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What China Whispers to North Korea

To some, China appears to be taking a decisive if typically understated diplomatic role as the host and central catalyst in the often rocky six-party talks among North and South Korea, Russia, Japan, the United States, and China to negotiate a multilateral solution to the most pressing security dilemma in Northeast Asia: North Korea's nuclear weapons program. To others, Beijing is still being too cautious and lenient toward Pyongyang, limiting itself to opaque, behind-the-scenes attempts to influence the hermit kingdom diplomatically, without being willing to get tough and use real leverage.

Recent, evolving tectonic shifts in Asian geopolitics have changed the framework within which delicate negotiations to remove nuclear weapons from the Korean peninsula take place. While China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) have hailed their continuously strengthened friendship during the course of their 55-year diplomatic relationship,[1] one evolving dynamic is that China and the United States have entered a new era of bilateral relations through their post-September 11 cooperation in the war on terrorism. Secretary of State Colin Powell described the state of U.S.-China relations as recently as last year as the best that they have been in more than 30 years.[2]

Given China's delicately balanced position between the United States and the DPRK, its role as chief mediator seems only natural. Moreover, considering the decades-long legacy of deep hostility and mistrust between the United States and the DPRK, China's role as an honest broker even appears indispensable to craft a solution to the nuclear crisis. Although some may wonder what leverage Beijing holds over Pyongyang, a more fundamental

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The Washington Quarterly • 28:2 pp. 35–48.

question, particularly to some outside Beijing, remains: what exactly are the messages that China is whispering in North Korea's ear?

Message One: No Nukes

China has significantly departed from its traditionally low-profile diplomacy in Korean peninsular affairs with an explicit message that North Korea must put an end to its nuclear weapons program. This decisiveness contrasts sharply with Beijing's onlooker approach to the first North Korean nuclear crisis, when it emphasized that "the issue was a direct matter between the DPRK and the three sides—the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the United States, and the Republic of Korea."[3]

Ten years later, security concerns along its northeastern border have prompted Beijing's more active diplomacy, because a nuclear North Korea could seriously undermine the regional stability underlying China's economic growth. China's development strategy aims to achieve a comprehensively well-off society, defined by Deng Xiaoping in 1984 as *xiaokang shehui*, or a per capita gross national product of $800, by 2020. China cannot afford another "lost decade" caused by domestic or international turmoil. Accordingly, for the past decade, the notion of concealing strength and waiting for opportunities (*taoguang yanghui*) has guided China's diplomacy. This conservative practice has created a favorable international environment that promotes domestic development.

China's relations with its other neighbors have improved, facilitating its economic and strategic interests. On its southeastern border, China has forged friendly, cooperative relations with countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) through the ASEAN Plus China mechanism, which has institutionalized the annual ASEAN Plus China leaders' summit; embarked on a regional free-trade agreement; and developed a code of conduct for the South China Sea. Meanwhile, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, formed with Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan in a joint effort to fight terrorism, separatism, and extremism and to promote economic cooperation, has allowed China to secure its northwestern border. China has also signed the declaration on principles for relations and comprehensive cooperation with India, which improved its sometimes prickly relations with its southwestern neighbor.

China's northeastern border, in contrast, remains a security vulnerability, with hostilities deepening and the threat of nuclear weapons casting a long shadow over the Korean peninsula. To put it simply, China seeks to stabilize this border and reinforce the status quo. Neither a North Korean nuclear program nor regime instability, much less regime change, serves those inter-

ests. On the current course, with its materials and capabilites, a nuclear North Korea seems to be only a matter of time, though the actual number of bombs remains anyone's guess. In October 2004, China acknowledged for the first time Pyongyang's intention to conduct a uranium-enrichment program.[4] A scenario in which war could break out on the Korean peninsula cannot be completely ruled out.

U.S. estimates of the threat posed by the DPRK rose substantially after the September 11 attacks. The mistrust generated by the unraveling of the 1994 Agreed Framework has further increased the difficulty of relying exclusively on diplomacy. Hawks in the Bush administration who tend to equate scrapping North Korea's nuclear weapons program with toppling Kim Jong Il's regime have contemplated a more coercive approach toward North Korea. A U.S. military strike against the DPRK could, according to the terms of Beijing's 1961 Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance with the DPRK, force Beijing into an embarrassing confrontation with the United States. More importantly, a U.S.-DPRK war threatens China's well-maintained economic growth, with one estimate predicting a reduction in growth of 10–20 percent.[5] The prospect of a larger geopolitical realignment in Asia resulting from the collapse of the Kim Jong Il regime also makes China uneasy.

> China's role as honest broker appears indispensable but insufficient.

Refugees from North Korea also pose a potential threat to China's social stability. The 1,000-kilometer-plus border between China and the DPRK provides easy access for North Koreans, identified as "illegal border crossers" by the Chinese government. Since 2002, this issue has been further complicated by North Koreans who seek asylum in foreign embassies and institutions in Beijing. In July 2004, 468 North Korean border crossers reportedly were airlifted to Seoul through a Southeast Asian country, thought to be Vietnam.[6] Untold more are still camped inside South Korea's embassy in Beijing awaiting diplomatic settlement.

In October 2004, President George W. Bush signed the North Korean Human Rights Act into law, authorizing $20 million annually until 2008 to help DPRK refugees and likely further complicating Beijing's diplomatic efforts by reinforcing Pyongyang's perceptions of a U.S. "hostile policy" of regime change and by encouraging further defections. China attracts criticism whether it repatriates or accommodates border crossers. To grapple with this problem, Beijing has had to strike a delicate balance among various factors, including abiding by domestic and international laws, demonstrating a hu-

manitarian spirit, and maintaining good relations with the two Koreas. Recently, the arrival of asylum seekers at an increasingly dramatic pace has forced Beijing to harden its position. The Chinese Foreign Ministry has urged foreign diplomats in China to refuse to protect North Korean asylum seekers and has pledged that the "snake-heads" organizing these acts will be severely punished in accordance with Chinese law.[7]

In November, the rumored movement of 10,000 Chinese troops to its North Korean border, coupled with the disappearance of some portraits of Kim Jong Il in Pyongyang, spawned speculation that the DPRK regime was unraveling and raised fears of a massive influx of North Korean refugees. China, although concerned, seemed to have confidence that the situation would be resolved. Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister Wu Dawei dismissed negative reports as "completely groundless" and "extremely dangerous," while stressing the political stability of and economic development in the DPRK.[8]

China has significantly departed from its traditionally low-profile diplomacy.

North Korea's attempt to acquire a nuclear deterrent also risks disrupting East Asia's nuclear balance. A North Korean bomb could jeopardize long-term stability in the region by triggering the nuclear ambitions of Japan, South Korea, or even Taiwan. China already has three nuclear neighbors in Russia, India, and Pakistan. A regional nuclear arms race among existing nonnuclear neighbors could leave it surrounded. The disclosure in September 2004 of South Korea's near bomb-grade uranium-enrichment experiment four years earlier and plutonium-based nuclear research in the early 1980s heightened such concerns. Japan is widely believed to possess the capability to develop nuclear weapons quickly and easily if it chooses to do so. Reports in October 2004 that Taiwan may have carried out plutonium-separation experiments in the mid-1980s,[9] as well as a *Taipei Times* editorial in August 2004 suggesting that nuclear weapons with the ability to "obliterate China's 10 largest cities and the Three Gorges Dam" would be a powerful deterrent to the threat from mainland China,[10] also trouble Beijing.

Accompanying these security concerns is China's desire to build positive relations with the United States. U.S. preoccupation with Iraq has increased the value of China's shared interest in a nonnuclear Korean peninsula. Beyond the war in Iraq, divergent approaches within the Bush administration and a lack both of military and diplomatic means for dealing with Kim Jong Il's regime has paralyzed Washington. Beijing, however, enjoys political and economic leverage over Pyongyang and therefore could be a valuable part-

ner to play hardball. Washington has in fact reduced its profile on the nuclear issue, for better or worse, in hopes that Beijing will take the lead in initiating diplomatic solutions to the crisis on the peninsula. During the past few years, as China and the United States have substantially improved their relationship, the North Korean issue conveniently created a new synergy between the two countries. In such a context, the traditional "lips and teeth" relationship between China and the DPRK, in which Beijing envisioned using North Korea as a buffer against the United States, appears both obsolete and self-destructive.

Message Two: Negotiate

Since the initial disclosure of North Korea's highly enriched uranium program in October 2002, Beijing has expressed its willingness to host dialogues for interested parties while continuing to stress dialogue and negotiation as the most effective means to settle the nuclear issue.[11] On March 8–9, 2003, China went a step further by sending former foreign minister and vice premier Qian Qichen to the Chinese-DPRK border to meet Kim Jong Il in a major effort to convince Pyongyang to enter trilateral talks with the United States and China.[12] On July 15, 2003, Chinese vice foreign minister Dai Bingguo met with Kim Jong Il, delivering a letter from Chinese president Hu Jintao that included a proposal for multilateral talks. China has thus acted decisively to build a bridge over the quagmire by facilitating the environment necessary to start peaceful talks.

Since April 2003, China has hosted one trilateral negotiation and three rounds of six-party talks. Beijing has gone beyond its initial role as a host, assuming further responsibilities as peacemaker and mediator. Besides providing the venue, China also mapped out the framework for negotiations, mediated between disagreeing parties, and has worked hard to get the talks back on track since they stalled in September 2004. To reenergize the talks, Hu reaffirmed with Bush both sides' determination to continue multilateral negotiations during a phone conversation on October 7, 2004. Beijing also sent out its special envoy, Ambassador Ning Fukui, to shuttle between South Korea and the United States to discuss ways to bring North Korea back to the negotiating table.

On October 18–20, 2004, Beijing invited North Korea's second-most powerful leader, Kim Yong Nam, president of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly, to visit China where he and the Chinese side agreed that the six-party talks were the best channel to advance a solution to the nuclear issue. During meetings several days later, Powell and Chinese leaders also reaffirmed the need for the six-party framework to continue and for

the talks to be revived. China's efforts to facilitate talks have been substantial and internationally regarded as constructive. As Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs James A. Kelly remarked, "Achievements from the talks are in no small part due to the extensive efforts of the Chinese ... and we are extremely grateful for the hard work they have been doing."[13]

Message Three: We Understand Your Position

Based on geographic proximity, ideological affinity, and time-weathered friendship, China alone can express a full and sincere understanding of North Korea's security concerns. China's emphasis on satisfying North Korea's economic and security needs, in addition to ending its nuclear activities, reflects this empathy.

Bush's branding of North Korea as a "rogue state" and member of the "axis of evil" along with Iraq and Iran raised great concern in China about a rising unilateralist trend in U.S. foreign policy. Such words are alien to the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, initiated by China, India, and Myanmar in 1954 as guidelines for international relations, which stress mutual noninterference in internal affairs and peaceful coexistence in international relations. During Kim Yong Nam's visit to Beijing in October 2004, Wu Bangguo, China's top legislator, named these principles as key contributors to the smooth development of bilateral relations. Although China sees eye to eye with the United States on the need for North Korea to denuclearize, China is against the use of "axis of evil" rhetoric in international relations and issued an early warning within days of the 2002 U.S. State of the Union address, saying that "consequences will be very serious if [the United States] proceeds with this kind of logic."[14] The revelation of North Korea's active nuclear program proved that China's worry was not simply idle speculation. The "axis of evil" rhetoric, coupled with the United States' toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq, has presumably heightened North Korea's fear of the possibility of U.S. aggression. It may have also encouraged the DPRK's return to nuclear brinkmanship.

North Korea had preferred bilateral dialogues with the United States, suspecting that multilateral talks were a device to mobilize collective pressures against Pyongyang. The process, however, has proved North Korea's fears unwarranted. Eager to be a fair mediator and avoid any turbulence on the Korean peninsula, Beijing has attempted to establish a balanced tone for the six-party talks, based on reconciliation, an incremental process, and reciprocity. This approach is healthier and, more importantly, potentially more productive than Pyongyang's hard-nosed style or Washington's hard-

line tactics. The six-party talks have demonstrated that more confrontational approaches are ineffectual at best and at times threaten to increase tensions between the parties. Beijing took North Korea's security concerns seriously. When Pyongyang proposed "words for words" and "action for action" as principles for the negotiation, China instantly incorporated that into its agenda, reiterating it in the chairman's statement in the third round of talks.

Beijing has also addressed Pyongyang's concerns through its interpretation of the progress of the talks. In Beijing's view, the six-party talks have achieved two major goals: the parties have reached consensus that the first step toward nuclear abandonment is to implement a nuclear freeze and adopt relevant measures to that end, and they agreed to seek peaceful resolution of the nuclear issue step-by-step following the aforementioned principle of "words for words" and "action for action."[15] Washington's estimation of the achievements thus far, however, might be different. It has not scaled down its yardstick of "complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization" (CVID). Serious divisions between the United States and North Korea on the exact sequence of disarmament and assistance remain; North Korea has requested to receive a reward for freezing, and the United States has insisted on credible dismantlement first.

> The traditional PRC-DPRK 'lips and teeth' relationship appears obsolete and self-destructive.

Message Four: No Unqualified Support

China has been known as North Korea's "big brother"—a legacy from their blood-cemented alliance in the Korean War. China's attitude during the last two years of talks, however, has shown a guarded but unmistakable change. Especially in comparison to relations 50 years ago, China no longer feels obligated to be Pyongyang's patron and no longer provides unqualified support to North Korea. In other words, North Korea will have to learn to behave or lose Chinese aid and international support. The Chinese leadership has indicated to Kim Jong Il that reluctance on Pyongyang's part to dismantle its nuclear weapons program would severely hamper Beijing's ability and willingness to continuously offer aid. This was expressed in Hu's three suggestions to Pyongyang in August 2003, encouraging North Korea to attain economic self-sufficiency, try reform, and improve relations with its neighbors by halting its weapons of mass destruction program.[16] On February 12, 2003, China voted for a resolution in the IAEA that accused North Korea of

violating the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and referred the issue to the UN Security Council. Beijing knew that North Korea would take such a referral seriously, as demonstrated by Pyongyang's threat to turn Seoul into a "sea of fire" in the face of an imminent Security Council resolution in 1994. Beijing's willingness to go along with the February 2003 resolution signaled its seriousness and implicitly warned the DPRK of severe consequences if it failed to cooperate.

The Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Assistance between China and North Korea now seems more of a burden to China than anything else. It is difficult to imagine that China would ever intervene directly and defend the DPRK in the event of a crisis on the Korean peninsula, as called for in the treaty. China's diplomatic philosophy has changed considerably since the Korean War. Beijing no longer considers itself under an international obligation to assist socialist camps, nor is it interested in "exporting revolution." Both internally and externally, it is against China's interests to wage a war against the United States on behalf of the DPRK. In recent years, the Chinese leadership has been orienting its foreign policy to serve domestic priorities. It no longer perceives the United States as it did in the 1950s as the imperialist conspiring to strangle China in the cradle of socialism.

Having improved its relations with the United States from strategic competitor when Bush first assumed the presidency to constructive cooperator after the September 11 attacks, China is now extremely reluctant to compromise this relationship. Furthermore, the grave political and economic consequences that could accompany friction with the world's lone superpower explain in part China's visible efforts to downplay the 1961 treaty—efforts that contrast with North Korea's attempts to emphasize the pact's importance. Beijing's low-key celebrations of the treaty's anniversary in recent years have marked a subtle departure from the ceremonious commemoration in 1996, when Beijing sent a naval flotilla to visit North Korea for the first time and announced a donation of 100,000 tons of grain. With Pyongyang sliding further down the slope of nuclear brinkmanship and enveloping the region in security uncertainties, Beijing clearly wants to avoid emboldening North Korea with any fantasy about China's willingness to provide unequivocal support and security.

Message Five: Reform to Avoid Sanctions

China has generally refrained from using its lifeline assistance, which is believed to account for 70–90 percent of North Korea's fuel and one-third of its food imports, to exert economic pressure on North Korea. By insisting on not resorting to sanctions before exhausting all other peaceful means, China

has invited international pressure on itself. Many in Washington believe that China is insufficiently tough, instead arguing that Beijing must wield its sticks to make the DPRK receptive to its whispers. Beijing, however, has been reluctant to press harder. Washington regarded China's cutoff of oil supplies to North Korea for three days in March 2003 as muscle flexing and expects China to do more. Yet, some observers believed Beijing's claim that the incident was an unintended consequence of mechanical problems.[17]

China rarely uses sanctions in its diplomacy, as in most cases employment of such a tool would seem to trample on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. Moreover, understanding the resilience and pride of its hermit neighbor, Beijing doubts the effectiveness of sanctions against North Korea. Whenever any country or institution has made a threat against it, Pyongyang has always retaliated with more hawkish rhetoric. Although it supported the February 2003 IAEA resolution as a semi-ultimatum to Pyongyang, Beijing worried that an actual UN Security Council resolution at that time could prompt an extreme reaction from the DPRK. On July 4, 2003, China and Russia voted against a proposed Security Council resolution condemning North Korea's nuclear program and withdrawal from the NPT, believing that such a resolution would only provoke North Korea unnecessarily. China is likely more reluctant to resort to sanctions bilaterally than multilaterally, with the endorsement and support of the United Nations. Some in Beijing also suspect that North Korea had determined to "fight to win or die." Starved and desperate as it is, Pyongyang has little to lose and can thus risk a confrontation with the world's lone superpower. In such a situation, Beijing believes that a strategy of using coercion to force the DPRK to back down appears inefficient and self-defeating.

> China alone can express a sincere understanding of North Korea's security concerns.

Moreover, the spillover effects of sanctions would affect a neighboring country more than a remote power. Ceasing to breathe life into North Korea, Beijing could invite a larger influx of illegal border crossers and the economic and social burden that they would bring. Washington is less concerned about such issues, with its priority of preventing nuclear proliferation largely obscuring other considerations. Those who expect more hard power from Beijing ignore the fact that paving the way for regime change in North Korea by initiating economic collapse is not in Beijing's interest.

Instead, China whispers words of economic reform, urging North Korea to attain economic self-sufficiency and try Chinese-style reform. The multilateral talks provide a platform to expose North Korea to this idea and mo-

tivate it to reform through interaction with various parties who are equally eager to see changes in Pyongyang. The Chinese model may not be completely suitable to North Korea, but Beijing holds the view, based on its own experience, that reversing economic reform and liberalization, once they begin, will be very difficult. Having already shown Kim Jong Il the benefits of the economic changes taking place in China, Beijing must still convince him that a controlled market economy can best reduce political and social risks in North Korea. In addition, economic growth would require substantial reduction in the DPRK's massive investment in its military, which is unlikely without alleviating North Korea's security concerns. Looking beyond the issue of nuclear weapons, China aims to effect a permanent and comprehensive solution to the North Korean conundrum.

Whispering in the Wind? Testing China's Diplomacy

Since September 2004, North Korea deferred further rounds of the six-party talks until after the U.S. presidential election, holding out for possible bilateral negotiations had Senator John Kerry (D-Mass.) won. Since Bush's reelection, however, the North Koreans have continued to stall, clearly waiting for the second-term Bush administration to reveal its priorities and positions. North Korea is also likely using this time to observe how the Chinese leadership decides to continue wielding its influence.

Having not foreseen the twists and turns during negotiations so far, Beijing may be finding itself "riding a tiger, afraid to dismount"—thrust forward into a protagonist's role that it may not be fully prepared to play. After agreeing to host the North Korean nuclear talks, China quickly realized that its responsibilities ran beyond setting the table; it also had to provide the menu and cajole the guests into bringing main dishes. China's diplomatic achievements as host, peacemaker, and mediator, as well as the international recognition of these achievements, seem to have encouraged Beijing to persevere in its new, proactive foreign policy. Beijing's embrace of multilateralism, initiation of active intervention, and willingness to flex some diplomatic muscles are helping to project a fresh international image. Yet, this new diplomacy also tests China's resolve and ability to reemerge as a power player in the international arena by ending the North Korean nuclear crisis.

Before the U.S. presidential election, one of the foreign policy rifts between the U.S. candidates was whether Washington should take a bilateral approach favored by Kerry or stick to the multilateral one supported by Bush. Whether China should remain involved and continue to exert influence also became an issue of debate. Although both candidates agreed that China could continue to play a role, they differed on the extent of involve-

ment. Bush emphasized the need for six-party talks to wield multilateral leverage, while Kerry argued that bilateral and multilateral talks should proceed in parallel. At that time, uncertainty about the U.S. presidential election aroused three primary concerns in Beijing: that despite any efforts China invested in shuttle diplomacy, negotiations would not reconvene before the U.S. election; that potential bilateral talks would marginalize China; and, worst of all, that, if the United States and North Korea were to reach a fragile bilateral agreement that inevitably began to unravel, China would have to be brought back in to fix it—to mend the fold after a sheep is lost, as the Chinese expression goes.

Bush's reelection has ensured the continuity of the multilateral talks. In a phone conversation with South Korean president Roh Moo-hyun after his campaign victory, the two leaders agreed to make joint efforts toward holding the next round of talks soon. The reshuffling of Bush's cabinet and the continuing standstill of the talks, however, raise uncertainties that can play into the hands of administration hawks. Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security John Bolton, for example, has warned Pyongyang to "get out of the proliferation business or risk having your cargoes of terror interdicted."[18] Internationally, patience, including that of the United Nations which had lent full support to the multilateral diplomatic process, seems to be wearing thin. On September 27, 2004, North Korea's claim to have weaponized—not just reprocessed as it had claimed in 2003—its 8,000 spent nuclear fuel rods has in particular aroused new urgency. As Mohamed ElBaradei, director general of the IAEA, said in October 2004, "The six-party talks have been going on for quite a while and the international community is getting impatient to see quick results and see North Korea turning back to the nonproliferation regime."[19]

> China no longer provides unqualified support to North Korea.

Although China is not and has never claimed to be the dominant player on the North Korean nuclear issue, it does have an opportunity to use its diplomatic leverage to its own advantage as well as that of the international community. Hope still remains for the six-party talks—the very hope of peace and stability that they have afforded from the beginning. China's interest lies in lobbying the parties to revive the talks with some real movement forward, not in obscuring the path to a nuclear-free Korean peninsula by stepping back.

Beijing cannot resolve the deadlock alone. All six countries must resolve to attend the talks, and the United States and North Korea must each bring something to the table. Given these constraints, the question for China is

how to blend three key ingredients—peaceful dialogue, tactful cautions, and economic leverage—to persuade North Korea to cooperate. Directly after the 2004 U.S. presidential election, Beijing invited North Korea's vice foreign minister, Kim Yong Il, for a visit in an apparent effort to nudge Pyongyang to resume the talks. Later that month, on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit, Hu reaffirmed to Bush China's resolve to push for a new round of talks at an early date.

China rarely uses sanctions and doubts their effectiveness against North Korea.

If China uses its leading role wisely and effectively, it not only will help to produce a nuclear-free Korean peninsula but will also promote its international standing. If the parties to the North Korea talks exhaust their patience and tensions increase in the region, however, China is likely to bear much of the responsibility. Any abrupt end to the North Korean issue would likely end the Sino-U.S. honeymoon as well. Were North Korea to refuse to show up for talks, China would be faced with tough challenges that would test its resolve and its commitment to playing a more active and responsible role in the Asia Pacific region.

Turning Whispers into Talks to End the Crisis

North Korea, which still behaves at times like a stubborn child, has not received some of China's messages well. Pyongyang's conditions for resuming talks are invariably directed at the United States, such as to stop considering North Korea part of the "axis of evil," lift economic sanctions, and annul the human rights law. Many in the region still hope that China, like a dutiful big brother, will shepherd North Korea back into the fold of peaceful nations rather than letting it wander around with weapons of mass destruction in hand. China is not likely to make its demands by shouting but by whispering louder, "Do not go away again. Come home and enjoy the comforts we can provide. Why go on drifting, hungry, lonely, and desperate?"

Sandwiched between the intransigence of the two chief negotiators, China would also like to see a more flexible and practical U.S. policy toward North Korea instead of a take-it-or-leave-it proposal. If not, Beijing will not be able to exercise the leadership that Washington hopes will roll back North Korea's nuclear weapons program. Guessing what Beijing may whisper into the ear of Washington to achieve this flexibility is more difficult. China's

message toward the United States is likely to be more of a word of caution and a reminder of the uncertain aftermath of the U.S. invasion of Iraq and regime change in Baghdad. In China, one would say, "Beware of seeking out dragons and destroying them, as you may cause more dragons to emerge"; in the United States, "better the devil you know."

In *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu said, "Those skilled in war bring the enemy to the field of battle and are not brought there by him."[20] A bird's-eye view of the bargaining table reveals that North Korea has been able to maneuver the other parties with the nuclear card in its hand. This card is largely an impractical one, however, because either attacking the United States or selling weapons to terrorists would result in North Korea's self-destruction. A more reasonable solution for the DPRK would be to trade its nuclear card in return for help to address its more urgent security and economic needs. The United States also has limited choices, as the price of confrontation is much higher than a negotiated settlement and is altogether undesirable. Negotiations remain the most realistic option for both sides. As the chief mediator, Beijing now has the opportunity to inject a second wind into the process. With a louder whisper that is both sincere and determined, Beijing can continue to convey the five messages that North Korea cannot be a nuclear nation even though Beijing understands North Korea's concerns and will conditionally continue to support the DPRK if Pyongyang negotiates and reforms its economy. By balancing these messages, China can triangulate its desire for a nuclear-free Korean peninsula, a peaceful solution, and a reciprocal agreement encompassing the international community's desire for nuclear nonproliferation and North Korea's desire for existence and subsistence.

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