

“If the Neighborhood Catches Fire, One Will Also Come to Grief”

Chinese Attitudes toward North Korea’s Confrontational Acts, 2009-2014¹

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Chinese responses to North Korea’s confrontational acts in 2009-2014, such as the two nuclear tests, the three satellite launches, the Cheonan and Yeonpyeong incidents, and the various missile tests. It suggests that Chinese attitudes toward North Korean belligerence have considerably fluctuated, and the changes that occurred were not always of an incremental nature. In some cases, China adopted a less critical attitude, while on other occasions it judged Pyongyang’s conduct more harshly. The paper argues that China’s responses were shaped partly by the specific nature of the crises at hand, and partly by Beijing’s changing relations with the other major powers (the U.S., Russia, and Japan). It concludes that North Korea was partly able to take advantage of these patterns of Chinese behavior but its tactics often proved counterproductive.

Keywords: North Korea, China, foreign policy, nuclear weapons, conflict studies, Northeast Asian transport corridors

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RESUMEN

Este artículo examina las respuestas de China a los actos de confrontación de Corea del Norte entre 2009 y 2014, tales como las dos pruebas nucleares, los tres lanzamientos de satélites, los incidentes de Cheonan y Yeonpyeong, y las diversas pruebas de misiles. Se sugiere que las actitudes chinas hacia la beligerancia de Corea del Norte han fluctuado considerablemente, y los cambios que se produjeron no fueron siempre de carácter progresivo. En algunos casos, China adoptó una actitud menos crítica, mientras que en otras ocasiones se juzga la conducta de Pyongyang con más dureza. El documento sostiene que las respuestas de China fueron dictadas en parte por la naturaleza específica de la crisis que nos ocupa, pero también por el cambio de las relaciones de Pekín con las otras grandes potencias: Estados Unidos, Rusia y Japón. La conclusión resultante fue que Corea del Norte era en parte capaz de sacar ventaja de estos patrones de comportamiento de China, pero sus tácticas a menudo demostraron ser contraproducentes.

Palabras clave: Corea del Norte, China, política exterior, armas nucleares, estudios de conflicto, corredores de transporte del Noreste de Asia.

RESUM

Aquest article examina les respostes de la Xina als actes de confrontació de Corea del Nord entre 2009 i 2014, com ara les dues proves nuclears, els tres llançaments de satèl·lits, els incidents de Cheonan i Yeonpyeong, i les diverses proves de míssils. Es suggereix que les actituds xineses cap a la bel·ligerència de Corea del Nord han fluctuat considerablement, i els canvis que es van produir no van ser sempre de caràcter progressiu. En alguns casos, la Xina va adoptar una actitud menys crítica, mentre que en altres ocasions es jutja la conducta de Pyongyang amb més duresa. El document sosté que les respostes de la Xina van ser dictades en part per la naturalesa específica de la crisi que ens ocupa, però també pel canvi de les relacions de Pekín amb les altres grans potències: Estats Units, Rússia i el Japó. La conclusió resultant va ser que Corea del Nord era en part capaç de treure avantatge d'aquests patrons de comportament de la Xina, però les seves tàctiques sovint van demostrar ser contraproduents.

Paraules clau: Corea del Nord, Xina, política exterior, armes nuclears, estudis de conflicte, corredors de transport del Nord-est d'Àsia

Introduction

The scholars who have analyzed China's attitude toward the nuclear program of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), commonly known as North Korea, usually emphasized the complex and ambiguous nature of Chinese policies. They pointed out that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders were genuinely committed to the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula but they habitually preferred to use engagement, rather than coercion, to achieve this aim. Instead of openly supporting Washington and Seoul against Pyongyang (or vice versa), they tried to cooperate with both sides. The authors attributed this complexity to such factors as China's desire to prevent the collapse of the North

Korean regime, its general antipathy toward Western sanctions, the multitude of views among China's competing elite groups, and so on. Due to the ambiguities of China's conduct, external observers were often in disagreement over whether the proverbial cup was half empty or half full. While some authors complained that Beijing was still inclined to shield Pyongyang from U.S. pressure, others stressed that China increasingly regarded North Korea as a strategic burden, rather than a buffer state (see, among others, Cheng 2003; Chung 2010; Glaser 2009; Glaser and Billingsley 2012a; Kim 2010; Kim and Kim 2008; Lee 2013; Thompson 2010; Wu 2005).

Despite such differences, the majority of the related publications was focused on the strictly bilateral dimension of Sino-DPRK relations, and viewed it from a long-term perspective. That is, they sought to identify constant patterns in Sino-DPRK interactions, or examined the historical evolution of the relationship. In contrast, this paper suggests that Chinese attitudes toward North Korean belligerence have considerably fluctuated, and the changes that occurred were not always of an incremental nature. It argues that China's responses were shaped partly by the specific nature of the crises at hand, and partly by Beijing's relations with the other major powers at that time.

Actually, China's ambiguous attitude toward North Korean belligerence is deeply rooted in history. In the post-1953 period of the Cold War, Pyongyang's actions repeatedly generated tension in China's neighborhood. In the strategic sphere, the CCP leaders consistently sought to avoid entrapment in a new Korean War, and thus they seem to have disapproved those North Korean acts that were especially provocative. For instance, in 1983 a North Korean attempt to assassinate ROK President Chun Doo Hwan definitely infuriated the Chinese leaders. Behind the scenes, they confronted Pyongyang so firmly that the DPRK recalled every senior diplomat from its embassy in Beijing².

In the tactical sphere, however, China showed less consistency. Anxious to outcompete the USSR, Beijing alternately tried to woo Pyongyang by adopting a militant stance, by mediating between the DPRK and its opponents, or by combining the two approaches. In 1962-1964, both Chinese and North Korean propaganda called for the armed "liberation" of South Korea, but Beijing also helped Pyongyang to broaden its economic relations with Japan³. In 1970, China played on North Korea's fears of Japanese remilitarization, and stressed that the Soviet policy of peaceful co-existence "cherished illusions about Japanese

² Hungarian Embassy to the PRC, February 16, 1984, Hungarian National Archives (MOL), XIX-J-1-j China, 1984, 83. doboz, 78-10, 001692/1984.

³ Hungarian Embassy to the DPRK, January 17, 1964, MOL, XIX-J-1-j Korea, 1945-1964, 5. doboz, 5/bc, 001770/1964.

imperialism”⁴. Following the Japanese recognition of the PRC, Beijing changed tack, prodding Tokyo to establish diplomatic relations with Pyongyang⁵. In 1978, CCP Chairman Hua Guofeng used his trip to North Korea to put indirect pressure on Japan, and thus speed up the conclusion of the Sino-Japanese peace treaty⁶. Having settled the problem of the treaty, Hua assured Premier Masayoshi Ōhira that the DPRK had no aggressive designs against the ROK, and asked him to nudge South Korea toward a democratic transition⁷.

Certain aspects of China’s historical DPRK policy have still been present in Beijing’s reactions to the recent North Korean crises. In the strategic sphere, China is as determined as ever to prevent a large-scale armed conflict in Korea. As Renmin Ribao put it, “From China’s perspective, the potentials of war should be all steered clear of, simply for the common sense that if neighborhood catches fire, one will also come to grief.” (Li 2009). In the tactical sphere, however, Beijing’s fluctuating relations with Washington, Tokyo, Seoul, and Moscow have often influenced its reactions to North Korean belligerence. In some cases, China adopted a less critical attitude, while on other occasions it judged Pyongyang’s conduct more harshly.

To find patterns in China’s behavior, this article examines Chinese responses to North Korea’s confrontational acts in 2009-2014. This period was selected on the following grounds: First, the DPRK displayed an especially confrontational attitude in these years, carrying out two nuclear tests, three satellite launches, numerous other missile tests, and several armed attacks on ROK targets. Second, the dynamics of North Korean actions and Chinese reactions showed a wide variety. In 2009 and 2012, Pyongyang’s belligerence evoked explicit Chinese disapproval, but China renewed its policy of economic engagement not long after the DPRK softened its stance. In 2011, Pyongyang’s non-confrontational behavior promptly boosted Sino-DPRK cooperation. In 2013, Beijing’s open disapproval of North Korean belligerence was followed by sustained reluctance to economically engage the DPRK, the relaxation of tension notwithstanding. In 2010, China sought to control Pyongyang’s belligerence but did not criticize its actions as explicitly as it condemned Washington’s reactions, while in 2014, it adopted a

⁴ Hungarian Foreign Ministry, April 17, 1970, MOL, XIX-J-1-j Korea, 1970, 54. doboz, 81, 00843/1/1970.

⁵ Hungarian Embassy to the DPRK, May 5, 1973, MOL, XIX-J-1-j Korea, 1973, 68. doboz, 81-10, 001930/3/1973.

⁶ Hungarian Foreign Ministry, May 23, 1978, MOL, XIX-J-1-j China, 1978, 77. doboz, 78-1, 002378/7/1978.

⁷ Hungarian Embassy to the PRC, December 19, 1979, MOL, XIX-J-1-j South Korea, 1979, 81. doboz, 82-3, 005512/18/1979.

low-key attitude toward the aggravation of tension. This variety of action-reaction patterns is conducive to multi-factor analysis.

The 2009 Nuclear Test: Explicit Disapproval, then Dynamic Re-Engagement

In early 2009, news of North Korea's preparations for launching a satellite elicited a cautious reaction from the Chinese leadership. On March 7, Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi stressed that "all sides concerned should do more" to bring the six-party talks (which the two Koreas, America, China, Russia, and Japan had conducted over the North Korean nuclear program) to fruition ("China follows development," 2009). In late March, Chinese Defense Minister Liang Guanglie told his Japanese counterpart that "it would be best if the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) did not fire" the rocket, but he also urged Tokyo to "take a coolheaded attitude" on the issue ("Japan defense minister's China visit," 2009). That is, China disapproved of the planned launch but feared that any U.S. or Japanese over-reaction might derail the talks.

When the DPRK carried out the launch on April 5th, China, unlike the U.S. and Japan, was reluctant to identify the satellite rocket as a long-range missile, lest the former countries used the issue as a pretext to build up a missile defense system that would affect China, too. Due to Beijing's opposition to any new sanctions, the Presidential Statement that the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) adopted by consensus (April 13th) was limited to the verbal condemnation of the launch ("FM: China disapproves" 2009).

As soon as April 15th, Pyongyang announced its intention to restart its nuclear reactor, and leave the six-party talks for good. Still, Chinese efforts of economic engagement continued even in the first half of May ("China, DPRK," 2009). Only on May 25th, when the DPRK carried out a new nuclear test, did China explicitly condemn their action by publishing a statement nearly identical with the one Beijing had made after Pyongyang's first test in 2006 (Glaser 2009). Chinese analysts also adopted a sharply critical stance, and some of them concluded that the Korean Workers' Party (KWP) leaders intended to turn the DPRK into a full-fledged nuclear state. "It is impossible for the international community to accept the DPRK's nuclear test as legitimate," Peng Guangqian warned. "Pyongyang will face more comprehensive and harsher sanctions, and it will be squeezed further on the international stage." (Peng 2009). In June, the UNSC did impose new sanctions on North Korea, but Pyongyang remained defiant. In July, the state-run Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) openly declared that the DPRK felt compelled to develop nuclear arms, because China had failed to provide it with a "nuclear umbrella" (KCNA 2009).

Chinese scholar Zhang Tuosheng astutely summarized Beijing's security dilemma: "Either [alternative] – a nuclear-equipped DPRK or a collapsed DPRK – would cause disastrous interruption of the process of China's peaceful development." (Wu 2009). These considerations must have influenced Beijing's decision to re-engage Pyongyang. High-level exchanges started in August, probably facilitated by the fact that in this month, the DPRK made a few small conciliatory gestures toward South Korea and the U.S. In September, Kim Jong Il told Chinese Special Envoy Dai Bingguo that Pyongyang was willing to participate "in bilateral and multilateral talks" for the sake of denuclearization ("DPRK signals," 2009). Still, these gestures and promises were not so substantial as to explain why Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao visited the DPRK in early October to sign economic agreements worth \$200 million (Lee and Kang 2011: 14).

Actually, the nature of these agreements provides much insight into China's motives. Sino-DPRK logistical cooperation was to play an integral role in Beijing's plans to develop the economy of landlocked Northeast China. The long distance between Japan and the port of Dalian posed a serious obstacle, spurring Chinese efforts to look for a shorter outlet to the Sea of Japan. In 2006, Beijing authorities explored the possibilities of creating a transport corridor from Hunchun (Jilin province) to the Russian port of Zarubino and/or the North Korean port of Rajin. The Russian authorities, however, were not sufficiently cooperative, not the least because their vision of a corridor was a railway line between Khasan, Rajin, and (through the DPRK) the South Korean port of Busan (Lee and Kang 2011).

Notably, Russia, China, and South Korea were all participants of an immense multinational plan to construct a Trans-Asian Railway (TAR) under the auspices of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP). The DPRK was also expected to join TAR, but in 2009, by which time the other three states had ratified the TAR agreement, it still showed no sign of doing so (United Nations ESCAP 2013). Pyongyang's non-participation left a gap in TAR's planned Korean network. Due to Russian and North Korean obstruction, China had to opt for a Sino-DPRK corridor to Rajin. In 2009, trilateral economic cooperation between China, Japan, and the ROK started to make progress, increasing China's need for such a corridor. To implement these plans, Beijing needed tranquility and Sino-DPRK concord more than ever. In 2009, China's relations with Japan, Russia, South Korea, Taiwan, and the new U.S. administration were largely harmonious, creating little incentive for Beijing to cooperate with one state against another. Under such conditions, it was a reasonable course of action to join the universal condemnation of the nuclear test but to re-engage the DPRK as soon as it showed a modicum of flexibility.

The Cheonan and Yeonpyeong Crises: Partial Support, Subtle Pressure

China's readiness to adopt a lenient attitude toward North Korean belligerence manifested itself as soon as mid-October when the DPRK tested a few short-range missiles. Beijing promptly declared that the tests "will not derail the prospect of easing tension on the Korean Peninsula." Several Chinese experts were of the opinion that Pyongyang wanted to prod Washington to enter talks (Zhang Xin 2009). In November, after an inter-Korean naval clash, they thought that the incident was not a northern provocation, because the DPRK, having conducted a nuclear test, "did not need to resort to such tactics" to attract attention (Zhang Haizhou 2009).

Beijing's evident desire to play down these incidents was influenced by the fact that the Changjitu Plan, devised to connect the Changchun-Jilin-Tumen economic corridor with the port of Rajin, was just about to be approved (Lee and Kang 2011: 6). In early 2010, China's attitude shifted, but not in a way conducive to restraining the DPRK. In response to Washington's new arms sales to Taiwan, Beijing suspended Sino-U.S. military exchanges, making the CCP leaders increasingly disinclined to cooperate with the U.S. against North Korea. Professor Ye Hailin voiced this sentiment in an unusually explicit form: "Certainly, the US has to pay a heavy price for the deal. We have more than one card. On problems related to Afghanistan, the DPRK and Iran, Washington needs our cooperation." (Li 2010).

This background helps to explain why China's reaction to the sinking of the South Korean corvette Cheonan (March 26, 2010) and the subsequent U.S. military steps was not simply equivocal but sometimes unilaterally critical of Washington. In early May, President Hu Jintao met the leaders of the two Koreas on the same day, emphasizing China's intention to develop its relations with both states (Qin 2010b). Soon after, Kim Jong Il visited China to discuss issues of economic cooperation. The visit displeased the ROK, Professor Zhang Liangui noted, for Seoul misunderstood Beijing's "striving for peace and stability in the peninsula" (Zhang 2010a). Actually, Beijing did genuinely strive to conclude a Free Trade Agreement with Seoul and pursue trilateral Sino-Japanese-ROK cooperation, but these plans did not necessarily induce Pyongyang to adopt a peaceful stance toward Seoul. On the contrary, the KWP leaders may have rather tried to disrupt Sino-ROK cooperation by one means or another.

In late May, when Seoul concluded that the Cheonan had been sunk by a northern submarine, the Chinese leaders maintained that they lacked evidence to pin the blame on Pyongyang. This attitude triggered U.S. criticism, whereupon China responded with counter-charges (Thompson 2010). For instance, Professor Li Qingsi linked the incident with the Taiwan problem, and opined that Washington wanted use it to drive a wedge between Beijing and Pyongyang: “The instability on the Korean Peninsula is detrimental both to China and the ROK but is advantageous to the US.” (Li 2010). While North Korean propaganda attacked both Seoul and Washington, Chinese media comments were mostly directed against the U.S. Zhang Liangui’s words implicitly exposed the difference between Chinese and North Korean objectives:

The Cheonan affair has already dealt a blow to Sino-ROK relations [...] The ROK and Japan both would rely more on the US and thus boost the triangular alliance. As a measure of defense, the DPRK would play the China or Russia card, and the idea of two opposing triangles may gain ground. All these would hinder the efforts to forge an East Asian community (Zhang 2010b).

In November 2010, China seems to have adopted a more critical attitude toward the North Korean artillery attack on Yeonpyeong Island. In the UNSC, Chinese and U.S. views sharply diverged, but Chinese pressure probably played a major role in that the DPRK eventually decided not to react at all to the US-ROK military drills (Yang 2011). Behind the scenes, China seems to have reacted to the instability created by the Cheonan and Yeonpyeong crises by temporarily suspending its support to certain joint projects. Notably, plans to build a new bridge at Dandong and establish a new North Korean special economic zone on Hwanggumpyong and Wihwa islands were announced as early as February 2010 (Qin 2010a) but implementation started only in 2011. This factor may have restrained the DPRK at least to some extent.

Tranquility and Dynamic Engagement

From a Chinese perspective, Sino-DPRK partnership reached optimal status in 2011. During the entire year, the KWP leaders refrained from provoking armed clashes with the ROK, testing long-range missiles, and making shrill nuclear threats. On the contrary, they repeatedly expressed their interest in returning to the six-party talks. While Pyongyang’s negotiations with South Korean and U.S. nuclear envoys did not yield any concrete results, Beijing appreciated that they took place at all. In this atmosphere, Chinese observers were disinclined to regard Pyongyang’s attitude as the main obstacle to a settlement. On the one hand, they recognized that both sides adopted a less confrontational approach than before. On the other hand, they stressed that certain U.S. and South Korean

preconditions were not conducive to a deal. For instance, Professor Zhu Feng expressed the following opinion:

It would be beneficial if all parties follow the earlier agreement to disable the nuclear facilities at Yongbyon. [...] [The DPRK] should be provided with the necessary incentives to cooperate – such as satisfying its legitimate requirements for national security and development. China should be encouraged to push Pyongyang in that direction. But it seems that the US seeks to go much further with its various preconditions. [...] Washington's preference, in collaboration with Seoul and Tokyo, is not only for suspension of the DPRK's UEP [uranium enrichment program], but for moratoriums on its nuclear tests and long-range missile tests. But such preconditions are unrealistic (Zhu 2011).

Sino-DPRK concord was also reinforced by some other factors that caused friction between Washington and Beijing. Due to Chinese protests against new U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, Sino-U.S. military exchanges remained suspended. In November 2011, the Obama administration announced its “pivot to Asia” strategy – a conception widely regarded by Chinese observers as a plan to contain China (Glaser and Billingsley 2012b: 1-4, 9-10). The KWP leaders must have found these disputes advantageous to their interests. From March to October, KCNA published as many as 12 articles on Chinese protests against Washington's Taiwan policy, and on November 25th, it sharply condemned Obama's “pivot to Asia” (KCNA 2011c).

Once inter-Korean relations were less tense, it became possible to launch the bilateral projects that had been suspended during the crisis. Seeking to “push North Korea to forsake its nuclear plan,” in January China started building the new Dandong-Sinuiju bridge (Ji 2011). The bridge was to be linked to China's Dongbiandao railway, and the latter to the Trans-Siberian Railway (TSR). Following Kim Jong Il's visit in China (May 20-26th), China undertook to make further efforts to build a highway between Hunchun and Rason, while the DPRK formally established the Hwanggumpyong-Wihwa zone. Connected to a seaport, the Dongbiandao railway, and the new zone, Dandong aspired to become a Northeast Asian transport hub (“Dandong's new pattern of opening up,” 2011).

Despite the dynamic development of Sino-DPRK cooperation, the KWP leaders kept their eyes open for alternative partners. In 2011, Moscow once again proposed to construct railways and gas pipelines that would bypass China and link Russia, the DPRK, and the ROK with each other. In August, Kim Jong Il reached a tentative agreement with the Kremlin on these trilateral projects and on the cancellation of Pyongyang's debt (Kim and Blank: 602-603). Russia's renewed interest in this Eurasian transport corridor may have been influenced by

Beijing's new efforts to create an alternative corridor between China and Europe through Central Asia (Szczudlik-Tatar 2013: 7). The North Koreans were certainly aware of the plan to build a Russia-Kazakhstan-China highway (KCNA 2011a). These trends probably influenced their decision to show interest, for the first time, in the Trans-Asian Railway. Under the aegis of ESCAP, in March-April 2012 North Korean railway officials received training in Vietnam, and Russia offered to provide further training (United Nations ESCAP 2012: 3). On April 2nd, Moscow and Pyongyang announced that the Rajin-Khasan cargo freight service would begin in October (Park, Tan, and Govindasamy 2013: 139).

To implement these multilateral plans, North Korea needed a breakthrough in the nuclear dispute. In late 2011, the DPRK and the U.S. did enter negotiations in Beijing. China's strong desire for a settlement was clearly expressed by Chinese scholar Hu Mingyuan: "An economically prosperous and socially stable DPRK would suit the interests of its neighboring countries. [...] The DPRK needs to size up the situation, take the historic opportunity to suspend its uranium enrichment program, [and] stop criticizing the ROK government [...]. It's high time that Seoul, too, gave up its hard-line policy toward Pyongyang." (Hu 2012). Briefly interrupted by the death of Kim Jong Il and the succession of Kim Jong Un, the talks finally led to the Leap Day Agreement (February 29, 2012). Pyongyang agreed to impose a moratorium on its nuclear and missile tests and on uranium enrichment, whereas Washington undertook to provide food aid. Chinese observers welcomed the deal, but they were well aware of its provisional nature. Shen Dingli evaluated North Korea's motives and the agreement's prospects as follows:

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Pyongyang's first priority is to address its daily food supply. In this regard, to trade a nuclear and missile moratorium – it has not agreed to abandon them yet – for immediate concrete food supplies is a practical move. However, the DPRK would benefit more by shelving or even freezing its nuclear and missile development program for longer period in exchange for more economic aid and even security guarantees. [...] It is noticeable that both countries have hedged their bets, and while their reconciliatory stances are expandable, they are also reversible (Shen 2012a).

The April 2012 Satellite Crisis: Explicit Disapproval, then Dynamic Re-Engagement

On March 16th, the DPRK did announce that it would launch a satellite in mid-April. Since this step was bound to jeopardize the just-concluded Leap Day Agreement, the Chinese leaders must have felt strong disappointment. On March 26th, Hu Jintao emphatically told Lee Myung Bak: "We do not want to see a reversal of the hard-won momentum in relaxing tension on the peninsula." (Chu

2012). China expressed concern over the planned launch on the very same day when the announcement was made. In the following weeks, Beijing repeatedly issued similar warnings, but North Korea was not to be dissuaded (Glaser and Billingsley 2012a: 112-115). On April 13th, the DPRK made an attempt to launch the satellite (named Kwangmyŏngsŏng-3), but the rocket exploded soon after lift-off. On April 16th, the UNSC issued a Presidential Statement condemning the launch. The combined effect of the launch and the statement was more than enough to unravel the Leap Day Agreement.

From a Chinese perspective, it may have appeared puzzling why the KWP leaders, having recently displayed a strong interest in economic development, now suddenly took the risk of forfeiting the expected economic benefits of US-DPRK rapprochement. As early as March 19th, Chinese experts Huang Youfu and Wang Junsheng predicted that Washington would take retaliatory measures. Describing the planned launch as “harmful,” they attributed Pyongyang’s decision to “domestic political concerns” (Zhou 2012a). On March 26th, during his talks with Obama, Hu Jintao suggested that security considerations once again trumped economic ones in North Korean decision-making (Chu 2012). An unsigned article in *Global Times* expressed this view more bluntly: “Pyongyang, left behind on Northeast Asia’s road to prosperity, has been turning a deaf ear to the criticism. With decades-old sanctions still in effect, it has nothing more to lose.” (“Why China can’t persuade”, 2012).

Actually, North Korea’s decision to launch a satellite seems not to have been as abrupt as it appeared to external observers. From March 2011 to January 2012 – that is, in the very same period when Pyongyang energetically pursued economic cooperation with China and Russia, and entered nuclear talks with the U.S. –, KCNA carried as many as 22 articles on Chinese and Russian satellites. It also claimed that the U.S. sought to prevent both the DPRK and China from launching satellites (KCNA 2011b). These articles obviously sought to justify Pyongyang’s own launch, and ward off Chinese and Russian criticism. In June 2012, KCNA complained that “Space development is a right recognized by international law and, accordingly, various countries are launching satellites. To insist that only the DPRK should not be allowed to launch satellites is brigandish sophism.” (KCNA 2012a).

Anxious to avoid any semblance of weakness, the KWP often combined the soft-line policies they pursued in one sphere with hard-line policies in another sphere (Szalontai and Choi 2012). Since the Leap Day Agreement implied that the DPRK made wide-ranging security concessions because of its dire need to obtain food aid, they probably felt it imperative to demonstrate their strength but did not want to abandon economic development. On April 19th, a Chinese visitor noted

with evident surprise that North Korea “is putting more emphasis on economic development, despite its ‘military-first’ policy, and is gradually opening up to the outside world” (Wu 2012). In the spring and summer of 2012, the new regime of Kim Chŏngŭn repeatedly stressed its intention to make the DPRK both a self-declared “nuclear weapons state” and an “economic giant”.

To the Chinese leaders, this combined approach seemed far less advantageous than a unilateral emphasis on economic development. Still, signs of a Sino-DPRK rapprochement started to appear in mid-2012 (Glaser and Billingsley 2012a: 124-125), probably facilitated by the fact that in late May and early June, North Korea repeatedly announced that it had no plans to conduct a new nuclear test at present. These gestures suggested that the scenario of 2006 and 2009 (when Pyongyang’s missile launches evoked UNSC protests, which in turn triggered nuclear tests) would not be repeated this time.

It appears likely that the KWP leadership made these statements to reassure China, and thus persuade it to provide new assistance. On June 26th, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei did dismiss a news report about China’s alleged reluctance to pursue the Hwanggumpyong-Wihwa project as “groundless and irresponsible” (Xinhua 2012a). On July 14th, North Korea’s foreign minister expressed readiness to return to the six-party talks. Thereupon, in mid-August a DPRK delegation headed by Jang Song Thaek visited China to discuss the joint development of Rason and Hwanggumpyong-Wihwa. Both Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao assured Jang that China “resolutely supported” North Korea developing its economy. The agreements signed by the two sides, China Daily optimistically stated, “will not only help boost the DPRK’s battered economy. More importantly, they will contribute to the overall stability of the Korean Peninsula.” (“Helping DPRK economy,” 2012).

China’s helpfulness was probably also motivated by broader strategic considerations, such as the specter of Sino-Russian competition. As noted before, the Rajin-Khasan cargo freight service was expected to resume in October. In July, a Russian railway delegation did visit the DPRK (KCNA 2012b). On September 17th, a Russian-DPRK agreement wrote off the bulk of Pyongyang’s debt (Zakharova 2013: 142-143). These developments may have facilitated North Korea’s long-awaited decision to accede to the Intergovernmental Agreement on the Trans-Asian Railway Network on October 12th (United Nations ESCAP 2013: 4).

Furthermore, Chinese concerns about America’s “pivot to Asia” still persisted. During the restarted Sino-US military talks in May 2012, the American side reiterated that Washington did not take sides on the competing territorial claims

of China and the Southeast Asian countries. In July and August, however, Xinhua accused the U.S. of “openly supporting individual ASEAN members’ scheme to complicate the maritime dispute,” and reassuring Tokyo that “the Diaoyu Islands fell within the scope of the 1960 Japan-U.S. security treaty” (Xinhua 2012b). In this tense atmosphere, the CCP leaders were probably less inclined to support Washington in pressuring Pyongyang than in a period of Sino-American rapprochement. In September 2012, China’s security concerns were even more aggravated by the Japanese government’s decision to purchase three of the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Pyongyang seems to have found the dispute advantageous to its own interests, because between September 19th and November 6th, KCNA carried a total of 11 articles on the topic, extensively quoting China’s indignant protests.

The December 2012 Satellite Crisis: Explicit Disapproval, then Cautious Re-Engagement

In early October, however, new clouds appeared on the sky of Chinese-North Korean partnership. Following prolonged negotiations, the U.S. and the ROK reached an agreement that authorized South Korea to develop ballistic missiles with a range of 800 kilometers. On November 1st, Renmin Ribao remarked: “The new security moves South Korea and the United States have made lately may be easily considered by North Korea to be acts of provocation. In order to promote U.S. strategic rebalancing toward the Asia-Pacific region, the United States has allowed South Korea to enhance its ballistic missile striking capability.” (“Calm, restraint needed,” 2012). Interviewed by China Daily, Chinese expert Qu Xing correctly predicted that “the extension of the missile reach would further accelerate the arms race on the Korean Peninsula, and feeling the imbalance of military power, the DPRK would accordingly increase counter-military measures, which will bring more difficulties to the denuclearization.” (Zhou 2012b).

In October, KCNA approvingly quoted the critical comments the Chinese media made on the US-ROK missile agreement. Nevertheless, Chinese observers, instead of blaming solely Seoul and Washington, placed the problem into the context of the inter-Korean arms race. On October 20th, China Daily published an insightful analysis which, having described that the U.S. had initially curbed South Korea’s missile ambitions, pointed out that Pyongyang’s unwillingness to follow suit led to negative consequences:

Irrespective of this, the DPRK went ahead with its missile program, test-firing projectiles under some pretext or the other. In response, the UN Security Council imposed sanctions against the DPRK, with China’s support, saying its missiles could meet both peaceful and military ends, and could have a serious impact on

international security. Pyongyang has been complaining that such sanctions are unfair, because its “satellite launch” is peaceful. The UN action, to be fair, is not unjust because the international community, especially the missile control regime, judges other countries by the same norms of missile nonproliferation. [...]

Seoul may justify the expansion of its missile range as a response to Pyongyang's persistent missile pursuit. But Pyongyang could also say that its missile program is justified because Washington's “permission” to Seoul to develop longer-range missiles is indicative of the US' hostility toward the DPRK. There is no end to this chicken-and-egg game (Shen 2012b).

From this perspective, a confrontational North Korean act was as likely to evoke China's disapproval as the US-ROK agreement did, all the more so because North Korean belligerence invoked the risk of new UNSC sanctions. The UNSC factor considerably influenced China's attitudes, for in late 2012, Beijing was concerned about both South Korean and North Korean actions but eventually adopted a harder stance toward Pyongyang than toward Seoul.

The new crisis was triggered not only by the missile agreement but also by Seoul's decision to launch a satellite (named Naro-1). In late October 2012, South Korea, having made two failed launch attempts in 2009-2010, started preparations for a third one. Initial Chinese media reports about the launch plan were neutral in tone, but in late November, Pyongyang's reaction made China aware of the dangerous implications of the issue. On November 30th, Cheng Xiaohe warned that the DPRK was making preparations for a new ballistic missile test: “If South Korea's ‘Naro’ is successful, North Korea will surely feel as though it is being left behind. [...] the North Koreans also find it unfair that the international community has criticized them for conducting missile tests under the pretext of launching satellites but South Korea is allowed to develop and test missiles without reproach.” Nonetheless, Cheng concluded that a new North Korean missile test would “do more harm than good” (Cheng 2012).

On December 1st, the DPRK did announce that it would launch a new satellite. Three days later, the Chinese Foreign Ministry declared: “As a sovereign state, the DPRK is entitled to the peaceful use of outer space. But in view of the situation on the Korea Peninsular and restrictions of relevant UN Security Council resolutions, China hopes the DPRK can proceed from the overall situation of peace and stability on the peninsula and act prudently.” (Xinhua 2012c).

Once again, the KWP leaders refused to heed China's warnings. On December 12th, the DPRK launched its new satellite, which successfully entered the orbit. This feat enabled Pyongyang to achieve a rare prestige victory over Seoul, for the launch of Naro-1, having been abruptly cancelled on November 29th, took place only in January 2013. At the same time, the contrast between Pyongyang's rash action and the postponed launch of Naro-1 left the DPRK in an exposed position. On December 12th, China and the UNSC promptly expressed their displeasure over the launch. KCNA's angry comments were obviously addressed to China, too: "The UNSC, pursuant to the U.S. policy, prohibits the DPRK only from launching satellites. Even though South Korea and the countries around it planned or launched satellite[s], they were not blamed for increasing tension." (KCNA 2012c).

At that stage, the crisis had not reached yet such intensity as to seriously disrupt Sino-DPRK interactions. On 9 January 2013, the two governments signed an agreement on economic and technological cooperation. Global Times reported that Jilin's Department of Commerce sent officials to the DPRK to discuss how to make Rason and Hwanggumpyong-Wihwa attractive for foreign investment (Wen 2013). Still, it was an ominous sign that while KCNA extensively covered the visit of the Chinese government delegation, the English version of Xinhua and Renmin Ribao did not mention it at all.

The 2013 Nuclear Test: Explicit Disapproval and Economic Pressure

On January 22nd, the UNSC approved Resolution 2087, condemning Pyongyang's recent satellite launch. From China's perspective, Resolution 2087 appeared as "generally balanced" (Xinhua 2013a), but the KWP leaders definitely thought otherwise. On January 24th, North Korea's all-powerful National Defense Commission (NDC) promptly declared its intention to put an end to the denuclearization talks once and for all. The statement also made a sharply critical reference to China and Russia: "Those big countries, which are obliged to take the lead in building a fair world order, are abandoning without hesitation even elementary principle, under the influence of the U.S. arbitrary and high-handed practices, and failing to come to their senses." (KCNA 2013a). Soon after, Pyongyang declared that it was planning a new nuclear test. In this supercharged atmosphere, the CCP leaders were naturally more concerned about North Korea's belligerence than about South Korea's satellite launch. When Naro-1 entered the orbit, Renmin Ribao did voice the view that the launch "complicated" the situation, but the Chinese experts did not adopt an expressly critical attitude toward it. Nevertheless, Renmin Ribao warned that the launch "may be regarded as a new round of provocation by the DPRK, who might even be so angered as to accelerate the process of its third nuclear test." ("Launch of Naro," 2013).

On February 12th, North Korea did carry out a nuclear test, disregarding China's repeated warnings. When UNSC Resolution 2094 (March 7, 2013) imposed new sanctions on Pyongyang, the defiant KWP leadership uttered a series of increasingly shrill threats that ranged from the abandonment of the Korean Armistice Agreement to a pre-emptive nuclear strike. The crisis continued throughout April and May, at which time the DPRK even blocked the operation of the Kaesŏng Industrial Zone, the last link of inter-Korean economic cooperation.

By now, the crisis had reached such a magnitude that China could not get back to business with North Korea in the same way as before. As early as January 26th, Renmin Ribao republished a sharply critical article that had appeared in Global Times the day before. Having emphasized China's efforts to tone down Resolution 2087, the article complained about the NDC statement of January 24th. While its author stipulated that China would not support any U.S. attempt to impose "extreme UN sanctions," he also warned that Beijing would be ready to put economic pressure on Pyongyang in its own capacity: "If North Korea engages in further nuclear tests, China will not hesitate to reduce its assistance to North Korea." ("Not all Peninsula issues," 2013).

Various signs indicate that China did take steps of this kind after Pyongyang's nuclear test. On February 19th, China Daily quoted Professor Sang Baichuan who said that due to Pyongyang's belligerence, "efforts to further advance the two economic zones [Rason and Hwanggumpyong-Wihwa] have been suspended." (Li and Bao 2013). On May 23rd, Cheng Xiaohu mentioned that China's four state-owned commercial banks had stopped transactions with the DPRK's Foreign Trade Bank (Cheng 2013). In June 2013, an official of Dandong's Foreign Trade Administrative Department told Global Times that he had been instructed "not to send any company to the Pyongyang International Trade Fair in May this year" (Liang 2013).

Notably, the very name of the Hwanggumpyong-Wihwa economic zone, which had frequently cropped up in both the Chinese and North Korean media in 2011-2012, seems to have become a sort of taboo word after the crisis. Between February 27th and December 14th, China Daily did not make any reference to it. In June 2013, Global Times reported that the zone was "blocked and surrounded by a barbed fence, with North Korean soldiers on guard. A billboard saying 'Welcome to Hwanggumpyong Special Economic Zone' is the only proof to its existence." (Liang 2013). This article was followed by a long news blackout, only briefly interrupted by a few articles in December 2013. The English versions of Renmin Ribao and Xinhua have effectively ignored the zone since August 15, 2012 and October 16, 2012, respectively. Similarly, KCNA has not made any direct reference to developments in Hwanggumpyŏng-Wihwa since January 9, 2013.

Thus it seems likely that the zone became a matter of dispute between Beijing and Pyongyang. From a Chinese perspective, this project was of a lesser importance than Rason, a major link in the Changjitu Plan. Still, Chinese pressure affected Rason, too: “in the wake of the third nuclear test [...], Beijing put the brakes on plans to link Rason with the abundantly supplied Jilin electric grid.” (Abrahamian and See 2014: 24).

In 2013, the Chinese leaders evidently judged North Korea’s confrontational behavior more harshly than in 2012, let alone in 2009-2010. During the crisis, Global Times published a series of unprecedentedly critical articles about Pyongyang’s conduct in general and Sino-DPRK relations in particular. On February 24th, Zhang Liangui, a DPRK expert of the Central Committee’s Party School, raised the following charges against Pyongyang:

North Korea used to count on China to shield it from the US threat and pressure of the UN Security Council. When China didn’t do what the North wanted it to, the North would turn hostile, as it did this time. Developing nuclear weapons is North Korea’s national policy. It’s not a bargaining chip that North Korea will give up under any circumstances. North Korea may pretend to do so in order to get economic assistance from other countries and wait for the right timing, but will never follow through with it (“China living in denial,” 2013).

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That is, China’s anger was aroused not simply by the DPRK’s belligerence but even more so by the apparent irreversibility of the regime’s commitment to nuclearization. During the previous crises, Pyongyang sooner or later made a promise to return to the six-party talks, whereupon China expressed its readiness to turn over a new leaf. Since this time the DPRK ruled out such a scenario, Beijing could hardly hope that its policy of economic engagement would eventually yield the desired result. On the contrary, the CCP leaders seem to have concluded that even a later softening of Pyongyang’s public posture was not to be taken at face value.

China’s New Stance: Shift toward Alternative Partners and Reluctance to Re-engage

China’s increasingly critical stance toward the DPRK seems to have been interrelated with the Sino-South Korean and Sino-US rapprochement that occurred in 2013. As early as December 2012, when conservative candidate Park Geun-hye won the South Korean presidential elections, Chinese media praised her for her familiarity with Chinese language and culture (Zhan 2013). This positive assessment markedly differed from Pyongyang’s attitude, since North Korean propaganda repeatedly attacked Park during the election campaign

(Cheng 2012). Once Park took office in February 2013, Sino-ROK relations started to make good progress (Cheng 2013), all the more so because the two governments held similar opinions not only about the North Korean nuclear threat but also about Japan. In December 2012, following the electoral victory of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), Abe Shinzo, a politician well known for his nationalist and revisionist views, took over premiership. This shift further aggravated Sino-Japanese relations. Due to “Japan’s increasingly evident turn to the right, China and South Korea urgently need to enhance cooperation,” Chinese scholar Zhan Debin stressed (Zhan 2013). By late April, the new Park Geun-hye administration did move toward such a position, for she declared her intention to visit China soon after her trip to the U.S. but showed no interest in visiting Japan in the near future (“Japan’s Drift to the Far Right,” 2013). The significance of these priorities was underlined by the fact that in the same month, Chinese objections led to the indefinite postponement of the annual China-Japan-ROK summit. During Park’s visit in China (June 27-30th), both sides showed strong commitment to economic and security cooperation.

Since the Sino-Japanese conflict induced Beijing to engage Seoul, rather than Pyongyang, North Korea could no longer benefit from the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute. Probably this is why in 2013 KCNA carried only a single article directly critical of Japan’s attitude toward the dispute, and this one appeared before the nuclear test. During the remaining part of the year, it mentioned the topic only once, with the evident intention to create discord between South Korea and China. Namely, KCNA alleged that Park Geun-hye “supported Japan in its moves to grab [the] Diaoyu islands” (KCNA 2013b). This trend may have also reflected the fact that in May, Japan attempted to counter Sino-ROK cooperation by renewing its dialogue with the DPRK (Halpin 2014: 1).

Another factor influencing Chinese attitudes toward the DPRK was that the North Korean nuclear crisis created a consensus between the PRC and the United States. “After North Korea launched its rocket, China and the U.S. went head-to-head within the U.N. Security Council and disagreed over what resolutions should be adopted,” Cheng Xiaohe pointed out. The nuclear test, however, gave “the U.S. and China more opportunity for cooperation” (Cheng 2013). On June 7-8th, 2013, at the Obama-Xi Jinping summit, the two leaders’ shared disapproval of Pyongyang’s belligerence at least partly offset their disagreements over the South China Sea, and thus helped them in reaching a rapprochement. As Wang Fan remarked, “China’s participation in resolving the DPRK nuclear issue has helped propel China’s image as a responsible power committed to regional stability, and thus reshaped some US assumptions on China” (Wang 2013). In the light of the worsening Sino-Japanese dispute, China had a strong stake in projecting such an image. “During his visit to Washington in February, Abe [...]

repeatedly emphasized the danger of an increasingly powerful China,” China Daily reported, adding with evident satisfaction that Abe’s claims elicited only a lukewarm response from Obama (Cai 2013).

“The North must have felt disappointed about [...] China’s closer relationship with both the US and South Korea,” Jin Qiangyi pointed out. Ultimately, Xi’s expected meetings with Obama and Park Geun-hye induced the KWP leaders to send a high-ranking envoy to China. In June, they relaxed their attitude toward the ROK, and called for talks with Washington (Cheng 2013; “No more indulgences,” 2013). Nevertheless, in the summer and fall of 2013, the relaxation of tension did not lead to a quick renewal of Chinese economic engagement. While China welcomed the tentative signs of inter-Korean rapprochement and Pyongyang’s vague promises to return to the six-party talks, it seems not to have taken steps comparable to the economic agreements reached in August-September 2012 and January 2013. While the CCP leaders did send several high-level delegations to the DPRK, the latter’s main objective was to prod Pyongyang to take concrete steps toward denuclearization (Li 2013). That is, they were aimed not only at restoring Sino-DPRK concord but also at reinforcing Sino-US and Sino-ROK cooperation. Consequently, North Korea’s new approach was hardly conducive to a genuine Sino-DPRK reconciliation. Since the KWP leaders suspended their acts of open belligerence but did not show yet a credible commitment to denuclearization, China’s role, either as a restraining force or as a mediator, may have lost some of its significance.

Apart from Sino-ROK and Sino-US rapprochement, Beijing’s bargaining position vis-à-vis Pyongyang was also enhanced by certain new developments that implied a reduction of North Korea’s logistical importance. In August 2013, after a 9-year pause, the Hunchun-Makhalino railway resumed service, creating an opportunity for landlocked Jilin to reach the Russian port of Zarubino (Xinhua 2013b). This new transport corridor potentially enabled Beijing to implement the Changjitu Plan with less reliance on Rajin. Furthermore, in September 2013 Xi Jinping visited Central Asia to announce his plan to create a Silk Road Economic Belt linking the seacoast of East China with Europe through Central Asia and Xinjiang (Szcudlik-Tatar 2013: 3). Xi’s declaration heralded a new stage in China’s Eurasian Land Bridge strategy, and as such, it carried the risk that the Korean Peninsula might be logistically marginalized. Under such conditions, China probably saw less need to engage the DPRK than before.

The Missile Barrage: A Low-Key Attitude

Fortunately for Pyongyang, the challenge posed by the Silk Road Economic Belt was taken seriously both by Seoul and Moscow. In October 2013, Park Geun-hye announced her Eurasian Initiative, which included a renewed call for the construction of a railway link between the TSR and South Korea through the DPRK (Kim 2014). The potential feasibility of this idea was enhanced by the fact that in late September, the Rajin-Khasan railway had been finally opened for service. Since China's Silk Road Economic Belt would bypass the TSR, too, in November, Russian President Vladimir Putin promptly visited Seoul to express his support for Park's Iron Silk Road plan (Kim and Blank 2014: 611-616). Since both Seoul and Moscow had a stake in engaging Pyongyang, North Korea's bargaining position started to improve. Now it was China's turn to feel bypassed:

As a route through East Asia, it is unlikely to succeed without the participation of China, the conspicuously rising power on the world stage. [...] Neither Russia's Far East nor the two Koreas have sufficient demand for imports and exports, so a smart choice is to invite heavily populated China to get involved in the project. [...] If Pyongyang has a strategic vision, it will accept Russia's offer, cooperate with Seoul and tie the network with Beijing by opening a branch line by the Yalu River to enjoy full-fledged prosperity in this region ("China's participation needed," 2013).

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In November 2013, China Daily remarked that "the prospects for the project are uncertain, given the volatility of ROK-DPRK relations and the international community's endeavors to contain the DPRK's nuclear ambitions through UN sanctions" ("Ambitious Iron Silk Road Plan," 2013). This skepticism proved quite justified. In January-February 2014, Pyongyang temporarily softened its attitude toward Seoul, but from late February to mid-August, it test-fired a high number of short- and medium-range missiles. Of these tests, the launching of two Nodong-1 ballistic missiles (March 26th) posed the most serious challenge, for in 2006, a Nodong test had led to the DPRK's first nuclear test. On March 28th, the UNSC promptly condemned the tests, but this time it did not issue either a Presidential Statement or a Resolution. In response, on March 30th the DPRK warned that it might conduct "a new form of nuclear test," but eventually it did not do so. In mid-July, Pyongyang's new missile tests evoked another UNSC rebuke but the Council again refrained from making a formal statement.

Interestingly, China's reactions to these manifestations of North Korean belligerence were considerably more low-key and equivocal than they had been in 2012-2013. In March-April, Beijing did repeatedly call upon "all relevant parties" to refrain from provocative acts. In response to news about North

Korean preparations for a new nuclear test, the CCP leaders reaffirmed their commitment to denuclearization. Nonetheless, China rarely singled out the DPRK for criticism (a notable exception was a Chinese protest over a missile that nearly hit a Chinese airplane: Li 2014). Neither Xinhua and Renmin Ribao nor the less official China Daily and Global Times carried such critical, in-depth analyses about North Korea's conduct as they had in the previous two years. In contrast, China Daily repeatedly and explicitly castigated the U.S. for the renewed tension on the Korean Peninsula.

One likely cause of this difference was that in 2014, North Korea, by refraining from a nuclear test, managed not to cross Beijing's "red line." This factor probably played a role in that the UNSC did not impose new sanctions on the DPRK. Notably, the crisis did not become serious enough to dissuade the ROK from conducting talks with the North about the planned Trans-Korean Railway in April (Shin, Straub, and Lee 2014: 87). The Council's relative passivity may have also indicated a lack of consensus between the Great Powers. As early as February, China expressed opposition to the U.S. idea of raising North Korea's human rights violations at the International Criminal Court (Wang 2014). In mid-March, when the UNSC voted on a U.S.-proposed draft resolution about Russia's recent interference in Ukraine, Russia vetoed the resolution. Rejecting Washington's call for sanctions, China abstained ("UN fails Ukraine resolution," 2014). Under such circumstances, Moscow and Beijing were presumably less willing to take sides with Washington against Pyongyang than before. In turn, the non-imposition of UNSC sanctions for the Nodong tests enabled China to avoid an open confrontation with Pyongyang.

Sino-Russian competition may have also influenced China's attitude. From January 2014, Pyongyang took steps toward a rapprochement with Moscow. On March 24-28th, Aleksandr Galushka, Minister for the Development of the Far East, visited the DPRK to discuss issues of economic cooperation. Notably, his visit occurred at a time when North Korea had already embarked on a course of confrontation, and actually coincided with the Nodong tests. Due to the US-Russian dispute over Ukraine, Moscow showed little interest in criticizing Pyongyang's conduct (Kim and Blank 2014: 619-621). From China's perspective, it probably seemed disadvantageous to castigate the DPRK if Russia could not be expected to do likewise.

Finally, the relative deterioration of Sino-US relations reduced China's willingness to put pressure on Pyongyang. Anxious to restore harmony between his Asian allies, in March 2014 Obama arranged the very first meeting between Abe and Park Geun-hye. In April, during a visit in Japan, he assured Tokyo that the U.S.-Japanese treaty covered the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands as well.

Predictably, these steps displeased Beijing. Hu Mingyuan directly linked the problem with the North Korean question:

The United States has been urging China to press the DPRK on one hand while encouraging Japan to provoke China on the other. [...] The US is pouring fuel on the flames, so the DPRK will be angered and pushed into conducting a fourth nuclear test, which will undermine China's security and drive a wedge between China and the DPRK. Moreover, the US can fully make use of the DPRK's nuclear threat to strengthen US-Japan-ROK trilateral cooperation, and eventually form a "mini NATO" in Asia to contain China and Russia (Hu 2014).

In response to this perceived U.S. pressure, China toned down its criticism of Pyongyang's belligerence, but its engagement policy was focused on Russia and South Korea, rather than the DPRK. In May, a Putin-Xi Jinping meeting led to a breakthrough in the prolonged negotiations about Russian gas supplies to China and the joint construction of a new Russian port at Zarubino that would link Northeast China with the sea – and thus bypass Rajin ("China and Russia," 2014). During Xi's visit to the ROK (July 2014), the two sides expressed their agreement both on the North Korean nuclear problem and the threat of Japanese revisionism. This consensus posed a challenge to Pyongyang, all the more so because Xi was the first Chinese head of state who visited South Korea before the North. Under these conditions, the DPRK found it advisable to continue its talks with Tokyo (Halpin 2014), and adopt a low-key attitude toward the Sino-Japanese territorial dispute.

Conclusion

These fluctuations in China's responses to North Korea's various confrontational acts seem to support the views of John Delury, who emphasized that China's approach should be seen on its own terms, rather than from the perspective of U.S. and South Koreans priorities (Delury 2012). While the Chinese leaders did take the "American factor" and the "South Korean factor" into consideration, their actions were also shaped by their changing relations with Japan and Russia. Furthermore, their growing or decreasing readiness to cooperate with Washington vis-à-vis Pyongyang reflected not only by their assessment of North Korea's conduct but also their approval or disapproval of the policies that the U.S. pursued elsewhere (above all, Japan, Taiwan, and the South China Sea). The patterns observed above may be summarized as follows:

1. China adopted a far more critical attitude toward Pyongyang's nuclear provocations than toward other negative aspects of North Korean conduct, and U.S. attempts at a blanket condemnation of North Korean

belligerence were not appreciated. The CCP leaders explicitly condemned both nuclear tests, but they did not react as negatively to the 2009 satellite launch as they would respond to the 2012 launches. The 2014 missile tests were so low on their priority list that they did not support any formal condemnation, and they positively refused to raise Pyongyang's human rights violations. These differences potentially enabled the KWP leaders to opt for such forms of confrontation that did not carry the risk of Chinese reprisals. Still, their awareness of China's particular sensitivity to the nuclear problem did not deter them from carrying out nuclear tests if they wanted to demonstrate their defiance of the UNSC.

2. A certain decline in North Korean belligerence seems to have been a necessary but not sufficient precondition of Chinese economic re-engagement. Even in 2009-2010 and 2012, when China had a strong stake in logistical cooperation with the DPRK, the CCP leaders apparently postponed some of the planned joint projects until Pyongyang adopted a less confrontational attitude. This approach enabled the DPRK to manipulate China to some extent, for a relaxed stance was at least potentially conducive to obtaining aid from Beijing. Still, such tactics did not always work, for in 2013, China was far less receptive to North Korea's lip service to denuclearization than before.
3. In contrast with Pyongyang's fixation on inter-Korean rivalry, China showed far less readiness to confront Seoul than to criticize Washington's Korea policy. For the DPRK, Sino-US friction offered the relatively best chance to secure Chinese indulgence. China's conflicts with Japan offered less opportunity, and they could even stimulate Sino-ROK rapprochement.
4. The prospect of cooperation with the U.S., South Korea, or Russia against a third country (like Japan) could potentially reduce North Korea's significance in China's eyes. Positive or negative changes in Sino-Russian relations seem to have affected Sino-DPRK relations to a greater extent than any of the three actors cared to publicly admit. Russian-DPRK rapprochement could enhance Pyongyang's bargaining power, but it may have been a less decisive factor that the two Great Powers' ability or inability to reach agreement on the transport corridors. Once again, Pyongyang's heavy-handed tactics backfired, for the difficult operation of the Hunchun-Rajin corridor probably reinforced China's interest in looking for an alternative route.

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