



BULLETIN

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China's Position with Regard to North Korea's Nuclear Test

by Justyna Szczudlik-Tatar

North Korea's second nuclear test, conducted on 25 May 2009, caused discontent in China, which condemned the actions of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and supported the resolution of the UN Security Council introducing sanctions against the DPRK that are more serious than those of 2006. It is not in China's interest to resolve the North Korean problem rapidly, however. Chinese policy with regard to the DPRK will consist in inclining it to return to the six-party negotiations, in observing the succession process there and in supporting its regime discretely. Any Chinese pressure will be temporary and will only be applied, for example, in the case of more nuclear tests.

Background. China continues to see North Korea as being in its sphere of interest and as an important country strategically—a buffer-state and a counterweight to South Korea, Japan, and their ally, the United States. The formal basis for the two countries' relations is the 1961 Chinese-North Korean Treaty of mutual assistance, which precludes either country's joining any alliance aimed against the other. China's establishment of diplomatic relations with South Korea in 1992, its adoption of a policy of equilibrium between the two Koreas, and the tightening of its relations with South Korea did not bring any change to the premises of China's policy towards the DPRK. China's most important aims in this context remain to keep North Korea in its sphere of interest, preserving North Korea's present regime and blocking the unification of the two Korean states.

Strategic concerns and the deficient North Korean economy based on the idea of Juche (self-reliance) incline China to provide the North Korean regime with the economic assistance that makes the continued functioning of the North Korean state and its economy possible. China supplies it with energy and food on preferential terms. China's efforts to incline North Korea to begin economic reforms have proven unsuccessful while the North Korean regime saw such efforts as a betrayal of socialism and a departure from the idea of Juche.

Until North Korea revealed its second (uranium) nuclear program in 2002, China was not actively involved in the resolution of the North Korean nuclear problem. It treated this issue as the DPRK's method to deter and pressure the USA and saw it only through the prism of North-Korean-American relations. China was opposed to raising the question of North Korea at the UN, and warned against a possible worsening of the situation on the peninsula. North Korea's withdrawal from the Non Proliferation Treaty in 2003 inclined China to assume the role of intermediary and participant in negotiations and to take steps to prevent any escalation of the crisis. Taking the initiative, even partially, was supposed to reflect China's growing position in the region and to reinforce China's image as a responsible member of the international community. In 2003, thanks partially to China's diplomatic efforts the six-party talks were initiated. They did not produce any tangible results, however, and the DPRK conducted nuclear tests on two occasions (in October 2006 and May 2009).

China's Position with Regard to North Korea's Nuclear Test in May 2009. China's formal reaction was similar to its 2006 declaration: China condemned the nuclear test and called on the DPRK to return to the six-party talks. The Chinese government called on all parties to remain calm and refrain from actions that could worsen the situation and to seek peaceful solutions through consultations and dialogue. China nonetheless supported UN Security Council Resolution 1874 of 12 June 2009, which prohibited the import and export of arms from North Korea and provided for the

possibility of inspecting merchandise shipped to and from the DPRK by sea, air and land routes in case of a justified suspicion that arms or materials used in the production of weapons of mass destruction are being transported. Financial sanctions were tightened and the list of North Korean firms whose assets abroad would be frozen was enlarged. Despite the sanctions, the DPRK conducted a test of short range missiles on 2 and 4 July 2009.

China is not inclined to exert pressure on the DPRK. A declaration of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs described relations between the two countries as 'normal' and stated that preparations for the commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries are under way. The Chinese authorities also speak cautiously about the implementation of the UN resolution, while on the subject of inspecting shipped merchandise they stress the need for evidence that UN provisions were broken. They also expressed unease that South Korea joining the Cracow Initiative (the Proliferation Security Initiative—PSI), stating that some of its principles infringe on International Law norms and the UN Charter. The true reasons for such a position, however, are China's reluctance to put pressure on the DPRK; the emergence of a new platform of cooperation between South Korea and the United States and other countries; and the stronger position in the region of the United States, the initiator of the PSI.

China is probably in contact with North Korea and is trying to revive the dialogue. This is reflected in statements made by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs about China's maintenance of contacts with all participants of the six-party talks. China is hoping that a peaceful process of power succession in North Korea will stabilize the internal situation there, as a result of which it will be possible to incline the North Korean regime to take up discussions. China is observing this process attentively. The Chinese press has denied the Japanese media's reports of a supposed secret visit to Beijing made in early June by Kim Jong-il's youngest son, Kim Jong-un, who is to succeed his father. The appearance of this information, however, could indicate China's discrete support for Kim Jong-un. The seizure of power in North Korea by the military, which would undoubtedly press for the further development of the nuclear program, would be an undesirable outcome for China.

Domestic Debate in China. China's possible reevaluation of its policy towards North Korea is reflected in the debate going on in the Chinese media, which points to the ineffectiveness of China's present approach to resolving the North Korean problem—an approach that harms China's image and which is based on the erroneous view that meeting North Korea's economic needs will induce its regime to abandon its nuclear program. Opinions about the ineffectiveness of the six-party talks and difficulties in returning to this form of negotiations are also being raised. Chinese analysts see the sources of the present crisis as lying not only with the DPRK, but also with the policy pursued by the United States under presidents G.W. Bush and Barack Obama (neglect of the problem). South Korea's president, Lee Myung-bak, is also being criticized for departing from the so-called "Sunshine Policy" of cooperation with the DPRK and so is Japan for its attitude precluding economic assistance for North Korea. The presence of critical voices in the Chinese public debate, which is controlled by the state, could indicate that the Chinese authorities are considering changing their policy.

Conclusions. In the present situation, Chinese policy toward the DPRK could evolve in two directions. The first is the avoidance of active involvement in the resolution of the North Korean problem. China is aware of its de facto slight leverage over the North Korean regime, and the latter's nuclear test bears this out. In this situation, China will emphasize the importance of a multilateral dialogue and will stress the USA's principal responsibility in this process. At the same time, China will observe the succession process in North Korea attentively and will most probably support the present regime, including Kim Jong-un, discretely. A mostly stable internal situation in North Korea after the succession, with a member of the Kim family at the helm (even if the country has a small number of nuclear arms) is preferable to the rule of the DPRK's military elite, which will seek to expand and improve its nuclear arsenal.

The second, less probable, scenario is China's cooperation with the US in trying to force the DPRK to desist from its present confrontational policy. This option is less beneficial for China, however, as it would test its true possibilities of pressuring North Korea. Moreover, success would be more beneficial to South Korea and Japan than to China, and would lead to a stronger US position in the region. On the other hand, the failure of such attempts would seriously harm China's image.

Most probably, China will try to avoid excessive involvement and will urge the DPRK to return to the six-party negotiations. Should there be more North Korean nuclear tests, China will condemn them, support possible UN sanctions, and might exert some short-term economic pressure on the DPRK regime in order to show China's responsibility for security in the region. China has no interest, however, in a rapid resolution of the problem of the North Korean nuclear program.