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Issue Brief

Managing the North Korean Nuclear Crisis

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April 26, 2017

The role of China in the on-going showdown between North Korea (DPRK) and the United States (US) has become more critical than ever. Unpredictable and



inexperienced leadership in Pyongyang and Washington, D.C. mean that to maintain peace and tranquility, Beijing will assume the role of a crisis manager. China is a neighbor of the Hermit Kingdom, its main trading partner and fuel supplier, thus, it wields unique influence on DPRK regime. Washington has publicly asked Beijing to exert pressure, diplomatically or economically, on Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs.

China has, so far, advised restraint. China has traditionally viewed North Korea as a buffer state to check US military presence on the peninsula. It provided economic assistance to prevent a domestic implosion. Chinese leadership, for years, have feared that a crumbling DPRK will trigger instability in northeastern China, as millions of refugees will attempt to cross the border. China always stopped short of supporting crippling economic sanctions against North Korea, until now.¹

Recently, Beijing supported a call for United Nations (UN) sanctions on Pyongyang banning coal imports from North Korea. Beijing implemented the sanctions. It halted coal imports from North Korea, and returned North Korean ships without permitting unloading of their cargo on Chinese ports.²

Meanwhile, the relationship between Beijing and Washington is evolving. The two great powers have inter-twined interests on strategic security and a complex trade relationship. For China, relationship with the US is its most critical strategic engagement as it directly relates to international security and

¹ "U.N. threatens new sanctions on North Korea over missile launch", CBS News, April 20, 2017, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/un-security-council-threatens-sanctions-north-korea-missile-launch/>

² John Ruwitch and MengMeng, 'Exclusive: North Korean ships head home after China orders coal returned' Reuters, April 11, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-northkorea-coal-exclusive-idUSKBN17D0D8>

global economy and finance. Meanwhile, bilateral trade is crucial for both nations. President Trump has directly linked a trade war with Chinese cooperation in resolving the North Korean nuclear crisis.³ He has even vowed that China is the 'economic lifeline' of North Korea,⁴ and if China won't "deal with North Korea", then "US and its allies will."⁵ These periodic statements are meant to increase pressure on China to act, rather than mere cautioning to both sides.

Chinese leadership has counseled restraint and dialogue for resolving the nuclear arms build-up by North Korea. President Xi in a phone call, days after his visit to US, called for restraint and peaceful means for realizing denuclearization of the Korean peninsula.⁶ Later, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi warned of "storm clouds gathering" and "once a war really happens, the result will be nothing but multiple loss. No one can become a winner."⁷ Meanwhile, China also signaled military readiness in the event of a crisis, by putting its cruise-missile capable bombers on state of 'higher alert'⁸, while reportedly, also ordering military to be ready to 'move' to North Korean border.⁹

As the tensions increase, need for coordinated actions from China and the US becomes more urgent. China and US need to jointly address the North Korean nuclear issue, because brinkmanship and a miscalculation can escalate the current crisis. War, however, is not an option available to any side. The goal should be to force North Korea into negotiations, which lead to removal of nuclear infrastructure and associated technologies from both Koreas, while maintaining internal order and peace on the peninsula.

³ MahitaGajanan, 'President Trump Defends Flip on China Currency Manipulation', TIME, April 18, 2017, <http://time.com/4744134/president-trump-china-north-korea/>

⁴ Donald Trump, Twitter Post, April 21, 2017, 6:04PM, Tweet, <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/855406847200768000>

⁵ Donald Trump, Twitter Post, April 13, 2017, 6:08PM, Tweet, <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/852508752142114816>

⁶ Xi Jinping Holds Telephone Talks with President Donald Trump of the US", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, April 12, 2017, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1453741.shtml

⁷ Christopher Bodeen, 'Chinese foreign minister: No winners if Korea war breaks out', Associated Press, April 15, 2017, <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/china-experts-low-chance-korea-fighting-46793498>

⁸ Ryan Browne and Elise Labott, 'US official: With eye on North Korea, China puts bombers on high alert', CNN, April 21, 2017, <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/04/20/politics/us-north-korea-china/>

⁹ Elizabeth Shim, 'China tells military to be ready to 'move' to North Korea border', United Press International, April 12 2017, http://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2017/04/12/China-tells-military-to-be-ready-to-move-to-North-Korea-border/5871492003177/