried out its third nuclear test despite opposition from China as well as the United States. Pyongyang justified its nuclear test by criticizing the UN Security Council Resolution 2087 of January 13, 2013, condemning the North's rocket launch in December 2012. Before the nuclear test, Pyongyang had vowed that it would implement "a nuclear test of higher capacity targeting the United States" but also criticized China by condemning "other big countries for siding with the United States."³⁴ Pyongyang once again appeared to attempt to capitalize on its third nuclear test "to leverage grudging Chinese largesse to sustain the regime."³⁵

China's response to the North's brinkmanship was somewhat assertive compared with its previous responses in 2006 and 2009. With its support of the UN Security Council Resolution 2094, top policy makers officially exposed their deep concerns about North Korea's brinkmanship in the alliance game. Foreign Minister Wang Yi made clear that "China would not allow troublemaking on China's doorstep." President Xi also indirectly warned Pyongyang that no country "should be allowed to throw a region and even the whole world into chaos for selfish gain."³⁶

China's deepening dissatisfaction with North Korea's brinkmanship was more clearly reflected in various journal articles. Before Pyongyang's avowed nuclear test, the *Global Times* sternly demanded that the Chinese government not only diminish its support for North Korea if it performed the nuclear test but also avoid becoming North Korea's hostage.³⁷ Moreover, Deng Yuwen, deputy editor of the *Study Times* [Xueshi Shibao], a weekly journal of the Central Party School, even wrote an article titled, "China should Abandon North Korea" in the *Financial Times*. In the unprecedented article, Deng argued that "a nuclear-armed North Korea could try to twist China's arm if Beijing were to fail to meet its demands or if the United States were to signal goodwill towards it."³⁸

From Beijing's perspective, clearly, Pyongyang's coercive diplomacy was intolerable within the context of newly emerging Sino–U.S. cooperative relations. In February 2012, during his trip to Washington, D.C., President Xi set forth a proposal for "A New Type of Great Power Relations" between the two countries. The main point of the concept is that China and the United States need to develop a win–win strategy by deepening mutual interests rather than conflicts and confrontation.³⁹ From Beijing's perspective, North Korea's third nuclear test was a calculated tactic to obstruct cooperative U.S.–China relations.

However, despite Beijing's anger at the North's nuclear test, the logic of the alliance game between the two sides persisted. As the United States and South Korea embarked on their joint military exercise Key Resolve in mid-March, and North Korea responded with the threat of a nuclear war, China actively intervened to de-escalate

tensions, confirming its commitment to the alliance with North Korea. As before, the two sides attempted to rely on their mutual high-profile diplomacy in the alliance game. Indeed, North Korea dramatically abandoned its brinkmanship and began to create an atmosphere for negotiations following Vice Marshal of the Korean People's Army Choe Royong-hae's visit to China in late May 2013.⁴⁰ In addition, during the visit by Chinese Vice President Li Yuanchao to Pyongyang in July, Kim Jong Un assured Li that there would be "no more security threats" in the Northeast Asian region.⁴¹

As a matter of fact, even China's support of UN Resolution 2094 did not lead to substantial Chinese sanctions on North Korea. China still aided North Korea with large amounts of light oil, food and fertilizer from March to April.⁴² Moreover, the announcement by the Bank of China on May 7 that it would close its account with North Korea's Foreign Trade Bank cannot be seen as an actual sanction, because smaller Chinese banks in the Northeastern province were still able to continue their daily financial trade with North Korea.⁴³ Once again, this time around, Beijing's geopolitical considerations regarding North Korea eventually led to China's fulfilling its critical role as a patron state in pacifying Pyongyang. As the Chinese *Global Times* clearly summarizes, "the North's stance toward China, whether it's friendly or not, will influence the strategic posture of Northeast Asia... Abandoning North Korea is unlikely to become China's diplomatic choice."⁴⁴

Within the same context, China's response to North Korea's series of nuclear tests in 2016 also did not deviate from the logic of alliance between the two sides. North Korea conducted its fourth nuclear test on January 5, 2016. In addition to the intention not only to enhance its nuclear technologies, such as the miniaturization of a nuclear warhead, but also to consolidate Kim Jong Un's domestic position as the supreme leader, Pyongyang appeared to leverage the fourth nuclear test to pressure Washington to give up its vicious hostile policy toward North Korea.⁴⁵ Still, Pyongyang's coercive diplomacy toward Washington failed to achieve its objectives, since the latter imposed sanctions that were tougher than ever.⁴⁶ Moreover, Washington confirmed its alliance commitment to South Korea by sending B52 bombers based in Guam to the peninsula.⁴⁷

However, from the perspective of North Korea's relations with China, Pyongyang's brinkmanship was not so ineffective. Beijing once again reiterated its basic positions, including the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, safeguarding peace and stability in the region, and resolving the nuclear issue through the Six-Party Talks.⁴⁸ Beijing made clear to Washington in the adversary game not only that China is not the key to resolving the North Korean problem but also that different parties' reasonable concerns, which implies North Korea's interests, must be addressed in a balanced manner.⁴⁹ Moreover, Beijing strongly rejected the draft of a UN Security Council Resolution proposed by the United States which included the prohibition of oil exports to North Korea.⁵⁰

Beijing's willingness to stabilize its relations with Pyongyang in the alliance game became much stronger as the possibility of deploying the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) in South Korea grew. Immediately after North Korea's rocket launch on February 7, Washington and Seoul swiftly agreed to start discussions about the deployment of THAAD. In response, Beijing strongly warned that it would not tolerate

such a plan. The editorial of the *Global Times* under the auspices of the *People's Daily* demanded that China take corresponding measures if Washington and Seoul decided to deploy THAAD.⁵¹ In the meeting with his counterpart John Kerry on February 12, Foreign Minister Wang Yi also made clear that the United States should abandon the missile defense system so as not to undermine China's security interests and regional stability.⁵² Subsequently on February 17, Wang Yi proposed a peace treaty that would end the current armistice on the peninsula.⁵³ Wang Yi's initiative clearly revealed Beijing's intention to take a responsible role as North Korea's ally, in that Pyongyang has long pursued such a peace treaty with the United States.

UN Security Council Resolution 2270 adopted on March 2 also did not compromise China's commitment to North Korea, even though Beijing affirmed the comprehensive implementation of the resolution and thereby banned its trade of goods such as gold, coal, and aviation fuel with North Korea. China still appeared to avoid implementing strict sanctions on North Korea by taking advantage of exceptions in the resolution; the permission of trade for the purpose of people's livelihood. The fact that China's trade with North Korea, which accounts for 90 percent of the latter's total trade, is mainly conducted at the local level, becomes another loophole on which Beijing capitalizes.⁵⁴

This time around high-level diplomacy once again became a useful way to nurture their alliance relationship. Immediately after Kim Jong Un was elected Chairman of the Worker's Party of North Korea on May 9, 2016, Xi Jinping sent a congratulatory message to Pyongyang emphasizing the traditional friendship between the two sides.⁵⁵ On June 1, Xi also met a North Korean delegation led by Ri Su-yong, vice chairman of the Worker's Party of North Korea. The fact that Xi had not met the high-ranking North Korean officials since May 2013 revealed Beijing's intention to stabilize its relations with Pyongyang.⁵⁶

Beijing began more clearly to distance themselves from Washington and Seoul in the adversary game in dealing with North Korea's nuclear issue after the two latter parties announced the deployment of THAAD on July 8. With an expression of its "strong dissatisfaction and firm opposition" to the decision, Beijing made clear that the deployment of THAAD would not be helpful for achieving the goal of denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula.⁵⁷ This signaled that from that time on China would reduce its efforts to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue against the expectations of Washington and Seoul. Indeed, in the ASEAN Regional Forum in late July, foreign ministers of China and North Korea met for the first time in two years and confirmed the friendship between the two countries in the alliance game. The fact that this friendly atmosphere of the meeting clearly contrasted with that of Wang Yi's meeting with his South Korean counterpart a day earlier, in which Wang Yi expressed China's strong opposition to the deployment of THAAD, indicated Beijing's intention to stabilize its relations with Pyongyang.⁵⁸

Even North Korea's fifth nuclear test on September 9 did not reduce China's opposition to the deployment of THAAD. While Beijing reiterated its official criticism of the North's nuclear test, it simultaneously blamed Washington and Seoul for deploying THAAD, that it claimed would pose a threat to China's security and damage

the regional strategic balance.⁵⁹ In December, China also undertook a large-scale military drill with its aircraft carrier Liaoning in the Bohai Sea near the West Sea of South Korea. It seems clear that such saber rattling was a military warning against the deployment of THAAD.⁶⁰ Moreover, as the actual deployment of THAAD began in March 2017, China even signaled the possibility of a surgical strike on the THAAD battery in South Korea.⁶¹

In addition, China did not hide its willingness to stabilize its relations with North Korea despite its support of the UN Security Council Resolution 2321, “the toughest sanctions ever” in response to the North’s fifth nuclear test. In early March 2017, in his meeting with North Korea’s Vice Foreign Minister Li Kil-song, the first high-level talks in nine months, Wang Yi confirmed the friendship between the two countries, who exchanged their views on regional issues of mutual interest. It was reported that the two sides might have discussed the THAAD issue in the meeting.⁶²

China also has not relented on its uncompromising stance over the THAAD issue with the Moon Jae-in government, its new South Korean dialogue partner. Initially, Beijing expected the Moon government to take a more deliberate approach to THAAD than the ousted hawkish Park Geun-hye government did. Indeed, the Moon government decided in June to suspend further deployment of THAAD, citing the need for an environmental assessment. Nevertheless, immediately after North Korea’s launch of its intercontinental ballistic missile on July 28, Seoul swiftly decided to further deploy THAAD units. In response, China strongly criticized the Moon government for behaving in “an irresolute manner” and of “cooling down the momentum of the improvement of bilateral relations.”⁶³

Overall, from its alliance with China, North Korea appears to regard the deployment of THAAD in South Korea as a strategic opportunity for securing Beijing’s alliance commitment more than as a threat to its security. Within this context, North Korea’s series of missile launches may be interpreted as a well-calculated tactic to provide a further rational reason for Washington and Seoul to justify the deployment of the missile interceptor system, thereby entrapping China on North Korea’s side.

Conclusion

North Korea claims that it has been developing nuclear and missile capabilities to use them as a deterrent against the threat posed by the United States and South Korea. In contrast, the United States (along with South Korea) maintains that North Korea has been doing so with the intention of using them for offensive purposes. Whatever motivations lie behind North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs, North Korea is aware that further nuclear and missiles tests will incur increasingly harsh international sanctions. In order to survive the sanctions, North Korea needs to entrap China on its side, for the North Korean economy is highly dependent upon China. To reduce its fear of abandonment by China, North Korea heightens the level of its nuclear and missiles threats with no consideration for saving China’s face. Though such North Korean military adventurism upsets China, North Korea continues it in order to entrap China on

its side, as explained above.

North Korea will continue its nuclear and missile tests to emphasize that it has WMD capabilities to launch a strike on the U.S. mainland. Such actions are intended to bring the United States to the negotiating table to develop a peace agreement between the United States and North Korea. However, whenever North Korea conducts nuclear and missile tests, the international community will impose harsher sanctions. Then, as has been a repeated pattern since 2006 when North Korea conducted its first nuclear test, North Korea will heighten the threat level to the extent that the United States (along with South Korea) will react by strengthening its military readiness against the North Korean threat. Worrying that the United States will take advantage of the North Korean situation to contain China, China will perceive the United States as a challenger to the stability of the Korean peninsula as well as of Northeast Asia in general. As a result of North Korea's deliberate attempt to change the challenger–defender framework, China would not fully implement the sanctions, though it participates in them in order to save face. North Korea will continue practicing brinkmanship by increasing the threat level through its nuclear or missile tests.

The above speculation means that, when North Korea develops nuclear and missile capabilities, North Korea would not take China's opposition into full consideration. That is, China will not have leverage to curb North Korea's WMD program as long as its top priority regarding the Koreans is to maintain stability on the peninsula.

All that said, North Korea's brinkmanship strategy *vis-à-vis* China and the United States would be seriously challenged when the United States finally perceives that North Korea has developed the WMD capabilities to target U.S. territories. Then, the United States might make a surgical strike on North Korea's nuclear and missile sites, even at the risk of such an action resulting in a Sino–U.S. military confrontation on the peninsula. To note, in 1961 the United States imposed a naval blockade surrounding Cuba at the risk of a breakout of a U.S.–Soviet war. Under such circumstances, China might step back to avoid being entrapped into an unwanted Second Korean War. That is, North Korea could be caught in its own trap. Therefore, from the North Korean perspective, it will attempt to find the red line, on the other side of which the United States would contemplate military attacks against North Korea. If it can find that line, it will escalate tensions to just short of it. However, it is not an easy task to find the line, as it will involve perceptions and misperceptions of the various players in the games, i.e., the United States (along with South Korea), China and North Korea itself.

A corollary of the above argument is that China should seriously discuss North Korean contingency plans with the United States and South Korea in order to develop an effective strategy to curb North Korea's military adventurism. Paradoxically, this would lead to North Korea's fully considering China's position. Otherwise, North Korea will continue its nuclear brinkmanship *vis-à-vis* China as well as the United States.

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