

Listening for the Coda:

**China and the Rise, Fall (and Future?)
of the Korean Six-Party Talks**

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**War and Peace Dynamics (WarPeD)
Occasional Paper 1 (2020)**

December 2020

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From their beginnings in 2003, the Six-Party Talks (SPT) on nuclear disarmament in the Korean Peninsula were widely considered in China to be the primary mechanism for defusing the ongoing nuclear crisis in the Democratic People's Republic of (North) Korea (DPRK). Ignoring international outcry and economic pressure, the reclusive state had withdrawn from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) more than a decade prior and instead proceeded to accelerate its development of an indigenous nuclear weapon. This situation culminated in six separate nuclear tests from 2006-17, as well as missile tests which demonstrated an increasing level of DPRK technological prowess.

The SPT, which ultimately sought to convince Pyongyang to scale back and then dismantle its nuclear weapons program represented an ambitious attempt, spearheaded by Beijing, at multilateral confidence-building in a region dominated by great power politics and weak regional organisations. In addition to China and North Korea, participants in the talks included representatives from Japan, Russia, the Republic of (South) Korea (RoK) and the United States. Yet, from its inception Beijing was widely considered to be the driving force behind the process. The Six-Party Talks were viewed by Beijing not only as the optimal method of achieving peace in the region but also as a means of demonstrating China's firm commitment to a negotiated peace on the peninsula. Through the SPT mechanism, Beijing also sought to curtail the use of more coercive measures such as deeper economic sanctions or the use of force, options which the United States had maintained due to North Korea's ongoing intransigence.

Since North Korea had repeatedly demanded direct bilateral talks with the United States, a stipulation which the US had until recently refused to entertain, participation in the SPT was considered a means of bringing American and North Korean interests to the table while also maintaining a strong Chinese presence in the negotiations. At the same time, the SPT was developed to remove, or at least blunt, the pressure for direct bilateral talks between Washington and Pyongyang. China's stance was a clear change from the previous North Korean nuclear crisis of the early 1990s, when Beijing was considerably more distanced from US-DPRK talks which resulted in an unsuccessful 'Agreed Framework' between the two governments in 1994.¹ The failures of the Framework led to the emergence of the second North Korean nuclear crisis, less than a decade afterwards, and one which is still far from being resolved.

In all, there were six rounds of Six-Party Talks commencing in 2003 which produced informal agreements of various magnitudes, but also led to frequent stalemates and diplomatic posturing on North Korea's part, with Pyongyang which ultimately walking away from the talks in 2009. A high point in the negotiations was reached after September 2005 with a deal which included a pledge by Pyongyang to work towards dismantling its nuclear programme and re-joining the NPT,² but shortly afterwards the DPRK began to distance itself from that pledge, claiming bad faith on the part of Washington. Nevertheless, China continued to maintain that the SPT was the best option for a solution to the security dilemma in the region, even though the talks also

magnified the growing divisions between Beijing and Pyongyang despite their close strategic ties during the cold war. In October 2006, North Korea tested a very low-yield nuclear device at Gilju near the Chinese border, sparking angry international reactions, including from Beijing. Nevertheless, the talks continued two months later.

Following the last SPT round concluded in September 2007, these negotiations have yet to be revived, with Pyongyang's April 2009 statement that it would 'never again' return to the negotiating table,³ and following up this vow with a second, more successful nuclear test the following month. The most recent test in September 2017, which was claimed by North Korea to be a hydrogen bomb and with a yield estimated at up to 250 kilotons, touched off a harsh war of words between the North Korean regime of Kim Jong-un and the new administration of Donald Trump in Washington, including petty name-calling, ('dotard', 'Little Rocket Man'), and threats by Pyongyang to attack American positions in the Pacific Ocean.⁴ In the wake of the 2017 nuclear and missile tests, the US government pushed for increased economic sanctions on the Kim regime via the United Nations, sanctions which even traditionally reluctant China and Russia agreed to support.

During 2018, however, the tables rapidly turned in Korean diplomacy from a near-war footing to a rapid easing of tensions, via a series of events which culminated in a watershed summit between Kim and Trump in June of that year. First, the Winter Olympics held in February 2018 in Pyeongchang, South Korea, provided an opportunity for a North Korea delegation, led by Kim Jong-un's sister Kim Yo-jong, to meet with their Southern counterparts, including RoK President Moon Jae-in. The Games allowed for a considerable amount of face-saving between the two Koreas, and enough diplomatic momentum was created to support a follow-up meeting in April of that year between Kim Jong-un and President Moon at the Peace House on the Military Demarcation Line between the two Koreas. This summit produced the Panmunjom Declaration, which affirmed their interest in furthering peacebuilding measures and working towards disarmament and eventual reunification.⁵ These agreements stopped well short of a peace agreement, (legally, the two Koreas as still at war despite the 1953 Armistice), but they did act as an intermediate step to the US-DPRK Singapore Summit.

Following the meeting between Kim and Trump, a four-point agreement was signed by both leaders, including a pledge to create a new 'peace regime' and to work towards denuclearisation.⁶ However, the key issue of a timetable for North Korean nuclear disarmament has remained unresolved, and since the meeting there have been no follow-up nuclear weapon or missile tests, but also little added progress in convincing the Kim regime to step back from its nuclear weapons policies. An erratic stance by the Trump government over whether to resume US-South Korean military manoeuvres, unilaterally suspended by Washington as a goodwill gesture in the wake of the Singapore agreement, has further clouded the situation, as well as complicated relations between the Trump and Moon governments.⁷ The follow-up summit between Trump and Kim in Hanoi in February 2019 produced no substantial results, and underscored what may be a tangled process of getting to a mutually acceptable definition of 'denuclearisation'.

During the tumultuous rollercoaster of Korean nuclear diplomacy during 2018, the Chinese government of Xi Jinping was often perceived as either being sidelined or in the difficult position of constantly having to catch up with fast-moving events. President Xi did hold three meetings with Kim Jong-un, twice in Beijing and once in Dalian, during 2018, the first time the North Korea leader had ever visited China,⁸ but the inter-Korean and Singapore meetings have largely overshadowed these talks. Beijing has made it clear that it wishes to remain central to the ongoing process of Korean peace-building and should the efforts of the Trump government continue to stumble, the Xi government may be placing itself in a position to take the lead in

future negotiations, a move which could involve the revival of the SPT in some capacity. At present, such a scenario is unlikely to take place in the short term, primarily due to cooling Sino-American relations since the beginning of the 2018 which have been especially damaged by an escalating 'trade war' of tariffs and counter-tariffs on Chinese and US goods.⁹ Moreover, the Trump government has shown little sign of allowing Beijing to play a more prominent role in future DPRK negotiations. During August 2018, Trump even went so far as to blame the Xi government for the breakdown in North Korea talks, a charge Beijing denied, with a Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson suggesting that 'no one could be better at irresponsibly distorting facts than the US.'¹⁰

Another obstacle to restoring the SPT is the still brittle relationship between Beijing and Seoul as the two governments attempt to restart relations following an attempt to discourage the joint US-RoK development of the Terminal High Altitude Air Defence (THAAD) anti-missile system after the Xi government placed a series of economic punitive measures on South Korea during 2017. Although THAAD had been created to counter short-range missiles from the North, China expressed concerns that the surveillance system could also be used to degrade China's own missile capabilities in Northeast Asia.¹¹ Tensions cooled after a compromise was reached in November 2017, but the ongoing relationship between China and North Korea remains an irritant for Seoul.

Can the Six-Party Talks, or some sort of successor arrangement, be rejuvenated as an alternative to the current 'hub and spoke' talks which began in early 2018, especially should North-South and US-DPRK negotiations stall and regional tensions rise again? In short, China's growing diplomatic and strategic closeness with North Korea along with a cooling of diplomatic relations with the US and its Asian allies, will make any revival of the talks a difficult prospect. An examination of the origins and course of the SPT process may provide some insights into whether the concept has truly outlived its usefulness. In order for China's support for the SPT to again produce results, the country will need to be more pragmatic about North Korea's disruptive policies in the region, as well as balancing the interests of the other major players in the dispute, starting with the US, and more effectively advocate that the SPT idea evolve further as an alternative method for finally achieving a nuclear peace on the peninsula.

The Advent of the Six-Party Talks

The current, albeit sporadic, North Korean nuclear crisis arguably began in October 2002 when DPRK officials admitted to the American government that they had defied the 1994 Framework Agreement and were again working on a uranium-enrichment program in preparation for the development of nuclear weapons. North Korea was furious at being cited in January 2002 as part of the 'axis of evil' (*xie'ezhouxin*) by the George W. Bush government, further depleting the limited goodwill which had been created in the later years of the Bill Clinton administration and creating much concern in China as well.¹² Additional comments from Washington on North Korea, including referring to the country as an 'outpost of tyranny', possessing a 'despotic government' further entrenched the idea in Pyongyang that it was at greater risk of being subject to the same forced 'regime change' which would ultimately take place in Iraq.¹³ Unlike in the Iraqi case, however, the United States, sensitive to the delicate political atmosphere of Northeast Asia, responded to this possible nuclear threat from the DPRK by calling instead for a diplomatic solution and encouraging confidence-building in hopes of motivating the Kim Jong-il regime to retreat from further weapons experimentation.

In the wake of the removal of protective seals placed on North Korean nuclear reactors by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in December 2002, the DPRK announced the

following month that it was again seeking to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty. The urgency of the situation resulted in a trilateral meeting between the United States, China and North Korea in April 2003, where it became apparent after the lack of progress that the United States would be more comfortable with more seats at the negotiating table. This stance was opposed by North Korea but accepted by Beijing, whose delegates were also worried about being the sole buffer between two states so diametrically opposed to each other on the methods of solving the crisis. Since China wanted to ensure the American and North Korean delegations were not excessively isolated from each other, Chinese representatives encouraged a meeting venue which allowed for informal talking between sessions. The Beijing delegation even went so far as to alter its official title from 'China' to 'People's Republic of China' so that, using the English alphabetical seating arrangement, American and DPRK delegates were seated next to each other at the hexagonal table.¹⁴

The first three rounds of Six-Party Talks in 2003-4 produced little in the way of tangible results and rather served to provide background information about the views and positions of each of the main actors. During that time, North Korea was accused of continuing to prepare materials for nuclear weapons, which the government claimed was necessary for their defence. Much initial attention centred around the DPRK nuclear facilities at Yongbyon, which was reportedly capable of producing enough plutonium for approximately one nuclear weapon per year should it be brought up to full operating capacity.¹⁵ It is unknown whether other forms of nuclear weapons development are being pursued elsewhere in the country. As well, North Korea retains stockpiles of short-range *Rodong* missiles capable of striking South Korea and Japan and has tested a longer-range *Taepodong*-type missile which some analysts fear could strike the North American west coast once fully operational. An August 1998 test of a *Taepodong I* missile, which flew over Japanese airspace before crashing into the western Pacific, was considered evidence that North Korea was close to developing rudimentary heavy-lift and ICBM technology.¹⁶ After the incident, Pyongyang claimed that it had been attempting to launch a satellite, a rationale accepted by neither Washington nor Tokyo.

The Six-Party Talks were meant to demonstrate the usefulness of both informal and non-hierarchical security cooperation, in keeping with Beijing's longstanding view that multilateral negotiations via these methods were far more useful in ensuring peace and stability than the use of formal alliances such as NATO in which great powers dominated both policymaking and the actions of smaller states. However, it was the informality of the talks, coupled with their irregular schedules which have encouraged many of the participants to extend the talks for various reasons. North Korea's initial actions in the SPT clearly suggested a delaying action to permit the country to reach the point where its nuclear capabilities could be entrenched and then internationally acknowledged. At the same time, North Korean negotiators attempted to diversify the agenda by requesting further aid, an upgrading of its diplomatic status, and formal diplomatic relations with Washington, thus creating linkages between disarmament and specific economic and political goods, especially a resumption of energy imports, useful to North Korea only.¹⁷

The differences between Pyongyang and the other five participants in the SPT underscored the difficulties of establishing a dialogue on mutual defence issues that could form the basis for a security community. As one study explained, the first step towards creating such a community involves a change in the strategic atmosphere of a region, a corresponding change in how the new atmosphere is perceived by the actors involved, and the presence of external threats.¹⁸ While the first and second prerequisites were present to varying degrees within the SPT, there were and are sharp differences between North Korea and the other five members as to the definitions of these security threats.

Faced with these divisions, Beijing continued to encourage dialogue to prevent a further deterioration of the security situation in the region, while discouraging the United States from reacting to North Korea's actions by threatening force over Pyongyang's non-compliance. The SPT process had been followed closely since its inception by the highest ranks of both the Chinese Foreign Ministry and the top leadership itself, with then-Chinese President Hu Jintao frequently involving himself in the process.¹⁹ As one study noted, China's deep engagement in the SPT demonstrated an acknowledgement of the country's ongoing interests in the Peninsula while assuming a commitment to a growing responsibility in promoting regional peace as China develops as a great power. Moreover, the SPT offered China an additional strategic link with the United States, which shared China's view that the best outcome of the talks would be a de-nuclearised North Korea.²⁰ However, this level of participation required that Beijing place a great deal of its regional and international prestige on the line in the name of securing a lasting agreement, and as was demonstrated by North Korea's crossing of the nuclear threshold in 2006 and subsequent events, the outcome of the talks were what China, or indeed the other four participants in the SPT, had been hoping for.

North Korea's Nuclear Tests and the Chinese Responses

In February 2005, North Korea stated it would suspend its participation in any talks concerning its nuclear programme for an 'indefinite period', blaming the George W. Bush administration's intention to 'antagonise, isolate and stifle it at any cost'.²¹ The statement also underscored North Korea's assertion that it was seeking nuclear weapons for self-defence. The US had repeatedly rebuffed DPRK demands for direct one-on-one talks, and the Bush government was unwilling to offer another version of the previous oil and assistance deal from 1994 out of concern that such actions would reward hostile behaviour. Yet, in September 2005 at the end of the fifth round of the SPT, North Korea reacted positively to a clause in a Joint Statement that the United States would not seek to attack the DPRK with either nuclear or conventional weapons. Moreover, the agreement noted the willingness of both Washington and Tokyo to normalise their relationships with North Korea, a longstanding demand from Pyongyang.²²

Despite the significant concessions which Washington was willing to make with that stipulation, Pyongyang was not dissuaded from establishing its nuclear weapons capabilities as a *fait accompli*. The Kim government inched closer to its first nuclear test in July 2006 when it conducted launches of both short-range (*Rodong II*, *Scud*) and two long-range missiles (possibly *Taepodong II*-class), events which China termed 'regrettable' (*quehan*). Prior to the testing, then-Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao had taken the unprecedented step of calling upon Pyongyang to cease its provocative behaviour or risk damage to Sino-DPRK relations.²³ Finally, the country detonated an approximately one kiloton nuclear device near the city of Gilju close to the border with China on 9 October 2006, making North Korea the *de facto* ninth global nuclear power.

Beijing received only a twenty-minute warning of this event, via a phone call from Pyongyang, and the Chinese government launched an unusually strong public criticism of the blast, calling the act 'flagrant' (*hanran*) and in violation of established international practices. Clearly, China's diplomatic efforts and insistence that the SPT process would be sufficient to deter Pyongyang from crossing the nuclear threshold were dealt a severe blow.²⁴ Shortly afterwards, Beijing sided with the rest of the UN Security Council in passing Resolution 1718, imposing economic and military sanctions on the DPRK. However, Beijing favoured a return to the Six-Party Talks rather than threats of force to solve the crisis. Despite the sanctions, it has been argued that the overall economic relationship between China and North Korea was not significantly altered and that Beijing remains hesitant to place more severely punitive economic sanctions on the Kim Jong-il

government.²⁵ Beijing was successful, however, in re-starting the talks despite the test, as negotiations began anew at the end of 2006 and produced a tentative stopgap agreement in March 2007, although even this development was marred by North Korean protests over the status of US\$25 million in DPRK funds the US Treasury had temporarily ordered frozen within the Macau-based financial institution Banco Delta Asia.²⁶

The 2006 nuclear crisis, defined by the test which went ahead despite Chinese pressure, illustrated the degree to which Beijing's diplomatic power over the DPRK had eroded since the cold war and how the regional policies of both countries had begun to diverge. On one hand, many in the Chinese government continued to regard North Korea as an essential ally and worried that an implosion of the country would result in American forces returning to the Chinese border as well as producing a massive DPRK refugee crisis (*tuobeizhe*) in the northern provinces of Heilongjiang and Jilin, the traditional 'rust belt' of heavy industry zones ill-equipped to handle a massive humanitarian emergency.²⁷ Since 2004, the Chinese northeast had been the subject of an economic revival programme (*zhenxing dongbei*) launched by the Hu Jintao regime in recognition of the region's loss of economic stature following the Dengist reforms and the movement of China's modernisation policies towards the more southerly coastal regions.²⁸ Any crisis within the DPRK, especially a full state collapse, would produce a substantial backlash in the Chinese northeast.

After September 2003 PLA forces began to guard the Sino-North Korean border after civilian People's Armed Police (PAP) units were withdrawn, and three years later reports appeared describing the Chinese construction of fencing along the border. These were considered further signs of the growing impatience in Beijing directed towards North Korea.²⁹ Chinese military forces would have to respond should North Korea suffer a violent political implosion to avoid a spillover of any conflict or refugee crisis into China. However, Beijing at the same time does not want another nuclear power on its doorstep. While China and North Korea remain informal allies, the examples of the Soviet Union, India and Vietnam during the cold war demonstrated that even staunch ideological partners may turn on each other over time. There was also the fear of a 'firechain' (*lianhuo*) effect involving Japan, South Korea and possibly other Asian governments developing a counter-capability for deterrence purposes, should a North Korean nuclear weapons capability be maintained. Even casting aside this extreme case, North Korea as a nuclear power is seen by China as a destabilising force for the whole of East Asia.³⁰

Since the 1990s, China had dedicated much of its regional foreign policy to creating a more congenial milieu for its domestic development by establishing a more stable East Asian periphery. A permanent nuclear weapons status for North Korea would rapidly destabilize the tenuous power balance Beijing has supported. As one report noted, there are several worst-case scenarios which China is anxious to avoid, thus preventing it from supporting more stringent punishment of the Kim regime. These include a mass refugee crisis across the Yalu River, an implosion of the North Korean state leading to a security vacuum, direct military confrontation between the United States and the DPRK, and the possibility of 'precipitous reunification' of the two Koreas which would result in American forces being deployed north of the current Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) and thus closer to the Chinese border.³¹

China has since been boxed into a 'not too hot, not too cold' approach to pressuring North Korea to give up its nuclear ambitions, a situation which not only severely limited Beijing's policy options but provided ample ambiguity to allow Pyongyang to continue to sporadically advance its nuclear ambitions while backing away from previous agreements, without fear of triggering a forceful response. Although the Sino-DPRK relationship has become more businesslike and less ideological since the 1990s, China is still commonly viewed as the only state with enough

diplomatic and economic leverage against Pyongyang to convince it to abandon its nuclear programme. This point had been revived by the Trump administration when the security situation on the Peninsula began to deteriorate in 2017, causing the Xi government to hit back at what it saw as a wrongheaded 'China responsibility theory' (*Zhongguo fuzelun*) and instead call for all parties to participate in regional peace-building.³²

After the 2006 nuclear test, Beijing pushed for a resumption of the SPT and was initially successful, which appeared to suggest that all sides wished to avoid a cascade effect which would have made any further diplomacy impossible.³³ At the same time, Beijing came to the realisation that any progress on rolling back a North Korean bomb will require assistance from the United States. Pyongyang has insisted that it would be willing to talk directly to the United States on a strictly bilateral basis, but Washington under the Bush administration had been unwilling to do so and China has insisted that it be part of the negotiating process. In the last round of Six-Party Talks in September 2007, Pyongyang was persuaded to disable its nuclear programme indefinitely and to allow for inspection of its nuclear facilities in exchange for increased diplomatic and economic contacts between itself and the US and Japan.

In June 2008, Pyongyang destroyed its cooling tower at the Yongbyon facility, in full view of the international media, as a sign of good faith. That facility had gone online five years previously and had been the focus of international concern about its capability of producing fissile materials.³⁴ That event was the last of the high-water marks of the SPT. Inter-Korean relations had cooled due to DPRK animosity towards then-South Korean President Lee Myung-bak, who stepped away from the 'sunshine' soft diplomatic approaches, including the offering of economic carrots as a precursor to talks, of his immediate predecessors. The clearest evidence of this policy shift was the cessation of unconditional shipments of food and fertiliser to the North, which has added to reports of a deteriorating food security situation. President Lee also shifted the focus of North Korean policy to embrace the idea of 'denuclearisation, openness and three thousand' (DOT), the latter concept being the need to push North Korea's *per capita* income up to US\$3000 within a decade.³⁵ Lee's government stressed that further diplomatic gains and progress on economic assistance must be traded for substantial progress from Pyongyang on disarmament, a reciprocity approach which North Korea had largely resisted.

It was also in 2008 that news first surfaced that that Kim Jong-il had suffered a stroke,³⁶ and was possibly suffering from pancreatic cancer, further complicating the negotiation processes. In May 2009, approximately one month after Pyongyang announced it would not return to the Six Party-Talks, saying there was 'no need' for the SPT,³⁷ North Korea conducted a series of missile tests which culminated in the second nuclear test at the Gilju site. This detonation appeared to be more successful, with a blast yield of at least a kiloton and possibly up to 6kT in magnitude. Yet the explosion was still well short of the power and sophistication of a 1940s-era American nuclear warhead, which would suggest the technology was still being perfected, according to one scientific report released after the blast.³⁸ Nor has it been proven that North Korea could miniaturise a nuclear device to the point where it could be successfully deployed as a warhead on a missile. The 2009 test was also strongly condemned by Beijing, though arguably not to the same degree as the first, its Foreign Ministry issuing a statement expressing its 'resolute opposition' (*jianjue fandui*) to the test and calling upon North Korea to respect the need for denuclearisation, avoid any further provocative actions and return to the Six-Party Talks.³⁹

China attempted to quash any attempts from the international community to punish North Korea via harsh sanctions or the threat of force, noting that the end goal should be the peaceful persuasion of North Korea to remove its nuclear capability and rejoin regional strategic talks.⁴⁰ Beijing eventually supported tougher sanctions via the UN Security Council and its Resolution

1874, but would not call for punitive measures beyond that document. In September 2009, following reports that Kim Jong-il was still suffering from poor health, it was revealed that Kim Jong-un was to be groomed for a potential succession, bypassing his two older brothers. The younger Kim's position as heir-apparent was confirmed with his attendance to a KWP conference in September 2010 when he was named a four-star general despite his youth, (being reportedly born in 1983), and negligible military and governmental experience.⁴¹

After the second nuclear test, Beijing sought a softer and more closed door approach to bringing North Korea back to the negotiations, including a high-level visit by Premier Wen in October 2009, suggesting that Beijing was seeking warmer political and possibly economic ties as the best method of reducing tensions rather than by the threat of further economic sanctions. During that meeting, Kim Jong-il agreed to the possibility of returning to the talks but only under unspecified preconditions.⁴² Even the third nuclear test which the DPRK conducted in early 2013 did not strongly deter China's more conservative and conciliatory policies towards the DPRK. The immediate response from the Chinese Foreign Ministry was a mild rebuke indicating Beijing expressed 'firm opposition' to the testing.⁴³ Before that test, Beijing's approach also appeared to be having a moderating effect on American policies.

The United States, as a means of encouraging the resumption of the SPT, began to quietly float the idea of bilateral talks when President Obama, in a November 2009 interview with a South Korean news agency, suggested that US-DPRK talks could conceivably take place on the sidelines of the SPT in exchange for an acceleration of Pyongyang's disarmament commitments, thus creating the potential for an expansion of the overall negotiation process. China also supported the creation of a low-level US-North Korea dialogue while simultaneously prodding the North Korean government to return to multilateral talks.⁴⁴ However, it remained to be seen whether the US would be prepared to offer solutions, regardless of Chinese support, beyond the assistance-for-disarmament package which was unveiled in 2005 and was itself an echo of the 1994 deal.

Following the 2013 test, any American movement towards a resumption of talks came to an abrupt halt, especially after the DPRK began issuing more virulent threats against the US, including against American military installations in Guam and Hawai'i, and with Washington rejecting calls from Pyongyang to recognise North Korea as a nuclear state.⁴⁵ As well, the Kim Jong-un government deflated hopes that the DPRK could be convinced to trade its nuclear development plans for increased security guarantees and economic assistance when an announcement was made via the official North Korean news agency that the US would be 'mistaken' if it were to be assumed DPRK nuclear weapons could be treated simply as a 'bargaining chip'.⁴⁶ China, despite its tenacious diplomatic approach, remained out in the cold as the sole supporter of multilateral negotiations via the SPT.

Diplomatic Strains at the End of the Kim Jong-il Era

After North Korea cemented its membership in the nuclear club in 2006, the question of whether multilateral talks could produce tangible results, as China advocated, became far more difficult to answer. History has suggested that a given state crossing the nuclear threshold is normally very reluctant to abandon nuclear weapons, as has been the case with the five oldest nuclear powers since the cold war. Yet in the case of South Africa, which abandoned its nuclear programme in the 1990s as the *apartheid* regime was ending, and Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine, which willingly transferred their shares of the old Soviet nuclear arsenal to Russia upon achieving independence, there was some precedent for a nuclear 'U-turn' even after warheads have been developed or deployed.⁴⁷ Conversely, there is also the fact that Iraq in 2003 and Libya

in 2011, both states which had developed a rudimentary nuclear weapons programme, were subject to Western-backed regime change which would not have been possible had they been full nuclear weapons states. In September 2011, DPRK officials in Pyongyang stated to a visiting British envoy that had Gaddafi not opted to halt Libya's nuclear bomb development, 'NATO would not have attacked his country.'⁴⁸ Any future progress on convincing Pyongyang to dismantle its own nuclear programme would assuredly require a formidable security guarantee for North Korea, especially in the wake of the 'Bush Doctrine'⁴⁹ which allowed for the US to engage in 'preventive warfare' as observed in the case of the Iraq conflict.

Beijing has been increasingly placed in the difficult position of trying to avoid exercising too much pressure on North Korea, especially as Pyongyang began the process of preparing for a succession between 'Dear Leader' Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un, plans which had to be accelerated after the elder Kim's death in December 2011. Kim Jong-un acceded to power as a political cipher, with little information available about either his domestic or foreign policy orientations, or the amount of power he would have to share with either family members, the upper-tier membership of the ruling Korean Workers' Party (KWP), or the politically powerful North Korean military. The elder Kim's demise also appeared to catch Chinese policymakers off-guard, as reports from Beijing suggested that China was hopeful that the leadership transition period would last for a few more years to ensure a stable handover of power.⁵⁰

China's Foreign Ministry had also expressed hopes that neither the United States nor North Korea's neighbours would take advantage of the transition period for strategic gains and would instead work towards preserving and improving stability Northeast Asia. The days after the death did see a flurry of shuttle diplomacy among SPT members to gauge the possibility of a resumption of talks, with China very much at the centre of the process as evidenced by visits to Beijing by then-Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda and a high-ranking South Korean nuclear envoy. In January 2012, a state visit to Beijing by South Korean President Lee was dominated by the North Korea issue with Beijing offering assurances that it stood with Seoul in seeking to maintain peace on the Korean Peninsula.⁵¹ However, China like other states in the region, is aware that the hasty installation of Kim Jong-un at the beginning of 2012 was indicative of another period of uncertainty in Northeast Asian security.

In the name of promoting peace on the peninsula, Beijing had already tried to walk a diplomatic minefield even in the years before Kim Jong-il's death. This was especially the case in the wake of the sinking of the South Korean Naval corvette ROKS *Cheonan* in March 2010, allegedly by a North Korean torpedo, and the shelling of South Korea's Yeonpyeong Island west of the peninsula by the North Korean military, which culminated in a brief exchange of artillery fire in November of that year. The Yeonpyeong incident, which resulted in the deaths of two South Korean military personnel and two civilians, was viewed by the DPRK as a necessary reaction to a military exercise the South Korean military was conducting on the island near disputed waters.⁵² During the shelling, China's media implied that both sides shared responsibility for the attacks, and according to the Chinese news agency *Xinhua*, Beijing's then-foreign minister Yang Jiechi stated that, 'as a responsible country, China decides its position based on the merits of each case and does not seek to protect any side.'⁵³ Beijing attempted to prevent any linkage between the *Cheonan* sinking and the Six-Party Talks, viewing them as separate matters.⁵⁴ The muted Chinese reaction to both incidents appeared to suggest that despite frustration with the torpid pace of peace negotiations on the Korean Peninsula, China remained unwilling to directly criticise Pyongyang's actions despite international pressure to do so.

Moreover, during the same month as the Yeonpyeong incident, leaked American government documents suggested that the Chinese government would be accepting of a unified Korean

peninsula in the future and that Beijing's impatience with the Kim regime had intensified after the second North Korean nuclear test. According to one leaked April 2009 diplomatic missive, Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister He Yafei was quoted as saying that Pyongyang was behaving like a 'spoiled child' (*sajiao*) in order to get the attention of the "adult", by engaging in missile testing.⁵⁵ Nonetheless, Beijing continued to rebuff Western calls for more punitive sanctions and it remains unlikely that China would support the option of force as a means of resolving North Korea's nuclear ambitions.

Beijing remains unwilling to publically accept North Korea as a nuclear power and is vehemently opposed to the possibility of Pyongyang selling its nuclear technology to state (or non-state) actors. China has placed a great deal of its diplomatic prestige on the line by continuing to support the SPT process despite ongoing North Korean intransigence. These talks are a crucial test for China's strategy towards supporting the development of security communities, as opposed to hierarchical alliances, as a means of resolving modern crises. However, despite some movement towards restarting negotiations by the Kim Jong-un government, it will be a far more complicated task for China to convince the DPRK to sign a disarmament agreement with any kind of staying power under current diplomatic conditions. Although the progress, or lack thereof, of the SPT has underscored Beijing's increasingly limited power over North Korea, China remains responsible for any revival of the SPT process, which may mean changing the ratio of carrots and sticks proffered to North Korea, to ensure that the talks may be restored. Moreover, it is still not beyond the realm of possibility that a breakthrough via the SPT could result in the development of a forum for a more formal Northeast Asian security community, creating multilateral strategic cooperation in a region which would greatly benefit from such a regime.

China and North Korea: The Limits to Informal Cooperation

Despite the cooling of political relations between Beijing and Pyongyang following the erosion of the SPT after 2009, China remained North Korea's only major financial partner, with trade between the two sides reaching US\$4.67 billion in the first ten months of 2011. Moreover, the period after the 2009 nuclear test was marked by much closer economic relations between Beijing and Pyongyang despite the continuing dormancy of the SPT. China represented 83% of North Korea's total trade in 2010, up from 78.5% the year previous and only 25% in 1999,⁵⁶ and Beijing provided millions more in aid and technical assistance to Pyongyang annually. China remained open to developing joint ventures designed to assist the North Korean economy, as evidenced by the high-profile opening 2011 of the Hwanggumpyong industrial park near North Korea's border with China which was attended by Wang Qishan, China's then-Vice-Premier overseeing economic, energy and financial affairs, and then-PRC Commerce Minister Chen Deming. It was hoped that these projects would attract greater Chinese investment along the North Korea border regions.⁵⁷

The determination by Beijing to maintain economic links with North Korea was underscored by the decision by Premier Wen to visit Pyongyang in 2009, the first visit by a Chinese premier since 1991, and the subsequent trade and investment agreements since that visit. Beijing had expressed interest not only in North Korea's mining sector, but also in other areas including transport and pharmaceuticals, potentially tying together some of North Korea's industries with those in Northeast China.⁵⁸ North Korea's dependence upon Chinese trade was also illustrated by the short time, (about forty-eight hours), that the Sino-DPRK border was closed right after Kim Jong-il's passing, suggesting that Pyongyang could only afford a token interruption in Chinese trade and aid despite the political crisis at home.⁵⁹ However, following the 2013 nuclear test, signs began to appear that Beijing was beginning to scale back some of its economic ties to

Pyongyang, as evidenced by a reduction in Chinese exports to North Korea during the first half of that year to US\$1.59 billion, a 13.6% drop compared with the same period in 2012.⁶⁰ Beijing's resistance to deep sanctions on the DPRK became less viable after Pyongyang conducted its fourth and fifth nuclear tests in 2016, and the sixth in September 2017, and China would agree in 2017 to support considerably harsher economic blocks on the Kim regime. By early 2018, Chinese exports to North Korea reportedly dropped by a third, and Chinese-enforced fuel oil restrictions severely affected the DPRK economy, coupled with clampdowns on labour remittances from North Korean workers in China.⁶¹

On one hand, the diplomatic situation post-Singapore has been good for Chinese strategy in the Korean Peninsula, as tensions have significantly cooled with both DPRK missile tests and US-South Korean military manoeuvres suspended indefinitely. China had been pushing for such a 'freeze for freeze' compromise for months before the Singapore summit.⁶² However, despite these gains, it remains uncertain whether the current détente period can endure, given the unpredictable nature of the Kim regime and the capricious foreign policy aims of the Trump government. Moreover, China fears being marginalised during the next phases, whenever they begin, of a potential DPRK peace process. The SPT may act as both a safety net in case the current process fails, and a way for Beijing to regain its momentum as the driver of Korean Peninsula peace-building. Despite previous bombast, North Korea may also not be averse to restoring the SPT, as was suggested by April 2018 reports that Kim Jong-un had expressed interest in resuming the talks when he met for the first time with President Xi in Beijing.⁶³ Russia, which has also been on the sidelines of the current US-RoK-DPRK peace process, has been a strong supporter of returning to the Six-Party Talks. Japan under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, which has been seeking, so far unsuccessfully, to establish a summit with Kim Jong-un, may also be open to the SPT both as a conduit to Pyongyang but also as a means of gauging Chinese and Russian policies in the region.⁶⁴

Should the SPT restart in the short term, however, North Korea would be in a much stronger position, compared with a decade ago, to resist either diplomatic pressure or coercion to again accept a disarmament agreement. Ongoing resistance by the Trump government to multilateralism in various forms would be another considerable obstacle, as well as generally uncertain US-China and US-Russia relations. Originally, Beijing had expressed great interest in the SPT as a means of solidifying a lasting peace on the peninsula and opening the door for greater regional contacts beyond simply the governmental level. As with other forms of multilateral cooperation, Beijing had framed the SPT in terms of 'community building', the developing of policies of not only strategic links but economic agreements and general cross-state exchanges. However, the suspended Six-Party Talks and accompanying failure to reach the primary goal of developing a multilateral framework for the phased scaling back of North Korea's nuclear programme strongly suggests a need for re-thinking in light of the Singapore summit. Abandoning the SPT altogether is a poor option for China as, despite its flaws, talks allowed the major regional actors to monitor each other's policies, including Pyongyang's. Moreover, Beijing remains unwilling to walk away from the SPT idea, especially since as one specialist noted, in the wake of the SPT's failure, 'the biggest loser- besides the North Korean people- would arguably be China,'⁶⁵ given the amount of political investment the Chinese government has made.

Instead, there is a requirement for deepening the structure of the SPT with a more clearly defined policy of obtaining peace in the region as well as the means to provide a wider array of incentives for North Korea. This path would, of necessity, require all participants to be more transparent about their strategic goals for the region, and would necessitate a more formalised schedule of contacts among the membership. Nevertheless, any move towards greater

formalisation of the talks would help address several driving forces beyond the nuclear question, behind more formal multilateral cooperation. These include the need to address a formal end to the Korean War and potential military demobilisation, discussions towards potential unification and formal international recognition of the DPRK by the United States, as well as a phased removal of economic sanctions on Pyongyang.

A more formalised regional security regime may ultimately be required to create opportunities for dialogue to expand in order to address these future issues such as more structured inter-Korean political cooperation, an idea which is not new.⁶⁶ However, for these goals to be achieved, any revival of the SPT must move beyond its stagnant phase of what had been called ‘*ad hoc* multilateralism’.⁶⁷ There may be a requirement for considerable change in the overall political landscape in the coming years, not only in North Korea but within the other major actors, which would encourage resumption of the SPT. However, until that time there appears to be a stubborn ‘watch and wait’ atmosphere among the major actors in the region, including Beijing, which is pervading much Northeast Asian security thinking today, despite the fragile gains made in Singapore. This period of uncertainty continues to affect, for better and worse, Chinese efforts to advance some form of multilateral solution to North Korea’s ongoing nuclear security issues.

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