

Prepare a creative exit strategy

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Mar 15, 2016

Earlier this month, the East Asia Foundation, in conjunction with the Korea-Pacific Program at the School of Global Policy and Strategy at the University of California in San Diego, hosted a seminar that touched upon the security crisis on the Korean Peninsula.

The forum, organized under the theme "South Korea, China and the U.S.: Moving Forward," clearly demonstrated the three nations' opposing views.

South Korea made a decisive diplomatic move, according to a South Korean participant who attended the security affairs seminar.

"If Seoul had not shut down the Kaesong Industrial Complex first, the international community's cooperation - including the United Nations Security Council resolution and sanctions on North Korea - would have not been possible."

An American participant then replied that this was what Washington had long sought, and now the Obama administration's policy of strategic patience would finally start showing tangible results.

Yet, according to a Chinese scholar, "In fact, China's diplomacy has largely shined. While South Korea and the United States were obsessed with sanctions, China presented an exit strategy linking the denuclearization of the North with a peace regime on the peninsula."

Among these opinions, China's appeared most convincing. Beijing's latest diplomatic moves no longer resemble its previous stance, in which it lukewarmly participated in approving sanctions on North Korea. China has traditionally stressed peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, the denuclearization of the peninsula and resolving the crisis through talks and negotiation. This is in China's national interest.

Until now, Beijing has been criticized for reacting halfheartedly to the denuclearization of Pyongyang because it gave priority to peace and stability.

But this time, it reacted differently. It readily agreed to the toughest UN resolution to date, led by South Korea, the United States and Japan. Beijing has also shown an active attitude toward implementing sanctions. Yet that doesn't mean that it has forgotten its first priority of peace and stability.

At a joint press conference last month in Washington with U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said, "In light of the evolving situation, we have put forward a basic proposal. That is, we want to pursue in parallel tracks the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and the replacement of the Korean armistice with a peace agreement."

This remark is indicative of China's current stance.

It was a significant diplomatic accomplishment for China to clearly remind the United States that without peaceful negotiations between Washington and Pyongyang, the denuclearization of North Korea would realistically be impossible. Kerry and Susan Rice, the White House's national security adviser, have subsequently talked about the need for a peaceful negotiation with Pyongyang. That's another testament to China's evolution.

Of course, we don't know what the specifics of a Chinese proposal for a peace agreement will be. Taking into account the political schedules of the United States, a direct U.S.-North Korea dialogue is not possible. The South Korean government would be opposed, too.

The next option will be resuming the six-party talks and implementing Article 4 in the Sept. 19, 2005, joint statement. "The six parties committed to joint efforts for lasting peace and stability in Northeast Asia. The directly related parties will negotiate a permanent peace regime on the peninsula at an appropriate separate forum," the article states, referring to the United States, China and the two Koreas.

This would lead to what China wants - resuming the six-party talks to denuclearize Pyongyang and resolving the crisis through talks and negotiation. This is a truly exquisite move. China also earned additional points for putting the brakes on protests over U.S. moves to deploy an advanced antimissile system to South Korea.

In other words, China - by agreeing to sanctions - has achieved four diplomatic accomplishments: finding ways leading up to the North's denuclearization; peace and stability on the peninsula; resolving the situation through six-party talks; and slowing down the U.S. plan to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (Thaad) antimissile system to the South.

This is "realpolitik," although Washington also made some concessions to cajole Chinese President Xi Jinping into attending the Nuclear Security Summit this month.

Of course, working to materialize all these goals won't be easy, but China seems to be more composed than at any other time in the past.

It clearly conveyed North Korea's message to Washington, and it will have a stronger influence on Pyongyang. In the future, Beijing will use this influence to adjust the implementation of sanctions if Washington becomes uncooperative toward having bilateral discussions, resuming six-party talks and pushing forward the deployment of the Thaad battery. This is the diplomatic groundwork to achieve both our cause and practical interests. South Korea is currently left alone. It seems to have relatively little room to maneuver since it has invested all its diplomatic efforts on sanctions on North Korea. Some analysts fear South Korea may become a pitiful outsider among superpowers as they exchange subtle glances over our head while we obsess over sanctions. So even though it may come late, South Korea must begin preparing a creative exit strategy.

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