

Thoughts from the Chairman

FREEMAN REPORT | ISSUE 13 | SEPTEMBER 2013

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A NEW TYPE OF MAJOR POWER
RELATIONS ON NORTH KOREA

BONNIE S. GLASER

Earlier this year it appeared to some that U.S. and Chinese approaches to North Korea were converging. More recently, however, the gap between Beijing and Washington in their policies toward Pyongyang is widening. The absence of effective coordination between the United States and China will undoubtedly work to North Korea’s advantage. In addition, if cooperation on North Korea between the United States and China unravels, it will have a negative impact on their efforts to build a new type of major power relationship.

After Pyongyang conducted its third nuclear test in February, the Chinese government took unprecedented measures to implement UN sanctions against North Korea. Among the most prominent steps, the state-run bank of China halted business with North Korea’s main foreign exchange bank. In addition, the central government instructed local governments to implement UN Resolution 2094, which led to more rigorous inspections of North Korea-bound cargo.

When Presidents Obama and Xi Jinping met at Sunnylands, they agreed to work together to deepen cooperation and dialogue to achieve denuclearization. In his readout of the meeting to the press, then National Security Adviser Tom Donilon stated that the two leaders had “quite a bit of alignment on the North Korean issue.” He characterized the two nations’ shared approach as “continuing to apply pressure both to halt North Korea’s ability to proliferate and to make clear that its continued pursuit of nuclear weapons is incompatible with its economic development goals.”

Since then, however, U.S. and Chinese policy approaches have increasingly diverged. Beijing’s focus is on promoting

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dialogue—resuming the Six-Party Talks—as a pathway to a solution to the North Korean nuclear issue. From the perspective of the United States, along with Japan and South Korea, however, it is premature to discuss reconvening the Six-Party Talks because North Korea has not reaffirmed its commitments made in the agreements reached during prior rounds of the talks; it has not abided by the UN Security Council’s resolutions; and it has not demonstrated sincerity to give up its nuclear weapons. After recent consultations in Seoul, Beijing, and Tokyo, Ambassador Glyn Davies, the U.S. special representative for North Korea policy, expressed concern that North Korea seeks to use the Six-Party Talks to gain recognition as a nuclear weapons state, which is not an acceptable outcome.

China’s policy seems to have come full circle. Kim Jong-un’s decision to launch a long-range Unha-3 missile in December 2012 and then conduct a nuclear test in February incensed Chinese leaders, prompting harsh statements and actions designed to signal Beijing’s displeasure. Yet, after several rounds of high-level meetings between Chinese and North Korean officials, the two allies apparently mended fences. On a visit to Beijing in May as a personal envoy of the North Korean leader, Vice Marshal Choe Ryong-hae indicated that the North was “willing to accept advice from the Chinese side and carry out dialogue with relevant parties.” He delivered a letter from Kim Jong-un to Xi Jinping expressing the commitment to “appropriately resolve the relevant questions through the six-party talks and other forms” adding that Pyongyang was “willing to take active measures in this regard.” In July, Chinese vice president and Politburo Standing Committee member Li Yuanchao visited Pyongyang. Kim Jong-un told Li that his country “supports China’s efforts to resume the six-party talks and is willing to make joint efforts with all parties to maintain peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula.” Although these assurances were not accompanied by any concrete actions, they were enough for China to begin actively pushing for another round of the Six-Party Talks.

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—Bonnie Glaser in *The Atlantic*
“Why China Will Oppose Any Strike on Syria”

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—Bonnie Glaser in *Taipei Times*
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“Construction of such a bridge would increase the anxiety in Taiwan about the potential for greater pressure from Beijing to engage in political talks about reunification.”

—Bonnie Glaser in *Fox News*
“Taiwan not likely to dig China’s plan for \$80B tunnel connection, say experts”

A NEW TYPE OF MAJOR POWER RELATIONS ON NORTH KOREA *(continued)*

Evidence of a widening gap between the United States and China is growing. When China's special representative for Korean peninsula affairs Wu Dawei met with Glyn Davies in Beijing on September 12, he called on all parties to make greater efforts for the resumption of the Six-Party Talks. Without consulting Washington, China and North Korea machinated a Track 1.5 meeting for September 18 and announced that Chinese and North Korean nuclear negotiators would attend. However, the United States, Japan, and South Korea deemed such a meeting premature. Although Davies publicly commended Beijing for convening the meeting, Washington was surely peeved at the surprise initiative. The United States had instead hoped for talks among the five nations that are demanding denuclearization—Japan, South Korea, the United States, China, and Russia.

At a recent meeting I attended in Shanghai, a leading academic emphasized that although the United States and China seek common goals on the Korean peninsula, they have different bottom lines. China's bottom line is that North Korea not cause problems, while the U.S. bottom line is denuclearization and regime change, he maintained. In other words, Pyongyang is no longer challenging Beijing's bottom line because for the time being it has refrained from taking destabilizing actions. Therefore, there can be a return to business as usual, including resumption of the Six-Party Talks. Moreover, China remains hopeful that North Korea will implement economic reforms, which is widely viewed by the Chinese as the only real means to an eventual decision by Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear weapons.

It appears that we are back to square one. The United States and China both favor a Korean peninsula free of nuclear weapons, but they support different means to achieve that goal. The widening gap between China and the United States in policy toward North Korea does not bode well for their efforts to establish a new type of major power relationship. ■

(This piece originally appeared in China-US Focus on September 19, 2013.)

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