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A New Tack for China after North Korea's Nuclear Test?

John J. Tkacik, Jr.

From the beginning of the North Korean *affaire nucleaire* in 1993, China's devout wish has been that North Korea might bluster about having the bomb—and allow the world to suspect it had one—without actually testing one and removing all doubt. North Korea could leverage that ambiguity for international aid, while China could act as an honest broker and still claim to be concerned about nuclear proliferation. Following North Korea's claimed nuclear test, China's diplomatic rhetoric is changing, and its policy may be, too. The United States should press Beijing to join in supporting tough sanctions on Pyongyang.

Blame America

Throughout the past decade, Beijing's consistent posture has been to withhold criticism of North Korea and to blame North Korea's ills on the United States. "America's policies toward North Korea, this is the main problem we are facing," Ambassador Wang Yi told the press after the first round of the Six-Party Talks in Beijing in August 2003.¹

In September 2005, under intense Chinese pressure, the Bush Administration went so far as to declare that it would "respect" North Korea's "right" to light water nuclear reactors in the infamous "Statement of Principles." The Chinese were ruthless. A senior U.S. official told the *New York Times*, "At one point they told us that we were totally isolated on this.... [T]hey would go to the press" and blame the United States for wrecking the talks.² Chinese diplomats and academics still insist that the U.S. lift financial sanctions on North Korea,

despite the country's extensive counterfeiting, narcotics, and money-laundering operations, in order to lure Pyongyang back to the Talks.³

But all this isn't enough for North Korea. When China was pressured to join a U.N. resolution condemning North Korea's July Fourth 2006 missile tests, North Korea responded, "Only the strong can defend justice in the world today where the jungle law prevails. Neither the U.N. nor anyone else [i.e., China] can protect us."

Pyongyang's "Protector" Still?

Will Beijing protect a nuclear rogue? On October 5, as Pyongyang's pronouncements made it clear that Dear Leader Kim Jong Il would really test a nuclear device, John Bolton, the U.S. Ambassador to the U.N., chided Beijing for its client-state's behavior. Bolton told reporters, "We will find out... this afternoon what North Korea's protectors on the Council are going to do," to which his Chinese counterpart, Ambassador Wang Guangya, retorted, "On this issue, everybody is unanimous.... No one is going to protect them."⁴

Beijing's rhetoric since the test has a new tenor of alarm unlike anything heard heretofore. Beijing admits that Pyongyang's October 9 nuclear test has

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had a “negative impact” (“*fumiande yinxiang*”) on relations across the Yalu River. Pyongyang’s bomb test was “*hanran*”—which is not just “flagrant,” as the English translation puts it, but “stubbornly defiant.” When Ambassador Bolton left a Security Council meeting October 9, he observed with satisfaction, “I didn’t see any protectors of North Korea in that room this morning.”⁵

Speaking with reporters the next day, Ambassador Wang admitted that a “firm, constructive, appropriate but prudent response” to North Korea was needed and added, “I think there has to be some punitive actions.”⁶ Was Wang merely telling his U.S. audience what it wanted to hear, or was he announcing a change in China’s policy? Just a few hours earlier, Beijing had said China favored “positive and appropriate measures” rather than “the negative issue of punishment.”⁷

The fact that the “*hanran*” statement ran on the front page of *People’s Daily* was itself a diplomatic victory for Washington.⁸ Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman Liu Jianchao was unusually frank in his October 10 press briefing. In response to questions from foreign journalists, he repeated that the nuclear test—“the way it was done”—had “a negative impact on China-North Korea relations” and that “massive differences” had emerged between China and North Korea on the matter.⁹

U.S. Now Holds the High Ground

The United States now occupies the negotiating high ground, and Ambassador Bolton must take advantage of it. China will still argue that relentless American financial pressures on North Korea have pushed Pyongyang to the wall. “The only way” to address the current crisis, the Chinese will say, “is through dialogue and consultation” via the Six-

1. See Agence France-Presse, “China blames US for the impasse in talks with N Korea,” *Taipei Times*, September 2, 2004, p. 6, at <http://www.taipetimes.com/News/world/archives/2003/09/02/2003066184>.
2. Joseph Kahn and David E. Sanger, “U.S.-Korean Deal on Arms Leaves Key Points Open,” *The New York Times*, September 20, 2005, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/20/international/asia/20korea.html>.
3. On July 12, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman Liu Jianchao said U.S. financial sanctions have “already affected the progress of the six-party talks.” Asked what specific steps Beijing wanted to see, Liu said, “You should ask the U.S. side.” See “China asks U.S., North Korea to settle,” Associated Press, July 12, 2006, at <http://www.businessweek.com/ap/financialnews/D81QHPEGB.htm>. On September 19, another ministry spokesperson said, “I want to point out that the Six-Party Talks is now in an impasse due to the financial sanction. . . and parties concerned should solve the issue of financial sanctions appropriately, so as to create favorable conditions for an early resumption of the Talks.” See “Foreign Ministry Spokesman Qin Gang’s Regular Press Conference on 19 September 2006,” Foreign Ministry of China, at <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw/s2510/2511/t272834.htm>. See also Sohn Suk-joo, “China’s ambassador rules out Beijing’s pressure on Pyongyang,” Yonhap News Agency, March 22, 2006, at <http://www.yonhapnews.co.kr/Engnews/20060322/91000000020060322105929E5.html>. Chinese scholar Chu Shulong says the U.S. must “defuse” the issue. See Chris Buckley, “China flies into North Korean storm,” Reuters, July 10, 2006.
4. Anna Fifield, “New UN leader to tackle N. Korea,” *Financial Times*, October 5, 2006, at <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/3c1314b8-54a3-11db-901f-0000779e2340.html>.
5. Remarks by Ambassador John R. Bolton, USUN Press Release No. 265(06), October 9, 2006, at http://www.usunnewyork.usmission.gov/06_265.htm.
6. Nick Wadhams, “China: N. Korea Faces ‘Punitive Actions,’” *The Associated Press*, October 10, 2006, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/10/10/AR2006101000455.html>.
7. “Liu Jianchao: Zhongguo conglai wei tong Chaoxian jinxingguo renhe xingshide he hezuo” [Liu Jianchao says China has never engaged in any nuclear cooperation in any form with North Korea], Beijing *Renminwang*, October 10, 2006, at <http://world.people.com.cn/GB/8212/9491/57325/4901987.html>.
8. Last July’s Security Council Resolution 1695 that “condemned” North Korea’s missile tests was ignored in the *People’s Daily*—except for a page 3 story that cited China’s anodyne statement and North Korea’s protest. Even after the resolution passed, China resolutely declined to be critical of North Korea’s behavior. Instead, China called for a “resumption of the Six Party Talks” and resolving the matter via “consultation and dialogue.”
9. See Liu Jianchao above.

Party Talks.¹⁰ “All sides must evince clear flexibility,” said Foreign Ministry Spokesman Liu, adding that the “number one” priority is “denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula...and stability and peace in Northeast Asia,” as if a nuclear North Korea were *not* the primary source of instability and hostility in the region.¹¹

Testy wording is one thing, but the real test of China’s willingness to be a responsible stakeholder in Northeast Asian stability will be its actions. The United States has submitted a draft resolution to the U.N. Security Council that, among other things, calls on all member states “to undertake and facilitate inspection of cargo to or from the DPRK” in order to prevent the trafficking of dangerous weapons. The draft also calls for “freezing any financial or other assets or resources” related to “illicit activities...related to counterfeiting, money-laundering or narcotics.”¹² These sanctions will

have real teeth as U.S. naval, intelligence, and financial agencies track suspicious transactions and make them known to foreign governments.

The U.S. Mission to the U.N. must press China to accept this strong language and be prepared to hold China (and Russia and others) accountable for its enforcement.

The new and mature tenor of China’s diplomatic rhetoric may signal a real change in Beijing’s policies on North Korea—or it may reflect a Chinese tactic of “soft on the outside” but “hard on the inside”¹³ when engaging Washington. How receptive Beijing is to the U.S. call for enforceable sanctions on North Korea will reveal how serious China really is about being a responsible stakeholder.

John J. Tkacik, Jr., is Senior Research Fellow in China Policy in the Asian Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. “Draft UN resolution on North Korea,” United Nations Security Council, October 10, 2006, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2006/10/10/uresolution.xml>.

13. Or, as the Chinese say, “Wai song, nei jin.”