

Inside Multilateralism: The Six-Party Talks

Herculean efforts to negotiate a resolution to the second North Korean nuclear crisis have stretched the patience of the six principal players—North Korea, the United States, South Korea, China, Japan, and Russia. Although the parties involved each have an idea of what must be accomplished, the sequence and manner in which they seek to meet these objectives have hindered progress. Despite extensive diplomatic efforts to facilitate and host the six-party talks, domestic policy constraints, differing priorities, and conflicting historical analogies among each of the countries have brought vastly differing perspectives to the multilateral negotiating table. As a result, Beijing's range of influence and maneuverability to help broker a solution to the North Korean nuclear crisis has been severely restricted.

Gaining a clear understanding of what has been occurring beneath the surface of the Beijing talks is an important though often overlooked prerequisite to realizing a comprehensive multilateral resolution. Such an undertaking would enable the parties to identify areas and means of cooperation. This task is impeded, however, by a proliferation of conjecture-based assessments in Asia and the United States of the drivers and directions of the approaches of the six parties to dealing with the North Korean nuclear issue. Through a series of interviews, probing the perceptions and working assumptions of key U.S., Chinese, North Korean, South Korean, Japanese, and Russian government policy advisers focusing on this issue has yielded insights into the impact of divergent domestic priorities, national interests, and historical analogies on the multilateral negotiations in Beijing.

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Unveiling Divergences

Each country uses a different historical model (Ukraine or Libya) for a potential solution.

The second North Korean nuclear crisis was sparked in October 2002, amid U.S. intelligence reports indicating the existence of a clandestine highly enriched uranium (HEU) weapons program in North Korea and against the backdrop of the Bush administration's mounting campaign to affect regime change in Iraq. The United States called for complete nuclear disarmament ahead of any substantive negotiations, and the Kim Jong-il regime responded by undoing the core vestiges of the 1994 Agreed Framework between the United States and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), a bilateral accord that addressed the first phase of the nuclear crisis.

Seeking to stabilize rapidly escalating tensions between Pyongyang and Washington, the Chinese convened a face-saving trilateral meeting in Beijing among North Korean, U.S., and Chinese diplomats in April 2003. At the time, the Bush administration's adamant refusal to meet bilaterally with the

North Koreans contributed to concerns that the nuclear crisis could spiral out of control. To engage Washington in subsequent negotiations, the Chinese expanded the talks to include South Korea, Japan, and Russia to reflect the Bush administration's view that the nuclear issue was a "neighborhood problem" that should include countries from the region with a vested interest in a nuclear-free North Korea.¹ In August 2003, the Chinese hosted the first round of the six-party talks in Beijing.

By institutionalizing the earlier ad hoc trilateral negotiations, Beijing established an important forum focused on reaching a comprehensive resolution. Although a total of three rounds of six-party talks have been convened and a fourth has been scheduled, none has produced substantive progress. The deep mistrust between Pyongyang and Washington remains, as does the rigidity of each party's respective negotiating stance. Compounding this mistrust are other stumbling blocks in the form of divergent policy constraints, both perceived and actual.

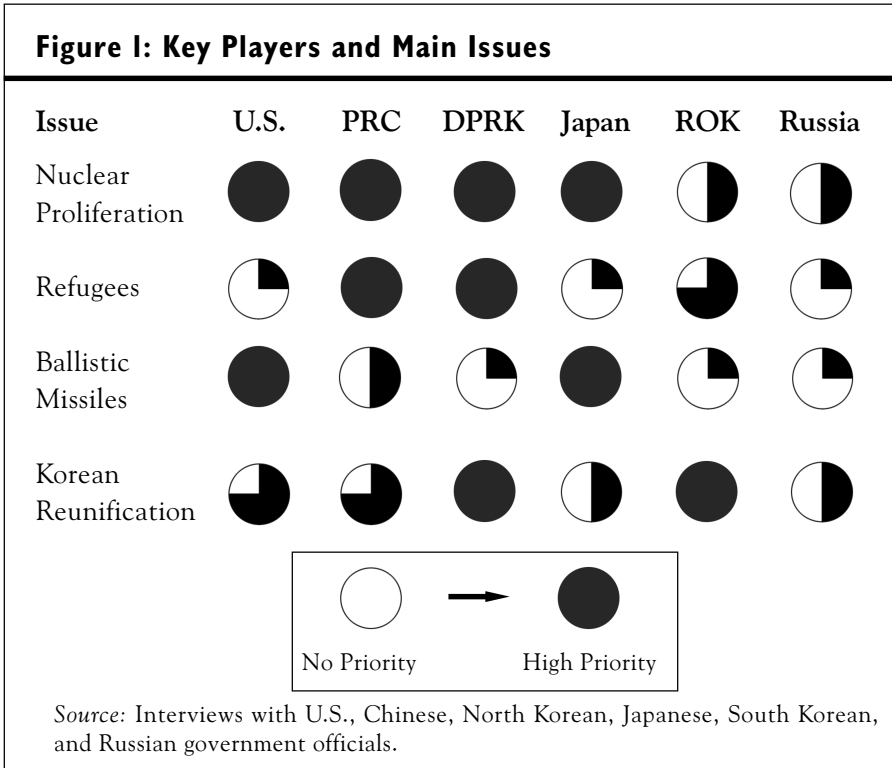
Rather than simply asking key government policy advisers in the various foreign ministries and other relevant departments to assess how each country involved in the talks views and deals with the nuclear crisis, a hypothetical, three-stage, Chinese-sponsored road map was devised and then utilized to solicit reactions during interviews.² In the first hypothetical stage, the Chinese would continue conducting high-level bilateral meetings with their

U.S., Russian, Japanese, and North and South Korean counterparts to better establish priorities and coordinate disparate policy objectives. In the second stage, after conducting these bilateral consultations, senior Chinese diplomats and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) International Department officials would draft a comprehensive road map. This drafting session would be followed by multiparty talks convened in Beijing, culminating in a formal agreement. In the third stage, multilateral processes and entities would be put in place to implement key objectives, such as effecting North Korean nuclear disarmament, assisting North Korean economic development efforts, and establishing bilateral diplomatic relations between Pyongyang and Washington, as well as Tokyo. (Official diplomatic relations with Seoul would violate both Koreas' position that there is only one Korean state.) The road map was also intended to provide an example of how structured multilateral negotiations can enable the parties to move beyond the nuclear deadlock.

The obstacles, however, are formidable. Although the nuclear crisis has become a high-profile issue, there are other core constituent issues on which the six countries rarely share a consensus view. In figure 1, the degree to which the circle is filled indicates the level of priority that a particular issue constitutes for the respective countries. In some instances where countries have the same level of priority for an issue, there is an important qualification regarding how the particular countries are interlinked. For example, although the "nuclear proliferation" issue is a high priority (full dark circle) for the United States and China, the priority level for Beijing is a function of how much the issue alarms Washington. China has significant doubts about whether North Korea has been able to mate a viable nuclear warhead to an effective delivery system with accurate guidance technology, but the nuclear proliferation concern is a top priority for Beijing because the United States deems this issue to be the dominant threat to its national security. Given Washington's perception, Beijing has been conscious about allaying and minimizing such a major concern. In contrast, the "refugee issue" circle is full for China yet significantly less so for the United States. China is highly concerned that an escalating refugee issue could directly and indirectly deal a blow to China's internal economic development plans. In sum, figure 1 is designed to represent the complexities confronting each country in seeking a package deal.

UNITED STATES

In the wake of the September 11 attacks, Washington's focus on North Korea shifted from preserving the international nuclear nonproliferation regime to preventing terrorist organizations and rogue states from acquiring nuclear weapons or fissile material. Although some senior U.S. administra-



tion officials view the source of the problem as the regime in Pyongyang itself, Washington has focused on nonmilitary regime change policies to deal with Kim Jong-il following the major challenges of postwar reconstruction in Iraq. Measures such as the Proliferation Security Initiative have significantly reduced North Korea’s ability to conduct missile sales, launder money, and sell narcotics abroad.

Because of the U.S. government’s terrorism-centric view, the North Korean nuclear imbroglio, which has been neither directly nor peripherally related to the current war on terrorism, has presented a conceptual quandary to the Bush administration since 2001. President George W. Bush’s “axis of evil” speech was in some respects an ineffective attempt to link the North Korean nuclear issue to countering terrorism. Despite the North’s terrorist acts against its southern neighbor in the 1980s and its harboring of Japanese Red Army faction members, the threat emanating from North Korea at present is less terrorism and more regional instability spawned by nuclear proliferation or an increase in the flow of refugees.

Because of Washington’s singular focus on terrorism, North Korea has become a secondary issue on the administration’s national security priority list, thereby imposing policy constraints on dealing effectively with Pyongyang. A clear indication of this is the relatively midlevel U.S. diplomatic person-

nel assigned to dealing with the crisis. Compared to the vice foreign minister-rank officials in China and equivalent-level diplomatic officials from other countries, the primary U.S. official was James Kelly, an assistant secretary of state. Chinese government policy analysts indicated that their country's leadership viewed Washington's unwillingness to designate a more senior decisionmaker as an indication of U.S. reluctance to fully support China's multilateral diplomatic effort.

Although Washington has been publicly supportive of Beijing's activities in the context of the six-party talks, senior Bush administration officials have expressed frustration to their Chinese counterparts in closed bilateral meetings over China's reluctance to pressure North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons.³ This stance is predicated on the U.S. belief that Beijing has substantial influence over Pyongyang. During the Korean War, relations between China and North Korea were heralded as being as close as "lips and teeth."⁴ Yet, since then the Sino-North Korean relationship has had a long history of mutual distrust and deep suspicion.

In sum, the greatest challenge facing the Bush administration in dealing with North Korea is its lack of strong policy coordination with China in jointly leading the multilateral diplomatic effort. This divergence is encapsulated in the different historical model that each country uses for a potential solution to the North Korean nuclear problem. While China and other countries, including South Korea, Russia, and North Korea itself, look to Ukraine as a potential model, the United States, along with Japan, advocates using the Libyan case as a model for a potential solution. The Bush administration has heralded Libya's decision in December 2003 to give up its nascent nuclear weapons program in return for readmission into the international system as a guiding example of how offering carrots against the background of a hard-line approach bolsters international nonproliferation efforts. Washington seeks the same response from North Korea: voluntary nuclear disarmament in return for integration into the international system. In this respect, Washington has applied tailored containment as an interim measure until North Korea relinquishes its nuclear weapons programs.

At successive rounds of the six-party talks in Beijing, to the irritation and frustration of North Korea in particular, U.S. officials have insisted on the multilateral adoption of a Libyan case approach. The Kim Jong-il regime believes, however, that fundamental differences set North Korea apart from Libya. Indeed, Pyongyang argues that, given the early stage of Libya's program, the Libyans did not have much to lose by agreeing to dismantle its nuclear weapons program. In contrast, North Korea seeks a comprehensive negotiated settlement that would compensate it for relinquishing its entire nuclear arsenal. Unlike Libya, whose reward for nuclear dismantlement was access to assets frozen in Europe and the United States following the Libyan-

sponsored 1988 bombing of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, North Korea is demanding large-scale economic development assistance, diplomatic normalization, and a security guarantee.

SOUTH KOREA

While the Bush administration has remained predominantly focused on terrorism, South Korean president Roh Moo-hyun's primary concern has been maintaining the stable security environment needed to promote his administration's "Peace and Prosperity Policy," a continuation of Kim Dae-jung's "Sunshine Policy." Through his policy, Roh wants to expand nascent economic ties with Pyongyang to develop inter-Korean relations further. Seoul seeks to avoid the massive costs that a rapid reunification with

Pyongyang would entail and instead achieve a gradual integration and reunification of the two Koreas through South Korean direct investment and growing inter-Korean trade.⁵

A major impediment to this approach has been the U.S. policy toward North Korea of tailored containment, through which Washington has sought to force a rollback of North Korea's nuclear programs through economic and political pressure. Following North Korea's

admission in October 2002 that it had been conducting a clandestine HEU weapons program, Washington sought to send a clear message to Pyongyang that it would not negotiate with a country that had cheated on its nonproliferation commitments. In pursuing its tailored containment policy, the Bush administration caused two unintended reactions in South Korea that significantly altered the way Seoul viewed the rising tensions between Pyongyang and Washington.

The first was to boost the presidential electoral prospects of the leftward-leaning candidate Roh in the 2002 contest. Determined to pick up where his predecessor, Kim Dae-jung, had left off, Roh made continuing the Sunshine Policy a pillar of his campaign platform. In opposing this policy, Roh's rival, the arch-conservative Lee Hoi-chang, essentially aligned himself with Washington's approach. Just days before the November elections, two U.S. servicemen who had earlier struck and killed two South Korean schoolgirls with their military vehicle were acquitted of criminal negligence by a U.S. military court in Seoul.⁶ In a presidential contest that was the closest in the short history of South Korea's democracy, Lee's endorsement of the U.S. policy toward North Korea proved to be a distinct liability in the atmosphere of widespread, virulent anti-Americanism that followed the acquit-

Seoul seeks gradual integration and reunification of the two Koreas.

tals. In pursuing tailored containment, the Bush administration had publicly challenged the legitimacy of the Sunshine Policy and laid out the main policy battleground in the South Korean presidential election.

The second unintended consequence of the tailored containment policy was that it enabled Roh to foster the broad public support needed to take the Sunshine Policy to the next level. Soon after his inauguration in February 2003, Roh initiated a more proactive South Korean role in inter-Korean relations. In direct contrast to Washington's policy and its refusal to negotiate with Pyongyang, Roh sent senior government officials to meet with the North Korean leadership. Roh's envoys reportedly conveyed specific plans for unprecedented inter-Korean economic relations, with "aid on a massive scale."⁷ Seeking to drive a wedge between Seoul and Washington, Pyongyang suspended inter-Korean talks until June 2005, citing the hostile U.S. policy. Ironically the impetus for, as well as the main obstacle to, implementing Seoul's bold plan to integrate North Korea into the regional economic system remains Washington's adherence to tailored containment.

The main obstacle to Seoul's plan to integrate North Korea remains Washington.

CHINA

As the friction between Washington and Pyongyang began intensifying in late 2002, Beijing began to play a new and remarkably proactive role, in direct contrast to its hands-off approach in 1994. A major factor accounting for the change in Chinese strategic thinking and reevaluation of its policy has been the concept of *xiaokang*. The CCP's definition refers to a *xiaokang* society wherein a majority of the Chinese population is middle class. Although economic advancement is a core aspect of *xiaokang*, Chinese officials stress that references to the middle class are not purely in material terms. Yet, from the senior Chinese leadership's perspective, the primary objective of *xiaokang* is to attain a \$3,000 per capita gross domestic product by 2020.⁸ Three major components are deemed essential to realize this goal: fostering a stable external political and security environment necessary for internal economic development; integrating China further into the international political and economic order to help secure stable markets, as exemplified by its active participation in multilateral institutions such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and the World Trade Organization; and developing broad and deep relations with the United States to eliminate the need for exces-

sive military spending.⁹ Beijing has been particularly vigilant against the emergence of any external security threats that might hamper critically needed foreign investment flows into the country.

Of the policy papers prepared at the request of the Chinese leadership as tensions rose between Washington and Pyongyang, an unconventional one citing the increased likelihood of a major disruption to South Korean foreign direct investment (FDI) in the mainland attracted much attention. It is posited that among the potential ramifications directly affecting China was the

sudden withdrawal of South Korean FDI for the North's reconstruction, should North Korea collapse as a result of Washington's nonmilitary regime-change policies.¹⁰ This would be a major shock to *xiaokang* activities and would seriously undermine the Chinese leadership's ability to reach their 2020 economic development target.

Although Beijing and Washington are concerned about a North Korean nuclear arsenal and the potential for proliferation in

Northeast Asia, Beijing's perception of the North Korean security threat differs significantly from that of the United States.¹¹ Given North Korea's anemic economy, Washington's portrayal of North Korea as a threat to global security has amazed Chinese officials. Beijing is concerned about the credible threat posed by loose nuclear material if North Korea were to collapse as a state, but it otherwise deems the danger presented by North Korea's nuclear weapons programs to be more symbolic than actual. Chinese officials assert that, for North Korea's nuclear weapons program to have solid credibility, warhead assembly and testing—two steps of significantly greater difficulty than operating a nuclear reactor—would be required.¹² In the absence of these steps, Chinese officials view Washington's characterization of North Korea as a direct threat to U.S. national security with skepticism.¹³

Mainland Chinese editorials have also focused on the symbolic significance of Pyongyang's nuclear brinkmanship, citing North Korea's attempts to use the powerful symbol of a nuclear arsenal to secure a nonaggression treaty and economic concessions from the United States.¹⁴ From Beijing's perspective, North Korea's nuclear brinkmanship is a desperate attempt to bring Goliath to the bargaining table. China's early skepticism about North Korea's nuclear arsenal also applies to Pyongyang's nascent ballistic missile program. Given its own experience developing intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and North Korea's lack of either a network of satellites or a system of radar installations in the Pacific Ocean, Beijing is cognizant

A major factor accounting for the change in China has been its concept of *xiaokang*.

that, unless tested and refined, North Korea's Taepo-dong-class ICBMs cannot be considered reliable.¹⁵ Overall, China views North Korean nuclear and missile capabilities as having a louder bark than bite.

Citing the enormous disparities between the capabilities of North Korea, arguably the world's poorest country, and the United States, the uncontested global superpower, Beijing views the threat from the North more as a potential failed state and humanitarian disaster than as a rogue state or intentional threat to international security.¹⁶ Should the nuclear crisis spiral out of control and lead to an armed confrontation between North Korea and the United States, Beijing is concerned about the prospect of U.S. forces on its border and a flood of North Korean refugees streaming into northern China.¹⁷

As a signatory to international agreements and conventions on the treatment of refugees, China's adherence to these accords would cause considerable internal strains as North Korean refugees would be treated far better than rural Chinese citizens. An exodus of North Korean refugees into China would not only be a humanitarian crisis, debilitating China's economy and straining its domestic stability, but would also increase the possibility of international aid organizations setting up and administering refugee camps on the mainland.¹⁸ This potential intrusion to China's sovereignty helps explain why North Koreans who succeed in escaping to China today are not called refugees but instead are labeled as economic migrants by Beijing.

To protect against such state weakness, instability, and ultimately even failure, Beijing has been willing to prop up the hermit state with critical supplies of food and oil, such as when North Korea almost collapsed in the late 1990s due to a devastating famine that killed an estimated two million people. Current assessments made by nongovernmental organizations active in the region, as well as North Korea-focused research institutes, draw a startling picture. At present, more than 40 percent of North Korea's subsistence-level food supplies and almost 90 percent of its oil imports reportedly come from China.¹⁹

Although the United States has repeatedly expressed its frustration that China has not been more willing to use this leverage against North Korea, Beijing has actually applied such pressure previously. Senior Chinese officials warned North Korean foreign minister Paek Nam-sun during an early 2003 visit to Beijing that renewed provocations by the North toward the United States could strain Chinese-North Korean relations. To reinforce that point, China temporarily shut off an oil pipeline from its Daqing oilfields to North Korea for three days in March 2003, officially citing technical problems. According to a Western diplomat, the message to the Kim Jong-il regime was clear: behave.²⁰ Beijing walks a fine line when issuing

such a message, as any political or diplomatic benefit gained needs to be tempered by an assessment of how a major, sustained oil pipeline shutdown would impact North Korea's stability.

Overall, Beijing's main position can perhaps best be summed up in a statement by Sha Zukang, China's former ambassador for arms control and disarmament affairs: "Dialogue and consultation is the best way to reach consensus on problem matters. ... We should recognize that North Korea

Russia has been open for business with North Korea despite the nuclear impasse.

has legitimate security concerns. We need to continue the dialogue and practice more patience to ensure that the Korean peninsula is free of nuclear weapons."²¹ Eager to focus on its internal economic development and its *xiaokang* strategy, Beijing has consistently emphasized a dialogue and consultation approach among the principal parties. This attempt to avoid the quandary of having to choose between Pyongyang and Washington has frustrated U.S. diplomats.

When Secretary of State Colin Powell sought direct Chinese intervention in the deepening nuclear impasse during a February 2003 visit to Beijing, he was rebuffed, albeit politely.²² Restating its policy, Beijing urged Washington to commence bilateral negotiations with Pyongyang immediately to resolve the crisis. Eager to prevent a further deterioration of U.S.–North Korean relations following Bush's swift victory in Iraq, the Chinese leadership began conducting an intensive campaign of shuttle diplomacy, sending senior envoys to Pyongyang, Washington, Tokyo, Seoul, and Moscow; sponsoring a preliminary trilateral meeting among Beijing, Washington, and Pyongyang; and hosting subsequent rounds of the six-party talks. Beijing has been motivated not only by its desire to stabilize North Korea and address Pyongyang's nuclear program, but also to enmesh Washington in a regional multilateral process and prevent it from taking unilateral action as it did in Iraq. Similarly, Chinese officials stress in domestic media outlets that Chinese diplomatic initiatives in 2005 to restart the stalled six-party talks were motivated more by concerns about containing Washington's reactions than dealing with Pyongyang's nuclear weapons programs.²³

In contrast to the U.S.-led emphasis on Libya as a model for solving the North Korea problem, China has emerged as a strong supporter of a Ukrainian-type model for resolving the current nuclear impasse. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukraine inherited Soviet nuclear missiles based on its territory that made it into a formidable *de facto* nuclear power almost overnight. Concerned by the prospect of nuclear proliferation,

the United States and Russia together persuaded Ukraine that dismantling its inherited nuclear arsenal would be more advantageous than retaining it. To allay concerns about its inability to defend itself without nuclear weapons, Ukraine was offered a multilateral security guarantee with associated economic rewards. China believes that multilaterally adopting such an approach toward North Korea could result in substantive progress. South Korea, North Korea, and Russia are also firm advocates of applying a version of the Ukraine model. As the United States continues to push the Libya model and China advocates the Ukraine model, it has become more difficult to build consensus and explore creative solutions at the six-party talks. A core stumbling block in the talks remains the question of who takes the first step, with China emphasizing the Ukrainian example to extend security assurances and economic incentives first, while the United States contends that the onus is on North Korea to dismantle its nuclear weapons infrastructure, just as Libya did, before concessions can follow.

JAPAN

Prior to the October 2002 nuclear crisis and China's April 2003 trilateral talks initiative, the Japanese government under Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi eagerly sought to engage the Kim Jong-il regime more visibly and proactively. Koizumi made a high-profile visit to Pyongyang in September 2002, offering substantial economic inducements in an effort to accelerate Japanese–North Korean diplomatic normalization. The Dear Leader's startling admission during that trip that North Korea had abducted Japanese citizens in the 1970s and 1980s, however, effectively halted Koizumi's engagement policy. The Japanese public demanded a swift and satisfactory resolution of the abductee issue before any resumption of broader normalization talks.²⁴

Although the public remains preoccupied with the abductions, Japanese government officials are concerned that applying excessive pressure on North Korea may elicit a radical response that would threaten Japan's security. Of specific concern is the potential for a nuclear- or chemical-warhead-armed No-dong missile attack on Tokyo.²⁵ Most Japanese policymakers seek to avoid such a scenario by fostering gradual transformations in the hermit state through dialogue and engagement. In a report entitled "Basic Strategies for Japan's Foreign Policy in the 21st Century: New Era, New Vision, New Diplomacy," the Japanese Foreign Ministry stated that "North Korea itself needs to make substantial efforts if it is to become a member of the international community. Japan's objective is not to overturn the regime in North Korea but to gradually change the nature of its political and economic systems."²⁶

North Korea has been effective in exploiting differences among the other five parties.

A vocal group of Japan Defense Agency officials, however, has been advocating a preemptive strike capability against North Korea as a deterrent. The development of this view was sparked by North Korea's 1998 Taepo-dong missile test over Honshu island, which completely stunned the Japanese government.²⁷ In January 2003, then-Minister of State for Defense Shigeru Ishiba, in his testimony before the Japanese House of Representatives Budget Committee, made an unprecedented explicit reference to

Tokyo's use of preemptive military force: "We will consider the start [of a military attack] if [Pyongyang] expresses an intention to demolish Tokyo and starts fueling its missiles to realize that."²⁸

Despite its bold rhetoric, Japan is not currently capable of a military strike. Until Japan's National Space Development Agency twin spy-satellite launch in March 2003, the government's only source of satellite imagery on North Korea was the United States. Ja-

pan still lacks the resources to coordinate and mount a preemptive attack.²⁹ Moreover, with respect to its military capability, Japan's pacifist constitution has traditionally limited its armed forces to maintaining a self-defense posture. As a result, Japan's military has neither the equipment nor the training for a long-range strike.³⁰

Ultimately, regardless of its military or nuclear posture, the Japanese government believes that it would be able to lead negotiations with North Korea to address both Tokyo's and the international community's security concerns if it were not constrained by the Japanese public's demand that the abduction issue be resolved first.³¹ A closer examination of the geopolitical context, however, reveals that the main factor preventing the Koizumi government from playing a leading role is not a domestic constraint, but rather a North Korean regime that is only interested in negotiating with the United States. Given this dynamic, Tokyo will largely be relegated to the sidelines during the negotiation phase.

RUSSIA

For Moscow, the six-party talks are a venue in which it is able to support other members' proposals but is unable to lead. In stark contrast to China, Russia possesses little of the once formidable political and diplomatic clout that made it a major power in the region. Rather than seeking ways to gain an edge in a global ideological contest, Russia is now keen to leverage its substantial oil resources strategically to play China and Japan off of each

other. Although the oil pipeline deals are economically lucrative for the Russians, they also serve an important political function as a tool with which Moscow can create influence in Northeast Asia. After much lobbying by Beijing and Tokyo, Russian president Vladimir Putin recently announced that his country would prioritize China over Japan as the recipient of oil from a trans-Siberian pipeline project.³²

Despite the on-going nuclear crisis, Russia continues to pursue its mercantilist policy, seeking economic opportunities in the region. Moscow is supportive of multilateral efforts to unravel the nuclear imbroglio, but the lack of progress in the six-party talks has not impeded its pipeline as well as railway deals.³³ In October 2004, Moscow disclosed a North Korean–Russian deal to link the Trans-Siberian Railroad with Rajin, a port in northeastern North Korea.³⁴ Although the nuclear impasse has frozen other countries' North Korea policies, Russia has been open for business.

Key Insights and Lessons

By utilizing a hypothetical, three-stage, Chinese-sponsored road map for resolving the North Korean nuclear crisis, it was possible to discern and achieve a better understanding of major complexities beneath the surface of the multilateral negotiations in Beijing. The divergent perceptions and expectations of each member to the six-party talks reveal the expanding obstacles that impede the development of a comprehensive, peaceful resolution. North Korea has been effective in exploiting these differences among the other five parties to gain concessions and time. Significantly, the insights revealed here can be used to align policies, counter divisive North Korean negotiating tactics, and increase the effectiveness of multilateral negotiating strategies.

The first core insight is the wide divergence of members' perceptions about what stage they believe negotiations have entered. Figure 2 highlights the key quotes which reinforce each country's self-assessment of where it views itself in the Chinese-sponsored, three-stage road map. The most glaring and significant divergence exists between the United States, which believed that negotiations were effectively at "phase 0," or had not even gotten off the ground, and China, which pointed out that three rounds of talks had brought the multilateral talks to stage 2 of the hypothetical three-stage process described earlier. Although minimal tangible progress has been made, China emphasizes that sustaining the process is more important than expecting a major breakthrough at any particular round of talks. The Chinese belief is that numerous successive meetings will eventually lead to real progress.

Compounding this situation is the ongoing and growing perception gap between Beijing and Washington on the question of China's leverage over North Korea. The Bush administration contends that China has major economic and political leverage over the Kim regime but is unwilling to exert that leverage to pressure Pyongyang to accept stringent nuclear disarmament.³⁵ Beijing, in turn, argues that it is unable to apply its leverage because it is concerned that doing so would critically weaken the Kim regime and trigger a massive flow of North Korean refugees into China.

A second key insight is the emergence of a South Korean–Chinese working partnership that has forwarded various proposals to break the nuclear impasse. Within the six-party talks, Beijing and Seoul have increasingly coordinated their policies in dealing both with Pyongyang and Washington. Overall, China and South Korea have sought to close the gap between the United States and North Korea by enticing Pyongyang to give up its nuclear arsenal in exchange for integration into the regional economy and by encouraging Washington to adopt a more flexible negotiating stance toward the North. China and South Korea are eager to affect a peaceful resolution of the nuclear crisis, as stability on the Korean peninsula is a prerequisite for Beijing's interests in preventing major disruptions to internal economic development in China and its *xiaokang* strategy as well as to Seoul's interest in gradual reunification between the two Koreas. The Chinese and South Korean working assumption is that only Beijing and Seoul can exert any meaningful and sustained constructive influence on Pyongyang and Washington.

A third insight is that most of the government officials in Chinese, South Korean, Russian, North Korean, and Japanese foreign ministries working on the six-party talks are not Northeast Asian specialists as would be expected. Rather, they are Americanists. The high concentration of U.S.-focused policy advisers in Beijing, Seoul, Tokyo, and Moscow is indicative of how Washington's friends and allies in the region are sympathetic to North Korea's security concerns and its desire to discourage any U.S. misadventure on the Korean peninsula. Collectively, these friends and allies have urged the Bush administration to soften its overriding insistence that North Korea make assurances on and take actions toward nuclear disarmament prior to negotiations on economic rewards and a security guarantee, a sequencing arrangement to which Pyongyang is vehemently opposed. Within Northeast Asian capitals, Washington's rigid stance is being viewed as a key hurdle to engaging Pyongyang in substantive multilateral negotiations. To this effect, Wang Yi, a vice foreign minister at the time and a key architect of the formation of the six-party talks in 2003, observed that "[t]he American policy towards [the] DPRK—this is the main problem we are facing."³⁶

Figure 2: Analysis of Government Policy Analysts' Responses and Critiques

| | Perceived Stage | Key Quotes |
|--------|-----------------|--|
| U.S. | ➡ Phase 0 | "Nuclear rollback commitment first" |
| PRC | ➡ Mid-Stage 2 | "Process important, not outcome" |
| DPRK | ➡ Phase 0 | "Only bilateral talks have been substantive" |
| Japan | ➡ Mid-Stage 1 | "Abductee issue constricts NK policy" |
| ROK | ➡ Early Stage 2 | "Soft landing is key objective" |
| Russia | ➡ Early Stage 1 | "Substantive talks have not started" |

Source: Interviews with U.S., Chinese, North Korean, Japanese, South Korean, and Russian government officials.

As the enormous difficulties even convening the six-party talks indicate, China cannot resolve the crisis by itself. The present divisions in perceptions, interests, historical analogies, and policies among the six countries dealing with the nuclear problem will exacerbate and prolong the present deadlock. Until recently, the Bush administration's approach to dealing with North Korea has centered on largely ignoring the reclusive regime and gradually cutting off its overseas sources of illicit funds. Conversely, China's focus on achieving its long-term xiaokang objectives drives its diplomatic efforts to resolve the nuclear crisis.

In this respect, substantive Sino-U.S. collaboration in leading a multilateral effort to end the crisis is long overdue. Closing the perception gap between Washington and Beijing on the question of China's leverage over North Korea is an important starting point. Discussing if, when, and under what circumstances that leverage will be applied will influence the effectiveness of a joint approach to dealing with North Korea. Should Washington and Beijing make the political decision to start this process toward developing a joint North Korea policy and be able to forge an effective multilateral strategy for negotiating and implementing a comprehensive resolution to the nuclear crisis, the probability of achieving a stringent package deal to attain peaceful nuclear disarmament would rise significantly.

Notes

1. Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, "President Bush Optimistic About Multilateral Talks With North Korea," Washington, D.C., August 1, 2003, <http://usembassy.state.gov/Seoul/www41az.html>.
2. From June to August and October to November 2004, off-the-record interviews and meetings were conducted with government policy advisers from the U.S. Department of State; the Political Affairs Section of the U.S. Embassy in Beijing; the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) Foreign Ministry's North America Desk; the People's Republic of China (PRC) Foreign Ministry's North America Division; the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) International Department; the PRC Central Party School; the PRC Ministry of State Security; the Political Affairs Section of the Embassy of the Republic of Korea (ROK) in Washington, D.C.; the ROK Foreign Ministry's North Korea Task Force, the Japanese Foreign Ministry's North America Desk, and the Political Affairs Section at the Russian Embassy in Beijing.
3. State Department officials, interviews with author, Washington, D.C., June 14–18, 2004.
4. See Anne Wu, "What China Whispers to North Korea," *The Washington Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (Spring 2005): 35–36.
5. ROK Foreign Ministry policy adviser, interview with author, Seoul, August 9–13, 2004.
6. Bae Keun-min, "Tone of Anti-U.S. Protest Changes," *Korea Times*, December 2, 2002.
7. Soo-Jeong Lee, "South Korea Seeks Easing of Nuclear Crisis at Economic Talks With North Korea," Associated Press, February 12, 2003.
8. Jiang Zemin, CCP's 16th National Congress, Beijing, November 8–14, 2002.
9. PRC government policy advisers, interviews with author, Beijing, August 2–6, 2004.
10. John S. Park, "North Korean Crisis: China Shows the Way to Pyongyang," *International Herald Tribune*, May 14, 2004.
11. See, for example, PRC Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan, comments to the 1st session of the 10th National People's Congress, Beijing, March 6, 2004.
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