

# The Impact of the North Korean Nuclear Issue on Northeast Asian Countries and China's Responsibility

## -- Centering on China, the United States and North Korea

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**Abstract.** The essence of the North Korea nuclear dilemma is the continuation of the Cold War confrontation in the last century, and the "zero-sum game" thinking restricts the dialogue and consultation between the United States and North Korea, the key parties of the North Korean nuclear issue. With the solidification of the North Korean nuclear dilemma, both the United States and North Korea bear huge economic costs but maintain the trend of "Mutually Assured Destruction"; at the same time, The conflict of interests between the United States and North Korea poses a severe threat and challenge to the security environment in the border area of northeast China. In the role of mediator, China should appeal both sides to jointly make concessions; persist in realizing nuclear security through peaceful means such as dialogue and negotiation; safeguard China's state interests resolutely; and balance US-North Korea relations. Rational handling of China-North Korea relations and China-US relations is an issue that China should cope.

**Keywords:** Security Dilemma; The Impact of the North Korean Nuclear Issue; China's Position and Action.

### 1. Introduction

The diplomacy of the United States and North Korea has experienced ups and downs in the past decades. Due to the lack of mutual trust and long-term hostility, even if the two sides have been able to open up the situation and have had brief contacts with each other, they have failed to make a breakthrough on substantive issues. On the contrary, the willingness for dialogue has been seriously eroded in a series of differences. In the absence of a clear interpretation mechanism and a strong implementation mechanism in the global governance system and the urgent need for reform of the nuclear non-proliferation mechanism, the continuation of the stalemate on the North Korean nuclear issue endangers the interests of many parties.

In the fierce dispute, there is no winner. North Korea has conducted nuclear missile tests many times since the establishment of Kim Jong-un's government, and in recent years it has regarded itself as a nuclear state, while the United States has worked with many countries to impose additional sanctions on North Korea step by step, aiming to make North Korea abandon its nuclear weapons and block North Korea's space for survival and development. At the expense of several opportunities for the sound development of its economy and people's livelihood, North Korea is determined to break through the international encirclement and blockade, and its nuclear missile capability has achieved a series of milestones year by year, which has threatened the local security of the United States.

On the other hand, the United States chose to strengthen the alliance between the United States and South Korea and face off with North Korea on the peninsula. The nuclear balance and the arms race make the security interests of both sides based on harming the security interests of the other side, and the party that launches the nuclear strike first cannot guarantee the superiority of its own country, but leads to the retaliatory strike of the other side and perishes together with the other party, that is, the situation of "Mutually Assured Destruction".

Why the conflict between the United States and North Korea in Northeast Asia is a kind of strategic consumption instead of gaining benefits? What kind of threat does the conflict pose to China's border security? At the same time, how should China get rid of the shackle of the "China responsibility theory" advocated by the United States? What position and attitude should China take to promote the

US-DPRK negotiations on the North Korea nuclear issue? How should the United States and North Korea communicate effectively? What constructive role should China play in achieving nuclear security, balancing US-North Korea relations, reasonably handling China-North Korea relations in the new era, and promoting China-US cooperation on the North Korean nuclear issue? These are all issues worthy of discussion.

## **2. The Impact of North Korea Nuclear Dilemma: It has Seriously Damaged the Strategic Interests of the Three Parties in Northeast Asia**

The continuation of the nuclear dilemma in North Korea has more losses than benefits for both the United States and North Korea. The United States and North Korea are hostile to each other. And both of them are updating their military technology on the grounds of security, improving the construction of the nuclear weapons system which makes the cost of responding to the crisis more expensive and the situation in Northeast Asia more complicated. Each deployment of a new generation of advanced weapons systems makes it more difficult to estimate the strategic balance and the outcome of nuclear war.

Today, military threats from the United States to North Korea is self-evident; while nuclear arsenal of North Korea is relatively complete, and its domestic nuclear activities are hidden. Meanwhile, the research of missile technology is also in the period of full speed sprint. North Korea will not stop the pace of developing nuclear weapons or take the initiative to suspend the progress of nuclear weapons development, so its threat to the security of the United States is also increasing day by day. The strength and willingness of ambitious countries to challenge the dominant position of the unipolar country by force will lead to large-scale conflicts. North Korea's strategy of rejecting abandoning nuclear weapons challenges the absolute authority established by the United States in the international community, and makes other regimes perceive that it is possible to compete with the United States as long as they withstand tremendous international pressure and skillfully use their strategic thinking; in the meantime, it also brings unprecedented challenges to the nuclear non-proliferation system in Northeast Asia.

Due to the imperfect governance system in Northeast Asia, the international order in Northeast Asia is still in a state of chaos and disorder. Therefore, the United States and North Korea try their best to maximize their national interests and international power in the light of realistic thinking instead of paying more attention to morality, norms and order.

### **2.1 Adverse Impact on the United States**

The North Korea nuclear dilemma has a negative impact on the national defense and security of the United States, military funds, and the dominance of Northeast Asia. The US government has repeatedly claimed that the development of the North Korean nuclear program threatens the security of the United States, but the threat posed by the existence of other nuclear powers, such as India, to the United States should not be underestimated. The words and deeds of the United States have demonstrated its ambition to interfere in the affairs of the peninsula. Its logic and the purpose is to curb the development of North Korea's nuclear weapons and reduce competitors in the nuclear field. The United States regards North Korea as China's "backyard" and interferes with the stability of China's surrounding environment. At that time, China must come forward to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue, bear most of the responsibility, and thus be trapped in the blockade of the first island chain laid by the United States. In fact, the United States failed to realize it. Even if US allies such as Japan and South Korea have been forced to bear more military spending in recent years, US annual military spending remains high because, after all, building forward position overseas is essentially a huge expense.

The United States has consumed huge war resources in the 20-year war in Afghanistan, and the military expenditure is as high as 2 trillion dollars, which has seriously affected the global military strategic development layout of the United States. The US Air Force plans to use 2022 military

construction funds to strengthen its facilities in Europe and the Indian-Pacific Ocean region, and is preparing to introduce a new generation of nuclear weapons. If the United States frequently threatens North Korea with force and takes a tough attitude in dealing with the North Korean nuclear issue, it will distract the United States and have to fight on multiple fronts, taking care of one at the expense of the other.

Today's world has long been rid of the relatively stable bipolar pattern of the last century. Both the United States and North Korea pursue the tactics of "Coward game" and do not give in to each other, which may eventually increase the risk of political miscarriage of justice between the two sides, resulting in a situation of loss to both sides. A final problem with multipolarity lies in its tendency to foster miscalculation. Multipolarity leads states to underestimate the resolve of rival states and the strength of opposing coalitions. States then mistakenly conclude that they have the military capability to coerce an opponent, or if that fails, to defeat it in battle.[1] If the United States frequently uses force to deal with the North Korean nuclear issue in a tough manner in the future, the situation on the entire peninsula will certainly become even more tense, resulting in the awkward situation of distracting the United States in formulating foreign policy and paying attention to one thing at the expense of the other. Moreover, if North Korea's nuclear weapons pose a fatal nuclear threat to countries such as Japan and South Korea, it could break America's commitment to its allies as an "extended nuclear deterrent". Once North Korea steps into the club of nuclear states, Japan and South Korea are bound to have great suspicion and mistrust of the "nuclear umbrella" of the US military, which is likely to repeat the illegal research and development of nuclear weapons by these regimes. The military alliance between the United States and South Korea will also be loosened. After all, after North Korea's first nuclear test, some politicians in South Korea began to question the effectiveness of the US-South Korean alliance and explore the possibility of South Korea developing nuclear weapons. [2] Today, nuclear materials and nuclear technology are no longer monopoly resources or secret resources among several nuclear states, and there are huge cracks in the nuclear non-proliferation mechanism. It has been proved that both Japan and South Korea conducted secret nuclear tests, but they had to give up mainly because of pressure from the United States. Once Japan and South Korea succeed in their nuclear tests, they will no longer seek the asylum of the United States, and their dependence on the United States will also be reduced, which will lead to a tremendous impact on the alliance of the United States, Japan and South Korea, which evolved from the "South Triangle."

The United States intervenes in the North Korean nuclear issue in order to contest for the hegemonic position in Northeast Asia, but it is stuck in a quagmire: the United States will be overwhelmed by the economic burden of going to war with North Korea, while the high military spending in the standoff between the United States and North Korea consumes the possibility of a steady increase in the American economy. In this way, the control of the United States in Northeast Asia is getting weaker and weaker, and the loss outweighs the gain.

## **2.2 Adverse Effects on North Korea**

It is also impossible for North Korea to be completely immune to the security dilemma, after all, the lack of economy and resources is related to international survival.

North Korea is only a small country with a balance of power with the United States in terms of nuclear weapons (it is also difficult to catch up with the United States in the level of development of nuclear weapons), and the United States has the strongest army in the world today. Under such circumstances, it is quite difficult for North Korea to be hostile to the United States, and the confrontation between North Korea and the US-South Korea alliance constantly triggers the crisis awareness of the United States and South Korea and further strengthens the military presence of the US-South Korea alliance. As a matter of fact, blindly upgrading the armaments does not guarantee that the governance of the country can rest easy for a long time. Even if the Soviet Union had more than 10,000 nuclear weapons in the 1980s, it failed to stop the tragedy of the collapse of the Soviet Union. If North Korea follows step by step according to the hostile actions of the United States and

South Korea, on the premise that the DPRK faces fewer choices and a higher cost of trial and error, the boundless, uncontrolled and meaningless military expenditure is not in line with North Korea's established strategic line of shifting the focus of development to economic construction, and it will be more difficult for North Korea to get rid of poverty and backwardness, which is tantamount to the failure of national governance.

Since the 1960s, North Korea has maintained high investment in military industry and military spending, in order to develop nuclear weapons and conquer missile technology. And the price is that it has to sacrifice its huge national wealth and miss the opportunity to improve the quality of life of its people for decades.

The development of agriculture and light industry is relatively backward, even the production space of civilian means of production has been greatly compressed, and the economic structure is seriously out of balance. Although North Korea has also shown its willingness to reverse the situation to the outside world and Kim Jong-un has also stated that the key front of the "frontal breakthrough" [3] is the economic front North Korea is subject to long-term international blockades and extremely imperfect infrastructure construction, so its long-term economic accumulation is not easy to solve and it is difficult to recover in the short term. However, the normalization of diplomatic relations between the United States and North Korea is a key link in promoting North Korea's early integration into the international community, and it is only after the United States has lifted sanctions that the DPRK may consider putting reform and opening up on the agenda and reconsidering cooperation with Japan, South Korea, and other countries in economic, trade, cultural and other fields. However, North Korea is still actively developing its nuclear program, with an astonishing number of modern troops gathering on 220 thousand square kilometers of land.

This not only excessively depletes strategic resources and sets obstacles to the resumption of economic development, but also plays a negative role in establishing mutual trust between the North and the South and realizing reform, opening up, and peaceful reunification at an early date.

### **2.3 Adverse Effects on China**

The North Korea nuclear dilemma has brought multiple challenges to China's security environment. Any nuclear-armed country can use nuclear weapons against other countries and regions, so China's territory is also within the range of North Korea's nuclear weapons and missiles. The revolutionary friendship between China and North Korea at the period of the establishing of two states has long changed, and now the interaction between China and North Korea is more focused on the actual national interests. North Korea's determination to possess nuclear weapons has preserved North Korea's political interests, but it has damaged the stability of the security environment around China, making China further surrounded by its nuclear arsenal.

Even if China-North Korea relations do not deteriorate in the short term, North Korea cannot completely eliminate or rule out the possibility of nuclear leakage. And the shock caused by the nuclear test has also caused a lot of panic to people living in the border area of northeast China, adding potential factors of social instability. The conditions of North Korea's nuclear facilities are relatively backward. Once the North Korean nuclear accident occurs, Northeast China will face multiple security problems such as air control, groundwater pollution and the outbreak of refugee flows.

In addition, the North Korea regard China as a shield, and a number of test sites are located near the border with China, which makes the United States cautious in its consideration of the "targeted clearance" of North Korea's nuclear facilities. Once the United States acts rashly, the border area of both China and North Korea will be destructively damaged. If the North Korean regime suddenly disintegrates and the US troops stationed in South Korea will not withdraw from the Korean Peninsula, but will carry out a new round of occupation. So China will need to redeploy its defense lines along the entire Yalu River to deal with the US-South Korean military exercises, and the border security of the northeast region will face an even greater threat. For the United States, only a large number of unstable factors in China's surrounding environment can slow down China's growth into the most influential country in the world. As there is a vast Pacific Ocean between the United States and

Northeast Asia, whether it is ships and aircraft transporting US troops stationed in South Korea, or spending a lot of money on the use of weapons of mass destruction, conducting large-scale joint military exercises is not as economical as China take the initiative to sanction North Korea and resolve the North Korean nuclear issue. Under its manipulation, the United States wants to divert China's attention to the surrounding South China Sea issue, the Taiwan issue, and the North Korean nuclear issue in Northeast Asia, in a vain attempt to block the road to the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation with its usual competitive thinking since the founding of the United States.

### **3. China's Actions: Actively Assume the Role of Coordinator on the Principle of Peace and Responsibility**

The interests of China, the United States and the DPRK on the Korean Peninsula have something in common: all three sides want peace on the peninsula and do not want the smoke of gunpowder on the peninsula to reappear; China and the United States do not want the DPRK to develop nuclear weapons, and the DPRK has also adjusted its strategic line of "attaching equal importance to nuclear and economic development." hope to. Strengthen trust and cooperation, North Korea "freeze nuclear" and "stop nuclear", promise phased denuclearization; the United States gradually reduce sanctions, suspend US-ROK military exercises, and stop peddling sophisticated weapons to South Korea, gradually reducing restrictions on the DPRK will give hope to the denuclearization of the peninsula; China will take the initiative to assume the responsibility of mediators and steadily promote peace on the peninsula on the basis of safeguarding national security interests. All parties make concerted efforts to reduce suspicions and differences on issues related to their major interests and rebuild a new international pattern in Northeast Asia.

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#### **3.1 Adhere to the Principle of Peace**

It is the bottom line thinking of China's participation in peninsula affairs to adopt peaceful handling methods such as dialogue, consultation, negotiation, and so on. Under the influence of Confucianism for thousands of years, China attaches importance to morality and friendship in dealing with its relations with neighboring countries, emphasizing the concepts of common development, common security, and a community with a shared future for the region. On the other hand, the United States mainly relies on making as many allies as possible and carrying out military cooperation with various parties, and also pursues hegemonism as a means of coercing other countries.

At present, although the United States and the DPRK are hostile to each other due to the great disparity in national strength, neither of the two countries can guarantee that the nuclear arsenals of "enemy countries" can be destroyed, so they still maintain a nuclear balance of power, thus creating more possibilities for peace on the peninsula.

"The pacifist abhors the international competition in armaments (or arms race") which in his view, even if it does not lead inevitably to war, piles up an "overkill" capability, produces an international climate of neurotic fear, wastes vast amounts of economic and scientific-technological resources

which could otherwise be channeled into development assistance for the poorer nations.”[4] All parties should cherish this hard-won peace, jointly consult an effective crisis management mechanism, try their best to avoid the vicious circle of unnecessary conflicts and endless arms race, establish a consciousness of "Security Community," and obtain the "Greatest Common Divisor" for ensuring the security of all parties on the peninsula. On this basis, we will join hands to create a new atmosphere of mutual benefit and common prosperity.

In addition, China must take right and wrong as the yardstick and take China's national interests as the starting point and foothold to actively participate in peninsula affairs. It is necessary to adhere to the nuclear security concept of "equal emphasis on development and security, rights and obligations, autonomy and cooperation, palliative and permanent treatment". China has been actively playing a regulatory role for peace and stability on the peninsula, organizing six-party talks, actively calling for "double suspension", and repeatedly playing a responsible regulatory role in times of tension on the peninsula. However, countries should also be aware of the fact that China is not a party with decisive influence on this issue and has no obligation to be responsible for the settlement of the issue. China should also properly express its legitimate demands when dealing with North Korean nuclear affairs.

### **3.2 Balance DPRK-US Relations and Reasonably Handle Relations with North Korea and the United States**

As a country that has established diplomatic relations with the US and the DPRK, China should try to play a role in balancing US-DPRK relations and promoting sound coordination of policies of all parties. At present, it is difficult for the two countries to establish mutual trust, but there is also a meeting point of interests between them. And North Korea is not a country that challenges the dominant position of the United States, so the two sides have the possibility of peaceful coexistence. During the Trump administration, he considered the plan of a "small deal" and hoped that the most basic step for North Korea at present is to stop nuclear tests and suspend nuclear activities. Although North Korea has a strong willingness to possess nuclear weapons, its economic development has been hampered by severe sanctions from the US, and actually, it stopped developing nuclear weapons in 2018. The possibility of reaching an agreement between the two sides cannot be ruled out. In other words, although the six-party talks mechanism is almost difficult to re-operate, there is still great hope for a "double suspension" agreement.

“The concept of sovereignty is an ever-changing description of the essential authorities of states, intended to serve rather than control them in a world that states dominate. Hence, virtually anything that states choose to do to enhance their capacity to deal with the complicated problems of a changing world is seen by those engaged in the practice of statecraft as perfectly normal an exercise rather than a diminution of sovereignty.”[5] The United States should maintain the current good situation, avoid large-scale military exercises causing unease or panic to the DPRK, basic respect for the DPRK regime and sovereignty is a prerequisite for effective contact with it, recognize the legitimacy of the DPRK regime in an appropriate way, and abandon the hostile policy of waiting for the "collapse of the DPRK" by high-handed means. From the practitioners' perspective, therefore, proposals to "deconstruct" or abandon sovereignty are mis-directed and impractical, since constructive change will far more likely be facilitated through the continued transformation of sovereignty than through its abandonment.[6] By respecting the sovereignty of the DPRK, the United States can gradually clarify the reality that the DPRK is unwilling to abandon its nuclear weapons, understand its more serious concerns about security, and take the lead in making compromises in the manner of a great power, so that sincerity and action can be effectively combined with sanctions and incentives. At present, international sanctions against North Korea have become the norm, but most countries lack incentive and tolerance to North Korea. The United States should give first and take later, and pay more costs in exchange for greater benefits. North Korea should also avoid political miscalculation and think twice for its own economic recovery and development. After all, economic power is the base of the development of military power, and powerful economic power can be transformed into corresponding military power.

China should convey to the United States that it should give before taking in exchange for greater benefits; it should also ask the DPRK to avoid political miscalculation and make more considerations for economic recovery and development. After all, economic power is the base of the development of military power, and powerful economic power can be transformed into corresponding military power. From a humanitarian point of view, China should support the DPRK in the areas of economic construction and improvement of people's livelihood. In the current international jungle, economic stagnation is tantamount to retrogression. North Korea now wants America to ease some sanctions to give it breathing space rather than security competition.

China should help the DPRK establish a new awareness of security, gradually coordinate with the international community to limit and reduce the upgrading of its nuclear capabilities, encourage and guide the DPRK to focus on economic construction, and carry out various economic and cultural exchanges and cooperation with the DPRK. Help North Korea integrate into the international community as soon as possible in the areas of food aid, energy transmission and technical support. And appeal to the United States and the UN Security Council to adjust sanctions against the DPRK, relax import and export restrictions, improve the DPRK's economic and trade structure, ensure the normal operation of the country, and ensure the basic livelihood of the people. let the DPRK realize the prosperous economic prospects that denuclearization can bring, and jointly make constructive efforts for the normalization of the situation on the peninsula.

China should also show the DPRK a baseline on the issue of denuclearization, that is, to resolutely oppose the DPRK's nuclear policy and its provocative actions that undermine peace and stability on the peninsula. China should not bear the burden and not be affected by the DPRK, reasonably implement some UN sanctions resolutions and carry out fixed-point sanctions, and must not blindly carry out "across-the-board" sanctions, which will worsen Sino-DPRK relations. Sanctions against the DPRK must be clearly oriented. It is quite urgent to impose sanctions on institutions or individuals related to North Korea's nuclear weapons and missile development. A targeted embargo on materials related to nuclear development will create a shortage of certain materials in North Korea, which can force it to slow down its research and development progress. The success of the sanctions model is inseparable from the persistence of long-term stability, the appropriate scope of sanctions and the implementation of each link one by one.

### **3.3 Strengthen Exchanges and Cooperation between China and the United States**

The stalemate on the North Korean nuclear issue is detrimental to the national security and strategic interests of China and the United States, and they should work together to build and improve a long-term, normative and binding nuclear non-proliferation system to safeguard the world nuclear non-proliferation regime. If some non-State actors, especially terrorist forces, also acquire and use nuclear weapons or other radioactive weapons, then nuclear weapons are likely to be used in actual combat to lead to unimaginable tragedies.

China and the United States also share common interests on the peninsula. The economies of various countries could have interdependent and exchange needed goods, and peaceful coexistence is conducive to economic prosperity. Economic prosperity should make China and the United States pursue peace and stability even more. But unfortunately, the US policy toward China puts too much emphasis on competition and is more inclined to deepen the alliance between the United States and South Korea, which is intended to make China fall into the quagmire of the nuclear quagmire of Northeast Asia and North Korea, and the hegemony of the United States will be further extended in the Eastern Hemisphere.

China needs to explain to the United States that threatening North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons by force will not prompt North Korea to make concessions, but will accelerate its pace of enriching its nuclear arsenal. "Systemic outcomes can alter systemic structure by weakening existing great powers and/or generating new ones. This dynamic is clearly apparent in the event of major power wars, which can exhaust some great powers and empower others at their expense." [7] If the United States really uses force against the west coast of the Pacific Ocean, the huge consumption of

war resources will narrow the gap between the United States and other countries. The US government has always adopted a fierce competitive strategy and is keen to suppress competitors, and it will be the result that it is extremely reluctant to see. No one can predict whether the war between the United States and North Korea will escalate to the level of nuclear war. After all, they have emphasized a preemptive nuclear strike, and the dispute between the two sides has focused on nuclear weapons. Cold peace will make the United States fall into the quagmire of the "new cold war" again, while the existence of North Korea's nuclear weapons and the increasing improvement of the nuclear weapons system make the United States have to think twice before choosing to go to war. Under the current situation, it is requisite for the United States to seek a new path in order to make a breakthrough in the North Korea nuclear dilemma.

#### 4. Conclusion

The standoff over the North Korean nuclear issue has damaged the national interests of China, the United States and North Korea in Northeast Asia. The United States and the DPRK all bear the burden of "balance of power" and consume strategic resources to each other. The United States intervenes in peninsula affairs in order to consolidate its hegemonic position in Northeast Asia, but it cannot stop North Korea's nuclear missile test or force North Korea to stop the arms race. on the contrary, it has caused a series of problems, such as the expansion of the threat of national defense security, the defect of defense expenditure structure, the decline of influence in Northeast Asia and so on. It is not easy for North Korea to compete with the United States. although the fierce confrontation in the post-Cold War era did not destroy North Korea's military power, North Korea is missing a number of economic development opportunities, and the development of economy and people's livelihood will always make concessions for political choices. indirectly delayed the process of peninsula reunification.

As an indispensable mediator in North Korea nuclear dilemma, in addition to adhering to the bottom line of peaceful settlement of disputes, China should be soberly aware that the six-party negotiations exist in name only because of the withdrawal of the DPRK. Therefore, the DPRK cannot be forced to return to the talks with the coercive diplomacy. It needs to gradually guide, gradually restrict, and reduce the space for North Korea to develop nuclear tests in stages. There is a need to improve North Korea's awareness of the external security environment and persuade North Korea to stop nuclear testing and nuclear development before talking about other steps towards denuclearization. A certain degree of concession and compromise by the United States is also a key part of the reconciliation between the two countries. To get rid of the security dilemma, it is necessary to lift some economic sanctions, suspend the joint drills for a long time, stop diplomatic isolation, and recognize the legitimacy of the North Korean regime to a certain extent.

The realization of peace on the peninsula requires the key parties on the DPRK nuclear issue to face each other and make joint efforts.

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