

THE ART OF MEDIATING REGIONAL CONFLICT IN ASIA

China's experience of the Nuclear Crisis on the Korean Peninsula

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Mediation is a procedure in which two or more parties with the help of a neutral mediator are able to find a mutually acceptable solution to their conflict (1). Its central essence lies in the process of enabling disputants to find their own solutions -- a process of assisted negotiation in which the mediator, who has no power to impose outcomes, facilitates the respective parties' efforts to work their way through the issues at hand, ideally towards consensus. The major role of the mediator in this process is to change the way participants relate to the problem and to each other by helping them to discover new information about each other and new ways of "seeing" the issue and the other side. This is true whether the mediator is an individual or a country. But mediation by countries is more complex because communication among disputants and mediator through institutional mechanisms is usually less direct and humane, thus hard for interpretation,

and each move forward by any party typically requires political decisions at its highest level.

Many Asian countries interpret “mediator” in the sense of the Persian definition of the word, which suggests “meddler,” someone “barging in uninvited” (2). China’s efforts to mediate, through the six-party talks, the nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula, in revealing key elements of mediation art in Asia, offers useful lessons.

Motivation to be a Mediator

Asian countries are less inclined to serve as mediators in international, regional, or bilateral conflicts for a variety of historical and cultural reasons. Many remain developing countries focused on economic growth and domestic problems, with little interest in, or energy to expend on, trying to resolve others’ problems. The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, initiated by China, India, and Myanmar in 1954 as guidelines for international relations, which stress mutual noninterference in internal affairs and peaceful coexistence in international relations, remains a golden principle for many Asian countries. The concept of mediation seems to run counter to this Asian principle of non-interference.

In the history of diplomacy, China has rarely played the role of mediator in international affairs. Until recently, the list of special envoys the United Nations Secretary-General has sent to various conflict-ridden or conflict-prone areas has included no Chinese. Among the reasons for the absence of Chinese in this capacity are: 1) that non-interference remains at the core of China’s philosophy of diplomacy; 2) that China believes that the status of neutral onlooker, because it leaves more room to maneuver in diplomatic efforts, is in most cases conducive to maximizing its national interest; 3) that China, excepting issues that impinge on core interests such as sovereignty

and territorial integrity, prefers to pursue diplomacy in a peaceful, friendly manner and to avoid confrontation and conflict.

The nuclear issue involving the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) turned out to be the exceptional case that has exposed China's mediation potential and skills for the first time in the international arena. Since 2003, China has been playing a decisive mediation role in the six-party talks aimed at finding a solution that mitigates the potential for crisis. The reasons that prompted China's switch of mind were: First of all, DPRK's nuclear problem poses a direct and pressing security threat to China and the region. China views a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula as essential to lasting peace, security, and stability in Northeast Asia, and non-proliferation as a high priority to assure an optimal environment for its continued domestic economic development. The foremost risk of not putting DPRK's nukes under control would be disrupting East Asia's nuclear balance. A North Korean bomb could jeopardize long-term stability in the region by triggering nuclear ambitions on the part of Japan, South Korea, or even Taiwan.

Second, China's decisive intervention into the DPRK's nuclear problem is closely linked to multi-layer security concerns. China wants to avoid the escalation of hostility between the United States and DPRK, which could bring either potential conflict to its neighborhood or the collapse of the Kim Jong IL regime. Both scenarios would destabilize China's northeastern border, endangering its domestic security and potentially bringing a large influx of DPRK refugees that would increase its economic and diplomatic burdens.

Third, besides its own security concerns, China viewed a mediating role in this context as an opportunity to improve its relationship with the United States, which was exerting pressure on China to assume the role of mediator. U.S. preoccupation with Iraq has increased the value of China's shared

interest in a non-nuclear Korean peninsula. Beyond the war in Iraq, divergent approaches within the Bush administration and a lack both of military and diplomatic means for dealing with Kim Jong Il's regime has paralyzed Washington. Beijing, however, enjoys political and economic leverage over Pyongyang and therefore could be a valuable partner. Beijing, in an eagerness to improve its often rocky relations with the US, echoed positively by treating cooperation on the DPRK issue as a new synergy between the two countries.

Last but not the least, China's relative confidence in mediating this case also prompted its intervention. Given China's long-term brotherhood relationship with DPRK and its delicately balanced position between the United States and the DPRK, its role as chief mediator seems only natural. Moreover, considering the decades-long legacy of deep hostility and mistrust between the United States and the DPRK, China's role as an honest broker even appears indispensable to craft a solution to the nuclear crisis.

Twists and Turns of Mediation

Since the initial disclosure of North Korea's highly enriched uranium program in October 2002, Beijing has expressed its willingness to host dialogues for interested parties while continuing to stress dialogue and negotiation as the most effective means to settle the nuclear issue. On March 8-9, 2003, China went a step further by sending former foreign minister and vice premier Qian Qichen to the Chinese-DPRK border to meet Kim Jong Il in a major effort to convince Pyongyang to enter trilateral talks with the United States and China. On July 15, 2003, Chinese vice foreign minister Dai Bingguo met with Kim Jong Il, delivering a letter from Chinese president Hu Jintao that included a proposal for multilateral talks. China has thus acted decisively to build a bridge over the quagmire by facilitating the environment necessary to start peaceful talks.

Despite the advantages China enjoys as a mediator, and the international community's high expectations, efforts to broker an agreement among the parties did not go smoothly. Complicating factors included, but were not limited to: 1) The problematic relationship between the negotiating parties at times disrupted China's attempt to lay a confidence-building foundation for the talks. The abiding hostility and mistrust between the United States and the DPRK, Beijing's doubts about Washington's sincerity in dealing with Kim, and Washington's suspicions of Beijing's reluctance to exert its influence over Pyongyang are proved particularly detrimental to mediation activities. 2) The hard-nosed negotiating style of the major parties, particularly the United States and the DPRK, as well as the DPRK's upper hand in playing off inherent differences among the various parties, made it difficult for China to move the talks forward. 3) Undesirable elements such as Japan's hostage issue being added to the negotiations splintered the denuclearization-focused diplomatic process. 4) Provocative actions such as the DPRK's alleged test of nuclear bombs and launching of missiles further sidetracked negotiations. 5) The negative influence of domestic politics, Washington hawks' rhetoric around imposing coercive measures on the DPRK, as well as limited authority accorded the US chief negotiators, slowed the progress of the talks. Lack of substantial progress early on initially cast doubt on the effectiveness of China's mediation in the six-party process.

In spite of all twists and turns, the protracted negotiations finally yielded fruits. After five rounds of the six-party talks facilitated by China from 2003 to 2007, a breakthrough occurred in February 2007 when the DPRK agreed to shut down its nuclear facilities in exchange for fuel aid and steps towards the normalization of relations with the United States and Japan. In the following October 2007 agreement, DPRK agreed to, by 31 December 2007, disable all existing nuclear facilities, beginning by disabling the three core

facilities at Yongbyon, and provide a complete and correct declaration of all its nuclear program. As alleged by US chief negotiator Christopher Hill in February 2008, all agreed disablement tasks at the reprocessing plant were completed prior to the deadline. In exchange, the DPRK has received almost 200,000 tons of HFO, including one shipment each from South Korea, China, Russia and the US. Yet the declaration is still to be received.

Mediation of Asian Characteristics

Neutral, harmonious, influential mediation is critical in the Asian context. China attaches great importance to its first experience mediating a major crisis involving regional security, and counts the process a diplomatic success. In the 2007 White Paper on China's Foreign Affairs, Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi remarked that *"we actively pursued multilateral diplomacy and played a constructive role in addressing hotspot issues such as the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula"* (3).

Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Wang Yi described China's role 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 (1) enhance contacts, (2) build trust, (3) seek common grounds while reserving differences, and (4) expand consensus."* The dominant philosophy that governed China's concept of conflict resolution and subsequent mediation behavior can be seen in retrospect to have been Confucian, emphasizing harmonious relationships.

The essential principles and skills China employed to advance the six-party talks towards mediation of the potential conflict include the following:

1) *Abide by the principle of non-interference in other countries' internal affairs even while actively intervening as the dispute escalates.* The mediator's role being to facilitate the process and let the disputants make the decisions, respecting disputants' autonomy is the key, particularly in Asia's

mediation-averse culture. Abiding by the non-interference principle is also important to assure that China is sensitive to the DPRK's circumstances and respectful of its strong sense of national pride, and that nothing ulterior underlies China's motive of safeguarding the non-proliferation regime and regional security. In October 2006, China voted in favor of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1718, which imposed sanctions against DPRK for its nuclear test. Yet in the meantime China emphasized that sanctions were not the end in themselves and voiced its reservation over the practice of inspecting cargo to and from the DPRK. Instead China used this occasion to ask all states concerned to refrain from any actions that might aggravate tension and to facilitate the early resumption of the Six-Party Talks. In this way, it was able, by walking the fine line between upholding the international non-proliferation regime and not intruding into the DPRK's internal affairs, to remain credible as a mediator in the eyes of both the DPRK and the United States.

2) *Stand ready to nudge towards action when necessary to advance peaceful negotiations.* Effective mediators are able at least to influence, if not control, the negotiation process. For China, managing the process meant sticking to the six-party talks as the most realistic and ideally peaceful way to resolving the crisis, it also meant being willing to wield diplomatic clout to keep parties on the track when the talks stalemated or derailed. China's suspension of oil supplies to the DPRK for three days in March 2003 was regarded as muscle flexing intended to nudge Pyongyang into the denuclearization talks. When Kim Jong Il announced in February 2005 that the DPRK would indefinitely postpone participation in the six-party talks following Condoleezza Rice's characterization of the country as an "outpost of tyranny," China sent as peacemakers to the DPRK, in February and July, respectively, two special envoys of president Hu Jintao, the head of the Chinese Communist Party's international department Wang Jiarui, and State Councilor Tang Jiaxuan. Another case in point is when Pyongyang resumed its boycott of the talks, after the September 2005 denuclearization statement,

because of new U.S.-imposed financial sanctions on North Korean enterprises suspected of counterfeiting and money laundering. Frustrated by the setback, China did not hesitate to voice that financial sanctions had a negative impact on the negotiations.

3) *Establish an optimal environment to foster communication and reduce mutual hostility between the major parties in dispute.* China believes that the success of the talks is up to the two key parties, the United States and the DPRK, and that the crux of the problem was the lack of mutual trust between the two. China has long tried to promote direct dialogue between the United States and the DPRK using a classic transformative mediation approach that emphasizes the disputants' relationship dynamics including empowerment (the ability to make their own decisions) and recognition (the ability to acknowledge each others' experiences). Finding the US and DPRK negotiators aloof to each other at the outset of the talks, China arranged, and then, on the excuse of being in the middle, withdrew from, the three-party talks, creating an opportunity for the other two parties to communicate directly. China seated the countries at the hexagon-shaped table used for the six-party talks in alphabetical order, deliberately using on its own name plate the full name of "People's Republic of China (PRC)" so that the DPRK and United States would be seated next to each other (the seating arrangement was as follows: DPRK, Japan, PRC, Russia, South Korea, US). When the negotiations stalemated in September 2005 and tension began to mount, Vice Foreign Minister Dai Bingguo took advantage of China's Mid-Autumn Festival falling during the second stage of the fourth round of the six-party talks to invite the delegates, on the night of September 18, to a banquet under the full moon, a Chinese tradition. The US and DPRK chief negotiators were seated next to each other during the banquet, which was reported to have played a key role in jumpstarting the deadlocked talks.

4) *Serve as an honest broker while being firm in its position and cautiously taking the initiative in guiding the talks.* Mediators are generally of two kinds: ones without a position, and ones that take a clear stand on the issue being mediated. China is one of the latter. Nonproliferation, regional stability, and peaceful talks are the three lines China has been trying to defend. A serious dispute that rose during the fourth round of the six-party talks over specifics of the provision regarding the DPRK's light water reactors, and breaking the talks into two stages (26 July–7 August and 13–19 September) 35 days apart, only exacerbated persistent differences among the parties and threatened further forward movement of the talks. US chief negotiator Christopher Hill was so skeptical of the talks' continuation that he announced on 18 September that he would leave Beijing the next day. It was later widely recognized that China's persistent efforts to coordinate, facilitate, and pursue compromise, and its initiative in taking the lead in drafting a statement, salvaged the talks from the brink of collapse and gained universal accession to an agreement. The deciding moment came when China presented to the United States and the DPRK, in a "take it or leave it" manner, the final draft of a joint statement. One news report claimed that in the last 24 hours before the fifth and final draft statement was signed, Beijing threatened Washington by stating that it would draft no new joint statements and that failure to accept this last version would lead to a breakdown in the talks (4). This decisiveness ended the negotiation stalemate and led to the inking of an agreement in principle to end the DPRK's nuclear program. As observed by Thomas Christensen, it is hard to imagine how such an agreement could have been reached without active Chinese participation (5).

5) *Advocate a step-by-step approach to the negotiation process.* Contrary to the US negotiation style, which, influenced by the four-year cycle of the US administration, aims for quick solutions and implementation within a short period of time, China's negotiation behavior emphasizes patience and gradualism and aims at comprehensive, long-term solutions.

China's objective was not the ambitious, once-and-for-all solution envisioned by the United States, of "complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement" (CVID). China preferred to approach the denuclearization of the DPRK by addressing the issue of its plutonium program before tackling the thornier, trickier problem of the country's uranium program, to use a staged approach, in other words. China also hoped that the negotiations would solve not only the immediate problem of nuclear proliferation, but also the long-term threat to regional peace and security. It was to this end that China incorporated in its mediation a willingness to help improve the circumstances of the indicated parties. One approach China is applying is "regime improvement," which aims to leverage economic reform to alter the DPRK's mentality and behavior. In January 2006, Beijing invited Kim Jong Il to an eight-day visit to China. Besides meetings with Chinese leaders about denuclearization matters, Kim's itinerary was filled with visits to economically prosperous zones and high-tech firms--another intensive effort by China to convince Kim to embrace economic openness and reform through engagement in the talks. This approach showed initial promise as Kim praised China's achievement as "astounding" and expressed his interest in exploring the path of development in DPRK. The negotiation process would have been smoother if Washington has reduced its perceived "regime change" desire and echoed China's "regime improvement" approach, which would have been helpful to ameliorate the hostile relations between Washington and Pyongyang, to set a constructive tone for the denuclearization talks, and to shepherd the DPRK back into the international community through economic openness and reform.

6) *Aim for a give-and-take agreement as the outcome of negotiations.* In advocating a solution that would both end the DPRK's nuclear program and satisfy the nation's economic and security needs, China positioned itself as a fair and balanced mediator. China believes the precondition of exerting its leverage over Pyongyang is for the United States to present a solution that

China regards as acceptable to Pyongyang, and China has been trying to mediate an agreement based on equality, reciprocity and compromise. The principles contained in the September 2005 Joint Statement drafted by China reflected just such a balanced approach in committing the DPRK to abandon all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs and returning to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and to IAEA safeguards, while the US affirmed that it had no intention to attack or invade the DPRK, and China, Japan, ROK, Russia and the US stated their willingness to provide energy assistance to the DPRK. Those principles were transferred into action-oriented plans in February 2007 when the DPRK agreed to shut down its nuclear facilities in exchange for fuel aid and steps towards normalization of relations with the United States and Japan.

Lessons Learned

Despite the promising progress, the delay in implementing the February 2007 agreement on dismantling the DPRK's nuclear facilities has raised the question: Is this framework of six-party talks sustainable for achieving a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula? Are a protracted negotiation process and less effective implementation consequences of the coercion-aversion mediation style? Before the denuclearization agreement was inked, disappointment within the Bush administration over China's performance in bringing Pyongyang back to the talks fostered the notion that Beijing had been too cautious and lenient with Pyongyang. President Bush suggested in an interview with Fox News in June 2005 that he would like to see China move more aggressively to push North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons program. China countered that its leverage had been limited and that shaking a stick at the Kim Jong Il regime would have only proved counterproductive, which is true to the extent that had China overreached, it would have forsaken its neutrality as a mediator in the eyes of the DPRK. China's

dilemma was that it was to a degree held hostage to its own advantages as an influential mediator.

Moreover, China's role was not clearly defined; it was in a sense caught in between the roles of mediator and negotiator. Its essential interest in the negotiation process found China at times seeming more substantive negotiator than mediator. One observer goes even further to say that although China has defined its role as "active mediation," China has in fact assumed the multiple and mutually complementary roles of initiator, host, facilitator, prodder, consensus-builder, go-between, broker, and deal-maker in the on-again, off-again six-party process (6).

The merits and the shortfalls of being a mediator are all about neutrality. In the previous rounds, Beijing successfully projected itself as an impartial broker between Pyongyang and Washington. This effort served well to engage the DPRK without interfering with its domestic affairs. But impartiality also prevented Beijing from exerting greater influence to achieve the final deal, and any perceived shift of the balance invited the blame that Beijing had stepped away from its mediation role and its "nonintervention" policy. Consequently, some observers lamented that "China's active hosting and mediating roles also ensure it a seat at the table, but Beijing has not yet publicly advocated concrete proposals for how to move forward in addressing the North Korean nuclear issue" (7).

Taking on the role of a more active negotiator would have given Beijing a free hand to steer the substantive negotiations between Pyongyang and Washington, whose interests hardly meet. Beijing could have been more effective by joining the circle of Pyongyang and Washington to negotiate the substance instead of remaining in the outer circle to facilitate the talking process.

Perhaps if China had shifted its emphasis, not tried to adhere so rigidly to its mediator's role and acted even more as a negotiator, putting its own interests on the table and trying to influence the outcome, it might have been able to initiate earlier in the negotiation process a road map that afforded equal importance to ending North Korea's nuclear weapons program and satisfying its security and economic needs. If China had projected itself as an assertive negotiator with a key interest on the table, it still had a chance to orient the six-party talks to a larger interest of regional peace and security. The current focus on dismantling Pyongyang's nukes magnified the disparities among the six parties and enabled Pyongyang to expand its bargaining power. Also, the nuclear issue was (and is) obscuring other common concerns such as Pyongyang's economic development, the unification of the Korean Peninsula, and an institutionalized security dialogue mechanism based on the six-party talks framework.

With a negotiator's role, China could lead the talks to a solution conducive to the long-term interest of regional security and development. If China was able to expand the talks into the big picture of regional prosperity and to diversify the cards each party might play, not only could it splinter the differences, but it could also create the opportunity to promote reforms in Pyongyang just as happened to China two decades ago, ending the de facto war status on the Korean Peninsula through a peace treaty, and galvanizing a new cooperation in Northeast Asia. In other words, China could help nurture a regional environment that makes Pyongyang's denuclearization necessary.

The six-party talks will be more sustainable only if they create a negotiation model that can maximize the common denominator of regional security and stability. By expanding the denuclearization road map to a more comprehensive one and acting as a negotiator to implement it, China could increase its effectiveness in helping to resolve North Korea's nuclear problem, and this is something only China can do. Embracing a new

negotiation model, not just a mediation model, to expedite the solution of this issue would work to the advantage of the world, and to China's own advantage as a responsible regional player and reemerging world power.

China's eagerness to produce results sometimes generated joint statements that fell short of well-intended action plans, achieving only symbolic significance. The September 2005 statement, for example, was taken as a point of pride by the Chinese government, attracting considerable media coverage hailing Beijing's newfound diplomatic confidence and influence. Yet, less than 24 hours after the celebratory issuing of the statement, the DPRK insisted that giving up its nuclear programs was contingent on the United States' transfer of light water reactors, a pronouncement that seemed entirely at odds with the other parties' interpretations of the joint statement. But because the section of the statement stipulating the appropriate timing of the transfer was vaguely worded, it appeared to some that the Chinese draft had only papered over remaining differences between the United States and North Korea (8).

Lessons for Other Mediators in Asia

Because Asians tend traditionally not to be interested in mediating regional conflicts, more non-Asians are trying to serve as mediators for the conflict-prone region. But if conflict resolution is to be effective, it is essential that (1) Asians rediscover their useful mediation skills, and (2) non-Asians better understand the Asian art of mediation before trying to apply western standards. Thinking in the Asian cultural context and from the Asian point of view is particularly important for the non-Asians currently mediating other major conflicts in Asia, such as those in Sri Lanka and Myanmar. To this end, consideration of the following issues is essential.

1. *The entry point for mediation.* In Asia, parties to a conflict are often reluctant to accept third-party mediation. Governments, especially, being averse to outside interference in their internal affairs and in consideration of saving face, prefer to rely on their own resources before resorting to external facilitators. The DPRK case was exceptional, in any case, as China agreed to assume the role of mediator at the urging of an external stakeholder, the United States. The various parties owing to its regional influence and historical friendship with the DPRK accepted China as mediator. To assure a smoother process and better outcome, third-party mediators should be invited by, not imposed upon, negotiating parties, and be well perceived and accepted by all parties.

2. *Balance between regional and outside interests.* Third party mediators, no matter how hard they strive to be neutral, unavoidably bring their own interests. Third-party mediators external to the region, being imbued with the interests and agendas of outside players, are particularly likely to be viewed with skepticism by the parties being mediated. A case in point is the United Nation's good offices in Myanmar. The UN Secretary-General's special envoy trying to mediate a peace agreement between the Myanmar Junta government and Aung San Suu Kyi is not an independent mediator, being accountable to the five permanent members of the Security Council. The Myanmar authority reasonably finds it difficult to view as a credible mediator a person perceived to carry a big stick on behalf of the western powers that have questioned the government's legitimacy and been critical of its human rights record. Its relatively independent status as a mediator, resistance to outside pressure to adopt a more coercive mediation style, understanding of the DPRK's concerns and regional circumstances, and balanced approach to satisfying the key interests of the various parties all worked in favor of China's mediation efforts.

3. *Nuanced approach to mediation.* That Asian people are subtler both in expressing themselves and in reacting to others should be taken into consideration in the negotiation context. The current UN special envoy to Myanmar, Ibrahim Gambari, lamented that his March 2008 visit was the most disappointing because the government rejected the idea of technical assistance, independent monitors, and national economic reform (9). From an Asian point of view, the Myanmar authority's response was hardly surprising given that it perceived its legitimacy to have been questioned, impinged, and threatened. Only China, in its ever subtle and respectful way, by exposing Kim Jong Il to China's achievement through a "seeing is believing" approach, could have instilled in the leader the desire to embark on economic reform. In Asia, desired changes are brought about by creating an environment that disposes the concerned parties to make the right decision on their own initiative; preaching to them or invoking the "name and shame" method will invariably ruin any mediation attempt.

Given its relatively successful mediation experience in the six-party talks and the lessons it offers other mediators, China has the potential to assume a more active role as a regional player in conflict resolution. But it will have difficulty realizing this potential until it becomes more clear minded about how to balance its diplomatic priorities of creating an optimal environment for domestic development and playing a more assertive role in regional and international affairs. Even so, its mediation experience in the DPRK's nuclear issue has created a valuable legacy for future mediation efforts in Asia.

Qian Cheng & Wu Xiaohui's endnotes

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