



China's Mediation Diplomacy in the North Korean Nuclear Conflict

Author: Rosa María Rodrigo Calvo

Curriculum Vitae:

Degree in East Asian Studies from the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC).

Master's Degree in East Asia: Expert in Contemporary China and International Relations (UOC).

Abstract

China's commitment to North Korea is the result both of historical regional interaction and of ideology. Chinese interests in the Korean Peninsula seek a favorable balance of power in North East Asia, stability and security, together with maintaining a geostrategic buffer and enhancing its status through great power diplomacy. China has rarely played the role of mediator in international affairs, but the nuclear conflict with North Korea made China agree to serve as mediator and address the issue in order to stabilize the Korean Peninsula. China believes in a process implemented through coordinated steps and has opposed harsh international sanctions on North Korea in the hope of avoiding regime collapse. Pyongyang's nuclear tests and missile launches have complicated its relationship with Beijing in recent years, and the Moon government's commitment to North-South reconciliation have catapulted Seoul into the role of facilitator and mediator. However, this new scenario has not diminished China's traditional leverage on North Korea, and its diplomatic role as mediator, even though questioned in the realist spheres, continues to play an important part on building mutual trust and confidence in the negotiation process to guide North Korea through the path to abandon its nuclear program, boost its economy and facilitate the transition to conflict resolution.

Keywords: Nuclear conflict, North Korea, China, mediation, negotiation.

Overview on China and North Korea relations

Northeast Asia has extraordinarily complex geopolitical relationships. The development of the region focusses on fostering pragmatic and cooperative solutions to the new challenges of the 21st century, such as those related to security, energy, environmental damage or the rebalancing of global governance to reflect the growth of the economic, political and military power of Northeast Asia. In relation to security matters, the nuclear problem with North Korea stands out as the main issue in the region, a conflict that remains unresolved after several decades (CHA and KANG, 2018).

With the Korean peninsula as its kinetic center, Northeast Asia is the only international region or sub-region where the world's four great powers - China, Russia, Japan, and the United States (U.S.) - uneasily meet and interact, and where their respective interests coalesce, compete, or clash. Indeed, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)'s nuclear strategy has been significantly shaped by the perceived American nuclear existential threat since the early 1950s, in search of a self-sufficient nuclear deterrent (KIM, 2018).

China's interest in Korea transcends Cold War politics and has shown a consistent pattern of loyalty to the country. China's support to North Korea dates to the Korean War (1950–1953), and since then, has lent political and economic backing to the North Korean leaders. The relationship between the two countries was described by Zhou Enlai as “lips and teeth” in October 1950, to justify the geopolitical necessity of this military action, stating that if the North Korean “lip” was gone, China (the “teeth”) would feel cold. Even back then, however, China did not support North Korea at any cost but prioritized its own geopolitical imperative. What really drove China's behavior in the Korean War was Beijing's own assessment of the connection between a degenerated geopolitical environment for China and the loss of a buffer, the lips, against the U.S., not a sense of brotherhood with North Korea (CHEN, 2018). The two countries signed the Sino-North Korean Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty in 1961 which ratifies that the two nations can take all necessary measures, including military support, to oppose any country or coalition that might attack either nation. This right is extremely important to China to ensure its “Three-no's” policy towards North Korea: no war, no instability and no nuclear weapons. However, Beijing does not believe to be obligated to defend North Korea in any conflict initiated by Pyongyang (PALTIEL, 2007; SU, 2018).

Beijing is committed to nonalignment and an independent foreign policy, principles established by Deng Xiaoping in 1982 during the Cold War to keep China out of the U.S.-Soviet confrontation¹. It has established different types of partnerships that, unlike traditional alliances, do not emphasize military cooperation and security commitment. For a time, and despite the insistence of the international community for China to exert influence over North Korea, Beijing stayed aside on the idea of a multilateral approach to the problem. The point of inflexion came in 2002, after the Bush administration included North Korea on the "axis of evil" list and asked China for help to pressure North Korea to give in to the U.S. demands of a complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearization (CVID). China agreed to serve as mediator and gradually managed to handle the process towards organizing the Six-Party Talks in August 2003 between the U.S., North Korea, South Korea, Japan, Russia and China. It was created as the main way for the international community to negotiate ad hoc on the North Korean problem and to try to coordinate and take a more integrative approach in order to achieve denuclearization of the DPRK. The six countries reaffirmed their common CVID

goal of all North Korea's nuclear programs, and to implement it through coordinated steps. The disjointed process was hindered over the years by North Korea's repeated missile tests and other provocations. Progress reached a stalemate when Pyongyang walked out of negotiations in 2009 (BAJORIA and XU, 2013; KIM, 2018; RODRIGO, 2011; ROZMAN, 2011).

Strains in the relationship between China and the DPRK began to surface when Pyongyang tested a nuclear weapon in October 2006 and Beijing supported United Nations (U.N.) Security Council Resolution 1718, which imposed sanctions on Pyongyang. With this resolution and subsequent ones, Beijing signaled a shift in tone from diplomacy to punishment and has supported more actively the different resolutions. The last few years have witnessed dramatic oscillations in the Sino-North Korean relationship which suffered a deep dive in 2017 after several North Korean missile and nuclear weapons tests, provocations that prompted China to publicly rebuke Pyongyang and support more sanctions against the country (BELL, 2018). On February 18, 2017, China announced the suspension of its purchases of coal from North Korea throughout the year, which was a political and economic reversal to Pyongyang (RIOS, 2018). After North Korea's latest missile launch in November 2017, the global security situation worsened and China expressed grave concern and opposition, calling on North Korea to cease actions that had increased tensions on the Korean peninsula. However, Beijing has urged world powers not to push Pyongyang too hard, for fear of precipitating the leadership's collapse and triggering dangerous military action (ALBERT, 2018).

The perpetuation in time of the conflict with North Korea has become a matter of high political profile and can only continue to hinder the establishment of a stable regional order in East Asia. Despite the trend towards increased cooperation, the mere existence of the nuclear issue generates tense situations that make difficult to achieve significant progress in peace, security and regional cooperation. The obstacles to the resolution of the conflict are caused, to a large extent, by the different points of view on basic issues of each of the parties. Notwithstanding diplomatic efforts to solve the problem, these are inhibited by the security dilemmas of each one of them, making it difficult to reach consensus in the negotiations.

Conflict and mediation

Conflict is a situation in which two or more parties perceive that they have mutually incompatible objectives. Creating a transition between conflict and peace is a process that implies that these parties put an end to their dispute or disagreement. and includes a set of methods and approaches used to facilitate the reduction and the end of the conflict. Conflict is a dynamic process in which the intensity level changes over the conflict's life cycleⁱⁱ (VÄYRYNEN et al, 2018). It develops through an escalation phase and entrapment, to de-escalation and termination. The concept of conflict prevention, conflict management and conflict resolution are regarded as applicable at different phases of a conflict. Traditionally, conflict prevention measures are designed for the early phases, before a conflict has become manifest, whereas management measures are applied in later phases, when a conflict is manifest. Conflict resolution implies tackling the root causes of the conflict and is applied in the de-escalation phase. On the other hand, mediation, can be applied in any of the phases of a conflict cycle (MITCHELL, 1981).

Any effective security paradigm must address the legitimate concerns and interests of all its members. Peace processes are often complex, multilayered efforts that involve a host of actors at different levels of society. Mediating regional conflicts require an acute understanding of the culture in the region and must be strategically designed and skillfully implemented. The U.N. Guidelines for Effective Mediationⁱⁱⁱ identifies it as an important means for the peaceful settlement of disputes and conflicts, and it has proven to be an effective instrument to address both inter-State and intra-State conflicts. Mediation is a process of conflict resolution where those in conflict seek the assistance of, or accept an offer of help from, a third party to change their perceptions or behavior without resorting to the use of physical force or invoking the authority of law and, in an agreed framework, find a satisfactory solution to their demands. Third-party mediators are assumed to be neutral, however, absolute neutrality in a peace process might render the role of mediators as protectors of peace meaningless. In their task to help the parties, they can play different roles as hosts, observers, facilitators, educators, or advocates, but through their actions in guiding the process they have an influence over the outcome of negotiations (AHTISAARI and RINTAKOSKI, 2013).

Involvement of China in conflict mediation

In the history of diplomacy, China has rarely played the role of mediator in international affairs, resulting this attitude from the noninterference policy that remains at the core of China's diplomatic philosophy. However, the efforts of the DPRK to obtain nuclear capabilities turned out to be the exceptional case that has exposed China's mediation potential into the international arena for the first time (QIAN and WU, 2009). Since the initial disclosure of North Korea's highly enriched uranium program in October 2002, Beijing expressed its willingness to host talks for interested parties while continuing to stress dialogue and negotiation as the most effective means to settle the nuclear issue. The first few months of 2003 witnessed Beijing's uncharacteristically proactive mediation diplomacy to prevent the U.S.-DPRK nuclear standoff from spiraling out of control. This was made possible by a *qitong cunyi* formula – seeking common ground while preserving differences – of allowing bilateral talks within the Six-Party Talks framework. Due to the different priorities and concerns of each one of the parties, these efforts were full of failed agreements, until the year 2009 after which the talks were no longer held (HAN, 2007; KIM, 2018; RODRIGO, 2011).

Since then, China has implicitly assumed responsibility as a de facto mediator with the main mediation objective being to prevent the conflict from escalating. With a deep understanding of the history and status of the DPRK and the nuclear crisis, China has never expected a quick and smooth solution of the conflict; and its mediation strategy has been largely aimed at underlying incremental efforts, calling for self-restraint and, whenever possible, used its influence over both countries to keep the process under control (CHA and KANG, 2018; QIAN and WU, 2009). This is what diplomacy is considered to represent, negotiating to obtain the best agreement possible and finding common ground between the different parties. There is a need of balance and patience to sort out the complicated issues and make them transactable, so they can be negotiated. It is about finding an open path when others are closed or blocked, to keep conversations aiming to the conflict to end (ROFE, 2018).

As explained by KIM (2010), mediation-as-conflict-management is an intrinsically triangular process since the parties to the conflict seek to position themselves in reference

both to each other and to the mediator, while the mediator seeks to guide them both towards a negotiated solution that neither is able to make alone, or to persuade them to engage in direct bilateral negotiation. The greatest challenge for China has been to navigate between the two parties, the U.S. and the DPRK, with the potential for instability or even collapse in North Korea, and allied entrapment, with the danger of being caught in a conflict escalation not of its own making. Given China's major stake in the situation, there was no way China could act simply as a neutral third party who had no self-agenda on the substance of the conflict. However, the most prominent aspect of China's mediation efforts is the influencing without interfering approach that has been employing throughout the process dispute (QIAN and WU, 2009).

China's mediation concept on conflict resolution

Chinese vice-foreign minister Wang Yi described China's role in the Six-Party Talks as active mediation in the following terms: "Conducting active mediation means continually making positive efforts to promote peace and talks in an objective and just attitude and see to it that all parties will enhance contacts, build trust, seek common grounds while reserving differences, and expand consensus" (KIM, 2010). In retrospect, the dominant philosophy that governed China's concept of conflict resolution and subsequent mediation behavior can be viewed as Confucian, emphasizing harmonious relationships, a holistic view, a long-term orientation, and coercion-aversion. Nonproliferation, regional stability, and peaceful talks are the three lines China defended (QIAN and WU, 2009).

China has always advocated a step-by-step approach to the nuclear conflict negotiation process and positioned itself as a fair and balanced mediator, trying to obtain an agreement based on equality, reciprocity, and compromise. Contrary to the U.S. negotiation style, which is directed toward quick solutions implemented within a short period of time, China's negotiation behavior emphasizes patience and gradualism and aims at comprehensive, long-term solutions (CHA and KANG, 2018). China's objective is not the ambitious, conclusive solution of complete denuclearization of the DPRK envisioned by the U.S. but prefers, instead, a staged approach and hopes to solve also, not only the immediate problem of nuclear proliferation, but also the long-term threat to regional peace and security. One approach to negotiation is regime improvement, which aims to leverage economic reform to alter the DPRK's mentality and behavior, an intensive effort by China to convince Kim to embrace economic openness and reform through engagement in the talks (QIAN and WU, 2009).

China's position has been caught between the role of mediator and negotiator. A more precise description of China's effort has been termed *medinegotiation*, a unique balance between mediation and negotiation. Even though China has described its role as an active mediator, it has, in fact, assumed the multiple and complementary roles of initiator, host, facilitator, prodder, consensus builder, go-between, broker, and deal maker in the on-off conversations (KIM, 2010). During the process, China had to decide when it needed to remain a neutral mediator to facilitate smooth dialogues and when it needed to be a more assertive negotiator to safeguard its own interests. and lead the talks to a solution conducive to the long-term interest of regional security and development (QIAN and WU, 2009).

Chinese strategic thinking on North Korea

Bilateral diplomacy and unilateral action have remained China's main form for handling international affairs, both in political and economic cooperation and strategic and security issues. Participation in multilateral actions was rather passive for years, and responded not to its own, but to other's initiatives. China's relationship with North Korea is marked by geography and ideological solidarity and its interest is on a stable peninsula, not reunified and without nuclear weapons (RÍOS, 2018b; RODRIGO, 2011).

China's primary security dilemma is about the search for stability in the region to allow its growth, so its policy towards the DPRK is designed to promote the survival of the regime, which includes the safety of its border cities and maintaining the strategic balance in Northeast Asia. China's strategy is associated with the political idea proclaimed by Jiang Zemin^{iv} to achieve a *xiaokang* type of society, in which most of the Chinese population is middle class, for which it is necessary to create a stable foreign policy in a secure environment that allows economic development. For that reason, a worry for Beijing, in the case of a collapse of North Korea, or of serious destabilization, would be handling waves of refugees fleeing across the border between the two nations. In addition, a North Korean collapse could create a problem of loose nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons on China's doorstep. These could fall into the hands of terrorists or opportunistic global smugglers (ALBERT, 2018; RODRIGO, 2011; ROZMAN, 20011; STONE and KELLY, 2018). Beijing is Pyongyang's former ally and its main trading partner, so it has used its leverage over the regime to try to return North Korea to the negotiating table. China has remained reluctant to implement the strict U.N. resolutions since, in addition, North Korea serves as a buffer zone between China and U.S. troops in South Korea. This means Beijing supports the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula if it contributes to reassure these aims. Due to North Korea's isolation from the international community, concerns have been raised regarding potential deficiencies in North Korean nuclear technologies and practices, related to nuclear safety and accident management. Nuclear tests in North Korea in 2016 and 2017 caused earthquakes which frightened residents of Northeast China, and distress was evident when reports of an on-site collapse raised worries over potential radioactive spills (PETRUSHKA, 2018; SU, 2018)

China believes that, without dialogue, pressure will be useless. Better strategy would be to convince North Korea that nobody wants to change their regime, words that should be supported by a moratorium on military deployments in the area. Beijing recognizes that North Korea has legitimate concerns for its security, so it believes it is important to continue the dialogue and be patient until the denuclearization of the country is achieved. This is the reason why China has always emphasized the dialogue between the parties and has been actively involved, as host and moderator, to stabilize North Korea (CHA and KANG, 2018; RÍOS, 2018b; RODRIGO, 2011).

China's other concern is the future of THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense), a large device that the U.S. has installed in South Korea and that Beijing sees as a first order threat to its security. China's support for U.N. resolutions, distancing itself from Pyongyang, can be considered a gesture to convince the U.S. of its good intentions to facilitate the resumption of negotiations. Accepting the measure of pressure on its ally awaits a counterpart from Washington, either in relation to North Korea or, especially, South Korea to reconsider the implementation of THAAD (RÍOS, 2018b).

Washington tends to see north Korea almost entirely as a nuclear problem rather than as a country with legitimate security concerns. The U.S. is talking about denuclearization as the prerequisite for its normalization of relations with Pyongyang while South Korea, like China, sees peace as the prerequisite for denuclearization. However, China prioritizes stability in Korea, wants the end of the now hostile U.S. military presence on the Peninsula, and desires the removal of foreign nuclear threats to its neighbor. It sees Pyongyang's nuclear program as a response to American threats, aimed much more at the U.S. and Japan than at China, and thus considers it basically Washington's problem, not its own (FREEMAN, 2018).

The strategic thinking behind North Korea's actions

North Korea shows an acute security dilemma, since it is existential in nature. Political isolation and internal economic difficulties raise concerns about the regime's survival, which is the primary cause for Pyongyang's motivation to obtain nuclear weapons. The need to show strength is driven by its internal and external vulnerability. The risky policy of North Korea using the powerful symbol of a nuclear arsenal to secure a treaty of non-aggression and economic concessions, is an attempt to force the U.S. to dialogue, although, in turn has led to bigger political, economic and financial isolation. Through negotiations, Pyongyang seeks to normalize relations with Washington and a commitment to security on non-aggression, although its demands and attitude suggest that it does not intend to denuclearize in the immediate future (RODRIGO, 2018a).

It is therefore necessary to contemplate the situation and admit that, up to now, the results of all the efforts have been scarce and that North Korea has applied a studied tactic of taking steps to accept conditions followed by non-acceptance and deceit. This strategy has achieved its goal, becoming a de facto nuclear country that has changed the strategic equation in East Asia and around the world and seems to want to continue with it as a means of safeguarding its regime and maintaining its negotiating capacity in the international environment. We find that, currently, we are operating with a different country from the one that was when the negotiations began, with a new strategic environment that demands a new security paradigm (CHA and KANG, 2019; REISS, 2009; RODRIGO, 2018a).

On March 31, 2013, North Korea adopted the *Byungjin* policy, or parallel development policy, both military and economic, in a plenary session of the Central Committee of the Party. Kim Jong Un stressed that the construction of "a strong and prosperous nation in which people can enjoy the richness and splendor of socialism" was essential, through the reinforcement of defensive and deterrent capacity and focusing on the acceleration of economic construction (CHEON, 2013). What North Korea possibly wants to achieve with its advanced nuclear program is to elevate its status on the world's board, to relate internationally on the level of nuclearized countries and, thus, to treat the U.S. president as an equal in the talks. In exchange for discussing the denuclearization, Kim Jong Un could probably look for a relaxation in the sanctions to obtain economic benefits and promote the development of the country, basis of its *Byungjin* policy (RODRIGO, 2018b). Moreover, there are analysts who consider that behind North Korea's recent smile diplomacy lies also a long-term strategy to decouple South Korean security from that of Japan and the U.S. (CHA and KANG, 2018).

The North Korean leadership is thus convinced that its existence as an autonomous state derives directly from its possession of nuclear weapons. Pyongyang would not want stronger protection from Beijing, even though it would enhance its security, because it would erode the country's self-reliance and exert Chinese suzerainty. Moreover, the Kim regime could be staking its role as China's buffer to leverage China — i.e., to prompt China to continue to invest in the survivability of the Kim regime (BELL, 2018). Some analysts affirm that China's tightening of economic ties is unlikely to deter Kim's nuclear ambitions, while others say the North Korean leader no longer cares what China thinks of its actions. Whether Chinese pressure can sway Pyongyang to alter its behavior remains to be seen, especially in a climate of distrust in Northeast Asia (ALBERT, 2018;).

Current situation of the conflict with North Korea

Decade after decade, analysts have argued that North Korea will either collapse or start a war. Yet North Korea still exists as a country and has managed to become nuclearized, improve its economy and retain almost complete political control. In fact, today is probably more stable than it has been for decades, the political institutions, economy and society have experienced major and possibly enduring changes. The *Byungjin* policy doesn't mean that Kim Jong Un has embarked in complete economic reforms, but that he has linked his legitimacy to his ability to make good on the promise of parallel development. The partial economic reforms may even be a stabilizing force and U.N. sanctions have not caused the regime to collapse, nor it is clear that this could happen in the future. On the contrary, it is argued that they could have had the unintended effect of actually strengthening North Korean procurement networks (CHA and KANG, 2018; RODRIGO, 2018b).

Both the increases in U.S. military and economic pressure against North Korea under today's Trump administration and the heated rhetorical exchanges between Pyongyang and Washington caused China to lose hope in the possibility of a diplomatic solution to the nuclear conflict. Over the past few years, relations between Beijing and Pyongyang deteriorated to the point where Chinese strategists were suggesting that China might not take North Korea's side in the event of a conflict on the peninsula. Kim Jong Un ignored Beijing's demands to refrain from provocative activities, conducting multiple missile and nuclear tests since assuming power. Demonstrating a complete disregard for China's interests, Kim had all his nuclear tests conducted at the Punggye-ri site, about 100 miles from the Chinese border, which caused significant consternation in Beijing about a nuclear fallout. Not only that, but Kim had a habit of conducting these tests during moments of significance for Beijing, which may have affected Xi Jinping, feeling personally disrespected by these tests, as it became obvious to the world that the timing of North Korea's nuclear testing was no coincidence (SKYLAR, 2018).

During that time, the bilateral relationship between China and North Korea has been tested in unprecedented ways, and it has demonstrated to be more complex than cursory observation suggests. Some analysts believe that the economic and regional forces pushing both sides together are the strongest they have been since the Korean War, but deep political fissures still divide both nations (PETRUSHKA, 2018). An underlying stability, however, belies the external appearance of volatility in the Sino-North relationship, because the essential foundation of China's special relationship with Pyongyang is not less-immutable

factors such as affective sentiments, but rather a more enduring geostrategic reality (BELL, 2018).

Despite historical ties, Kim Jong Un didn't visit China for the first six years of his rule after succeeding his father, Kim Jong Il. China surprised many observers by supporting several rounds of U.N. sanctions against North Korea in response to its 2016 and 2017 nuclear tests. This became a severe impediment to Sino-DPRK relations. As a result, in 2017, some Chinese observers discarded the importance of North Korea as a strategic buffer and called on Beijing to rethink its North Korea strategy (PETRUSHKA, 2018). Although the alliance between Beijing and Pyongyang has been considered as "a thing of the past," Xi Jinping still envisions China as playing an instrumental role in the interaction between its neighbor and other international players. Its strategy involves the contention of the U.S. and the DPRK, proposing measures to reduce the speed of the collision, present itself as a mediator in search of peace and activate the possibility of resuming negotiations (ALBERT, 2018; RIOS, 2018b).

The recent developments on the Korean Peninsula have been dominated by North Korea's rapid rapprochement to the U.S. and the revitalization of inter-Korean relations. A series of positive developments have occurred on the Korean Peninsula as a result of multiple summits between North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and South Korean President Moon Jae In, Chinese President Xi Jinping and U.S. President Donald Trump. It is notable that South Korea has recently been a more central player in these developments than China, which historically has played the more dominant role in North Korean affairs (SU, 2018).

Nevertheless, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has turned again to his longtime ally, China. For months, North Korea has demanded the U.S. to ease sanctions, claiming to have dismantled some of its nuclear facilities. Washington keeps refusing to change positions and insists on maintaining sanctions until Pyongyang's complete denuclearization in accordance with the Jun 2018 agreement between President Trump and Kim Jong Un in Singapore which, however, have no concrete measures, only aspirations to achieve the denuclearization of North Korea in exchange for security guarantees (RODRIGO, 2018c). For each side, China's support is valuable; as North Korea's biggest trading partner, aid provider and investor, China, however, is critical for the U.S. to maintain the pressure on Pyongyang. To move ahead with denuclearization, Xi Jinping's government has suggested a phased approach in which North Korean concessions should be met with ones from the international community—a position, nonetheless, potentially at odds with Washington's (CHIN and JEONG, 2019b).

Prior to meeting with Moon Jae In, Kim Jong Un made a smart move by visiting Beijing on March 28, 2018. The meeting appeased its only ally, ensured Chinese leverage on North Korea, and helped repair their frosty relations. On May 7, Kim met with Xi for the second time prior to his meeting with Trump to nourish ties with Beijing. While China did not participate in the Singapore Summit on June 12, 2018, its influence was certainly present. For instance, Kim Jong Un flew the Chinese state-owned Air China jet, which reportedly normally carries Xi Jinping. Furthermore, the U.S. commitment to halt large-scale joint military exercises with South Korea and the freezing of North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile tests echoed China's dual track approach and suspension-for-suspension proposal to advance the nuclear issue through dialogue (CHA and KANG, 2018). One week after the U.S.-DPRK summit in Singapore, Kim met with Xi for the third time in three months. The

three visits reinforced China as a driving force behind developments on the peninsula and bolstered Beijing's confidence in its relationship with North Korea. These meetings have been followed by a series of lower level bilateral forums and increases in Chinese aid. The latter developments not only defied trends but also surprised many well-credentialed analysts whom several month ago concluded that the special, so-called "blood alliance" relationship between these two neighbors, didn't exist anymore (BELL, 2018). The thawing of Sino-DPRK relations is primarily motivated by Beijing's fear of negotiations about the future of the Korean Peninsula proceeding without an essential role for China (SUN 2018).

The leaders of China and North Korea used a summit on January 2019 to project a show of unity in the face of stalled negotiations over Pyongyang's nuclear program and to press the U.S. to compromise. The meetings gave Beijing a platform to underline its clout in global affairs and its critical leverage in resolving one of Washington's top security challenges. Mr. Kim's turn to Beijing offered a reminder of the close ties between North Korea and China, whose actions have been essential to the U.S.-led effort to enforce sanctions on Pyongyang. However, having met Mr. Trump, Kim Jong Un now enjoys new diplomatic clout, what means that Xi Jinping now must work harder to make sure Pyongyang doesn't decide to deal directly with the U.S. and cut China out of the nuclear conversation (CHIN and JEONG, 2019a). Xi Jinping has an interest in linking North Korea with trade, because it allows Beijing to portray itself as doing Mr. Trump a favor by helping him notch a foreign-policy win. The U.S., embroiled in an increasingly bitter dispute with China over trade practices, needs the cooperation of President Xi Jinping to enforce sanctions on North Korea and to nudge his ally into making concessions toward giving up his nuclear arsenal (CHIN and JEONG, 2019b).

China's policy toward North Korea is driven primarily by economic and security interests. On the economic front, while the Sino-DPRK trade balance is skewed towards North Korea, an open and stable regional market still will benefit China and its economic assistance will help sustain and facilitate the denuclearization process on the peninsula (FIFIELD, 2018; GREEN, 2018; SU, 2018). North Korean leader having achieved a credible nuclear program, is now moving on to the second track of the *Byungjin* policy strategy: the economic development. But there can be no large-scale economic cooperation between China and North Korea until the sanctions are lifted. China is pleased by North Korea's interest in prioritizing economic development and it sees the potential of enhanced political cooperation to help the North maintain its domestic political stability and regime security, which many Chinese believe could lead to denuclearization in the long run (SUN, 2018)

On the other hand, North Korea is also the centerpiece of strategic competition between China and the United States. Pyongyang has played into this competition, seeking to restore China-North Korea bilateral political and economic support while taking initial steps towards denuclearization with the United States. North Korea's bellicosity has given the U.S. diplomatic cover to reverse the trajectory of China's march toward regional hegemony as it has re-shifted the "strategic balance" of the region, in that it has prompted the United States and its allies to increase their military capacity in East Asia. In the long term, it is uncertain whether the North will choose to tilt toward China or the U.S. or to adopt a traditional small state diplomatic strategy of playing one country off against the other. Some analysts have a pessimistic appraisal of the future of Sino-North Korean relations, and the future direction of North Korea's foreign policy. They consider that as long as the North maintains self-reliance

as a core and immutable political tenet, and as long as this stands in defiance of China's plans for regional hegemony, one can expect Pyongyang's cycle of threats and reconciliation to continue. This could potentially be resolved if the United States and China announce a united front against Pyongyang — but competition for regional hegemony, and South Korea's aspirations for peaceful unification, make this difficult. The way China defines its own role will be one of the key factors behind North Korea's choice (BELL, 2018; SU, 2018).

North Korea has few security alternatives. The near-term prospects for concluding a peace treaty with the U.S. remain uncertain. Washington may be prepared to declare, with conditions, a formal end to the Korean War, but negotiating a peace treaty is far more complicated, as it will have to address a broad range of issues regarding the American troops' presence in South Korea, U.S. influence in Northeast Asia, and North Korea's denuclearization. At the same time, North Korea will need Chinese support to increase its leverage in those negotiations, and under certain conditions, China is willing to oblige in order to ensure Chinese interests are represented even within the North's other bilateral arrangements (SU, 2018).

There are discordant voices related to the consequences of the implementation of sanctions or the use of diplomacy to solve the North Korean conflict. In a realist approach, it is considered that the evidence overwhelmingly points to the fact that deterrence works on the Korean peninsula, that there is no combination of sanctions, inducements or engagement that could make North Korea give up its nuclear weapons – the essential deterrence to the survival of the regime – reform and open up its economy and change the ruling regime. They believe a new policy requires even more firmness and finesse, conducted across a full range of instruments of national and international power to deter use and proliferation and to demonstrate to other nations the high cost of commencing such a program. A policy backed by the pillars of deterrence: denying the objectives of, and imposing costs on, use or proliferation. Others, with a more liberalist view, believe on the approach for dialogue and mutual concessions on both sides and consider that China should make denuclearizing North Korea a priority to live up to the image of a responsible great power as well as protect the international nonproliferation regime. They consider that efforts by China have made an important contribution to easing tensions on the Peninsula, reviving engagement and dialogue, and maintaining peace and stability on the region (CHA and KANG, 2018; CHEN, 2018; EINHORN, 2017; WINNEFELD and MORELL, 2017).

Chinese President Xi Jinping's strategy may have been to confirm Beijing's influence on the Korean Peninsula ahead of the North Korea-U.S. summit. China has worked to consolidate its influence by creating a "rule" whereby North Korea only proceeds with major decisions – including those concerning summits with the U.S. – after first receiving Beijing's confirmation (PARK, 2019). China hopes to play an instrumental role in shaping any future peace and security regime for the Korean Peninsula and, to maximize its influence, could consider extending a formal security guarantee, a commitment to defend North Korea against external attack, once Pyongyang has taken concrete and sustainable steps towards denuclearization. Whether North Korea will be interested in Chinese security guarantees is uncertain but, however, will require of high diplomacy to address its demands and protect its interests as it moves down the path toward denuclearization (SU, 2018)

On writing this analysis, and still waiting for the second summit meeting between Trump and Kim Jong Un, that has been announced to be held by the end of this month of February, Kim Jong Un has obtained China's support to his negotiations with Trump and has sent also a signal to the American president that he is not alone (LANDLER and SANGER, 2019).

China's mediation role in North Korea's conflict is being driven by a desire for improved Sino-North Korean relations although the ultimate goal may also be to shape the direction of the upcoming U.S.-North Korean talks and to ensure that any outcome favors Chinese interests. China's diplomatic work could also allow to burnish China's self-image as a regional power, earn a seat at the negotiating table and assume the role of a mediator on the long-lasting conflict (SKYLAR, 2018).

Conclusions

The unending nuclear conflict with North Korea has become a matter of high political profile that affects security and the establishment of a stable regional order in East Asia. The design of a broad peace process in the Korean peninsula is more promising than one focused only on denuclearization. It should be thought of as a holistic approach where all sides would be able to discuss whatever issues they want to raise and run parallel to other negotiations more primal to the region's future.

After some decades of continuous U.S.-DPRK confrontation and negotiation, it now seems clear that Pyongyang will not give up its nuclear and missile programs without enough evidence of the end of U.S. enmity. Its security dilemma is existential and, only by taking steps to revive the notion of common security, largely by a legally binding peace treaty or non-aggression treaty, can U.S.-DPRK relations and Northeast Asian international relations come to rest on a more stable and safe footing. The approaches to the resolution of the conflict are different, some believe on deterrence and others on diplomacy. However, the abolition of nuclear weapons requires that we understand that North Korea chose to go nuclear because its security dilemma.

China believes in dialogue and, even though it has described its role in the conflict as an active mediator, its position has been caught between the role of mediator and negotiator. However, it is notable that South Korea has recently been a more central player in these developments than China, and a new North-South diplomatic track has been created, issue that seems to diminish China's traditional leverage in the DPRK. Nevertheless, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has turned to his longtime ally for support and, although Chinese President Xi Jinping will not be at the table with Trump and Kim, he will stay behind viewing the unfolding diplomacy in terms that go far beyond the Korean Peninsula. The important issue for Beijing is not only the denuclearization but to counter U.S. power in the region and increase Chinese influence on the peninsula. China doesn't abide for the U.S. vision of a CVID of the Korean Peninsula as a condition to ease the imposed sanctions on Pyongyang but, instead, supports incremental denuclearization talks with concessions in return, a long-term goal that will be achieved gradually and conditionally as the U.S. decreases the threat it poses to Pyongyang. Likewise, to soothe North Korea's security dilemma, will ask for peace negotiations to ease tensions. Beijing can exert considerable pressure on North Korea, but Xi Jinping's preference is to maintain a diplomatic process and expand economic cooperation between the two countries. However, due to the unpredictable

nature of the North Korean regime, it is unfeasible to reach a conclusion on the possible intentions involved in its last steps towards negotiations, whether behind North Korea's recent smile diplomacy only lies again a game strategy to get the support needed to boost its *Byungjin* policy and doesn't have any real intention to abandon its nuclear programs.

Beijing's interests lie within the search of strategic balance, security and stability in the region. On its role as a mediator, the most important matter for China is to keep dialogue going on, even if the U.S. refuses to make concessions, to try to settle down the conflict. On its role as negotiator, China wants to lead the talks to a solution conducive to the long-term interest of regional security and development, to expand the talks into the bigger issues of regional prosperity and to promote the economic reforms in Pyongyang, as a means to dilute North Korea's security dilemma and build mutual trust and confidence in the negotiation process. China's leverage on the DPRK and its mediation and negotiation diplomatic work on the nuclear conflict has made important contribution to easing tensions on the Peninsula, reviving engagement and dialogue, and maintaining peace and stability on the region and it can continue to play an important role in enabling the parties to understand the variety of options available and allowing them to find the path to facilitate the reduction or the conflict resolution.

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