

# **Hoping for a More Positive Role of China in the North Korean Nuclear Issue**

**Park Jae Kyu**

**President, Kyungnam University**

**(Former Minister of Unification)**

Since October 2002 when the North Korean nuclear issue was rekindled once again, the international community has had its eyes on North Korea (DPRK). Some are voicing concern of a nuclear war and are even trying to brand North Korea as another Iraq. The atmosphere of reconciliation and cooperation that emerged between the two Koreas ever since the 2000 inter-Korean summit has reached its limit and the confrontation between the United States and North Korea has worsened, leading to rising tensions on the Korean peninsula. Fortunately, a framework for dialogue to peacefully resolve the nuclear crisis has been created and one round of three-party talks and two rounds of six-party talks have been held. This is the result of diplomatic efforts exerted by concerned parties including South Korea. The role played by China (PRC) in these efforts was especially noteworthy.

From the beginning of the second nuclear crisis, China has displayed some promising ability. On October 25, 2002, Chinese President Jiang Zemin met with U.S. President Bush and agreed to work for the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula and a peaceful resolution to the crisis. By making such an agreement, the broad direction to settle the nuclear situation was set. In March 2003, China succeeded in persuading North Korea, which had insisted on bilateral talks with the United States, to take part in trilateral talks. In the following month of April in a closed session of the UN Security Council regarding the North Korean issue, China opposed the U.S. proposal to adopt a Security Council chairman's statement that included a warning to North Korea, quietly

solving the issue and thus ensuring that negotiations would continue without agitating Pyongyang. After the three-way talks ended without bearing fruit, Beijing facilitated the opening of the six-party talks through diplomatic means by sending Vice-Foreign Minister Dai Bingguo to Washington and Pyongyang. When the second round of six-party talks were delayed, Chairman of the National People's Congress Wu Bangguo visited the countries concerned to mediate the situation and succeeded in inducing the second round of discussions. China also played a major role in inducing the chairman's summary statement during the first round of talks, which included six items (such as the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula and the evasion of measures that would aggravate the situation), as well as the chairman's statement during the second round of talks (which included seven items, one being the establishment of a working group).

In this drama, China has donned many roles. It played the intermediary behind the scenes that facilitated the process leading up to the three-party and six-party talks; the host that induced the various discussions and contacts between the participants; and the middleman that relieved the tension between the United States and North Korea and fine-tuned the differences in opinion. Its performance received the applause of the international community, and in turn the PRC enhanced its image on the world stage — from cold-war combatant caught in endless struggle to 21<sup>st</sup> century peacemaker advocating dialogue.

Despite such performances, the nuclear crisis is still in its early stages of resolution. Greater effort and initial action on the part of China is required. Nuclear dismantlement along with security guarantees and economic assistance to North Korea are a core part of the resolution of the nuclear issue. China has sufficient motivation and the preconditions to settle these problems. On the economic front, China is pursuing stable economic development based on rapid growth. In order to further advancement, it is essential that China maintains cooperative ties with advanced Western nations, including the United States, and that the situation in Northeast Asia, especially on the Korean peninsula, remains stable. On the security front, China needs

to maintain its cooperative partnership with the United States while keeping in check the expanding U.S. hegemony in the region and the increasing military strength of Japan. Preventing the movements for independence in Tibet and Taiwan is also an important issue within the scope of China's security interests.

The North Korean nuclear issue is a great challenge to China in terms of its economy and security. If the United States' hard-line stance toward North Korea should lead to an attack on Pyongyang, the level of tension on the peninsula and the rest of the Northeast Asian region will increase sharply, having an adverse effect on the stable economic growth of China. Especially, if such a crisis creates a massive flow of North Korean refugees into China, the situation would spin out of control. On the other hand, a scenario where North Korea possesses nuclear weapon(s) would also lead to a situation unacceptable to China as such a state would cause South Korea, Japan, and even Taiwan to acquire nuclear arsenals. This would signify a catastrophe for China. In this light, the North Korean nuclear issue is an imminent problem that can directly undermine China's vital interest. Therefore, China has reason to prevent the situation from being settled in an extreme manner favorable to only the United States or North Korea.

Until now, China has tried to prevent U.S.-DPRK tensions from escalating and discussions from being suspended, maintaining a balance between the stance of both sides. However, the nuclear issue is an extremely volatile one that bears the possibility of being aggravated, especially if North Korea accelerates its nuclear development free from China's influence; if the related parties fail to reach a solution and U.S.-DPRK tensions nose-dive toward confrontation; and if the nuclear problem increases the possibility of degrading Sino-U.S. relations. If such scenarios are realized, China may be forced to choose between the United States and North Korea, a condition that would not only see China's past efforts disintegrate into a puff of smoke, but also possibly undermine China's newly established status, one that is much appreciated by the international community.

Hence, China needs to carry out a more proactive role before such a situation arises. In order to disperse security concerns regarding the DPRK, Beijing needs to employ a strategy that will encourage Pyongyang to make concessions by developing a negotiating chip that it can provide the North as a means of a guarantee. Also, Beijing should consider the substantial benefits it would receive with the peaceful resolution of the nuclear crisis and attempt to persuade Washington by expressing China's intentions to make greater contributions to settle the problem. China has the prerequisites to make such contributions. It is an economic power with sufficient capability to provide North Korea with economic support. In addition, China and North Korea have maintained a special relationship through their treaty of friendly cooperation. North Korea's security concerns can be resolved somewhat with the strong guarantee China provides through this treaty. China boasts a tradition of keeping old friends even while it makes new ones. For China to keep this tradition, it needs to first promise its ally, North Korea, a security guarantee as well as substantial support to help the DPRK overcome its economic hardships.

Time must pass and patience must be demonstrated before the North Korean nuclear issue can be resolved. However, both time and patience can be saved if China takes more positive steps toward providing North Korea with a security guarantee and economic support. To this endeavor, China's initiative is much anticipated.