



The Politics of Coexistence: South Korea and Sino-US Policies on the Korean Peninsula

LISELOTTE ODGAARD

ABSTRACT. The article argues that South Korea is promoting an interim order based on coexistence on the Korean peninsula. South Korea, Japan and the US have cooperated on proactive measures to ensure the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. Seoul and Beijing differ on the question of a permanent settlement, but they agree on the interim preventive measures of refraining from threats of using force, recognizing the legitimacy of the North Korean regime, and recommending that multilateral dialogue is pursued outside the UN framework. South Korea and China have established an informal division of labour, allowing South Korea to put pressure on the US to accept these measures, while China calls for Pyongyang to refrain from provocations that risk producing violent conflict and accept a six-party dialogue. The article concludes that the US-DPRK nuclear standoff on the Korean peninsula reflects a general tendency in Asia-Pacific security for the US to prefer force as a means of order creation in contrast to China that gravitates towards instruments of diplomacy.

KEYWORDS. coexistence • nuclear standoff • The English School • Korean peninsula • middle power • South Korea • North Korea

INTRODUCTION

The United States (US)-Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea) nuclear standoff that began in October 2002 with North Korea's declaration that it has a nuclear weapons programme may at first sight testify to the limitations of diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific where unipolarity is seen as an unstable structure that has yet to be replaced by a new pattern of state conduct. Fluctuating alliance patterns, boundaries of territorial jurisdiction and arenas for decision-making imply that the limitations of state conduct are subject to continuous renegotiation. When states have no compass defining their rights and obligations, patterns of cooperation and conflict become

dangerously unpredictable. The US-DPRK nuclear standoff is one incidence where instability risks engendering violent conflict.

The fluid regional climate poses possibilities for the US to promote a regional order framed according to US interpretations of the rights and obligations of states. The US considers the standoff a test of the commitment of regional states to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which if not respected justifies the use of force according to the US national security strategy. This approach does not only put the DPRK under pressure to comply, but also tests the commitment of China, Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea), Russia and Japan to US definitions of the limitations of state conduct. The US has expended considerable resources on obtaining their support for its confrontational stance in the dispute to ensure that responsibility for enforcement of the NPT framework is multilateral. The uncertainty surrounding the criteria for identifying a threat to international peace and stability has invited North Korea to threaten to use force to preempt the possibility of a military intervention. The 2003 US military intervention in Iraq demonstrated that a regime that in Washington has lost all credibility as an enemy of non-proliferation can do nothing to rectify this categorization through diplomatic channels. Threats of using force is considered the most rational survival strategy in Pyongyang since it increases the costs of aggression and as a result, it may persuade the US to shelve alleged plans for a military intervention.

In these volatile surroundings, South Korea's possibilities of influencing the dispute may seem very limited. In view of its modest economic and military capabilities, its asymmetrical alliance relations with the US and a domestic political climate offering limited popular support for the engagement policy of incumbent president Roh, South Korea merely qualifies as a middle power. These misgivings about South Korea's ability to influence regional security problems are well-founded since it is predominantly regional great powers that determine future political frameworks for maintaining peace and stability. In the case of the Korean peninsula, the US and China are the most likely candidates for defining the premises of order. In terms of economic, military and political capabilities and influence, US predominance remains unchallenged at present. As North Korea's deceitful ally, China is the only state capable of persuading North Korea to refrain from threats of using force. The US and China may, however, not be able to make use of their managerial capacity for purposes of regional stability. Without permanent mechanisms in place guaranteeing that

the common interests of states form part of efforts at conflict settlement, their willingness to compromise is likely to be wanting. The US has few incentives to adapt to Chinese demands for conflict resolution in view of its bid for a regional order based on US terms. China is equally disinterested in giving in to US pressures for adaptation because the Chinese imprint on a settlement is likely to be insignificant at a time when China's political capital and resource base remains limited. Under these circumstances, middle powers such as South Korea may play an active part in engendering peace and stability in the interim.

Middle powers are those states that without the trappings of special rights and responsibilities are capable of pursuing policies partially independent of great power alliances. Wight defines a middle power as a state with such military strength, resources and strategic position that in peacetime the great powers bid for its support, and in wartime it is capable of inflicting costs on a great power out of proportion to what the great power can hope to gain by attacking it (Wight 1978, 61-66). Middle powers do not command the same resources as great powers, implying that the type of influence they exercise is not determination or management, but rather contributions to the remodelling of security arrangements. However, capabilities alone is not enough for a state to be a middle power, but is also determined by its willingness to act as such. For that to happen, first, the strategic issue has to be significant for the national interests of the potential middle power. Often, the geo-strategic location of the middle power engenders its willingness to intervene. Second, a middle power must have resources or influence that gives it a special relationship with the great powers, causing the great powers to actively seek its involvement, recognizing that they need help from neighbouring states to solve a disagreement. The most effective method for middle powers to influence security arrangements is, if possible, to avoid choosing sides between contending powers, since if so positioned, they are able to influence both opponents. This influence is often exerted unilaterally instead of joining forces with other middle powers because they aim to be seen as partners of great powers rather than leaders of lesser powers (Holbraad 1984, 13, 23). It is outside of the reach of middle powers to instigate permanent mechanisms of conflict management since that is the realm of the great powers; instead, middle powers can aim to achieve coexistence, implying that as a rule, states are allowed to pursue their national interests insofar as they do not jeopardize international stability. Coexistence involves that opponents leave each other alone,

but in areas where their activities overlap they establish mechanisms allowing for the avoidance and control of crises that risks engendering violent conflict. The mechanisms sustaining coexistence include the rules of war, the rules of jurisdiction, and the rules of agreement (Bull 1995, 65-68).

For the rules of war to sustain coexistence, a definition is required of the constraints on the use of force that has been approved by the major allies of the great powers. If such constraints have been agreed, a great power commands an identifiable group of supporters allowing for stable spheres of influence between opposing great powers. The rules of jurisdiction sustain coexistence insofar as all great powers have approved of a definition of legitimate political authority. A common conception of legitimacy implies that the boundaries of the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states are clear. To sustain coexistence, the rules of agreement imply inter-alliance agreement on the institutional settings that define the limits of acceptable behaviour for all states. Common arenas for decision-making provide one coherent set of guidelines defining the rights and responsibilities of states.

Russia and Japan may be considered as candidates for the position of a middle power on the Korean peninsula. Russia is potentially able to wield considerable influence, but the issue is not at the top of its foreign policy agenda. Russia is mainly interested in avoiding the outbreak of violent conflict. With the exception of the question of multilateral dialogue, Russia gravitates towards the Chinese position. Urgent security concerns such as Chechen separatism and political instability in Central Asia do, however, result in half-hearted support for Beijing's policy. Japan places a high premium on conflict settlement on the Korean peninsula, gravitating towards the confrontational methods of the US. However, continuous dependency on US military deterrence and historically determined suspicions of Japanese regional intentions, especially from China and South Korea, constrains its freedom of action. Japan is therefore not left with much leeway to position itself as a middle power in the nuclear standoff.

South Korea is much better positioned to promote coexistence in the interim. The ROK is opting for limited cooperation with both the US and China, since these two powers are the principal determinants of the future political framework of the peninsula. Both the US and China prioritize maintaining close relations with South Korea, and the ROK's views on the US-DPRK nuclear standoff are partly compatible

with the policies of both. This leaves South Korea in a favourable position to persuade Washington and Beijing to adopt a policy founded in the non-use of force, recognition of the regime in Pyongyang, and multilateral dialogue outside the UN framework. China's long-term goals of preserving North Korean deterrence capabilities, securing the survival of the present regime, and postponing agreement on permanent enforcement mechanisms contrast with those of South Korea. However, in the interim South Korea and China agree on the goals of avoiding violent conflict, prevent regime change, and prioritising dialogue. Compatible views on how to restore stability on the Korean peninsula has allowed Beijing and Seoul to cooperate on persuading the US and the DPRK to refrain from threats of using force. These efforts may contribute to a resolution of the present standoff, but they only constitute preliminary steps towards the establishment of a regional order of coexistence.

PRINCIPLED ENFORCEMENT: US POLICY DURING THE NUCLEAR STANDOFF

North Korea was labelled a terror-sponsoring state by the US in 1988, but its policy during the nuclear standoff is tied with the 2001 war on terrorism. According to the US national security strategy, it is entitled to defend itself by using force against any state suspected of planning to use weapons of mass destruction against the US and of supporting terrorist groups (US National Security Council 2002). The DPRK is one state defined as a possible target on the grounds of its nuclear weapons programme. Efforts have been made since 1994 to assist North Korea in diverting its facilities for plutonium reprocessing into nuclear power reactors, but the US has not been confident that North Korea is committed to the NPT. In January 2002, US President Bush announced that the DPRK together with Iran and Iraq were suspected of violating US definitions of the just use of force.

Since then, North Korea has been flexing its muscles. Incidents include shooting at a South Korean patrol boat in South Korean waters in June 2002, firing a short-range, anti-ship missile into the Sea of Japan in February 2003, and intercepting a US reconnaissance aircraft in international airspace in March 2003. Pyongyang declared that it has a nuclear weapons programme in October 2002, in January 2003 it announced its withdrawal from the NPT, and in February 2003 it announced the restart of a nuclear reactor that had been

shelved as part of the 1994 agreement. In turn, the US is planning to relocate its 37,000 troops in the ROK, moving them away from vulnerable bases close to the North Korean border.

The US has dismissed that Pyongyang's threats of using force is aimed at raising the stakes to be bargained away in negotiations, arguing that North Korea is determined to become a nuclear-armed power. Therefore, diplomatic efforts are considered futile until the DPRK has agreed to scrap its nuclear program, and the US refuses to promise rewards should it comply with this demand. A confidential Pentagon report is said to contain detailed plans to bomb North Korea's nuclear plant at Yongbyon and its heavy artillery in the hills above the border with the ROK if it is confirmed that the DPRK has reprocessed its spent nuclear fuel rods, bringing it closer to producing nuclear weapons (AFP 2003a). The US has openly questioned North Korea's willingness to comply with Washington's definition of the limits of using force in the war against terrorism, maintaining that North Korea's acts of aggression that justify the use of force for purposes of self-defense. Such unilateral identification of threats towards international peace and stability is not conducive to coexistence, which implies that armed force is a means of last resort requiring prior approval from other states.

Another US priority with the war on terrorism is to secure that regimes at odds with US definitions of legitimacy are removed. The US considers states contributing to the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction to be legitimate targets of regime change, arguing that entities undermining US efforts to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons constitute threats to international peace and stability and are enemies of civilization (US National Security Council 2002). Ironically, the message conveyed is that to defend societies committed to the protection of human rights, liberal democracy and market economy, the US takes a time-out from the global constraints on its exercise of political authority. This policy has been demonstrated with the 2003 military intervention in Iraq without a UN mandate, and with the 2002 detention of suspected al-Qaeda and Taliban collaborators at Guantanamo Bay, denying them the protection of the US constitution and the Geneva Convention on prisoners of war.

North Korea's withdrawal from the NPT is not conducive to US definitions of legitimacy. A change of leadership has not been an official US policy. On the contrary, it remains the largest food donor to the DPRK (AFP 2003c). However, political hardliners in the Bush

administration have approved of a US policy of coercion to disarm North Korea with the purpose of a regime change. In April 2003, a memorandum from US Defence Secretary Rumsfeld to the Pentagon was leaked recommending that the US persuaded China to join forces with it in pressing for the ouster of the North Korean government (Torchia 2003). Rumsfeld has also accused Japan, South Korea and China of sustaining the regime in Pyongyang through money and goods, implying that the US would prefer to be in total control of North Korean supplies (Takahashi 2003). Since North Korea has been grouped with Iraq and Iran as the axis of evil, the level of confidence in US commitment to conflict resolution is at an all time low. One indication that North Korea has little faith in US intentions is the DPRK's announcement after the 2003 six-party talks in Beijing that it would continue to boost its nuclear deterrent for as long as the US remained hostile to the DPRK. US considerations of bringing about a regime change in Pyongyang is not in line with the principle on non-interference implying that political authorities with *de facto* control of a delimited territory are legitimate.

Finally, the US advocates a self-defined, multilateral approach with the purpose of adopting sanctions towards Pyongyang to force it to accept the NPT requirements. The US expects the neighbouring states to accept its definition of the limits of acceptable state conduct and to assist the enforcement of these constraints. It welcomes international approval of its foreign policy decisions for at least two reasons. First, approval allows for increased freedom of action without severe international repercussions in terms of influence and reputation. Second, if implementation is assisted by neighbouring states, the effectiveness of sanctions is likely to increase.

The US has issued a campaign to force North Korea to scrap its nuclear programme before all diplomatic options have been tested. The effectiveness of sanctions has been helped by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the Korea Energy Development Organization (KEDO). Following North Korea's refusal to comply with its safeguards agreement with the IAEA, allowing inspectors to verify whether the DPRK complies with its nuclear safeguard obligations, the IAEA referred the problem to the UN Security Council in February 2003 as requested by the US. Furthermore, in April 2003 the UN Security Council put the DPRK nuclear crisis on its agenda for the first time after weeks of intense US lobbying. KEDO decided to halt fuel donations to North Korea in November 2002, estimated to

constitute between 2.5 percent and 30 percent of North Korea's total energy supplies (BBC News 2002). To increase pressures on North Korea for compliance, in July 2003 the US advocated that KEDO call off the construction of two nuclear reactors in the DPRK. The member states have accepted postponing construction, suspending it for one year from December 2003. The US has looked for collaboration from Russia and China to ensure the effectiveness of sanctions, but has not been confident that China complies. The US has demanded that China uses its leverage to force the DPRK to retreat from its breach of the NPT instead of secretly undermining multilateral enforcement measures. It has also demanded that both Russia and China participate in future negotiations with North Korea to ensure their explicit commitment to a prospective settlement of the nuclear standoff (Gedda 2003, Brookes 2003). US determination to obtain multilateral approval of sanctions before dialogue has got off the ground contributes to the DPRK's exclusion from the process of conflict settlement. For example, North Korea was not invited to participate in a meeting on the nuclear standoff on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly's meeting in October 2003. The US sanctions policy is therefore at odds with the need for a common forum for decisions on how to resolve the present nuclear standoff.

US policy during the nuclear standoff may be called principled enforcement since the US has proved reluctant to compromise on its insistence on threatening to use force against a regime that is considered illegitimate and therefore not a trustworthy signatory state to a future security agreement. To ensure regional compliance, the US has attempted to enlist the support of neighbouring states and exclude the DPRK from the multilateral settlement process. The US approach to North Korea reduces the possibility of promoting the non-use of force, mutual recognition of legitimacy and a common institutional setting for inter-alliance decision-making as the fundamental principles of an order founded in coexistence.

PRAGMATIC ACCOMMODATION: CHINA'S POLICY DURING THE NUCLEAR STANDOFF

The confrontational approach of the US towards North Korea contrasts with the accommodating Chinese policy. Following the normalization of Sino-South Korean relations in 1992, China was only interested in a limited patron-client relationship with the DPRK

(Yahuda 1996, 210-214). One Chinese interest on the Korean peninsula is to prevent the use and threat of using weapons of mass destruction. China aims to deter potential adversaries from further armament that may force them to divert additional resources from economic to military modernization. China is a regional great power without the loyal states in its vicinity and the military capabilities that is normally considered necessary to maintain this position. One reason for the absence of a Chinese buffer zone is that its foreign policy is based on independence from binding long-term agreements with states that may later prove to be a liability. The advantage of China's reluctance towards alliances is that it allows China to respond flexibly to changes in balancing patterns. However, the US announcement of the war on terrorism in 2001 and its increased military and political engagement in South, Southeast and Central Asia highlights the vulnerability arising from China's independence of alliance relations. In view of the modest strategic nuclear capabilities of China, approximately ten intermediate-range and 88 medium-range ballistic missiles, its means of balancing the military power of the US and its allies in the Asia-Pacific are limited (Ellis and Koca 2000).

The increased US engagement in Asia coupled with continued US commitment to a missile defense, the technologically and strategically persuasive victory in the 2003 Iraq war, and the alleged US willingness to use force towards North Korea imply that Pyongyang's military threat to South Korea and Japan is valued by China, even if the Sino-North Korean alliance is fragile. On the other hand, the US-DPRK nuclear standoff is an unwelcome challenge to regional peace and stability that may produce a security threat towards China due to its alignment with North Korea. The most serious long-term threat to Chinese security is if the DPRK nuclear weapons programme provokes nuclearization of the US allies South Korea and Japan. The most immediate threat to China is that the US decides to intervene in North Korea, making the non-use of force a high priority for Beijing. China is walking a tightrope in trying to ensure that Pyongyang maintains its deterrence capability, but refrains from undue provocations that may threaten the regime and provoke a Northeast Asian arms race. Officially, Beijing employs moderate pressure on North Korea to constrain its provocative behaviour and supports denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. However, unofficially, China appears to have kept up its assistance for Pyongyang and has denied that North Korea has ever admitted to having nuclear weapons (Shao 2003). China has also

criticized the US plans for troop redeployments in the ROK, highlighting that even if these are intended to increase the flexibility, agility and effectiveness of the US troops, in Pyongyang the changes are instead interpreted as preparations for an attack on the DPRK (China Daily 2003b). An indication that China pursues a two-pronged strategy is when Chinese sources reported that it cut off oil supplies to the DPRK for three days in March 2003 after North Korea test-fired missiles into the Sea of Japan. This first apparent sign of Chinese willingness to apply economic pressure on Pyongyang was, however, denied by the state oil firm China National Petroleum Corporation (Kang Lim 2003). Although Chinese opposition towards the use of force is a precondition for the establishment of regional conflict settlement mechanisms, China's motives for this position remains suspicious and somewhat enigmatic due to its apparent *de facto* support for reinforcing or at least preserving present DPRK military capabilities. Adding to the confusion about China's commitment to its alliance obligations is its deployment of large contingencies of troops along the border towards North Korea. China claims that no increase in troop deployments has taken place and that the deployment of troops in the border area is part of ordinary reorganization efforts of its armed forces (Reuters 2003). In practice, however, the troops could be used for several purposes: to protect Chinese territory, to assist North Korea in the event of violent conflict, or to put pressure on Pyongyang to moderate its policy on the nuclear issue. As a result, China's support for the non-use of force aids a settlement of the nuclear standoff, but is not necessarily conducive to the emergence of a regional order founded in coexistence in the long term.

Another Chinese priority is to prevent a regime change in North Korea that may engender reunification with South Korea. In that event, the liberalist South can be expected to absorb the communist North, making the emergence of a strengthened US ally on the border of China a likely outcome. In addition, China is concerned about the refugee flows that might ensue a collapse of political authority in Pyongyang. China has no interest in contributing to the disappearance of one of the last regional states that challenges US hegemony. Consequently, China maintains that the Pyongyang government is legitimate by virtue of its effective control of North Korean territory. A token of this policy is Beijing's immediate return of DPRK refugees to North Korea despite US calls for allowing the refugees to apply for entrance to the US. Insofar as China continues to appear as an

unreliable alliance partner of North Korea, the threat from the Korean peninsula also diverts US attention away from containing China, prompting it to concentrate resources on deterrence of the DPRK.

To avoid injuring China's efforts to be accepted as a responsible power, Chinese reluctance to apply policies that call into question the legitimacy of the North Korean regime is played down. Instead, China has supported the South Korean engagement policy, which is designed to overcome the alliance divisions of the Cold War by cultivating dialogue and cooperation with Pyongyang. The inter-Korean rapprochement allows China to maintain cordial relations with both the South and the North, hence promoting the Chinese goal of regional peace and stability that allows it to concentrate on economic development. Moreover, the engagement policy encourages the DPRK's integration into the world economy, allowing for economic improvements that might gradually lift some of China's burden of providing aid to the faltering North Korean economy. Despite China's inclination to support the political authority of Pyongyang, its interest in collaborating with South Korea encourages it to employ a pragmatic policy on the question of legitimacy during the US-DPRK nuclear standoff.

China does not support decisions that may be interpreted as condemnations of the North Korean regime authorized by international law. One example is its opposition to US demands that the DPRK is censured by the UN Security Council for its withdrawal from the NPT. Such a move would imply official condemnation of Pyongyang's management of political authority from the international community. In cooperation with Russia, China therefore stalled such efforts, arguing that UN criticism would complicate diplomatic attempts to resolve the standoff (Lynch and Struck 2003). Instead, China has encouraged North Korea to enhance cooperation with South Korea to keep Seoul's engagement policy alive (Yang 2003; Huang and Dong 2003). China's interest in preserving the North Korean regime promotes a pragmatic policy calling for mutual recognition of legitimacy during the nuclear standoff that is unlikely to be sustained in the long run, when the question of a permanent settlement to the Korean problem is expected to be on the table.

A third Chinese priority is that US-DPRK attempts to settle the nuclear standoff take place at the bilateral level. China's aim of maintaining a limited patron-client relationship with the DPRK while avoiding being denounced as an obstructor of regional peace and

stability is best met by remaining on the sidelines of bilateral negotiations. In view of these considerations, bilateral negotiations would also maximize China's influence on a future settlement. A multilateral approach may by contrast offer neighbouring states such as South Korea and Japan a chance to redress North Korea's gravitation towards China. To avoid further multilateralization, China offered to host talks between the US and the DPRK in April 2003. These produced no immediate results, implying that Beijing had to give in to calls for a multilateral approach to be able to continue closing ranks with Japan, Russia and South Korea on the question of the resumption of dialogue between the US and North Korea. China's prioritization of dialogue is not conducive to US calls for stepping up sanctions before negotiations are on track, as indicated by Beijing's comment that KEDO's suspension of reactor construction in the DPRK was accepted with concern in Seoul and Tokyo because it poured cold water on a thawing situation (Wu 2003). China has compromised on its preference for a bilateral dialogue to promote multilateral dialogue outside the UN framework in the interim. By contrast, it prefers to shelve the question of a permanent settlement to avoid losing its current advantage of DPRK dependency on China.

China's policy during the US-DPRK nuclear standoff may be termed pragmatic accommodation. It has been characterized by support for the non-use of force, mutual recognition of legitimacy and support for bilateral dialogue on the settlement of the US-DPRK nuclear standoff. China reasons that a North Korean threat to regional peace and stability can be averted if the use of force is avoided and the current regime is not coerced into abandoning its nuclear programme, but instead considered as a state that can be expected to adhere to formal agreements. To promote its policy line, China has accepted accommodating the demands of the US and neighbouring states for multilateralization, stopping short of approving UN involvement, while continuing to extend support for Pyongyang. Compared to the US, China's Korea policy appears to be conducive to an interim settlement to the nuclear standoff based on coexistence. However, due to China's preference for the *status quo*, Beijing is likely to defy prospective calls for multilateral negotiations on the possibilities for a peace treaty ending the Korean War and allowing for reunification talks. China may therefore prove to be the principal obstacle to a permanent settlement on the Korean peninsula.

PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE: SOUTH KOREA'S POLICY DURING THE NUCLEAR STANDOFF

The US and China have looked to South Korea as a necessary partner in the efforts to maintain peace and stability on the Korean peninsula for several reasons. First, South Korean historical, ethnic and cultural links to North Korea are sufficiently strong that their security concerns remain closely intertwined. Second, the ROK is on good terms and in partial agreement with all powers involved in how to settle the nuclear standoff, leaving it in an ideal position to forge a compromise between the US and Chinese positions. The ROK aims to persuade the DPRK to give up its nuclear programme, allow IAEA inspections, stop missile exports and resume its missile-test moratorium as demanded by the US. However, the ROK also advocates DPRK demands for oil supplies, regime recognition, economic assistance and normalization of diplomatic relations with the US in line with Chinese preferences.

The non-use of force and denuclearization of the Korean peninsula remains a South Korean priority since the ROK would be a likely first target in case of violent conflict. The DPRK has on occasion directed test firings of missiles towards Japan, but violent encounters principally takes place between North and South Korea. For example, as late as July 2003 ROK and DPRK soldiers traded fire in the heavily mined demilitarized zone (DMZ), intended to keep the armed forces of the two countries apart. Washington's confrontational approach towards North Korea does not sit well with South Korea. As stated by South Korean president Roh, Seoul and Washington share the goal of preventing the DPRK from possessing nuclear weapons, but have different views on how to resolve the issue (Kyodo News 2003). Should the US decide to take military action on the DPRK to halt its nuclear programme, South Korea has dismissed the possibility of ROK participation, clarifying that on this point South Korea is unwilling to compromise (Sang 2003). South Korea questions the possibility aired by the US that the DPRK may already have a nuclear capability. It argues that such North Korean declarations is a strategy designed to improve its bargaining position before accepting to restart negotiations on the nuclear issue, and that as of yet no conclusive evidence has been produced to prove that North Korea has developed nuclear weapons. For example, Pyongyang's announcement in October 2003 that it had reprocessed 8,000 spent nuclear rods was interpreted as yet another instance of DPRK negotiating tactics (AFP 2003d). South Korean

efforts at making sure that no actions are taken that can be interpreted as preparations of a military intervention in North Korea imply that Seoul takes the threat from the north very seriously. South Korea has called for the US to postpone discussions on the repositioning of its forces away from the DMZ to the centre of the peninsula until the nuclear crisis is resolved, arguing that the plans to move US troops out of reach of the DPRK's artillery represent yet another reinforcement of US military capabilities on the peninsula that is interpreted as a precursor to military intervention in Pyongyang (Ko 2003). The US has not accepted a delay but agreed to subsequent negotiations on the realignment plans. However, after months of stalled negotiations South Korea recognized that the US was unwilling to compromise and complied with the US proposal to remove the majority of US troops from Seoul (Choe 2003). Subsequently, the ROK has taken a proactive stance to *de facto* unilateral US decisions on the repositioning of troops. In answer to a US proposal in June 2004 to withdraw approximately a third of its troops by December 2005, planning to replace manpower with weapons such as anti-missile systems, President Roh stated that South Korea should assume a greater role in its own defence (AFP 2004). The statement emphasized Seoul's resolve to remain partially independent of the US.

US threats to use force at a time when the risk of violent confrontation with the DPRK is high has left Seoul in doubt about US regional intentions of maintaining peace and stability on the Korean peninsula, as is the case with Japan, Russia and China. South Korea has attempted to form a duo with Japan on this issue, lobbying for the US to refrain from decisions that can be interpreted as preparations for military intervention. Japan is concerned about US willingness to defend it in case of a North Korean missile attack, as indicated by Japan's launching of its first two spy satellites in March 2003, allowing for surveillance of its air space independently of the US. Due to the awkward regional position of Japan and dissatisfaction with the DPRK's treatment of Japanese nationals, it is, however, far less critical of US behaviour in public than is South Korea, leaving it largely to Seoul to persuade the US to be less confrontational. For example, after trilateral meetings between the US, South Korea and Japan on UN involvement, it was only Seoul that recommended that this step was delayed until a later date (AFP 2003b).

China is equally determined to discourage threats of using force, volunteering to coordinate its efforts with South Korea (*China Daily*

2003a). By welcoming the ROK's diplomatic efforts, China ensures that South Korea is able to sustain some measure of independence from the US and is accepted by North Korea as a legitimate party in talks on the nuclear issue. Russia agrees with the views of South Korea and China, but is less outspoken on this issue, and policy coordination is bilateral since none of the three states wishes to encourage accusations that they are collaborating against the US.

In line with China, South Korea is concerned about US scepticism towards recognizing the legitimacy of the North Korean regime. Seoul aims at reunification based on its own political and economic model, but the drawbacks to a swift regime change are greater than the benefits. Washington's airing of plans to bring down the Pyongyang government promote a climate of suspicion that may provoke North Korea to use force. In addition, swift reunification would involve unwanted strains on the South Korean economy. Instead, South Korea encourages a slow rapprochement with the DPRK involving limited cooperation such as the relinking of inter-Korean railways in June 2003 in the DMZ, and the establishment of a military hotline to ease tensions along the Korean border in June 2004.

Seoul puts a high premium on Sino-South Korean collaboration, not only to obtain support for its critical stance towards US condemnation of Pyongyang, but also to dissuade the DPRK from undue military provocations. China is the only country with sufficient influence in North Korea that it is able to persuade the DPRK to display moderation. Chinese involvement is also a precondition that Pyongyang trusts that its interests are taken into account during negotiations. Consequently, a tacit division of labour has been established between Seoul and Beijing allowing South Korea to concentrate on lobbying for a more pragmatic US stance, while China pressures the DPRK to refrain from further obstructions to conflict settlement.

A third priority of the ROK is continued multilateral talks aiming at the establishment of an interim security agreement. Domestic pressures to avoid subservience to the US encourage this policy. The current president Roh was elected in December 2002 on the promise of securing an active role for South Korea in building a security framework on the peninsula that involves a partial departure from the role as a loyal subscriber to US policy. The South Korean government has prioritized the resumption of dialogue higher than direct involvement, as witnessed by its support for US-DPRK talks in Beijing

in April 2003 despite domestic criticism. However, South Korea also has an obvious interest in direct participation to influence the outcome of negotiations.

In the first instance, South Korea's principal partner in promoting multilateral dialogue was Japan, which is also concerned that it will be sidelined in negotiations. This concern is an additional reason for their opposition to the involvement of the UN Security Council since neither of them occupies a permanent seat. Instead, they have advocated *ad hoc* multilateral talks. Together with the US, Japan and South Korea also started discussions on the contents of a prospective agreement settling the nuclear standoff. The talks resulted in a joint proposal for resolution of the nuclear standoff including the establishment of an international inspection system allowing for verification that the DPRK is dismantling its nuclear weapons programme. However, Japan has also demanded negotiation of issues that potentially obstructs dialogue and fuels regional worries that Japan is unwilling to leave aside national concerns in the interest of regional peace and stability. Principally, North Korea's abduction of Japanese nationals in the 1970s and 1980s has threatened to cause the DPRK's premature departure from the multilateral talks opened in August 2003.

Russia proved instrumental in persuading the DPRK to participate in six-party talks from August 2003. Russia's diplomatic victory was granted it due to North Korean doubts about China's willingness to extend military support in the event of a US military intervention. However, North Korea depends so heavily on China that its compliance would not have been likely without a green light from China. Following China's retreat from insistence on bilateral dialogue from April 2003, China closed ranks with South Korea also on this issue. For example, China refused to back DPRK calls for the exclusion of Japan from talks provided Japan abstains from demanding negotiations on the abduction issue. The Sino-South Korean division of labour has proved imperative to sustain the momentum for multilateral dialogue.

Following multilateral talks in August 2003, North Korea demanded a non-aggression treaty and additional economic assistance in return for resuming dialogue. The US has ruled out the treaty option since it would involve extending a binding commitment to the *status quo* if North Korea was to accept discontinuing its missile test programme and allow IAEA inspections. On this point, the US would be supported by South Korea and Japan, who are not likely to welcome treaty-based arrangements until the US-DPRK nuclear standoff is

resolved. As a compromise, the ROK suggested that the US offered non-binding security guarantees, a proposal that was immediately supported by China and Russia, who offered to issue additional guarantees. In October 2003, the US accepted to make such an offer to North Korea, provided it first dismantles its nuclear weapons facilities and allow for the resumption of inspections.

China volunteered to persuade North Korea to accept resuming negotiations. China's defence minister Chi Haotian participated in bilateral talks in Pyongyang in October 2003, to be immediately followed by North Korean acceptance of multilateral negotiations on an interim arrangement. The topics discussed are anybody's guess. But it is likely that China has reassured Pyongyang that the troop build-up near its border is not directed at the DPRK and that in the event of violent conflict, China intends to respect its treaty obligations towards North Korea. China is, however, also likely to have pointed out that a war with the US at this time would almost certainly result in the ouster of Kim Jong-Il's government. Against that background, North Korea would be wise to accept the resumption of multilateral talks. Left with the choices of accepting denuclearization measures or risk the survival of the DPRK government, China prefers the former option for the time being. It is imperative for China that the nuclear standoff is settled, but that negotiation on a political framework resolving the question of the Korean partition is postponed. Since China's economic and military capabilities falls short of those of the US, Beijing prefers interim arrangements to remain in place, pending clarification of the fate of US plans such as those for a ballistic missile defence covering the Asia-Pacific and the consequences of the realignment of the US force posture in the Asia-Pacific, Eastern Europe and the Middle East. In view of Russian reservations on US global dominance, it is likely to comply with the Chinese position. By contrast, the US, Japan and South Korea would like to see such interim arrangements as the precursor to negotiations on a permanent solution to the Korean problem. These underlying cleavages imply that the next impediment to the establishment of political frameworks on the Korean peninsula may well be to persuade China to accept permanent mechanisms of coexistence.

South Korea's policy during the nuclear standoff may be said to aim for peaceful coexistence since it involves insistence on the non-use of force, adherence to the principle of non-interference through recognition of the legitimacy of the present Pyongyang regime, and

multilateral dialogue outside the UN framework for decision-making on how to ensure peace and stability on the Korean peninsula. South Korea gravitates towards China's demands for constraints on the use of force, regime recognition and the institutional setting appropriate for solving the immediate conflict. South Korean views on permanent mechanisms promoting peaceful coexistence in the long run are, however, principally compatible with US requirements.

MIDDLE POWER INTERVENTION AND THE PROSPECTS OF REGIONAL ORDER IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC

The results of South Korea's strategy of trying to forge a compromise solution to the US-DPRK nuclear standoff have so far been few. Sanctions have been enhanced, and it remains to be seen whether multilateral dialogue will be sustained, let alone result in an interim arrangement resolving the nuclear standoff. By July 2004, the US maintained that the DPRK must accept dismantling its nuclear programme before issuing provisional security guarantees, negotiating the suspension of sanctions, and removing North Korea from its list of terror sponsoring states, while the DPRK insisted that written security guarantees are extended, sanctions are called off and KEDOs work resumed before military denuclearization is accepted. The question of a permanent settlement on the Korean peninsula seems to be off the table since the US and Chinese positions differ sufficiently that a compromise is not in sight. On the positive side, violent conflict has so far been avoided. In addition, US recognition of the legitimacy of the North Korean regime and US commitment to dialogue no longer appears to be in question. China has accepted a multilateral approach to conflict settlement and has persuaded the DPRK to comply.

The importance of South Korean intervention for the prospects of settling a dispute that involves the strategic interests of the US and China is subtle since the results of its shuttle diplomacy are not immediately obvious. Seoul's influence is derived from China's need for collaboration with a power that agrees on China's interim goals on the Korean peninsula and volunteers to spend considerable political capital persuading the US to compromise on its confrontational stance. China itself cannot play the role of a middle power without losing all credibility in Pyongyang as the state protecting North Korean interests. Only South Korea fulfils China's requirements due to its alliance relations with the US and Japan and its willingness to part

company with its allies on how to resolve the dispute. The ROK is therefore also the state best positioned to persuade China to compromise on some points, such as the issue of multilateral dialogue.

The question remains if developments on the Korean peninsula reflect general tendencies in Sino-US policies on Asia-Pacific security. During the present period of transition, the US gravitates towards using force and threats of using force for purposes of order creation, whereas China has demonstrated a growing preference for the instruments of diplomacy. This difference has not merely emerged on the Korean peninsula. The seeds of this development first appeared in Southeast Asia in the 1990s. Here, the potential for violent conflict arose from China's annexation of territory in the South China Sea. The US retained a dominant military position in Southeast Asia, in part to allow for intervention in the event of threats towards the freedom of the high seas. China accepted invitations to informal talks from the Southeast Asian states in 1991 that over a period of twelve years engendered China's accession to ASEAN's formal security framework, the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia. At the same time, the US has stepped up its military presence and the frequency of joint military exercises in the area. In Central Asia, the divergent Sino-US preferences concerning policy instruments came out in the open with the war on terrorism in 2001. In this sub-region, the prospects of a permanent US military presence in the strategic backyard of China prompted Beijing to consolidate the emerging political framework of the Shanghai Five, with Russia as a crucial partner.

The US preference for force as a means of order creation is not surprising in view of its superior capabilities and political influence, allowing it to make a credible bid for a global order based on US terms. China's preference for the means of diplomacy is equally obvious. By far the weaker power, diplomatic solutions is China's best chance of postponing the settlement of a permanent regional order to a later date when its capabilities are sufficiently strong that it is capable of determining the principles of state conduct on a par with the US. This is also the reason that China has grown to appreciate the efforts of other states to contribute to regional peace and stability in contrast to the US, to whom they are often an impediment. Middle powers such as South Korea do not promote permanent patterns of security management in the Asia-Pacific since that is beyond their capacity; instead, they concentrate on preventing violent conflict in their

immediate environment, allowing them to influence regional order in the interim. Such priorities match those of China inordinately well because it increases the chances of deferring the question of a permanent order to a later date. ❁

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