



China's Role and Strategy on the Denuclearization and Peace Process after the North Korea-US Hanoi Summit

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China's Silence on the No Deal Hanoi Summit

China's role in negotiations for the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula is drawing renewed attention since the unexpected breakdown of the US-North Korea summit in Hanoi. China has been continuously emphasizing its intention to play a “constructive role” while remaining sensitive to “China Passing” in the denuclearization and peace processes on the Korean Peninsula. Yet different interpretations and speculations have been proposed as to the specific role and steps China will likely take in future denuclearization efforts.

There was a time when expectations and demands surrounding China's role in the sanctions regime against North Korea were heightened, with ideas such as the “China Responsibility Theory” gaining traction and calls for more pressure to be applied to China. The phrase “China Passing” has also emerged as a result of the inter-Korean and the US-North Korea summits in 2018 and the emergence of the possibility of a declaration of an end to the war between the Koreans and the United States. After the sudden series of summits between North Korea and China, Washington has also proposed its own “China behind-the-scenes theory.”

Despite China's insistence on taking on a more constructive role, controversy over China's role has intensified as it has yet to identify its actual specific role as compared to the second North Korean nuclear crisis in 2002. Although denuclearization negotiations have been developing since 2018, China's most prominent diplomatic move during this time has been its four consecutive summits with North Korea. However, it is questionable whether China has played a leading role in

these, as all four summits were arranged through Kim Jong Un's visits to China at the request of North Korea.

It is unusual that China has not yet taken additional steps beyond releasing public statements after the US-North Korea summit ended in an unexpected “no deal.” China has continuously claimed that the North Korea nuclear problem should be resolved bilaterally between the US and North Korea, and as such, it should have been that much more perplexed about the lack of a deal resulting from Hanoi. It is particularly interesting to observe China’s “quiet” stance following the breakdown of the Hanoi summit considering its previous attempts to play a more prominent role in denuclearization talks. For instance, Beijing had sought active involvement prior to and following the US-North Korea summit in Singapore despite controversies surrounding its so-called behind-the-scenes role, and even throughout its summits with North Korea.

It may be that China's unexpected and cautious moves reflect Beijing’s intention to watch the North Korea-US Hanoi Summit unfold in the face of conflict, including the trade disputes between Washington and Beijing. A review of remarks made by Foreign Affairs Minister Wang Yi and Premier Li Keqiang at a press conference of the Second Session of the 13th National People’s Congress in 2019 shows a glimpse of China's complex intentions. Despite the breakdown of the Hanoi Summit, both Minister Wang Yi and Premier Li Keqiang assessed the outcome positively and expressed optimism that dialogue could resume.

They also stated that denuclearization and the establishment of a peace regime are difficult to achieve in a single step, and that it will take a long time; therefore, all parties concerned should be patient and focus first on simple, achievable goals. The most interesting aspect is that despite the fact that the international community continues to argue about the underlying reasons behind the Hanoi Summit's breakdown, China has remained reticent and seemingly uninterested. While China has expressed a strong hope and expectation that dialogue will resume, it is not seeking to act as a practical mediator by pursuing diplomatic actions to resume discussions as it has done in the past.

China may have been actively expressing its hopes for the resumption of negotiations out of fear that the rupture of US-North Korea negotiations could lead to renewed tensions on the Korean Peninsula. However, on the other hand, China is also concerned that the US and North Korea may be hastily pushing the negotiation process forward. In short, China does not want US-North Korea dialogue to escalate tensions on the Korean Peninsula, but at the same time, it is also attentive to the ongoing and rapid developments on the Korean Peninsula, such as the pursuit of a peace regime.

China supported the US-North Korea summits, but behind this support lie numerous reservations about the potential for the success of the negotiations. In particular, China questioned

the intentions and motives of the Trump administration. Considering the realities of the difficulty in achieving denuclearization progress in a short period of time, China has raised doubts about the continuity of US policy on North Korea following the exit of the Trump administration. China is considering the North Korean nuclear problem as an issue that should be managed in a fairly long-term context.

Patterns in China's Role on the North Korean Nuclear Issue

China has shown a certain pattern in its response to the North Korean nuclear issue over the past 26 years, and its reaction to the Hanoi summit is aligned with this pattern. Since the first North Korean nuclear crisis in 1993, China has expanded its strategic presence while consistently maintaining its original position on denuclearization, peace and stability, and a peaceful resolution through negotiations and dialogue on the Korean Peninsula. In other words, China played a limited role as a quiet observer or “backdoor coordinator” during the first North Korean nuclear crisis in 1993, arranged three-way talks between the US and North Korea during the second North Korean nuclear crisis in 2003, and expanded its influence as a de facto mediator in the Six-Party Talks. However, since North Korea's sixth nuclear test in September 2017, China has been unusually quick to participate in strong sanctions against the North Korea, thereby strengthening its cooperation with the United States.

Although China played a role in 2003 and 2017, respectively, through different steps - mediating dialogue and tightening sanctions - the two periods share commonalities in that the possibility of US military action in the North Korean nuclear issue has increased and the crisis on the Korean Peninsula has escalated. In other words, China decided that denuclearization was a matter between North Korea and the US, and that there was no need to consume what leverage China had when its role was limited to begin with. On the other hand, when the crisis on the Korean Peninsula was likely to escalate, China played a role in driving dialogue and easing tensions by applying a combination of pressure and persuasion towards North Korea. Nevertheless, they maintained a prudent stance by not pressuring North Korea to the extent that instability and the crisis in the North Korean regime could escalate, or North Korea-China relations collapse. China perceives that a crisis in North Korea might destabilize the Korean Peninsula. In fact, China has participated in pressuring North Korea through sanctions since Pyongyang's sixth nuclear test, but continues to stress that the purpose of these sanctions was to drive dialogue.

In this process, China has first considered the US variable in the North Korean nuclear

issue. China agreed with North Korea by sticking to its position that the North Korean nuclear issue should be resolved through negotiations between Washington and Pyongyang, but also wanted to avoid deepening tensions with the US. Rather, China wanted to maintain its cooperative stance with the US in regards to the North Korean nuclear issue. China has always agreed on the principles of denuclearization in summit talks with the US, and also cooperated with the US in adopting nine UN Security Council resolutions against North Korea up until September 2017. In short, in the past China gradually expanded its role in the North Korean nuclear issue, but it has responded this time by considering its relations with the US and North Korea rather than being proactive and preemptive. In other words, the major variables of China's relations with the US, the stability of the North Korea regime and the situation on the Korean Peninsula have influenced China's strategy and role, but its policy stance of managing North Korea as a geopolitical buffer zone has remained unchanged.

The Strategy and Role of the Xi Jinping Government on the Denuclearization and Peace Process of the Korean Peninsula

The Xi Jinping administration is expected to maintain the existing Chinese policy stance on North Korea's nuclear issue. Given the complex domestic and international issues facing the Xi administration, its Korean Peninsula policy is basically aimed to “stabilize through the status quo,” and to maintain a “balanced diplomacy toward both North and South Korea.” A low-cost, stable international environment is still important for China to focus on securing new economic growth engines and maintain regime stability. In particular, China considers the development of this unseen and complex situation in which relations with the US are uncertain that could lead to a change in the relationship between the forces on the Korean Peninsula as an increasingly unstable variable.

However, the situation facing the Xi administration is not that simple. With the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and the peace process centered on negotiations between the US and North Korea since 2018, China's “meddling” role and the “need for pressure and persuasion against North Korea” has been reduced. The role of mediator has been taken over by South Korea, and direct talks between the US and North Korea have led to a reduction in pressure and demand for persuasion from North Korea. China's status and position as a player driving the negotiations forward have been temporarily weakened as denuclearization negotiations have progressed and fluctuated faster than expected.

The new development since 2018 is clearly a new challenge for China as well which needs

a new response. While the US is intensifying pressure on China, dialogue and negotiations between the US and North Korea are underway. China has a more limited scope restricting its movements than it ever has in the past. China's policy on the Korean Peninsula has not been successful either. China is facing challenges in stabilizing the Korean Peninsula and its "Two Koreas" policy due to the issue of THAAD deployment with South Korea and the issue of nuclear weapons development with North Korea. These issues are challenging China's strategic status as the only country among the four powers on the Korean Peninsula that maintains a certain cooperative relationship with both Koreas.

Therefore, China aims to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula, but at the same time hopes to manage the situation in a stable manner rather than embracing any sudden changes in the status quo on the Korean Peninsula. Although the North Korean nuclear issue is an important security issue for China, chances are low that it will become a high priority. Since China considers the North Korean nuclear problem as a long-term agenda item, it aims to restore relations with North Korea by both minimizing instability on the Korean Peninsula and maintaining its influence in the region.

China's complicated strategy focuses on the issues of establishing a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula, which will inevitably be linked to denuclearization negotiations. China is also wary of the fact that establishing a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula will inevitably cause a disruption to the current status of the US Forces in Korea and the ROK-US alliance. China may intend to do what it can to delay any changes to the situation, as there are concerns that the Korean Peninsula could slip into a new situation of uncertainty if USFK and the ROK-US alliance are placed on the negotiating table in earnest amid the current conflicts between Washington and Beijing. Therefore, rather than playing a leading role in the denuclearization and peace process of the Korean Peninsula in the future, China is expected to place a priority on managing its relations with North Korea and securing its position while keeping an eye on the progress of negotiations between Washington and Pyongyang.

However, in the future, the "China role" is likely to become an increasingly prominent one in any scenario of denuclearization negotiations. China's discontent to the proposed three- or four-party end-of-war declarations that exclude its presence, its four unusual summits with North Korea within the last ten months, and President Trump's comments on "China's behind-the-scenes role" imply that the role of China cannot be overlooked. In order for denuclearization to become complete and irreversible, a peace regime will eventually have to be established on the Korean Peninsula and a regime of reform and openness implemented in North Korea. The role that China plays in both of these processes will inevitably be an important one.

Under the current US-China rivalry, in which the US maintains strategic superiority, the US-China conflict will not have a direct negative impact until the denuclearization negotiations between Washington and Pyongyang are in place. However, if the denuclearization process accelerates and problems emerge regarding the shifting order on the Korean Peninsula, and possibly regarding the establishment of a peace regime, elements of the US-China rivalry are likely to act as obstacles, even potentially reversing the progress that has been made thus far.

In short, China recognizes the drastic changes in the status quo of the Korean Peninsula as an issue that further complicates its own situation, given its unstable domestic circumstances and the uncertainty of its rivalry and conflict with the US. In other words, given China's domestic political agenda, it is hard to expect China to serve as a facilitator or “active mediator” supporting and cooperating with the denuclearization peace initiatives that South Korea is pursuing.

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