



# *Freeman Chair in China Studies*

## 費和中國研究講座

---

### *China-US relations and its implications to N. Korea's nuclear Standoff* By Zhu Feng

(Paper for CSIS Seminar on August 18, 2004)

#### **Introduction**

The core relationship for resolving North Korean nuclear issues and other security matters on the Korean peninsula is the one between Washington and Pyongyang. However, the Washington-Beijing relationship is also critical and also needs to be carefully managed and improved if differences on the Korean peninsula are to be settled in a stable and peaceful way.

My presentation will first assess the current situation in the Six Party Talks, and argue for the need to reenergize these talks soon, or else face the unacceptable situation of an openly nuclear North Korea. Second, the presentation will delve the U.S.-China relationship on North Korean issues, and how the two can do a better job of working together to achieve their mutual aims on the Korea Peninsula.

#### **Current situation**

This month, August of 2004, marks the one year anniversary of the six party talks on North Korean nuclear issues. After a year of intense diplomatic efforts, some progress has been made, and a political and peaceful settlement of the nuclear standoff is inching forwards slowly, though not surely.

In the third round of talks at the end of June this year, Washington adjusted its longstanding policy toward North Korea, offering greater incentives for the North to accept verifiable disarmament. Meanwhile, North Korea also tabled its “freeze for compensation” proposal.

To energize the diplomatic process, Washington and other parties have attempted a more persuasive diplomacy, urging Pyongyang country to follow the “Libya Model” for renouncing and dismantling its sensitive weapons programs, in return for certain incentives.

In recent remarks, Secretary of State Colin Powell stated that the United States and other parties to the Six Party Talks would be prepared to help underwrite the considerable costs associated with ending these programs in North Korea. The South Korean also reiterated recently that Pyongyang would be able to obtain plenty of aid from the South after nuclear dismantlement is accomplished. Such activities may help mollify the isolation and pressures surrounding North Korea, but it is not clear they can fully alleviate Kim Jong Il's security concerns and suspicions.

Unfortunately, so far, there is no encouraging sign so far that North Korea is prepared to accept the American proposal, and the latest Six Party working group meeting last week in New York resulted in nothing new. The failure of those talks suggests Pyongyang is not prepared to disarm within a multilateral framework.

Looking ahead, no analysts believe there will be any significant progress, owing in part to the U.S. election season. With diplomatic progress stalled, North Korea reportedly continues to build its nuclear programs, adding further tension to the multilateral process. The possibility that North Korea would “break out” as a declared nuclear power – such as India and Pakistan – looms larger and larger. This is an unacceptable scenario not only for Northeast Asian security, for the global security and nonproliferation situation as well.

### **Reexamining the Six Party Talks**

Given the situation, we should ask ourselves a serious question: Why have the Six Party Talks so failed to make better progress? A part of the answer lies in Pyongyang’s stubbornness and desperation.

But we must honestly recognize there are problems elsewhere. Several key points deserve our attention. First, momentum in the Six Party Talks is slow to build, and usually is flagging. Washington has lurched between accommodation and intimidation, often contradicting the policies and pronouncements of other parties.

Second, coordination-building is poor and stagnant. Though other parties accept a “give and take” approach, some in Washington seem intent on denying Pyongyang the chance to conclude a multilateral agreement. When American moderates ask for increased coordination with other parties to “induce” Pyongyang, hardliners in Washington argue that Pyongyang cannot be trusted and will dishonor its promises at every opportunity. Under rising pressure from allies and Beijing, Washington seems prepared to offer some incentives, but still momentum is lacking. If we do not overcome these challenges of poor momentum and poor coordination, it seems certain we will face a nuclear North Korea in the future.

### **The U.S.-China role**

The U.S.-China relationship on these issues is critical to assuring both momentum and coordination. In particular, these two countries must harmonize their priorities in the settlement of this question.

Despite some competing preferences and priorities, Washington and Beijing are not in opposition to one another. Both countries share the objective of nuclear-free Korean Peninsula and seek a nuclear dismantlement process that heralds a stable and prosperous region. They principally differ over the “best approach” to reach these goals.

The U.S. argues it will not “reward” the bad behavior of North Korea, while China contends that acknowledging its security concerns and economic demands is reasonable and necessary. Washington appears to argue that the diplomatic conclusion of this issue should not necessarily allow for the survival of Pyongyang’s government, while Beijing advocates that all parties should treat the country as it is, rather than as it should be. Washington argues for rapid movement between a “nuclear freeze” and the beginning of disarmament – just three months – while Beijing seeks a lengthier step-by-step resolution.

American observers usually regard China as the key to a diplomatic settlement of the nuclear disputes with the North. Actually China *and* the United States, working in coordination, hold the key to a diplomatic solution. The reason is simple: Washington does not want to work directly with Pyongyang, but it also cannot count on Beijing to resolve these issues alone.

What puzzles China most is that Washington has strongly encouraged Beijing to act as a mediator, but then has not truly allowed China to play that role as much as it can. Beijing has found it extremely difficult to move Washington forward and to keep the core players in this dispute —Washington and Pyongyang— moving toward reciprocity and compromise. Beijing finds it particularly difficult to induce Pyongyang to accept the American compromise when there is little incentive for Pyongyang to turn away from its nuclear ambitions.

In fact, Beijing will not accept a nuclear North Korea, but Beijing must step carefully to assure its interests are met. Importantly, Washington cannot expect too much from China if Washington sees Chinese pressure merely as a “test case” for Beijing’s sincerity or even loyalty to the United States.

### **Recommendations to the United States and China for moving forward**

Unless the U.S. side is willing to go to bilateral negotiations with Pyongyang – something the Bush Administration has refused to support – there is no alternative to the Six Party Talks. For Beijing, the collapse of the talks would be a heavy blow to its security and diplomatic interests. Presumably, the same is true for the United States. Hence the two sides have a very strong shared interest in seeing the Six Party Talks succeed.

In this sense, the success of the Six Party Talks requires *both* “irrefutable inducements” and “indispensable pressures”, and both need to be carefully coordinated.

To go down such the path, Washington should be prepared to move beyond rhetoric in proposing the “Libya model”, and give more room to American negotiators to us employ a “give and take” approach to accommodate North Korea’s security concerns and economic needs, while weaning the North from its illusion that a nuclear capability is the only key to survival. Unquestionably, America’s June proposal is a good start. But more coordination between Washington and Beijing is needed to clearly lay out Washington’s expectations for China. China could play a “middleman” role, as the United Kingdom played in the case of Libya, but what kind of real mandate is Washington prepared to offer Beijing for taking on this role? The two sides need to discuss such questions seriously amongst senior leaders with decisionmaking responsibility.

Unfortunately, the Taiwan issue has become a serious distraction for Beijing. Beijing’s concern over Taiwan has become the top security priority in China, though it does not eclipse the North Korea issue.

However, China’s unhappiness about America’s approach in the wake of Chen Shuibian’s election clouds Beijing’s endeavors related to the nuclear standoff. This does *not – repeat, does not –* mean that China explicitly seeks to link the two issues. Conversely, I do not believe Beijing would seek to trade off its support for resolving the North Korea issue in order to be more provocative toward Taiwan. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that closer

U.S.-China cooperation on North Korea can be undermined should disputes over the Taiwan issue good badly.

In conclusion, differences and divergence between Beijing and Washington exist over North Korea. But they are not too big to overcome. The two countries must recognize a new imperative to build momentum and closer coordination in the diplomatic process. If not, and their policy preferences seriously diverge, it is a price too high to pay.

As we have seen in the past rounds of Beijing talks, the more Washington and Beijing get into negotiations with North Korea, the more the more strict adherence to their own priorities exposes their deep differences. When the six party talks comes to the crucial moment, Washington and Beijing should make clear to what extent their policy pursuits of dismantling N. Korea nuclear programs could complement and march each other; at the meantime, both sides should constructively and affirmatively exploit what scope of their policy compatibility could be achieved to push N. Korea harder down the road of its verifiable compliance with international nonproliferation regime.

As a first step, the U.S. side should send a strong message to Beijing that it is prepared to follow up on its bargain with a willingness to approach North Korea as it is, and not as Washington would wish it to be. With that assurance, Beijing would be more empowered to serve as an effective mediator. At the meantime, a clear message also needs to be sent from Beijing that China could stand for forcing N. Korea to give up in the coordination with the U.S. and other parties through all means at hand if all diplomatic attempts would be exhausted.