

*In Response:*  
***North Korean Denuclearization: A Poor Outlet to  
Avoid Thucydides' Trap***

Nicole Golliher

*Nicole Golliher is getting her masters in international affairs with a concentration in Asia at The George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs. Her research focuses on East Asian Security and the impacts of historical memory on the region. In 2014, she graduated from Seattle University with bachelor's degrees in international studies and political science. Currently, she works as the program coordinator at the United Nations Association, National Capital Area and is a senior editor for the International Affairs Review.*

As China continues to develop and gain in power, an essential issue facing the international system is how the United States and China will manage their relationship. Avoiding a conflict spiral benefits both parties, and that common interest provides the foundation for the United States and China to cooperate. History shows that cooperation between the rising and relatively declining power is possible, as was the case with the United States and the United Kingdom in the twentieth century. Attempting to build cooperation and to avoid future confrontation through an issue as complicated and failure-prone as North Korean denuclearization is not a wise course of action. Instead, the United States and China should focus on cooperating on issues they have reached agreements on before and jointly work to clarify mutual expectations.

The United States and China share a common interest in denuclearizing North Korea, but this goal is likely impossible, especially in the near future. China took the lead in the Six-Party Talks, but “domestic policy constraints, differing priorities, and conflicting historical analogies among each of the [six-party talk] countries” have “severely restricted” the policy space necessary for China to “broker a solution to the North Korean nuclear crisis.”<sup>1</sup> Fundamentally, too many barriers and complications exist

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to North Korean denuclearization to render it a sound outlet for improvement of Sino-American relations.

First, North Korea's isolation from the international community leaves the United States little leverage over Pyongyang. China, though having historically been one of North Korea's few friends, also has less influence over North Korea than is typically assumed. These issues are compounded by differing policy priorities in Washington and Beijing. While the United States focuses on denuclearization and ballistic missiles, China places more emphasis on ensuring North Korea's stability to avoid the refugee influx that would result from regime collapse.<sup>2</sup>

Second, North Korean denuclearization is far less attainable now that Pyongyang has the capacity to build nuclear weapons. Despite the poor chances for such a program's success, China continues to advocate for the Ukrainian model in denuclearizing North Korea. China's offer of "a multilateral security guarantee and associated economic rewards" prior to North Korea's relinquishing its weapons could result in Pyongyang taking the carrot and giving up nothing in return.<sup>3</sup> North Korea has failed to show credible commitment before, and there is little reason to believe they will show more commitment in the future.

Similarly, the United States has also failed to show credible commitment to deals reached in the Six-Party Talks. Mutual distrust renders unlikely the prospect that North Korea will be convinced by any incentives the United States promises. This is illustrated by North Korean reticence in believing President Obama's attempt to adopt a more positive relationship between the two countries after his 2008 election.<sup>4</sup> Even if North Korea were to accept a renewal of talks spearheaded by the United States and China, Evans J. R. Revere, a retired American diplomat and Asia expert, asserts that Pyongyang will not be "eager to bargain away the nuclear missile assets that it has taken such risk in developing in defiance of the international community."<sup>5</sup>

Finally, though China and the United States share a common interest in the denuclearization of North Korea, the involvement of Russia, Japan,

and South Korea complicates the issue.<sup>6</sup> Conflicting priorities between the United States and China are further complicated by Japan's focus on the abductees issue and Russia's self-interested goals, both of which obstructed previous Six-Party Talks from reaching successful agreements.<sup>7</sup> Making future Sino-American relations contingent on Japanese and Russian cooperation would likely lead to further problems in this bilateral relationship.

While North Korean denuclearization presents too many barriers, other issues may foster establishment of a platform of bilateral trust. Political scientist Gregory J. Moore argues that even though “hawks in Beijing” continue to protest against American troops in East Asia, Sino-American relations have improved since 2011.<sup>8</sup> Moore cites common interests in counter-terrorism and economic interdependence brought the two countries closer.

In fact, several areas of common interest provide fertile ground for future cooperation, but a number of factors will complicate the Sino-American relationship in the future. Mixed signals coming from both China and the United States significantly hinder the bilateral relationship. These include the discrepancies between President Obama's positive deals with China at the November 2014 APEC Summit and his negative comments about China during his 2015 State of the Union

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address. Such inconsistency makes it difficult for China to trust the United States, but arguing that this is evidence of U.S. failure to adjust to China's rise is not sufficient to explain the current state of the relationship. In Washington, it is politically untenable to praise China as a partner in global affairs. The same climate holds in China, where domestic nationalism makes it essential for the Chinese Communist Party to maintain its image of strength and commitment to global leadership. If left

unchecked, however, nationalist rhetoric – even if it is only intended for domestic consumption – will continue to exacerbate uncertainty and preclude cooperation.<sup>9</sup>

Policymakers can take a number of measures to prevent conflicting messages from hindering cooperation. For example, the United States and China should seek to build on the successes from their 2014 agreement to jointly reduce carbon emissions.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the 2014 APEC Summit illuminated further areas in which the United States and China share common interests: a stable global economy, open sea lanes for global trade, a peaceful Asian-Pacific region, and a plan of action against environmental threats.<sup>11</sup> These issues offer feasible gains and concrete opportunities for China and the United States to build cooperation.

China and the United States would also benefit from discussing the nature of their relationship. During such talks, China and the United States could construct a written statement clarifying their relationship and their commitment to avoiding confrontation. This document, like the agreement reached in 1972 that re-established Sino-American relations, would help dispel some of the uncertainties plaguing the current relationship. That 1972 communiqué opened relations between China and the United States at a time when cooperation between the two seemed impossible. By once again creating a document that clarifies expectations for their future relationship and areas of potential cooperation, the United States and China can construct a solid foundation to overcome the seeming impossibility of avoiding confrontation.

Constructing such a document would be no easy task. Certainly, some issues may be impossible to resolve right now, such as Taiwan and the East China Sea disputes. Rather than viewing these issues as barriers to trust-building, the document would provide a platform to clarify U.S. involvement in the region and Washington's positions on intra-regional disputes. U.S. involvement in these conflicts has actually provided a stabilizing influence.<sup>12</sup> So far, the United States has ensured that neither China, Taiwan, nor Japan have acted unilaterally or incited conflict.<sup>13</sup> China benefits from the U.S. role in these disputes, especially in the Sino-

Japanese dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Though nationalists in China call for the Party to maintain China's territorial integrity and not yield on the island issue, a conflict with Japan would hurt both parties due to their extensive economic ties.

Increased American presence in the region, as promised by the Obama administration's "rebalancing," will inevitably cause further uncertainty in China. Despite this, a future free of conflict in U.S.-Chinese relations is possible if the relationship is based on common interests and feasible achievements. Cooperation on North Korea denuclearization is welcome, but as it stands now, North Korea is not a feasible opportunity. Instead, jointly expanding on common areas of interest will provide a more feasible platform to continue and perhaps expand Sino-American cooperation in the future.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> John S. Park, "Inside Multilateralism: The Six-Party Talks," *The Washington Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (Autumn 2005): 75.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>4</sup> Evans J. R. Revere, "The North Korea Nuclear Problem: Sailing into Uncharted Waters," *American Foreign Policy Interests* 32, no. 3 (2010): 8.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>6</sup> Park, 78.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 86-87.

<sup>8</sup> Gregory J. Moore, "History, Nationalism and Face in Sino-Japanese Relations," *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 15, no. 3 (September 2010): 287.

<sup>9</sup> Erica Strecker Downs and Phillip C. Saunders, "Legitimacy and the Limits of Nationalism: China and the Diaoyu Islands," *International Security* 23, no. 3 (Winter 1989-1999): 116.

<sup>10</sup> Mark Landler, "US and China Reach Climate Accord After Months of Talks" *New York Times*, November 11, 2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/12/world/asia/china-us-xi-obama-apec.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/12/world/asia/china-us-xi-obama-apec.html?_r=0)

<sup>11</sup> Jack A. Goldstone, "US-China Relations After APEC," *Diplomat*, November 18, 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/11/us-china-relations-after-apec/>

<sup>12</sup> M. Taylor Fravel, "Explaining Stability in the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands Dispute," in *Getting the Triangle Straight: Managing China-Japan-US Relations*, (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution Press, 2010): 156.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.