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# China must do more

OP-ED



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*China finds itself in a delicate position, pulled in one direction by its desire to avoid a precipitous North Korean collapse, and in the opposite direction by its overriding need to deepen economic relations with the US, Japan, and South Korea*

Despair is dangerous in diplomacy. But North Korea's latest actions are making much of Asia hopeless. Only China, long reluctant to flex its diplomatic muscles, now has the power to find a diplomatic solution to the North Korean nuclear problem. But the question everyone from Tokyo to Seoul and from Washington to Moscow is asking is this: will China act in time?

China's influence on North Korea is uniquely powerful. China is keeping its increasingly desperate neighbour on life support by providing most of the non-food aid and energy that North Korea receives from abroad. But to prevent North Korea from realising a *fait accompli* in its pursuit of nuclear weapons, China must do more than mediate between North Korea and the US, the role it has so far played. Instead, it must now prompt North Korea to halt its nuclear development activities and return to the six-party talks with America, Japan, China, Russia, and South Korea that broke up weeks ago.

Recent developments indicate that North Korea's nuclear threat is becoming more serious by the day. Two weeks ago, North Korea declared that in June it successfully reprocessed some 8,000 spent nuclear fuel rods and now possesses 'nuclear deterrence', suggesting that Kim Jong Il's regime may actually be making atomic bombs.

Not only does North Korea show little interest in holding another session of the six-party talks that the Bush administration and the other participants are calling for; it now wants to ban the Japanese from participating. Kim accuses Japan of introducing unnecessary obstacles and complications into resolution of the nuclear question by raising the sensitive issue of North Korea's abduction of Japanese citizens.

But this is nothing more than a political diversion. It is inconceivable that multilateral negotiations could result in a breakthrough towards a diplomatic solution while North Korea is actively engaged in pursuing its nuclear weapons programme.

It must be clear by now that Pyongyang is determined to keep its nuclear weapons programme in order to obtain a credible assurance from the US that its bizarre and repressive regime will be allowed to survive. Unless America accommodates North Korea's demands for concluding a nonaggression treaty and ending 'hostile' policies, Kim's regime is likely to keep its nuclear weapons programme as its most effective deterrent against any pre-emptive US attack — something that the Bush administration, indeed, refuses to rule out.

America's military victory in the war in Iraq probably

hardened North Korea's resolve to rely on the nuclear option as its primary means of ensuring regime survival. But that should not surprise anyone: the North Korean regime has always been committed to making military power the 'first priority' in the state budget. This contrasts sharply with policies pursued by China and Vietnam, Asia's two other communist powers. In both countries, the leadership places military power last in their national development strategies.

It would be difficult for the US to change the highest priority of its own national security strategy — pre-empting terrorism and fighting the spread of weapons of mass destruction — especially with another nuclear threat looming in Iran. Insofar as the goal of preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons on the Korean peninsula is concerned, the US has thus succeeded by sustaining an ad hoc concert of powers thus far with China, Japan, Russia, and South Korea.

Indeed, in their first-ever joint declaration, Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao, Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, and South Korean President Roh Moo Hyun issued a plea on the sidelines of the ASEAN summit held in Bali on October 8 for a nuclear-free Korean peninsula. All sides realise that failure to achieve this would most likely result in a nuclear chain reaction with Japan, South Korea, and perhaps even Taiwan embarking on their own nuclear weapons development programs. That scenario is China's worst nightmare.

So the question now is what can China do to freeze — and, if possible, to reverse — North Korea's nuclear programme. China finds itself in a delicate position, pulled in one direction by its desire to avoid a precipitous North Korean collapse, and in the opposite direction by its overriding need to deepen economic relations with the US, Japan, and South Korea. This is why at the UN Security Council China opposed any military action or sanctions against North Korea, a country for which it sacrificed almost one million troops during the Korean War in 1950-53.

It is in China's vital national interest to halt North Korea's quest to become another declared nuclear power. China's success here would not only enhance its own international prestige, but would also contribute immensely to promoting regional stability and prosperity throughout East Asia. —DT-PS

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