

Can the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula Still Be Achieved?

—An analysis of the situation after Pyongyang's third nuclear test^{*}

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Unfazed by the strong opposition from the international community, North Korea carried out its third nuclear test on February 12, 2013. Tensions were already running high on the peninsula following the launch of the Unha-3 satellite in December 2012, but this act pushed the confrontation to new heights. On March 7, the United Nations Security Council unanimously passed Resolution 2094, imposing tougher sanctions on North Korea and creating even greater pressure on and isolation of the country. This, in turn, led to a series of provocative claims and actions by North Korea, including threats of military action and nuclear attack on the U.S., Japan and South Korea. Thus, this series of events pushed tensions to their highest level since the Korean Armistice Agreement was signed in July 1953.

The fear created by the crisis on the Korean Peninsula was felt across the world. During the month of April, North Korea's leader Kim Jong-un became the most widely reported leader in the international media, with many fearing the outbreak of military conflict on the peninsula.¹ These fears had been somewhat allayed

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by the end of April, yet in a period of only four months, North Korea had carried out missile and nuclear weapons tests, announced that it was scrapping all non-aggression pacts with the South, and threatened that “the outbreak of war was hours away.” This has pressured the international community to make renewed efforts to achieve denuclearization, stability and peace on the Korean Peninsula, bringing the situation into a new phase of “paradigm change.” Based on a comparison of the strengths of North and South Korea, the likelihood of direct military conflict between the North and South in the future is very small, but the crisis situation on the peninsula will nevertheless persist. If North Korea engages in direct military provocation, this may incite military retaliation by the South, meaning that we cannot rule out the possibility of military crisis in the future. Furthermore, the chances of the Six Party Talks being reconvened in the short term are extremely low. Thus, coming up with viable solutions to the Korean nuclear issue, methods that can be used to cool down crises on the peninsula, and ways by which to bring about a return to dialogue and agreements are important tasks in need of constant reconsideration.

WHY DOES NORTH KOREA WANT TO ESCALATE THE CRISIS ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA?

North Korea’s third nuclear test on February 12, 2013 violated the “Joint Declaration of the Six Party Talks” and stepped up the threat of nuclear proliferation on the Korean Peninsula. For China, which has devoted itself to its friendship with North Korea for many years and has worked hard to achieve a political and diplomatic resolution to the nuclear issue, this was another heavy blow, to which China expressed its firm opposition.

North Korea carried out its third nuclear test as retaliation for UN Security Council Resolution 2087, which was passed on January 23, 2013. However, launching a satellite was not North Korea’s legitimate “sovereign right,” as its government claimed, but was rather a step forward in North Korea’s plan for nuclear proliferation, in violation of the UN’s ban on the country producing weapons of mass destruction. As there are great similarities between

satellite technology and intercontinental ballistic missile technology, the United Nations passed Resolutions 1718 and 1874 in 2006 and 2009, respectively, which banned North Korea from carrying out satellite and long-range missile tests, expressly forbidding the country from carrying out ballistic missile tests under the guise of launching satellites. All East Asian powers are fully aware of the importance of preventing North Korea from combining its nuclear and missile technology.²

However, Pyongyang is determined to respond to calls for it to abandon nuclear technology with nuclear tests and satellite launches. This is not only a direct challenge to UN Security Council resolutions, but also shows that the DPRK wants to continue to use confrontational actions to further its “nuclear containment” strategy. Since the end of the Second World War, nuclear powers have combined “rocket” and “missile” technology to create mid- or long-range nuclear missiles to increase the projection and practical utility of their nuclear weapons. In the ten years from October 1998, when North Korea attempted to launch the “Taepodong 1” long-range missile for the first time, to 2009, North Korea carried out three long-range missile tests. However, in 2012 alone, North Korea carried out two so-called “satellite launches” in April and December. In April 2012, the DPRK also revised its constitution to proclaim itself a nuclear state, emphasizing that nuclear weapons were one of the three great legacies of Kim Jong-il. Pyongyang’s announcement that it was a nuclear power and its “satellite launches” were closely interlinked, indicating that these launches were not the “peaceful space exploration” that North Korea had claimed, but rather a planned step by the North Korean government to strengthen its nuclear capabilities.

Preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons and long-range missiles, has been a cornerstone of global security in the post-Cold War era. Pyongyang has tried everything to attain legal nuclear power status, undoubtedly with the survival of its political regime in mind. North Korea’s current political model, its aggressive and often irrational foreign policy, and its stagnated domestic economy have left the country in a vicious, and seemingly inescapable, cycle. The main

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motivations behind Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions are ensuring the survival of its current political system, showing off the leadership capabilities of the young leader and balancing out the huge discrepancy in conventional military power between North and South Korea. The events of the past few months indicate that Kim Jong-un era North Korea has abandoned promises of giving up nuclear power, and is instead adopting openly confrontational policies to force the international community to recognize

it as a nuclear power. At the same time as North Korea carried out its third nuclear test, it clearly stated that it would no longer participate in the Six Party Talks, and refused to engage in any bilateral or multilateral talks on the nuclear issue. Through such actions, North Korea is moving step by step towards its established goals. However, the actions and thoughts of the North Korean leadership not only pose a danger to the region and the wider international community, but will not bring any real benefit to North Korea itself. At the same time, they will heighten the risk of strategic tensions between major East Asian powers.³

On March 7, 2013, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 2094, which stepped up international sanctions against North Korea. This led to a series of threats and actions from the North, including claims that it would launch a nuclear strike on the U.S., carry out the nuclear destruction of South Korea, and use "nuclear lightning" to burn Japan to the ground. In addition, on March 25, North Korea announced that it would no longer adhere to the armistice agreement, and on April 5, it declared that it was pulling out of the North-South Kaesong joint industrial zone. Following this, on April 9 at Donghai'an, the North Korean government announced its intention to carry out a missile launch. Thus, in March and April 2013, the rhetoric and actions of the North reached an unprecedented level of provocation, giving the impression that

the country might launch a nuclear attack on South Korea, Japan or even the U.S. base in Guam at any moment. The North Korean government exacerbated this fear by telling foreigners to leave Seoul, warning embassy staff in Pyongyang to leave the city for their own safety, and releasing videos of an imitation nuclear attack on the U.S. Even China began to reach the end of its patience with the DPRK.⁴ This series of actions not only created fear of nuclear war among the international community, but also threatened North Korea's neighbours. Within a very short period of time, tensions on the Korean Peninsula reached their highest level since the Korean Armistice Agreement was signed in July 1953.⁵

Regardless of whether North Korea carried out satellite launches or nuclear tests, it nevertheless seriously violated the international community's principles of nuclear non-proliferation, as well as the series of resolutions made by the UN Security Council on the North Korean nuclear issue. The key motivation behind this behavior is the consolidation of Kim Jong-un's position, by showing his courage and determination to "destroy the U.S. and decimate South Korea." The young leader is desperate to make his mark on domestic politics and to gain personal prestige. At the same time, as the country is faced with a wide array of economic and social problems, diverting attention to crises in foreign relations can aid domestic political control and conceal the reality of domestic economic and social stagnation. To maintain the stability of the regime and legitimacy of its hereditary succession, the leadership is using nuclear tests to strengthen North Korea's position as a nuclear power and to force the international community to recognize the country as such.

Continual provocations and military threats towards other countries are seen as necessary for Pyongyang to make the international community accept that it will not give up nuclear power. They are part of strategic considerations by the North to "take the initiative by striking the first blow," alongside refusals to continue with bilateral and multilateral dialogues about the nuclear issue. On March 31, 2013, the North convened a plenary session of the Central Committee of the Worker's Party, declaring that nuclear weapons are a "lifeline" for the North, and that they would begin to adopt the "dual track strategy" of developing

the nuclear programme alongside the domestic economy. This announcement offered an explanation for the North's antagonistic behavior over the two months prior to this. North Korea is fully aware that any nuclear plans will be met with huge criticism among the international community. In light of this, North Korea is intentionally strengthening its "nuclear chip" by creating international tension, hoping to use the threat of nuclear war to force other countries to recognize that North Korea has already become a nuclear power.

On April 14, when Pyongyang was replying to the U.S.'s offer for dialogue, it announced that its conditions for dialogue with the U.S. and South Korea were that the UN abolishes its sanctions against North Korea, the U.S. removes its nuclear weapons from the Korean Peninsula, and that the U.S. and South Korea put an end to their military exercises aimed at the DPRK.⁶ The conditions that it offered to South Korea were that the Park Geun-Hye government must apologize for "violating North Korea's highest honor," as well as ending all hostile activities aimed at the North. However, these preconditions ruled out the possibility of opening discussions about North Korean denuclearization.⁷ North Korea swore that it would never again agree to bilateral or multilateral dialogues about giving up nuclear power unless "the entire world carried out total nuclear disarmament" and "the U.S. put an end to its imperialist policies."⁸ This is not totally without precedent, as after 2009, the Kim Jong-il government also emphasized that it wanted to turn dialogue on North Korea's nuclear program into "multilateral nuclear disarmament talks." However, the total rejection of dialogues on the nuclear issue is a new feature of the Kim Jong-un era.

THE NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF THE INTENSIFICATION OF THE KOREAN PENINSULA CRISIS

The latest round of the nuclear crisis was the most serious in all the years since North Korea's first nuclear test in 1993. The North Korean nuclear issue and the issue of the stability and peace of the Korean Peninsula have also undergone a clear "paradigm change."

Whether or not the latest round of the crisis will have a decisive impact on the North Korea policies of its neighboring states still remains to be seen. However, whether from the perspective of diplomatic and military reactions to the nuclear situation, or the role of the “North Korean threat” in East Asian security, the events of the past few months will set in motion some important changes.

First of all, the recent behavior of the North has lowered the hopes of the international community for a diplomatic and political solution to this issue. Confrontation on the North Korean nuclear issue appears to have undergone a fundamental change from the “action versus action” approach of the Six Party Talks framework to a “power versus power” approach. In other words, North Korea has unveiled its dual-track strategy of “developing both nuclear power and the economy,” but the U.S. and South Korea have made

clear that they are not willing to reduce their demands in order to engage in dialogue with the North. This means that it will only become more difficult to break through the deadlock on the nuclear issue in the future. It is no longer a question of how to promote “diplomatic and political exchange,” but has become a question of regime survival and whether or not the international community can work together to confront increasingly challenging North Korean nuclear crises in the future.

On April 10, 2013, the U.S. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel warned that North Korea’s aggressive words and provocative actions were “skating very close to a dangerous line.” At a press conference in the Pentagon on that day, Hagel stated that North Korea’s rhetoric and actions have not helped to solve a combustible situation. He said the U.S. and its allies hoped that this rhetoric would be “ratcheted down,” but that the U.S. was fully prepared to deal with any actions or provocation from the North. Furthermore,

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he said that he would refrain from making conjectures about whether Kim Jong-un's intentions were to start a war or bring about a return to the negotiating table, because "Kim Jong-un is an unpredictable man, and North Korea is an unpredictable country."⁹ However, he made it clear that the U.S. has the capacity to deal with any action North Korea might take.

As for the question of how close North Korea is to installing missiles with the capability of striking Japan or even further afield, the U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staffs, General Martin Dempsey stated at a press conference that, as North Korea has already carried out two nuclear tests and many successful missile tests, "we have to assume the worst case, and that is why we are postured as we are today." On April 9, 2013, when presenting evidence to Congress, the Commander of the U.S. Army's Pacific Command Samuel J. Locklear stated, "North Korea's missiles are not yet capable of threatening Hawaii or any other U.S. territory. Although Guam is perhaps within striking range, the U.S. has the ability to intercept any missiles that North Korea may launch on the U.S., Japan or South Korea." Locklear also claimed that Kim Jong-un is different to his father in that he does not follow a script of "provocation, dialogue, and then more provocation." His behavioral patterns are "harder to predict to the extent that he may not have thought at all about when to back down, which makes the situation on the Korean Peninsula somewhat more challenging."¹⁰ In addition, the young North Korean leader has no experience, acts without consideration or regard for international norms, and his rhetoric lacks a "bottom line." This means that his policies do have the potential to bring about military conflict on the Korean Peninsula. If North Korea becomes increasingly unpredictable, the crisis on the Korean Peninsula will become a long-term problem and it is hard to rule out the possibility of some form of military conflict in the future.

The latest missile launch by the North was by no means a declaration of war. However, if North Korean missiles are intercepted by the U.S., Japan and South Korea, this might prompt some degree of military retaliation from the North, which could, in turn, lead to a joint U.S.-South Korean military attack. In such

an instance, the Korean Peninsula is very likely to enter into a state of direct military conflict. If North Korea launches a missile, but it is not intercepted by the U.S., Japan or South Korea, this will heighten tensions, but will not directly lead to military conflict. The UN Security Council will have further discussions about the North Korean issue and will possibly introduce another round of tougher sanctions on the country. In addition, Pyongyang is currently in a position from which it is very difficult to back down, meaning that there is a high possibility that the country will launch further missiles. However, it is not clear whether the North will launch short-range or mid-range missiles, and this distinction will be important in determining what the consequences of further launches would be.

At the same time, the U.S. is working with South Korea, Japan and its other allies to make the necessary crisis preparations. South Korea would be likely to react to North Korean direct military provocation with military retaliation, and would not rule out the possibility of limited military action to deter the North from further provocations of war. The U.S.'s fundamental assessment of the current situation is that, even though North Korea is posing a military threat and may carry out a fourth nuclear test and missile launch in the future, it remains very scared of a military attack from South Korea and the U.S. The U.S. believes that North Korea is afraid that any military conflict with the South would draw in the U.S. and lead to a large-scale war on the Korean Peninsula. Thus, recent threats from the North are attempts to cover up its internal weakness and do not indicate that it is seeking to start a war.¹¹ As long as the U.S. and South Korea do not allow North Korean threats to scare them and do not back down to the North in diplomatic situations, these threats will not achieve their goals, namely, to force the U.S. to make diplomatic concessions and to get aid from the U.S. and South Korea. Whether the result of domestic or international considerations, the Obama administration will not formally recognize North Korea as a nuclear power. On the contrary, achieving the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula will remain the primary objective of U.S. policy on North Korea in the long-term.

Finally, the dual-track strategy of “developing nuclear weapons with one hand and the economy with the other” aims to force the international community into recognising North Korea as a nuclear power, and thus establish a new order on the Korean Peninsula and in East Asian security. However, this attempt to force North Korean rules onto other countries will only stir up even stronger international opposition. Unless North Korea’s domestic situation undergoes decisive change, the isolation of and pressure on the country is likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

Following North Korea’s third missile test and its subsequent threats of war, the Obama administration’s North Korea policy will become increasingly hard-line. Secretary of State John Kerry has repeatedly expressed his wish to engage in dialogue with the North, and stated that the door for U.S.-North Korea discussions is always open. However, the U.S. has put very large preconditions on this, namely, that North Korea must put an end to both its threats of war and its nuclear program before any dialogue can take place. Putting preconditions on dialogue not only allow the U.S. to retain diplomatic influence over North Korea and prevent the intensification of North Korea’s rhetoric and actions, but can also ensure that the U.S.’s North Korea policy continues to win the necessary political support in the international and domestic spheres. Although some people in the U.S. believe that dialogue is the only way to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue, domestic political needs will make it difficult for the Obama administration to show new diplomatic flexibility.¹²

At the same time, however, the U.S. is growing more and more sceptical about whether the North Korean nuclear issue can be resolved through dialogue, and whether North Korea can be brought back to the negotiating table at all.¹³ The Obama government is also considering restricting or preventing the North from developing weapons of mass destruction altogether, in a bid to reduce the likelihood that it can threaten the U.S. mainland with its nuclear missile capabilities. In recent months, there have been many reports in the media claiming that we have underestimated the capabilities of North Korean weapons of mass

destruction.¹⁴ Restricting or preventing the development of these weapons basically equates to limiting or even blocking North Korean industrialization and economic development, thus creating a situation in which the country no longer has the capacity to develop its nuclear weapons or missile programmes. If the U.S. implements a North Korea policy of this nature, this would allow it and its allies to impose even greater isolation and sanctions upon North Korea. However, this would push the North Korean economic, financial and industrial capacities further towards collapse, and exacerbate the domestic survival crisis of the domestic regime, with potentially adverse effects.

Due to current U.S. domestic policies, the chances that flexibility will emerge in the Obama administration's policy towards North Korea are very low indeed. This is especially the case as the U.S. media tends to treat the situations in North Korea and Iran as one and the same, which plays a part in pushing the Obama government towards making hard-line policy choices on North Korea. In his responses to questions at the House Foreign Affairs Committee Hearing on April 17, 2013, Secretary of State Kerry said, "Without Chinese support, North Korea would collapse."¹⁵ He went on to add that if there were to be a successful diplomatic solution to the North Korea issue, it could not be done without China on board. He also pointed out that the U.S.'s policy on North Korea is not one of "strategic patience," but rather "strategic impatience," and emphasized that "the U.S. would not make the same old mistakes again." On his visits to South Korea, China and Japan, Kerry clearly stated, "The United States would not return to past cycles of here's a little food aid, here's a little of this, then we'll talk."¹⁶ Kerry emphasized that if North Korea wants dialogue or food aid, it must first take concrete measures, and not simply make empty claims or promises. The question is, will the Kim Jong-un government give up its "dual-track strategy" for dialogue with the U.S.?

ARE THERE BETTER POLICY OPTIONS FOR CHINA?

The severity of the crisis that erupted on the Korea Peninsula between December 2012 and April 2013 reflected the serious lack of

trust and differences in perception between all parties involved. At the same time, it showed that the “North Korean nuclear issue” and the “North Korean issue” cannot be treated as two separate issues. Without reform in Kim Jong-un’s domestic political system, a move away from the Juche idea and “military first policies,” as well ending the country’s isolation and actively seeking compromise with the

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international community, it will be difficult for any breakthrough in the “North Korean nuclear issue” to take place. However, China cannot lead North Korea in the direction of reform without the help of other nations. The new reality of the heightened crisis on the Korean Peninsula requires China, the U.S., Japan, South Korea, Russia and other major North East Asian powers to put into place a series of more cooperative and coordinating policies on North Korea. In dealing with North Korea’s nuclear provocation, the international community must remain united and only then will it be able to show the DPRK that North East Asia will not buckle under its threats.

China must be aware that the U.S., Japan and South Korea may take advantage of the events on the Korean Peninsula to increase their military deployments in the region and strengthen their military alliances and cooperation. Furthermore, if North Korea’s provocative behavior is not brought under control, it will prove difficult to reduce these military deployments in the future. At the same time, China should not be too quick to accuse these countries of any wrongdoing. Russia has criticized North Korea far more openly than China, and in its response to the country’s recent actions, it has clearly leaned towards the U.S. and South Korean position. Today it is not China and Russia that are working together in opposing North Korea, but the entire international community that is united in its condemnation. China should not only concern itself with the increase in the U.S., Japan and South Korea’s military deployments, but also the serious damage that North Korea’s behavior will have on East Asian peace and stability, and respond appropriately to this threat. In a telephone

conversation with UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon on April 6, 2013, the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi warned that, “China will absolutely not stand for any troublemaking on its doorstep.”¹⁷ Furthermore, at the Bo’ao Asian Forum on April 8, President Xi Jinping stated, “No country can drag a whole region into conflict for its own personal gains.”¹⁸ This indicates the Chinese government’s firm attitude to the recent Korean Peninsula crisis.

Without a substantial dialogue on denuclearization or the willingness to set aside differences in dealing with these issues, this will become a long-term crisis, and create greater problems in East Asian security. The U.S. and South Korea have both expressed their desire for dialogue with North Korea, but have also increased their deployment of missile defense systems, strengthened military precautions and combat capabilities, and continued to carry out regular joint military exercises. Although agreeing to dialogue in theory, Washington has emphasized that the prerequisite to this dialogue is for North Korea to return to their former promises of denuclearization and stop their verbal and physical threats. At the U.S.-South Korea summit talks on April 7, 2013, South Korean President Park Geun-Hye announced that South Korea would continue to promote the “Seoul Process” between the North and South. Park also emphasized that the South would strengthen their military containment of the North and would under no circumstances tolerate “any military provocation” on the part of the North.¹⁹ Park’s “Seoul Process” proposal seems to promise closer North-South relations than during her predecessor Lee Myung-bak’s time in power, and no longer makes denuclearization the precondition for food aid or political contacts between the North and South. However, this does not mean that North Korea’s provocative behavior will force the U.S. and South Korea to make any compromises. Without the denuclearization of the North, the “Seoul Process” cannot hope to return to the Kim Tae-chung — Roh Moo Hyun era “Sunshine Policy,” and it will not decisively change the confrontation between the two halves of the Korean Peninsula.

The most uncertain factors determining the future of the Korean Peninsula are the domestic situation in North Korea and

Kim Jong-un's domestic and foreign policy. If North Korea is serious about reviving its national economy and achieving the Kim Jong-il era goal of "opening up to the outside world," it must both reform its domestic system and improve relations with the U.S., South Korea, Japan and other nations. North Korea must first stop its provocations and show its intention to denuclearize, and only then will it be able to improve its relations with other countries, which, in turn, will provide it with the constructive external environment needed for development. Its current strategy of creating nuclear confrontation in the hope of forcing the international community to recognize the legitimacy of North Korea's nuclear weapons and take the initiative in dialogues and negotiations, will only increase the pressure upon North Korea itself. Without a constructive process of denuclearization, North Korea will never attain the international cooperation that it requires for economic development.

Faced with immense pressure both domestically and internationally, Kim Jong-un has shown some flexibility. On May 22, 2013, Director of the Korean People's Army General Political Bureau, Choe Ryong-hae was sent as Kim Jong-un's special envoy to Beijing and presented President Xi Jinping with a handwritten letter from Kim Jong-un. In his talks with the Chinese leadership, Choe delivered three pieces of important news from Pyongyang. The first was that North Korea hopes to improve relations between North Korea and China. The second was that North Korea wants to focus on developing the economy, improving people's lives, and creating a peaceful external environment for itself. The third was that North Korea is willing to accept suggestions from China about establishing dialogues, including the reconvening of the Six Party Talks. However, this should not be taken as a sign that Kim Jong-un has decided to reopen denuclearization talks and adhere to the "Joint Declaration on the Six Party Talks" of 2005, as Pyongyang did not make any firm promises. Consequently, the international community did not believe that Choe Ryong-hae's visit to Beijing indicated any major change in the North Korean stance.²⁰ In fact, on the very day that Choe returned to North Korea, the North Korean media launched another propaganda campaign about its nuclear program.²¹

If the intention of Choe's visit was simply to inform Beijing that North Korea is now willing to engage in dialogue again, this will not be met with any great enthusiasm by the Chinese government. This is because the dialogue that the DPRK is proposing is only one to reduce the current tensions on the Korean Peninsula. This dialogue could involve negotiations about the reopening the Kaesong joint industrial zone, or talks with the U.S. about establishing a peaceful system on the Korean Peninsula, which North Korea has always wanted, but not negotiations about the denuclearization of the peninsula. Choe also emphasized that Kim Jong-un is willing to focus on economic development, improving people's lives and creating a peaceful external environment. However, we need to consider carefully what exactly is meant by this. Does it mean developing the economy under the precondition of possessing nuclear power, and promoting "peace" while trying to strengthen its nuclear capabilities? Or will it involve denuclearization, normalizing relations with the U.S., South Korea and Japan and the signing of a peace treaty with the South? China needs to make cautious judgments about the concrete results of Choe's visit.

The future of North Korea will depend on which of two different paths the country chooses to follow. The first is that, under the precondition of being a nuclear power, the country initiates domestic reform in order to achieve a limited form of opening up. However, in this case, the international community will not end their isolation of and pressure on North Korea, and the situation on the Korean Peninsula will continue to be tense and unstable. The other choice is to improve the country's external environment by engaging in dialogue on denuclearization, increase the pace of domestic political change and opening up to the outside world, and thus achieve greater national security and economic development. To a large extent, North Korea's attitude to the nuclear issue will determine the route that the country ultimately takes to achieve reform.²² Yet, no matter what happens, total denuclearization will be the result of such a change and is highly unlikely to be its precondition. Just as President Xi Jinping stressed during his meeting with Choe Ryong-hae, denuclearization and

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long-lasting peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula are common aspirations shared by all people in the region.²³ If North Korea persists with its provocative behavior, this will only make the collapse of the country all the more likely.

North Korea has already announced that it will never return to the Six Party Talks, and that it will pass legislation, revise the Party platform and introduce a cabinet-level Nuclear Development Agency to cement North Korea's status as a nuclear power. Faced with such prospects, we cannot allow the relaunching of the Six Party Talks to be dependent on the plans of the North

Korean leadership alone. In stabilizing the situation on the Korean Peninsula and achieving the goal of North Korean denuclearization, China needs to strengthen international cooperation, promote policy coordination, and deal with the North Korean issue in coordination with the international community as a whole, not merely preventing, but managing various potential changes in the situation on the peninsula.

Dialogue and cooperation between China and the U.S. is the key to preventing the situation from getting out of control and threatening the security of the whole East Asian region. On April 3, 2013, China's Minister of Defense Chang Wanquan and U.S. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel had a telephone conversation, in which they discussed their worries about the latest round of the Korean Peninsula crisis. Following this, on April 13, U.S. Secretary of State Kerry visited China and took part in constructive discussions with the Chinese leadership. China and the U.S. have wide-ranging common interests on the issue of North Korean denuclearization, and so the two countries should make active use of this new challenge to strengthen their strategic interdependence and improve their communication on East Asian security issues. Furthermore, cooperation in handling the North Korean nuclear issue is an important opportunity for the two countries to put the "new type of great power relations" to the test. To achieve this, U.S. and Chinese leaders should hold regular meetings, show their

mutual respect for one another, and act together to protect regional peace, stability and prosperity.²⁴ The denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula not only depends on the actions of North Korea, but also on whether North East Asian countries can cooperate in the face of huge regional security challenges such as this, and the scale on which this cooperation takes place.

CONCLUSION

North Korea's actions since February 2013 have pushed the political struggle on the peninsula to a new and more dangerous level. The events of the past few months have also provided us with some clear insight into Kim Jong-un's domestic and foreign policy, dashing all hopes that North Korea's young leader will initiate reform in the country. Under Kim Jong-un's leadership, North Korea's behavior has become more challenging and unpredictable than in the past, increasing the uncertainty on the peninsula. Against this background, adapting and developing China's North Korean policy has become a huge test for China's new leadership. The severity of the North Korean nuclear issue should not be underestimated, and North Korean rhetoric and actions over the past few months have reduced hopes of resolving this issue through diplomatic means. China should be calm and flexible in its handling of this issue, and needs to work hard to develop new ways of thinking, concepts and methods to deal with North Korea.

The Chinese government and its people have always cherished the friendship between China and North Korea. Because of this, China wants to avoid raised tensions on the Korean Peninsula and any worsening of the nuclear issue. However, the situation since February 2013 has posed an unprecedented challenge to China's own security. How should China deal with a North Korea that has already made it clear that it will not denuclearize and will continue to put all its efforts into expanding its nuclear capabilities? Amid current tensions, how should we go about re-launching the relevant dialogues and negotiations? How should we bring about stability on the peninsula and establish a new security order? The Chinese leadership must urgently find

answers to these questions. China cannot afford to be indifferent to the long-term continuation of the North Korean nuclear confrontation, as this poses a huge threat to China's national security and East Asian security as a whole.

As far as Beijing is concerned, there are two main questions that require serious thought. The first concerns how to improve the efficiency of denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula. The second is if North Korea can't be persuaded to halt its provocative policies and nuclear programme, what can China do to increase its influence over the nuclear issue and the North Korean issue as a whole? Recent events have shown that it is no longer an option to simply bide our time. Holding onto the hope that sooner or later North Korean economic development will soften the country's stance on these issues has already been proven to be an unrealistic expectation. The core of the nuclear issue is the North Korean issue itself. A North Korea that is not willing to give up nuclear weapons, continues to uphold its old system and retains its "military first" policies will only become even more provocative if the economy shows any signs of improvement. Thus, the time is ripe for China to reconsider its traditional policies on North Korea.

Promisingly, China's North Korea policies are already showing some signs of change, in that China is not allowing its North Korean and Korean Peninsula policies to be "hijacked" by the North. The Chinese government is fully aware that the traditional relations between China and North Korea cannot override China's own national interests of denuclearization and the stability of the Korean Peninsula. This is the basic principle that must be upheld in developing China-North Korean relations. The international media has also paid attention to China's firm stance on the issue of denuclearization.²⁵ The friendship and cooperation between China and North Korea has always been founded on the basis of the governments and people of the two countries respecting each other's security and interests. North Korea's economic development and national stability requires the support and understanding of the Chinese people, but North Korea's extremism and confrontation in its foreign policy is not only harming China's interests, but also

North Korea's own stability and development. If the North Korean government does not find a way to alter its rhetoric and actions, China needs to take a tough stance and let North Korea feel the effects.

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