Working Towards a Joint North Korean Strategy:
America’s Policy Options with China

RACHEL SEELY

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Advised by Professor Thomas Berger
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Executive Summary

North Korea’s provocations against South Korea in 2010 revealed not only the precarious condition of the Korean Peninsula but also how these events can negatively impact Sino-U.S. relations. In the aftermath of the shelling of Yeonp’yong Island, Washington and Beijing wrangled over how to respond to Pyongyang’s actions, and tensions reached a peak when China protested U.S.-ROK joint naval exercises in the Yellow Sea. The U.S. and other countries condemned both North Korea’s actions and China’s lukewarm response. Because the U.S. has limited policy options available to confront North Korea, Washington has accepted a multilateral management policy towards Pyongyang. This policy inevitably involves Beijing, as China is the largest regional power and has a long-standing relationship with North Korea.

The current policy Washington employs toward Beijing regarding the North Korean conundrum is reactive, as there is not deeper coordination between the U.S. and China on how to respond to Pyongyang’s bellicose actions. This policy causes periodic increases in Sino-U.S. tensions when events escalate on the peninsula, placing further strain on Sino-U.S. relations as a whole. Two alternative policies are examined, a hardline approach and a compromise and collaborative action policy. The hardline approach would eliminate any misconceptions about what U.S. goals are regarding North Korea and expectations of China’s role in the situation. However, current domestic constraints as well as doubts about how much change China can effect on the peninsula make this policy improbable. The multilateral engagement and concessions policy is aimed at addressing China’s concerns about stability and U.S. troop placement on the peninsula, and adjusting Washington’s “denuclearization now” stance to a more long-term strategy. While this policy would alleviate tensions between the U.S. and China over this issue, Washington would have to make numerous, and unpopular, concessions to China, damaging both America’s international standing as well as its position on nuclear nonproliferation.

After examining the alternatives, this paper concludes that the status quo policy is the most feasible option available, though there are some modifications that can be implemented. There are many legitimate reasons to follow this course of action, including general Sino-U.S. strategic suspicion, divergent goals for the peninsula and questions about China’s ability to capitulate North Korea. Improved mil-to-mil communication and initiating contingency planning between the U.S. and China could help prevent a crisis situation on the peninsula from causing serious damage to Sino-U.S. relations. Although the current policy is not ideal, as tensions continue to flare over the North Korea issue, this course of action is pragmatic; Washington recognizes that China has localized interests regarding North Korea in addition to overall mistrust of U.S. intentions. The alternative policies examined in this paper are currently implausible to enact at this time, thus the U.S. must make due with the periodic stress caused by the current policy, but also take steps to improve mil-to-mil communication and contingency planning in the case of a catastrophic event in North Korea.
1. Introduction

“In the eyes of U.S. politicians and the American public, North Korea replicates the worst horrors of the twentieth century while harboring the most dangerous prospects of the twenty-first. Its extreme totalitarianism armed with weapons of mass destruction (WMD) raises the threat of intimidation if not terror; yet options are limited. The North is more impervious to economic sanctions than any other state with military clout, and only China has the potential to apply them in ways that shake the regime’s foundations.”

This assumption in combination with the recent outburst of violence and nuclear confessions on the peninsula create a dangerous situation for Sino-U.S. relations. Many in Washington feel that China has the power and influence over North Korea to produce positive change, yet Beijing, acting out of its own national interests, refuses to do so. This creates heightened levels of tension, especially following any incidents of North Korean aggression or nuclear revelations. The recent sinking of a South Korean Navy vessel last year serves as a perfect illustration for how altercations incited by the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) can cause Washington and Beijing to be drawn into a diplomatic confrontation. In this specific example, Sino-U.S. tensions reached a peak in March of 2010 when the Cheonan, a South Korean Navy corvette, sank in the Yellow Sea after being damaged by an underwater explosion. Out of the 104 sailors aboard, 46 were killed. An investigation was launched to discover the cause of the sinking and North Korea was determined to be the culprit. Beijing, however, downplayed evidence of Pyongyang’s culpability in the event and instead insisted that the world “turn the page” on this incident. In the midst of condemning Pyongyang for the unprovoked attack, Washington had to wrestle with Beijing’s lukewarm response and vocal objections to censure North Korea. In addition a struggle over how strong the wording should be in the official report on the Cheonan sinking, Beijing shifted attention from the event to protest joint U.S.-South Korean naval exercises in the Yellow Sea, an area that China considers part of their territorial waters. This diverted scrutiny from North Korean action to tensions between China and the U.S..

The Cheonan incident and its aftermath not only contributed to heightened Sino-U.S. antagonism, but also took away from a unified and focused response to North Korea’s actions. While it is hard to be exact, it would not be an unfounded assumption to estimate that at least half of the headlines relating to the sinking of the Cheonan were more concerned with how two of the world’s largest powers were
sparring over the ‘correct’ response to Pyongyang rather than the immediate issue at hand, an action by North Korea that could have pushed the peninsula back into war. It is clear that the U.S. needs to reevaluate its response to China’s ambivalent stance in reaction to North Korea’s actions, as Pyongyang has the potential to be much more dangerous than sinking small naval vessels. As a rogue nation bent on obtaining nuclear weapons and selling nuclear and other weapons technologies to the highest bidder, there are likely to be more incidents in the future that will require the U.S. and other regional nations, including China, to work together.

China’s close relationship with the DPRK makes Beijing an easy target for policy makers claiming that China does have the necessary influence over Pyongyang, but chooses not to use it. Following the November 2010 shelling of Yonp’yong island that resulted in the deaths of four South Koreans, Admiral Mike Mullen stated that, “much of that volatility is owed to the reckless behavior of the North Korean regime, enabled by their friends in China.” Before exploring alternative policy options, this paper will briefly examine what China’s interests are on the peninsula, both stated and implied, as well as areas of potential leverage that Beijing has over Pyongyang. America’s China policy regarding North Korean nuclearization and bellicose behavior must be based upon realistic expectations of what China can and cannot do. While it would be easy to simply create a policy based on China’s assumed authority over the DPRK, the U.S. must adopt a more nuanced policy that takes into account Beijing’s complex relationship with Pyongyang. It is critical that the North Korean issue does not drive a wedge between the U.S. and China. In order to relieve unneeded pressure between Washington and Beijing over North Korea, the U.S. should carefully reassess its current policy options.

1.1 Time for a Strategic Reassessment of Policy

There are several reasons why it is now the opportune time to reassess America’s relation with China regarding North Korea. There are a host of issues that Beijing and Washington are confronting, from currency valuation, trade relations, and the recent financial crisis to nuclear nonproliferation, human rights and climate change. The DPRK’s nuclear agenda and recent harassments are just one of many issues on the table for Sino-U.S. relations. Yet because the situation is so unstable and liable to sudden
changes that may drastically magnify U.S.-Chinese tensions, this is an issue that needs to be re-evaluated now. North Korea’s belligerent acts in 2010 brought the matter to a forefront globally, and it added stress to Sino-U.S. relations. Following the sinking of the Cheonan and the shelling of Yonp’yong Island, China’s initial reaction was to downplay international condemnation of Pyongyang’s actions. Instead, Beijing criticized the U.S. and South Korea for military exercises in the Yellow Sea, viewing the maneuvers as more threatening to China’s security than North Korea’s violent behavior. However, almost a year after these incidents, we have now reached a relative calm over the issue, and it is now opportune for Washington to reevaluate its approach towards Beijing on the North Korea issue.

In addition to a lull in immediate dispute over the proper response to North Korean actions, there are two important leadership shifts on the coming horizon. The first is the supposed succession of power from Kim Jong-II to his son, Kim Jong-un. Since reports of Kim Jong-II’s failing health in 2009, there has been much speculation over the dynastic transition from father to son. This transition has many DPRK-watchers concerned, as it is unknown how the Kim Jong-un transition and governance will affect stability on the peninsula. Another crucial leadership transition will occur in 2012, as Chinese President Hu Jintao will likely be replaced by Xi Jinping. Xi is part of the fifth generation of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders, and is also known as part of the “princeling” faction, referring to the offspring of China’s past revolutionary leaders. Little is known about the fifth generation’s foreign policy, but there are some concerns that it might herald a return to more conservative policy-making as the CCP aims to return to its communist roots. Furthermore, Xi’s dedication to economic efficiency and growth could threaten U.S. policy makers’ attempts to persuade China to implement destabilizing North Korean policies. Xi has been quoted as saying that the Korean War was a “great and just war for safeguarding peace,” indicating that China may deepen ties with Pyongyang under Xi. While the outcomes of these two leadership transitions are unknown, it is advisable to reassess Washington’s DPRK policy before these changes happen and relations between China and the U.S. possibly deteriorate.
1.2 The North Korea Dilemma

This policy paper uses the North Korea issue as the focal point in an assessment of Sino-U.S. relations. While there are many other components that comprise U.S.-Chinese relations, tensions over North Korea are more uncertain and complex due to the inconsistent and erratic behavior of Pyongyang. Furthermore, the stakes are high in the DPRK situation for a number of reasons. North Korea has an aggressive nuclear and conventional weapons program, threatens both the U.S. and U.S. allies, endangers the global non-proliferation regime, and its repressive government is an affront to human rights. While immediate tensions between Beijing and Washington have relaxed, the overall Korean situation remains highly concerning. Due to recent events in 2010 and continuing concern over the DPRK’s nuclear weapons development and weapons proliferation, it is safe to say that tensions on the peninsula are at or surpassing levels reached during the first Korean nuclear crisis of 1994. North Korea’s actions show a steady decline in the nation’s willingness to abide by international rules. Since 2000, North Korea has withdrawn from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), removed inspectors and monitoring devices from its plutonium processing facilities, and declared itself a nuclear state through testing nuclear devices. Furthermore, the DPRK has proliferated nuclear weapons material and other missile hardware and technology to states including Iran, Pakistan and Syria. Construction on a plutonium-production reactor in Syria in 2001 was linked back to North Korean technology. Since the beginning of George W. Bush’s administration, North Korea has quadrupled its fissile material stockpile, conducted its first two nuclear tests, built new missiles, and withdrawn from the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. Bruce Klinger summarizes the situation:

What makes the problem so intractable and dangerous is the nature of the North Korean regime. Its self-imposed isolation, its horrid human rights record, its easily stirred state of belligerency toward South Korea, the massive conventional force it maintains on the edge of the demilitarized zone (DMZ), and its record of missile and nuclear technology proliferation give a chilling context to the nuclear threat.

Besides the obvious regional concerns, whether or not the U.S. can successfully navigate the North Korean crisis will have broader global effects. By ending the North Korean threat of proliferating weapons of mass destruction (WMD) technology, the U.S. would prevent an erosion of the nonproliferation regime. This would have far-reaching effects, not only by preventing an arms race in
East Asia, but also by boosting the legitimacy of the entire nonproliferation regime. Solving the North Korean conundrum would bring into line one of the most obstinate proliferators, and also solidly place China in the U.S. camp on securing WMD and nuclear weapons technology. The DPRK is a test case for America’s nonproliferation strategy. Currently, Sino-U.S. hedging could help the DPRK and prolong Pyongyang’s ability to continue on its nuclear path. Chinese relations with Pyongyang, for the purpose of providing a bulwark against the U.S. military place in South Korean and Japan, gives the rogue nation diplomatic protection and prolongs negotiations.

Due to China’s proximity to North Korea, Beijing will be instrumental in preventing black market sales of technologies and materials that can be used to make WMDs.

1.3 America’s Limited Policy Options Regarding North Korea

U.S. policy options for responding to North Korea’s provocative behavior and the regime’s nuclear aspirations are poor. North Korea has not shown any consistent commitment to treating with the United States or any other nation in the Six-Party group. Talks fluctuate between stalemates and progressive agreements, followed by a disintegration of negotiations. Occasionally this pattern is broken by sudden and unanticipated outbursts by North Korea, in the form of missile launches, covert naval attacks, or nuclear tests that immediately halt any agreements in process. In light of Pyongyang’s erratic behavior, the U.S. has limited policy options. One possible course of action is to ignore North Korea’s nuclear ambitions. While this would avoid losing face over being unable to affect positive change on the peninsula, it is not likely that Washington will allow North Korea to continue to develop its nuclear weapons capabilities when the possibility remains that Pyongyang will sell such weapons or technologies to non-state actors. Furthermore, turning a blind eye on North Korean nuclear proliferation not only allows international agreements such as the NPT to lose respectability by lack of enforcement, but it also allows the DPRK to retain the ability to use nuclear weapons against South Korea or to blackmail other nations into providing support to the Kim regime. Moreover, the U.S. hand may be forced by South Korean reactions to North Korean provocations. Washington’s ability to reassure and restrain the South mandates that it responds to these kinds of incidents. It is also the only avenue the U.S. has of deterring DPRK recklessness.
On the more aggressive and improbable end, the U.S. has the option to eliminate the threat. This could involve a strategic bombing campaign of suspected nuclear sites or a full-scale attack aimed at forcing a regime change. While this course of action may be effective in ceasing North Korea’s nuclear weapons development and weapons proliferation, Washington is not likely to follow such a hawkish course for a number of reasons, ranging from over-involvement in other regions to domestic and economic issues. Neither the American public nor elected representatives are likely to support another overseas engagement or intervention, especially one that involves the use of military force. While Americans are concerned with North Korean nuclear program and weapons proliferation, domestic issues such as economic recovery and unemployment have taken precedence over international issues in the past year, further limiting support for another international intervention. From a global standpoint, the military option only becomes more implausible. Russia backs China’s stance against a military solution and U.S. allies South Korea and Japan would be the most vulnerable to counter attacks if the situation came to war. Thus if the U.S. chooses to pursue this course of action, Washington would have to unilaterally decide to pursue military engagement and have limited to no support from regional countries. While this policy may have a more direct and immediate effect on North Korean actions, Washington is not likely to follow this course of action, unless the DPRK commits an outrageous act like pursuing full-scale war against South Korea or openly selling nuclear material to Iran. This leaves the U.S. to consider several less direct policies that still address the situation.

The remaining policy option falls between the two extremes of disregarding DPRK actions and executing a military strike against the Kim regime. Washington has chosen to employ a middle-of-the-road policy of multilateral negotiations backed by a combination of carrots and sticks. Since the disintegration of the Agreed Framework in 2002, the U.S. has avoided working bilaterally with North Korea in order to, as Kurt Campbell of the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific stated, “not reward North Korea for shattering the peace or defying the international community.” Washington has stated that it needs to see positive steps being taken by Pyongyang before relations can be resumed, so for the time being, the U.S. must work with regional countries and regional allies to confront the situation. Although the Six-Party Talks are currently suspended, they are the only multilateral vehicle designed specifically to
address North Korea. The U.S. has thus far been content to use the talks to engage North Korea, though results have been mixed.

The carrots and sticks portion of this policy includes incentives such as aid and diplomatic concessions supported by sanctions and military posturing. Using humanitarian aid as a tool to bring Pyongyang back to the bargaining table is a heavily debated tactic, as food aid could help to prop up the regime that is causing the humanitarian and political crisis. Furthermore, since North Korea is not a failed state, aid would be doled out under the current regime, raising questions about whether it will reach its intended recipients or instead be used by the Kim regime to gain further control over the populace. Diplomatic concession are also a contentious point, as many nations, including the U.S., are reluctant to “reward” North Korea’s negative behavior with further negotiations. Military posturing shows U.S. resolve to not tolerate aggressive actions by Pyongyang and have thus far prevented the situation from devolving into war. Sanctions, however, remain inconclusive when judged in term of effectiveness and risk destabilizing the Korean peninsula. Sanctions are often ineffective due to “leaks;” these can occur when neighboring countries, often China or Russia, refuse to participate in a certain sanctioning regime, or fail to implement sanctions fully, or if North Korea simply tightens its belt in response to sanctions. While sanctions offer a way to punish North Korea for breaking nuclear agreements or attacking South Korea, there are still enough leaks that make sanctions an incomplete independent policy.

1.4 Managing North Korea

This policy of multilateral negotiations in conjunction with incentives and pressure has not proven to be a certain, effective solution to the North Korean conundrum. Washington therefore employs both negotiations and sanctions to manage the problem. While policy makers in Washington aim for a conclusion to the North Korean conundrum, Pyongyang’s erratic bargaining, military posturing, distrust of negotiations and failure to follow through on agreements prevents reaching a conclusion to the crisis in the near future. The recent provocations in 2010 underscore the failure of two decades of U.S. and international efforts to halt the DPRK’s nuclear program and compel Pyongyang to cease its aggressive behavior. The best the U.S. can do is implement a policy that continues to manage the situation while working towards a long-term and permanent solution.
Several characteristics summarize Washington’s current North Korean policy; a continued commitment to denuclearization, a devotion to the six-party process, and efforts to work within a multilateral framework to sanction and pressure Pyongyang. President Obama has declared the need for “sustained, direct, and aggressive diplomacy” with Pyongyang as well as a commitment to “the complete and verifiable elimination for all of North Korea’s nuclear weapons programs, as well as its past proliferation activities.” The President also added that the U.S. would continue to use sanctions against North Korea as leverage to pressure North Korea to act. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated that “the approach that our administration is taking is of strategic patience in close coordination with our six-party allies.” The U.S. will likely continue to engage North Korea through multilateral platforms, including the Six Party Talks, Proliferation Security Initiative and the NPT. Along with engagement, this management policy includes pursuing and enforcing sanctions that limit North Korea’s ability to augment its nuclear agenda. The U.S. should continue to use the United Nations Security Council to pass and implement resolutions that condemn DPRK aggressive actions and nuclear plans.

This paper is focused on addressing how China fits into Washington’s North Korea policy and what steps can be taken to reduce Sino-U.S. tensions over this issue. Because the U.S. has crafted a DPRK policy that relies on multilateral engagement and sanctions, Beijing is invariable a component of Washington’s calculations. China is not only a key player in North Korea negotiations due to its involvement in the Six-Party Talks or its geographical proximity, but also because of its history with the DPRK. If Washington is to effectively manage the North Korean situation, then coordination with or support from China will be critical. The following section will briefly discuss China’s relationship to North Korea, followed by Beijing’s goals, both stated and implied, for the peninsula.

1.5 Sino-DPRK Relations

Many policy makers and pundits in Washington argue that China holds the key to forcing North Korea to capitulate to international demands to halt its nuclear weapons program. This argument is based on the presumed close relationship between Beijing and Pyongyang, an alliance that was formed during the Korean War and further solidified as the two communist nations developed. In spite of this bond formed through the brotherhood of communism and a war in the mid-twentieth century, the two nations...
have followed starkly different paths of development, with China pursuing rapid growth with a communist government that relies on a capitalist model of economic development, while North Korea remains a hermit nation, clinging to its own strict interpretation of a communist command economy. In terms of each nation’s place in the global community, China has become increasingly open to multilateral forums, international institutions like the United Nations and the World Trade Organization, and sees itself as a ‘responsible global power.’ The DPRK, on the other hand, has withdrawn into itself, and considers most nations in the world, specifically the United States, a threat to its national survival. Yet China and North Korea are still nominally bound to one another through their 1961 Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance, committing the two nations to mutual security assistance should either of them be attacked by an outsider. Although China has attempted to down-play this treaty, it has not officially broken this tangible tie to the DPRK despite the distance growing between the two nations.

The once-close relationship between the two nations has deteriorated since the Korean War, and even more so since China’s economic reforms. This gap widened as China became more involved in the international community. Yongho Kim and Myung Chul Kim write that:

China’s previous status as Pyongyang’s traditional patron has been eroded as it has repositioned itself from being a self-reliant, revolutionary communist country to a tacit conservative partner of the Western capitalist community and a stakeholder in the Northeast Asian region. In addition, generational turnover in both countries seems to have converted the blood-sealed alliance into a relationship more typical of adjacent nations. Additionally, despite Chinese encouragement and even pressure, the DPRK has resisted implementing Chinese-style economic reforms, revealing another fractious break between the two communist countries. North Korea’s erratic and provocative behavior, its illegal nuclear program, and cost in terms of economic aid may have turned the nation from a communist brother to a thorn in China’s side.

One aspect of the Sino-DPRK relationship that is continually raised is China’s ‘funding’ of the Kim regime. In addition to being North Korea’s only treaty ally, China supplies the North with an estimated half of its food imports, 75% of its trade, and nearly all of its oil. This economic dependency has increased as other nations, including South Korea, have reduced aid and trade in response to Pyongyang’s actions. In 2008, China supplied approximately 50% of all North Korean imports, totaling
$2 billion. Although Chinese leverage over the DPRK, namely economical, is liable to cause destabilization, Pyongyang’s lack of response to political pressure points to economic leverage as the only avenue remaining to capitulate North Korea’s cooperation. China often claims limited influence over North Korea’s leadership, however, Beijing’s aid and trade with the nation clearly show a large area of dominance. Victor Cha and David Kang write, “Beijing’s foreign ministry official’s claims of the little influence they have in Pyongyang appear to fly in the face of the substantial amounts of unreported aid they provide.”

According to the Jamestown Foundation, China’s trade with the DPRK has increased from $370 million in 1999 to $3.47 billion in 2010. Over half of North Korea’s exports are to China, and Chinese imports comprise 21% of North Korea’s total imports. Chinese foreign direct investment accounts for $41.2 million of the $44 million of FDI recorded by the United Nations. For aid, at least half of all of China’s aid goes to the DPRK, which has increased from $400 million in 2004 to $1.5 billion in 2009. This significant amount of aid reveals how much authority China could have over Pyongyang if the political will was present to use it. The DPRK’s survival is dependent upon China’s willingness to supply food and fuel, and China has continued to support Pyongyang despite the nation’s dangerous behavior. However, it is important to note that this economic, and in many cases, simple food and fuel aid, relationship is really a double edge sword for Beijing. Although it is not incorrect to say that China has the most leverage over Pyongyang based on the simple numbers, China may be placed in a position of either supporting North Korea or suffering the fallout, in the form of a mass influx of impoverished refugees if the nation collapses. Kim qualifies: “China does not receive as much North Korean gratitude as it would like nor wield as much leverage as Washington believes, precisely because Pyongyang knows that China’s aid is in its own self-interest.”

Robert Kagan, a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, is of the opinion that due to China’s divergent interests from the U.S., they are not likely to place greater pressure on North Korea. While Kagan’s argument assumes that although China does have leverage over Pyongyang and they choose not to use it for strategic reasons, Sheila Smith asserts that China actually does nothing because they do not have leverage. A senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations,
Smith states that due to North Korea’s increasingly isolated nature, “the Chinese are quite honest in saying they don’t have control over what goes on there.” According to a 2010 news article published by Xinhua, China feels that Washington’s conflation of the North Korea danger frightens Japan and South Korea into clinging more closely to the U.S. while concurrently damaging China’s international standing by criticizing Beijing’s limited role in the situation. The author claims that China is in just as much danger as other regional countries from North Korea’s nuclear program and U.S. demands for China to alleviate the situation are akin to asking China to risk everything for little gain. Li Chengxian, the Korean Ambassador to China argues that China’s influence with North Korea has been exaggerated, harming their stance with the DPRK as international pressure to ‘fix‘ the situation only harms Beijing’s remaining influence with Pyongyang. Li likens the relationship to dealing with a spoiled child; China is coming from a position of weakness by continuing to try to engage a “child” that rejects direction and obstinately continues to break the rules. This presents a different perspective on what China can or cannot do, or are willing to do, regarding the DPRK.

This leads into a discussion of Chinese intentions, both stated and implied, on the Korean peninsula. While the previous section has revealed China’s relationship with North Korea, it is important to understand what Beijing’s goals may be in order to gauge how China factors into Washington’s DPRK policy.

1.6 Beijing’s North Korean Agenda

Discerning China’s true intentions regarding North Korea can be difficult. While Beijing has made clear its official position on North Korean nuclearization, there are, of course, many other factors contributing to Beijing’s decision-making on the issue. Determining China’s implied interests is more speculative, but it is nonetheless helpful in calculating Beijing’s inclination to support Washington’s Korea policy. China has expressed its commitment to the global nuclear nonproliferation. In a dramatic shift from the PRC’s stance in the 1960s, where Beijing stated that every country had the right to develop nuclear weapons, China is now a member of nearly every major nonproliferation initiative and an advocate for nuclear responsibility.
In addition to China’s stated commitment to nuclear and WMD nonproliferation, Beijing has also expressed its resolution to maintain stability on the Korean peninsula. During a visit from Kim Jong Il in March of 2011 to Beijing, President Hu reiterated China’s dedication to maintaining peace and stability on the peninsula, as well as having a nuclear-free peninsula and improved development. These stated interests indicate that China’s intentions do overlap with Washington’s; both countries have declared their dedication to denuclearization and anti-WMD proliferation as well as looking for a solution that does not involve violence.

While China’s stated interests often overlap with the U.S. and thus the conclusion can be made that they are an excellent and well-positioned partner in the North Korean crisis, there are also many implied interests that hold Beijing back from becoming the ally that Washington desires. China’s stated interests have a global focus, while implied interests focus on what is best for China’s security and global position, vis-a-vis the U.S.. Samuel S. Kim, a Senior Research Scholar at Columbia University, summarizes how China’s Korea policy must be interpreted through the lens of the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) overarching demands and goals. The first is economic development, which further legitimizes the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) while promoting domestic stability. China’s second goal is the promotion of a peaceful and secure world environment that does not threaten China’s sovereignty or territorial integrity. Finally, China aims to cultivate its global status as a responsible world power in international politics. Based on these priorities, especially if they are interpreted in descending order of priority, it becomes slightly clearer as to what China is and is not willing to do in regards to North Korea.

If Beijing’s number one priority is maintaining continued economic development, then China would not be willing to participate nor support a policy that imposes harsh sanctions on North Korea to the point of initiating its collapse and a subsequent influx of refugees into China’s Northeastern provinces. It is clear that stability is a chief goal for Beijing, and China would not likely support a policy that threatened this. However, goals two and three, perpetuating a peaceful and secure external environment and cultivating China’s status as a responsible global power, presents both a challenge and an opportunity for Washington’s North Korea policy. A “secure external environment” not only includes stability in neighboring countries, but also extends to a regional configuration that does not threaten
China’s rise. Many of China’s considerations regarding the Korean peninsula are factored around America’s position in the region.

While China does have national interests that influence its North Korea policy, a large component of Beijing’s calculations involves the U.S., and many of them prove to be hindrances to better Sino-U.S. cooperation on the issue. The overarching theme behind these difficulties is mutual strategic suspicion. This mutual mistrust stems from issues ranging from 1) the trajectory of China’s rise, 2) conflict over the status of Taiwan, to 3) divergent goals and interests on the Korean peninsula. Complementing U.S. mistrust of Chinese intentions is China’s strategic mistrust of Washington. The U.S. has troops located in many countries on China’s periphery, including South Korea and Japan, as well as long-standing alliance relationships with many countries in the region. Although both countries appear to have to come to a grudging acceptance of the Taiwanese status quo, China’s trust in America remains shallow due to Washington’s continuing weapons sales to Taipei.41

Another factor to consider when gauging China’s perspective on the Korean peninsula is the importance of North Korea as a buffer zone against the U.S. and U.S. allies. Korea has historically acted as a buffer state for China and is regarded as a place of “兵家必争” or a strategic stronghold for military conflict.42 The U.S. currently sits at the center of a hub-and-spoke system of alliance in East Asia, with formal alliances with many nations in the region as well as troops stationed in South Korean and Japan. This undercuts one of China’s core interests, a secure external environment, reducing the likelihood of cooperation over the North Korean issue, due to the proximity of U.S. troops in South Korea and Japan.43 North Korea, though unstable and a political liability, remains a long-standing buffer for providing a separation zone from U.S. troops in South Korea. “Even though North Korea’s nuclear pursuits have directly challenged Chinese interests, mistrust of U.S. intentions on the Korean peninsula- which dates to the Korean War- has inhibited Sino-U.S. cooperation on Korean issues.”44

Some scholars take this buffer zone theory a step further and link China’s relationship with the DPRK to the Taiwan issue. China and the U.S. have long been at odds with one another over the status of Taiwan. China considers Taiwan an issue that is part of its core national interests and considers Taiwan a part of China. On the other hand, the U.S. maintains a commitment to a peaceful resolution of the
situation while continuing to supply Taipei with the military means to defend itself from the PRC. Shen Dingli writes, “from China’s perspective, Taiwan and the DPRK issues are intrinsically intertwined.”

Shen argues that with North Korea providing a buffer zone against U.S. troops in South Korea, China can better focus on defending its interests in the Taiwan Strait. He goes further by saying North Korea’s belligerent attitude towards the United States makes Washington think twice before potentially engaging in military action over Taiwan. Shen insists that China is unlikely to ignore the strategic value the DPRK plays in China’s national security interest.

Furthermore, policy makers in Washington should consider China’s reluctance to fully cooperate with the U.S. on the North Korea issue as a way for Beijing to counterbalance U.S. unilateralism in international affairs and involvement in Asia. According to Stephanie Kleine of the International Crisis Group, Beijing’s calculations regarding North Korea may be shaped by rising concerns about a perceived U.S. strategic return to Asia and by opposition to American military and political presence in the region. Kleine states, “China is using its close ties with Pyongyang as a bulwark against U.S. military dominance in the region, giving the rogue nation virtually unconditional diplomatic protection.”

Related to this motive, China may also be hedging on the North Korea problem in response to Washington’s Taiwan policy. Policy makers in Beijing could be holding out on cooperating fully on North Korea in order to coerce the U.S. to cease weapons sales to Taiwan.

While there are many Sino-U.S. issues that constrain China from cooperating on North Korea in order to preserve a “secure external environment” against a U.S. that may be trying to contain China’s rise, Beijing is still concerned with cultivating the image of a responsible world power. This third overarching PRC goal has the potential to outweigh security concerns in the North Korean situation, as China sees gains in participating in regional attempts to denuclearize the Korean peninsula. China’s participation in the Six-Party talks, as well as other regional multilateral organizations, has assuaged some fears about the trajectory of China’s rise. Quansheng Zhao writes that, “…the highly visible Six Party Talks increase China’s international standing. Beijing can credibly portray itself as a responsible major power that can take the lead in handling difficult international issues.” China may be able to gain from being involved in the Talks without providing tangible results. Regardless of whether Beijing enjoys a
close, communal relationship with Pyongyang, China knows that because it is one of the few nations remaining that has relations with the hermit state and the fact that Beijing’s support keeps the DPRK afloat, it can play the role of mediator during periods of crisis and even offer condemnation without risking reprisals from Pyongyang.

In summary, China’s stated commitment to a nuclear-free Korean peninsula, as well as a stable peninsula, is often at odds with their implied interests of a secure external environment. Strategic mistrust of American intentions in East Asia places limits on China’s willingness to fully cooperate on the North Korea issue, in addition to regional stability concerns. However, Beijing’s goal of framing China as a responsible world power has helped to increase their participation, and even leadership, in the Six-Party Talks. These conflicting agendas are represented throughout the history of the North Korea crisis, which reveal times in which China played a strong role, such as forcing Pyongyang to the table for the 2007 Joint Agreement, to a softer role in shielding the DPRK from condemnation in 2010. A 2010 report issued by the Council on Foreign Relations nicely summarizes the importance of engaging China on this issue while stating the difficulties Washington will encounter trying to create a coherent policy that factors Beijing in their North Korean policy.

Productive Sino-U.S. consultations on North Korea have been lauded in recent years as evidence that the Unites States and China can work together to address common security challenges. Conversely, the failure to collaborate to achieve North Korean denuclearization will represent a setback and an obstacle to other areas of U.S.-China security cooperation. For this reason, it is essential for the United States and China to develop a clear understanding regarding how to deal with North Korea, thereby establishing a framework for lasting stability on a nonnuclear Korean peninsula and in Northeast Asia.50

The remaining portion of this paper will address policy options available to the U.S. regarding China over the North Korean issue. First the current policy, status quo, will be defined, followed by an evaluation of its advantages and disadvantages. While this paper is based on the assumption that the status quo is inadequate, a deeper examination is necessary to determine whether or not there are legitimate reasons for the current policy. After the status quo policy is analyzed, two alternative policy options will be presented and weighed, followed by a recommended course of action.
2. Status Quo Policy

Washington’s current policy can be defined as explicitly including China in North Korean negotiations and talks, while implicitly not expecting much from Beijing in terms of tangible results on Pyongyang’s actions. The U.S. has been content with working with China only on a superficial level while pursuing other avenues of managing the DPRK situation, like strengthening relations with South Korea and Japan and continuing participation in the Six-Party Talks. China and the U.S. nominally work together on the North Korean crisis through the venue of the Six-Party Talks and the UN Security Council, but Sino-U.S. cooperation ends at this superficial level. In times of crisis, like the recent events in 2010, reveals that this lack of deeper coordination shows that this policy is often reactive and causes added tension between Washington and Beijing.

While at first glance it may appear shocking that the status quo policy does not include direct engagement with China on the North Korean issue, closer scrutiny of the reasons behind this policy reveals various legitimate concerns and a well thought-out rationale. Mutual strategic suspicion certainly contributes to why the U.S. and China cannot explicitly trust the other on this issue, yet there are more pragmatic reasons that hinder full cooperation. The other two contributing factors to Washington’s reluctance to further engage China are a recognition of China’s primary interests on the Korean peninsula and a suspicion that China does not have the necessary leverage to effect a positive change in Pyongyang’s trajectory. Additionally, China is still bound by their 1961 treaty with Pyongyang, precluding closer coordination with the U.S. and other Six-Party allies as Beijing remains committed to come to North Korea’s aid if they are attacked. “The basic problem is that China fears a North Korean implosion more than a North Korean nuclear weapon, because the former would generate chaos, conflict, refugees, and most important, a unified Korea allied with the United States on China’s border.”51 Washington recognizes China’s chief interest on the peninsula and understands that it would be very difficult to compel Beijing to deviate from their course of action.

Some scholars argue that Chinese influence on the North Korean nuclear quandary may be more limited while Washington’s influence surpasses that of Beijing’s.52 Even examples that are typically used to show Chinese leverage over Pyongyang may actually be more of an international appeasement method...
than instances of actual pressure. In March 2003 and again in September 2006 after North Korea’s missile test that summer, Beijing temporarily interrupted oil supply to North Korea. Halting the DPRK’s oil supply is not a very crucial form of leverage, as oil comprises less than 10% of North Korea’s total energy use, most of which is supplied by domestic coal. Temporary cessations of oil have little immediate effect on the nation, and do not directly threaten regime survival. Furthermore, the ‘technical issues’ oil cut-off in September 2006 had no lasting effects; while Pyongyang returned to multilateral negotiations, any progress that was made during the talks was nullified by the October 2006 nuclear test. By realistically determining that China will not likely give up regional goals and may have limited substantial influence, the U.S. is following a policy that does not exclude the largest regional power, yet pursues a DPRK policy without relying wholeheartedly on China.

Furthermore, China’s perception of the security threat presented by North Korea differs significantly from that of the United States. While Washington perceives DPRK nuclearization as a threat to global security, other than the danger of loose nuclear material in the case of North Korea’s collapse, Beijing feels that the danger presented by North Korea’s nuclear weapons program is more symbolic than actual. China points out that the deficiencies in Pyongyang’s nuclear program, from warhead assembly to lack of satellites, makes North Korea’s nuclear brinkmanship more of a ploy to get the U.S. to the bargaining table than a credible threat to global security. From Beijing’s point of view, North Korea is more dangerous as a potential failed state and humanitarian disaster than as a rogue state or calculated threat to international security. The U.S. clearly has a different assessment of North Korea’s menace, and the current policy takes into account these differences by ostensibly allowing both Washington and Beijing to have their own opinions on Pyongyang’s threat level while continuing to move forward together in the Six-Party Talks.

Washington’s current policy is pragmatic; the U.S. acknowledges that China’s principal concern is stability and chooses to move forward without deeper cooperation with China. Although China’s relationship with North Korea would be beneficial to Washington’s DPRK policy, the likelihood of China aligning with the U.S. on urgency and method to approaching Pyongyang is slim. The trade-off for the U.S., and region as a whole, is that a lack of more thorough coordination between Washington and Beijing
often leads to disputes over how to respond to North Korean provocations. However, the U.S. (and perhaps China as well) accepts periodic friction with China over North Korean policy, similar to annual public sparring over the Dalai Lama. The U.S. follows this pragmatic policy because it cannot be held hostage by Beijing’s internal decision-making and must continue to combat North Korea’s nuclear and weapons programs with or without China’s full cooperation.55

2.1 Status Quo Course of Action

The status quo stance of the United States translates into the following concrete policies:

Sanctions

Sanctions passed through the UN Security Council should continue to be used, as they will have the explicit support of most nations in the region, and at least minimal support from China and Russia. For example, UNSC Resolution 1718 allows for cargo to and from North Korea to be checked for WMDs, luxury items and certain weapons systems and permits freezing overseas assets of individuals and companies involved in the DPRK’s weapons programs. China’s participation in this Resolution is an avenue of support for the U.S.’s overall goals of limiting Pyongyang’s proliferation activities.56 The U.S. should also continue to use the Proliferation Security Initiative to further limit weapons proliferation. However, considering China’s reticence to fully enforce sanctions or use economic leverage over North Korea, the U.S. should not make its strategy entirely contingent upon Beijing’s cooperation.

Six-Party Talks

Although the Talks are currently stalled, Washington has made moves to get them restarted. In January, Stephen Bosworth and Sung Kim met with their Chinese counterparts to discuss efforts to start a new round of talks and in late July of 2011, U.S. officials met with North Korean diplomats to initiate a dialogue to test the plausibility of bringing all parties back to the negotiating table.5758 The U.S. continues to use the Six-Party Talks as a way not only to confront Pyongyang in a multilateral environment, but also as an avenue to treat with China on the issue. While there is still considerable divergence among regional powers as to how to treat with North Korea, the Six-Party Talks represent the best expression of regional
nations and Washington’s coinciding interests and the least expression of their antagonisms. Since Washington has refused to treat with Pyongyang on a bilateral level, the U.S. should continue to use the six-party platform to address the situation.

**Regional Allies**

In addition to continuing participation in the Six-Party Talks, Washington should maintain strong relations with South Korea and Japan. Joint military maneuvers, such as the annual “Ulchi Freedom Guardian” that began August 15, 2011 with South Korea and seven other nations, are an important way for Washington to maintain a strong presence in the region without close coordination with Beijing. Although Washington’s ally, Seoul, is increasingly concerned with the state of affairs, the U.S. has maintained a position of reassuring allies while also restraining them from offensive actions against Pyongyang in order to secure their support for a strategy that addresses deeper issues of nuclearization and weapons proliferation.

**2.2 Advantages of the Status Quo Policy**

As this policy recognizes that the steep challenges that must be overcome by the U.S. and China in order to fully work together on the North Korean crisis are insurmountable in the near future, neither time nor political capital is wasted in trying to come up with a solution. By continuing to engage China through the Six-Party Talks, the U.S. has been able to continue a working relationship with the PRC on the North Korean issues despite any public fall-out over issues in the region. While Washington and Beijing may trade shots in the media over joint U.S.-South Korean naval exercises in the Yellow Sea, they are still able to engage one another in multilateral institutions such as the UN and Six-Party Talks. This policy helps the U.S. maintain a multilateral approach towards the North Korean situation in addition to encouraging China to do the same. The U.S. should not cultivate a policy that relies on one country to combat North Korea’s nuclear program and weapons proliferation.

Furthermore, China’s connection with the DPRK may no longer be a fraternal relationship, and Beijing’s leverage with Pyongyang may not be worth perusing for the U.S.. Pyongyang’s 2006 nuclear test caught China off-guard and the fallout from the test reportedly weakened Chinese-North Korean relations as many Chinese policy analysts felt that ties with Pyongyang have become a strategic liability.
rather than a strategic asset. Additionally, relying on China’s economic leverage may not be an attractive course of action as it would likely cause a massive humanitarian crisis and/or incite more reckless behavior by Pyongyang as the DPRK may feel backed into a corner and would have nothing left to lose.

2.2 Disadvantages of the Status Quo Policy

As previously discussed, there are several negative aspects of this status quo policy. The disconnect between China and the U.S. over North Korean provocations often distracts from the urgency and dangerous nature of DPRK nuclearization. There is a possible widening gap between China and the U.S.-South Korea-Japan camps on the perception of the North Korean threat and how to manage it. If this is the case, then a policy that continues to ignore these disparities is likely to cause future complications, especially if the North Korean situation takes a turn for the worse. In the event that Pyongyang continues its nuclear program and increases its belligerent actions, the U.S. and its regional allies will have a difficult time creating a cohesive regional policy. If China fails to recognize the severity of the issue for other regional powers, this policy would have a major disadvantage in dealing with future complications. Paul Haenle of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace summarizes: “Refusing to take a stance against North Korea’s provocative and dangerous behavior will only allow Pyongyang to continue exploiting divisions between parties to gain concessions.”

Furthermore, disputes between Washington and Beijing over how to respond to certain situations, like the sinking of the Cheonan, have the potential to turn the issue into a Sino-U.S. problem and not a DPRK or proliferation matter. These disagreements over how to respond to North Korean actions can place further strain on Sino-U.S. relations, and at a very critical time. China’s naval expansion has many policy makers in the U.S. concerned about its implications and Beijing’s intentions. As China begins to more strongly assert its claims to territories in the seas surrounding the country, Washington’s North Korea policy, and subsequent strengthened relations with regional allies, poses a threat to China’s claims and overall growth. As U.S.-led security alliances are enhanced in response to DPRK actions, China may become more withdrawn from multilateral approaches as it may perceive these techniques place unwanted geostrategic pressure on China as they involve military action near China’s coast. Beijing would likely regard U.S. alliances that include military coordination as an overall U.S. strategy of
containing China’s rise by using the North Korean situation as a pretext to position troops near the mainland. Without deeper coordination, the current issue on the Korean peninsula can exacerbate Sino-U.S. tensions, especially in the event of a further deterioration in the North Korean issue.

3. A Hardline Approach: The Road to Pyongyang Runs Through Beijing

This alternative policy is based on the premise that if Beijing only made use of its considerable influence, the North Korean nuclear impasse could be resolved. Instead of accepting a course of action that simply manages the DPRK situation, the U.S. could enact a more forceful policy towards China in an effort to achieve positive gains on the Korean peninsula. China’s close connection with Pyongyang, both political and economic, invariably gives Beijing an unrivaled relationship with North Korea, something the U.S. and its allies do not possess. If Washington pressures Beijing to use its relationship and leverage over North Korea, then not only will positive steps be taken to resolve the nuclear crisis, but there would be less disconnect between American expectations and Chinese actions.

As this paper has previously discussed, China’s inaction or reticence to create a united response to North Korean provocations allows North Korea room to maneuver and create more chaos. The International Crisis Group writes;

Beijing’s unwillingness to condemn North Korea prevented a unified international response and undermines China’s own security interests, as it invites further North Korean military and nuclear initiatives, risks increased militarization of North East Asia and encourages an expanded U.S. military and political role in the region.

This quote reveals the root of the problem the U.S. faces with an uncooperative China regarding North Korean actions; without China as a strong ally, the U.S. and other regional allies lose the ability to strongly pressure against or condemn DPRK actions. While China most likely pursues this course of action out of a desire to maintain overall stability in the region, Beijing is increasingly harming its own security by allowing North Korea latitude to engage in military entanglements and develop nuclear capabilities. Costs incurred by China by following this policy include a stronger U.S. military alliance between Japan and South Korea, the risk that North Korea will continue develop and use nuclear weapons leading to another regional war, and continued U.S. political and military involvement in regions close to
China’s boarders. Fitzpatrick summarizes, “The priority China places on stability perversely allows North Korea to destabilize the entire region in ways that seem wholly contrary to China’s national interests.”

Dan Blumenthanl, a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, notes that Washington is falling back on a dangerous pattern; following an act of aggression by North Korea, China eventually urges their ally back to the negotiating table and “Washington then falls over itself complimenting China for its diplomatic skill.” Blumenthal argues that this arrangement allows North Korea to continue to commit acts of war with impunity while China simply looks the other way. In this policy, the U.S. should stress the dangers associated with Beijing sitting on the sidelines when it has the muscle to make Pyongyang play ball. Robert Haddick, writing for Foreign Policy, states that “Beijing’s ham-fisted approach to the North Korean issue is causing other countries in East Asia to rally around the United States in alarm over Chinese intentions, a result exactly contrary to China’s long term policy goals in the region.” If China does not alter their policy regarding Pyongyang, then they should prepare for more diplomatic isolation and a stronger security response from the U.S. and regional allies. This policy would not only hopefully have a positive effect on the overall North Korean conundrum, but also leave no room for confusion on where the U.S. would like China to stand on the issue.

It is important that this policy would not just be based on Washington pressuring China to do more; rather it would frame the policy to encourage China to act like a responsible world power. Cha and Kang state that, “the best argument, however, for China to play a more active role in diplomacy with North Korea, is not to improve relations with the United States, but to fulfill Beijing’s own aspirations to be a great power in the region.” U.S. pressure will not likely be popular in Beijing, but China has the opportunity to take regional stability interests to heart and work to provide a public good for the region. There are indications that when the U.S. has made nuclear nonproliferation a high priority, China has followed suit in an effort to take up the mantle of a responsible power. Under the G.W. Bush administration, the U.S. initiated a harsh stance on terrorism and WMDs. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as naming countries as part of an ‘axis of evil’ were key parts of the Bush Doctrine. Kim argues that China’s proactive diplomacy during this period, especially as it relates to North Korea and the Six-Party talks, was directly linked to the level of risk Beijing calculated in taking a more proactive role in the crisis
on the peninsula. In other words, as China began to throw its weight around economically, it began to cultivate a ‘responsible world power’ persona, and, according to Kim, this had much to do with constant pressure from America during the Bush administration.

The conclusion can be made that a policy which places both a high level of importance on being proactive on the peninsula while creating an opportunity for China to prove itself as a responsible power can entice Beijing to act. If Washington makes North Korean nuclearization a priority and takes a harsher position vis-a-vis China, then China will use its relationship and leverage to more effectively deal with North Korea. Furthermore, a tough U.S. stance and enhanced cooperation with allies would show Beijing the dangers of not fully participating in combating North Korean nuclearization. Beijing could soon find itself encircled by U.S., South Korean, and Japanese SDF forces all in coordination on North Korea and excluding an uncooperative China.

3.1 Course of Action

The course of action for this alternative policy would include the following measures:

Pressuring China

To increase pressure on China, the U.S. should solidify its relationships with Asian allies to counter-balance China’s reluctance to effect positive change on the peninsula. The threat of U.S. aid to augment a regional missile defense system could induce China to become a more active participant in North Korean dealings. Along these lines, if China is not pressured into working within American goals and timelines on the DPRK issue, Washington should make clear that it can work without Beijing on the North Korean problem. While the P+5 and the Six-Party Talks were created to deal with North Korean nuclearization in a multilateral manner, instead, China, and to some extent Russia as well, has used these venues to slow efforts to reign in their client states. Instead the U.S., along with regional allies, should seek avenues independent of China to deal with the situation.

Additionally, the U.S. must make clear that any party, including China, that fails to fully implement its obligation under the UN resolutions would be considered validating North Korea’s claim to be a nuclear weapons state. Washington should “encourage China to more strongly implement punitive responses that will compel North Korea to desist [aggressive actions] and return to negotiations.” While
China prioritizes stability at the cost of pushing for complete and verifiable denuclearization of the DPRK, the U.S. should not relent on this point and make it clear that this is and will continue to be the number one priority for Washington and its allies in Seoul and Tokyo.

**Deeply Engage Regional Allies**

Part of pressuring China includes better coordination between Washington, South Korea and Japan. The U.S. should use firmer collaboration with regional allies to show China that it could be excluded from North Korean planning, especially if it is perceived as implicitly allowing Pyongyang to continue its dangerous activities. In this policy, Washington, with the help of Seoul and Tokyo, should initiate multilateral negotiations aimed at eliminating the immediate missile threat from North Korea to its neighbors. This aspect would hedge against the possibility that China may not commit to being a stronger ally and allow the U.S. and other regional nations to continue to confront the DPRK situation.

**Offer Positive Opportunities for Beijing**

Although this policy presents a hard-line approach to dealing with Beijing on North Korea, this course of action also include positive framing of the issue that would incentivize Beijing to act as a ‘responsible world power.’ Washington should make clear the importance of making strides in DPRK denuclearization, thus providing China the opportunity to prove itself as a responsible nation by aiding in denuclearization. Weitz of the Center for New American Security writes, “The record shows that China is most likely to support American-led security initiatives if the U.S. government shapes the PRC’s cost-benefit analysis in a way that either makes the benefits of participation too large to forgo or the costs of exclusion too large to ignore.” The benefits of participating on this issue would include global recognition as a responsible power, which would do much to allay “Red China” fears, as well as strengthen relations between Washington and Beijing, as this course of action would include close coordination between the two countries. This policy would make the North Korean issues a top-level priority for both governments, as they would both work together on how to achieve a nonnuclear Korean peninsula.
3.2 Advantages of a Hardline Policy

If Beijing were to become a stronger partner in North Korean denuclearization, not only would new, and stronger, initiatives become a possibility, but previous strategies would become more effective. U.S. pressure could make Beijing more strongly support sanction regimes, such as UNSCR 1718, and more effectively support anti-proliferation efforts by securing its land and air borders. The benefits of this policy, if China yielded to U.S. and international pressure to be more proactive on DPRK denuclearization, would include an overall more effective and efficient North Korean policy that may actually have positive results in the near future. Beijing’s relationship with Pyongyang, especially its economic relationship, has true potential to solve the nuclear crisis as well as keep North Korea from lashing out against South. Additionally, as it stands now, the Six-Party Talks are in an indefinite hiatus, though there have been some overtures made to gauge willingness to restart them. With China pressured into taking a more assertive role, chances are high that the Talks could either be resumed or China could be able to effect positive change on the peninsula outside the multilateral framework of the Talks. The pros listed above are the possible positive outcomes in a best-case scenario. As it stands now with Washington’s current policy in which China only plays a nominal role, if China chose not capitulate to pressure, it would not necessarily have a negative effect on the U.S.’s DPRK policy. While Chinese support would undoubtably make U.S. policy more effective, Washington is not without means to impel Pyongyang to reconsider its nuclear plans and weapons proliferation. For example, Washington prompted North Korea to return to the third round of the Six-Party talks after sending F-117 stealth bombers to South Korea. Furthermore, the U.S. has a strong network of allies in Northeast Asia, such that a multilateral approach to the situation would still be plausible in order to continue to manage the crisis.

3.3 Disadvantages of a Hardline Policy

Regardless of what combination of carrots and sticks Washington could offer Beijing to pressure joint action on North Korean nuclearization, the reality of China using hard power to influence Pyongyang is not very plausible as long as China perceives a foreign attack on its mainland from the northeast as a remote possibility. The U.S. cannot alter its North Korean policy to preclude the
possibility of military action; although it can give Pyongyang assurances that its regime is not threatened, if the DPRK launches an attack against South Korea or sells nuclear weapons, the U.S. would be forced to act. China’s reluctance to play a stronger role in pressuring Pyongyang is often related to a domestic cost-benefit analysis on which the U.S. government can exert little influence. If Beijing sees the potential danger of using its influence to intimidate North Korea as outweighing the potential gains in the international arena, then China will not cave to U.S. pestering.

With the high level of mistrust between Washington and Pyongyang, the U.S. will not be able to change the situation by itself. Richard Weitz writes that, “China’s growing military power has resulted in many east Asian countries deepening their security ties with the U.S. and building up their defenses, including acquiring ballistic missile defenses. In response, the Chinese have tightened their ties with North Korea, which, despite the headaches it causes, is a reliable buffer state.” If a more aggressive policy alienates China, the U.S. will lose the cooperation of an important link to the DPRK, and may even push China into defending Pyongyang. This policy could further strain Sino-U.S. relations as China could perceive Washington’s strengthened ties with Seoul and Tokyo as method of containing China’s rise. A hard-line approach towards Beijing over Pyongyang could exacerbate other areas of tension between the U.S. and China.

Finally, if pressuring China backfires, the U.S. could find itself with a major missing link in its North Korean policy, specifically in the region of the Six-Party Talks and sanctions. Without China, the Six-Party Talks may never be revived. In the UN, China could express its disapproval for Washington’s pressuring by abstaining or even vetoing sanctions against Pyongyang. Even if China doesn’t explicitly reject sanctions, without Beijing’s cooperation on enforcing sanctions, they will be ineffectual, precluding an important area of Washington’s overall North Korean policy.

4. Compromise: Multilateral Engagement and Concessions

This alternative policy is based on a course of action that would better engage China to work within a multilateral framework. The U.S. would have to re-adjust its North Korea policy to take into account China’s proximity to the rogue nation as well as regional security concerns. Previous sections of
this paper have discussed how China may be reluctant to act more forcefully on the North Korean issue due to concerns about stability, refugees, and U.S. troop placement. This policy would have Washington work to assuage some of these concerns in order to make stronger Chinese participation in multilateral forums more palatable to Beijing. An underlying assumption of this policy is that China recognizes that North Korea has become a liability to its security and a danger to the world in general, and Beijing is ready and willing to accept an opening that allows them to deal with the situation in a manner that does not threaten their security.

China has become increasingly involved in multilateral functions since the conclusion of the cold war. By 1996, China had signed about 85-90 percent of all arms control agreements it was eligible for compared to just 10 to 20 percent in 1970. With an increase in participation in multilateral institutions, it appears China has come to realize that the multilateralism process coincides with Beijing’s desire to take greater responsibility in Asia and the world. Chu Shulong and Lin Xinzhu in Asian Perspective write, “China is fully aware that a rising, socialist China will remain a concern and even a “threat” or “potential threat” to many countries. The best way for a rising, controversial power to play a bigger role in Asia and the world is through the multilateral approach.” This policy would follow this assumption that China is willing to take on the mantle of a “responsible world power” by becoming more engaged in the multilateral approach to North Korea, particularly an approach that does not harm Beijing’s strategic interests.

Since multilateralism and cooperation, specifically by the U.S., are key to this policy, the Six-Party Talks should be at the center of this strategy. The Six-Party Talks are the only current mechanism in place that has the chance of overcoming the regional atmosphere of hedging, denial and avoidance of shared responsibility to transform into unified regional cooperation to achieve denuclearization, normalization, economic development and peace in Northeast Asia. China has shown itself to be a willing participant, if not a leader in the Talks. “The patience and tenacity with which China has pursued hands-on, preventative diplomacy can be seen in its efforts to keep the Six-Party Talks from collapsing,” says Samuel S. Kim in a 2004 article in Asian Perspective.
However, restarting the Six Party Talks will not be an easy task, and this policy hinges on whether all of the parties, but especially China and the United States, are willing to subordinate some of their own national objectives and preferences to the greater goals of denuclearization, normalization, economic development and peace.\textsuperscript{89} The Six-Party Talks have faced problems from domestic policy constraints, differing priorities, and conflicting historical analogies, limiting Beijing’s range of influence and maneuverability to help negotiate a solution to the nuclear crisis.\textsuperscript{90} John Park of the United States Institute for Peace summarizes that the greatest challenge facing the U.S. in better engaging the Six-Party talks to confront North Korea is a “lack of strong policy coordination with China in jointly leading the multilateral effort.”\textsuperscript{91}

This policy would require the U.S. to make some concessions in order to ease Chinese fears about possible outcomes on the peninsula. At this point, Beijing remains wary of many of the tools that the U.S. prefers for addressing the nuclear issue. Whereas Washington favors pressure and sanctions, China would prefer economic incentives and enticements for North Korea to join in dialogue and cooperation.\textsuperscript{92} This difference also extends to each country’s perspective on regime change. Hard-liners in Washington have long subscribed to the view that regime change is the only way to solve the North Korean problem, while Beijing is wary of regime change as it may precipitate a country-wide collapse in North Korea.\textsuperscript{93} Deeper cooperation on the North Korean issue would require concessions from the U.S. to alleviate Chinese security concerns. The premise of this policy is that with better coordination on denuclearization and support from China, the North Korean conundrum could move towards a solution.

\textbf{4.1 Course of Action}

This cooperative, multilateral policy would follow the following courses of action:

\textit{Revive the Six-Party Talks}

Although the Six-Party Talks are in a coma at this point, China’s past dedication to sustaining this multilateral approach towards engaging North Korea should not be discounted. Each of the nations in the Six-Party Talks should make the necessary concession in order to restart them. The U.S. would have to forfeit its “denuclearization now” attitude in exchange for a long-term strategy to contain the nuclear threat. Additionally, Washington would have to persuade Seoul to accept Pyongyang’s offer of returning
to the Talks without preconditions, namely an apology for the incidents in 2010. U.S. policy, in conjunction with China and other Six-Party members, would tackle the DPRK problem comprehensively, but in incremental steps, while in the meantime avoiding any out-right clashes between Pyongyang and Seoul or Tokyo.94

Make China a Rule-Maker

Another way to better engage China in multilateral action is to make Beijing a rule-maker in the process. Analysts have argued that China shows less of a proclivity to fall in line with multilateral agendas that it feels are led by the U.S., for U.S. interests. For example, following the Cheonan incident and the report that identified North Korea as the culprit behind the corvette’s sinking, Chinese analysts claimed that Beijing resisted the results of the report because Seoul did not invite China to participate.95 China should be relied upon to take a leadership position in the Six-Party Talks and other North Korean-focused action, as it is the nation with the most influence with Pyongyang. This would translate into China taking a leadership role in the Talks, with the U.S. and other members taking a background position.

Mitigate Chinese Concerns

Sino-U.S. strategic suspicion is currently a large stumbling block in joint coordination on North Korea. In order to better engage China, the U.S. needs to assuage Chinese mistrust of U.S. intentions. Washington should clarify U.S. objectives towards the Korean Peninsula, notably assuring China that the U.S. does not have any long-term interests in the peninsula past the resolution of the nuclear crisis and curbing aggression by Pyongyang. Furthermore, Washington should make clear that its alliance structures with Seoul and Tokyo are not intended to contain China’s rise, rather they are designed to confront the North Korean crisis. In conjunction with multilateral engagement, the U.S. should take the opportunity to initiate high-level military to military talks with the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) to further clarify U.S. intentions, especially in the case of a sudden disaster or incident.

Moreover, the U.S. must adjust its timeline for Korean denuclearization. Beijing favors a more extended timeline, believing that time is not on Pyongyang’s side due to the unstable nature of the regime and periodic food shortages. From China’s point of view, America’s insistence on punishment measures
for Pyongyang’s rogue nuclear program and provocations is destabilizing and dangerous. The policy recommends that Washington should place greater priority on factoring in China’s concerns when crafting a DPRK policy, including allowing significantly more trade and aid to the North than is currently its preference in order to assist stability. This will help the U.S. cooperate better with China and be able to reap the benefits of having a solid partnership with Beijing on North Korean denuclearization.

4.2 Advantages of the Compromise Policy

If the U.S. shows a strong commitment to a multilateral management plan of North Korea, China could be positively pressured into this multilateral framework in order to not be seen on Pyongyang’s side, and instead play the role of a responsible world power. Washington cannot sufficiently impose disincentives to effectively persuade Pyongyang; the U.S. must have support from Beijing and compromise on strategic objectives like a commitment to overall stability and an extended timeline.96 If the Six-Party Talks are able to restarted with a combination of compromises, especially by the U.S., and with Chinese pressure, then the Korean situation can be more positively managed and future outbursts on the peninsula can be avoided. Scott Snyder notes that the six-party mechanism enhances U.S.-Chinese cooperation while preserving U.S.-Japanese and U.S.-South Korean alliance coordination, so that all parties can work towards a nuclear-free Korean peninsula.97

A longer time-line on denuclearization would enable China to feel more assured of its boarder security, allowing Beijing’s cost-benefit analysis to swing in favor of integrating more fully with Six-Party allies and work towards a long-term solution on the peninsula. The Six-Party Talks have the potential to evolve into a new security framework, yet the U.S. would have to make quite a few concessions in order to cultivate a more China-friendly approach to the Talks. The Six-Party Talks are certainly a highlight in Sino-U.S. relations, as it is the only multilateral security forum lead by the United States and China.98 While this policy may result in a slower denuclearization of the peninsula, the gains of having regional cooperation, specifically between the U.S. and China, could outweigh the costs. Overall Sino-U.S. tensions could be reduced if Washington and Beijing could find common ground over North Korean denuclearization, and it is possible that this diminished antagonism
could positively influence other areas of concern, such as uncertainty over China’s recent naval expansion.

### 4.3 Disadvantages of the Compromise Policy

There are several challenges that confront this policy of deeper engagement with China through multilateralism. Although China has become more involved in multilateral institutions of late, Chinese leadership is not known for its diplomatic skills, and this may be even truer with the rise of the “Red Princes,” who may want to stay loyal to China’s earlier roots of focusing on internal development and stability. Furthermore, the conservative nature of Chinese diplomacy will make it difficult for Beijing to play a more proactive role in either the Six-Party talks or other forms of mediation.99 While China may be useful and even instrumental in getting North Korea to return to the negotiating table, that may be the extent of Beijing’s function in this equation, as they are hamstrung by their dedication to regional stability.

Re-starting the Six-Party Talks presents another challenge for this policy. The preconditions that various countries have set in order to initiate a new round of talks may make it difficult to revive the Talks. The U.S. seeks signs Pyongyang is sincere about disarmament, while South Korea wants a commitment from the North that it will cease its provocations. North Korea is willing to meet anyone, anywhere, but other members are wary that this would be rewarding Pyongyang’s negative behavior over the past year and a half. China, in contrast to the U.S. and its allies, advocates accepting North Korea’s overtures.100 It clearly would not be a simple task to win over all parties to resume negotiations.

David Lampton provides a wider context of the challenge of implementing this policy, “put in more realist terms, the problem is how to satisfy the needs of a rising power (China) for a role and voice in the international system...while, as a previously hegemonic power, the United States adjusts to a more pluralistic world in which outcomes must be negotiated, not imposed.”101 From a broad view, the U.S. is unlikely to sacrifice North Korean goals that are deemed crucial to upholding the nuclear nonproliferation regime. Politicians in Washington are unlikely to compromise a long-standing policy of certifiable denuclearization in order to placate China, a move that would both undermine America’s position on
nuclear weapons and appear weak for making concessions to China. While it is not unreasonable to propose that Washington make some concessions in North Korean negotiations in order to work within the multilateral framework, this policy would call for significant compromise in order to placate China. These concessions, like a longer timeline for denuclearization, would likely not be accepted by policymakers in Washington.

Also, there is the continued risk that China will only nominally commit to this new policy. Kim and Kim write that “China benefits from good relations with the U.S. and South Korea while at the same time maintaining an enduring security commitment to North Korea.” This policy could be risky, as China may only appear to be working on denuclearization while enjoying the benefits of improved relations with the U.S.. Furthermore, as Bruce Klinger writes, the U.S. might end up sacrificing “allies on the altar of denuclearization.” By working more closely with China, especially in the area of military-to-military talks, regional allies, especially South Korea, could feel threatened that China is gaining an upper hand in the situation, which may have negative effect on Seoul’s security. The U.S. may find itself with more difficult relations with Seoul and Tokyo as it sacrifices long-standing positions in order to gain a closer relationship with China that may or may not have an overall positive effect on North Korea. Finally, if North Korea’s aggressive actions are triggered by internal factors, such as ideology or the dynamics of leadership succession, Washington’s sacrifices for Beijing’s cooperation may be pointless.

5. Recommended Policy: Enhanced Status Quo

The three policies outlined in this paper represent different American approaches to China over the North Korean issue. The current policy, status quo, takes into consideration issues that preclude China from cooperating fully on DPRK nuclearization while still nominally including Beijing in negotiations. This policy is pragmatic, yet can cause periodic strains in Sino-U.S. relations when tensions flare in the peninsula. The second policy takes a hard-line tactic, pressuring China to either acquiesce to U.S. goals on the peninsula or be left out of negotiations. The third policy makes conciliatory overtures to China in
order to obtain their support in multilateral negotiations. Each of these policies has positive and negative sides, yet some are more plausible to implement than others.

This paper recommends following the general status quo policy, but with some modifications, such as increased mil-to-mil communication and initiating potential contingency planning between the U.S. and China. While this paper began on a platform that the status quo policy was inefficient and showed substantial disconnect between Beijing and Washington on a volatile and crucial issue, an investigation of the current policy as well as alternatives revealed that Washington is operating under the current policy for pragmatic reasons and due to a lack of plausible alternatives at this time. In addition to the cons already outlined, it is doubtful the second policy, a hard-line approach, could be implemented due to current American domestic issues. The U.S. is struggling through a political gridlock which recently resulted in playing a game of debt-ceiling chicken, in addition to the continued recession and high unemployment. The domestic issues American politicians are faced with make it unlikely that political capital will be wasted on pushing an issue not on the top agenda of the voting population. Furthermore, these domestic issues would also hinder the weight of any pressure placed on China to follow this hard-line policy.

As for the cooperative policy, U.S. policy makers would have to make drastic and unpopular concessions to a country that poses the largest threat to American-led security order in East Asia. Many of Washington’s allies in the region would likely not want to see the U.S. reduce its presence in East Asia as America has been at the center of an alliance structure for over half a century. Additionally, it would also compromise Washington’s stance on nuclear proliferation and aggressive acts towards South Korea. For these reasons, the status quo policy is the most credible policy available at this time. It is the best possible course of action as alternative policies remain either implausible or too costly.

Furthermore, the North Korea problem is just one subject among many that comprise Sino-U.S. relations, and thus is a symptom of a much larger issue. Frans-Paul van der Putten, a research fellow with the Clingendael Institute in The Hague, writes, “A major precondition for China to change its policy towards North Korea is an improvement in Sino-U.S. relations.” However, there are host of challenging issues that both nations would have to deal with before seeing a drastic improvement in relations and
cooperation. While disputes such as currency valuation and trade agreements could be solved through negotiations, tougher issues like Taiwan and territorial waters are likely to continue to remain unresolved and contribute to strained relations. For these reasons, the status quo policy is the recommended policy option for the U.S..

However, there are additional measures that can be taken by both American and China in order to prevent diplomatic flare-ups, like what occurred in 2010. Mil-to-mil communication and contingency planning would help calm some tensions over intentions without demanding either side to make large concessions. Contingency planning should involve direct U.S.-China talks, specifically ones in which Washington assures Beijing that a unified Korea would not threaten the PRC. Beijing understands that if North Korea ceased to exist, whether through a violent implosion, explosion, or through a gradual dissolution, the eventual outcome would remain the same; the remaining countries, Japan, South Korea, the new government in North Korea, and Taiwan would all be aligned with the U.S., creating a security issue for China. However, if the U.S. were able to assure China that following the immediate containment of loose nuclear material and refugee crisis, U.S. troops would vacate the peninsula, then some strategic suspicion could be moderated. Mil-to-mil relations between the U.S. and China have been difficult to maintain, as weapons sales to Taiwan complicates the relationship. Chinese General Cheng Bingde’s visit to the U.S. in May, 2011 reiterated concerns that strategic suspicion between the two nations harmed mil-to-mil talks. Cheng noted that America’s threat perception of China’s military, “pollutes the political environment for Sino-U.S. [military-to-military] relations.” Despite these difficulties, the precarious situation on the peninsula may now make the Chinese more willing to engage in mil-to-mil talks regarding Korean contingencies.

Contingency planning should include a dialogue about the future of the peninsula and the “principles” of a united Korea. This will include what a unified Korea might look like, and should include discussion about the number and location of U.S. troops that could possibly be deployed to the area in the event of a crisis or collapse. These discussions with China should be with the prior coordination with U.S. allies in Seoul and Tokyo. Regional powers should coordinate a plan for dealing with a North Korean collapse and the subsequent refugees in a way that does not threaten China’s economic security. The U.S.
should work with South Korea to assure China that Seoul has no revanchist plans on territories inside
China’s boarders populated with ethnic Koreans.\textsuperscript{108}

The Six Party Talks could become a possible avenue in which to hold these contingency planning
sessions. Ji-Yong Lee of the East-West Center argues that the Six Party Talks are not just about
Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons development program, but “it is very likely that the dynamics and politics
today at the Six Party Talks are going to spill over into future strategic configurations among the six
countries in the event of a North Korean contingency.”\textsuperscript{109} The Six-Party Talks could be used to begin a
regional dialogue about the future of the peninsula; however an obvious drawback would be the potential
to alienate North Korea with plans of a post-DPRK peninsula.

Direct mil-to-mil communication between Washington and Beijing, would be ideal, especially for
an issue as uncertain as the North Korean situation. During President Hu Jintao’s visit to Washington in
January of 2011, President Obama attempted to reopen military-to-military discussions, as they had been
abandoned the previous year following U.S. arms sales to Taiwan. Reopening communication between
the two militaries has been an uphill battle; an approach by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates in China
was turned down.\textsuperscript{110} Although the U.S. military and the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) do have a direct
hotline, both America and China have a proclivity towards disrupting bilateral military exchanges to show
displeasure at each other’s actions. However, there are steps being made in the right direction to make
consistent mil-to-mil relations a reality. An editorial in the \textit{New York Times} by Admiral Mike Mullen
reveals that this is an issue policy makers in Washington take seriously, and hope to rectify soon.\textsuperscript{111}

By pursuing these measures in addition to the status quo policy, the U.S. will be able to continue
to confront the North Korean crisis in a way that works towards achieving long-standing goals of
complete, certifiable denuclearization while upholding regional security commitments to allies. Working
Towards better military relations with China in addition to beginning regional talks about contingency
plans will help reduce tensions between Washington and Beijing over future North Korean issues. It is
clear that there are many obstacles in the way of achieving a better working relationship between Beijing
and Washington on North Korean denuclearization; overall Sino-U.S. mistrust and strategic suspicion,
issues over Taiwan, and China’s regional security concerns. Victor Cha and David Kang point out that the
best way for China to play a more active and positive role in diplomacy with North Korea is not to improve relations with the U.S., but to fulfill their own aspirations to be a great power in the region. Beijing not only has a vested interest in seeing a peaceful Korean peninsula, but by becoming a stronger force in the DPRK situation, China can undertake a responsibility to provide a public good for the region.¹¹²
Endnotes


16 Moore, “America’s Failed,” 19.


32 Gordon G. Chang. “Implications of China’s Economic Penetration of North Korea,” *The Jamestown Foundation* [Online]; 15 July 2011. Article accessed on 10 August 2011: [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_tnews%5Btt_news%5D=38181&tx_tnews%5BbackPid%5D=517](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_tnews%5Btt_news%5D=38181&tx_tnews%5BbackPid%5D=517)


40 Kim, “China’s New Role,” 166.

41 Shen, “Alliance Structures,” 5.

While a Sino-U.S. war is not currently a probable event, from China’s perspective, the PRC has been at war with the U.S. in the past and thus it is not inconceivable to plan policies according to a possible scenario of conflict with the U.S. China is at odds with the U.S. on a number of issues, most importantly over Taiwan, and thus Beijing’s policy on the peninsula will likely not preclude the contingency of war with the U.S.


Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid. 151.


Ibid. 18-19.


International Crisis Group, “China,” i.
67 Fitzpatrick, “Stopping,” 10


70 Cha and Kang, Nuclear North Korea, 165.

71 Ibid.


74 Prichard, Tilelli and Snyder, “U.S. Policy,” 15.

75 Denmark et.al., “No Illusions,” 22.


77 Weitz, “Understanding China’s Evolving Role,” 85

78 Prichard, Tilelli and Snyder, “U.S. Policy,” 22.

79 Denmark et. al., “No Illusions,” 22.

80 Kim and Kim, “Nuclear Quagmire,” 162.

81 Ibid. 155.

82 Weitz, “Understanding China’s Evolving Role,” 85.

83 Prichard, Tilelli and Snyder, “U.S. Policy,” 3


87 Snyder, “Responses,” 42.


89 Snyder, “Responses,” 33.

90 Park, “Inside Multilateralism,” 75.

91 Ibid. 79.


Snyder, “Responses,” 42.

Zhao, “Co-Management,” 57.


Harlan, “Useful.”


Prichard, Tilelli and Snyder, “U.S. Policy,” 22-23.


Lee, “U.S.-ROK Alliance,” 2.

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Cha and Kang, Nuclear North Korea, 165.
MA Policy Paper Proposal

Working Towards a Joint North Korean Strategy:
America’s Policy Options with China

(Working Title)

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

This paper will be a policy paper discussing Sino-U.S. relations in the area of the Korean Peninsula, particularly in confronting North Korean actions and aspirations. This paper will outline three policy options for U.S. policy toward China as it pertains to dealing with North Korean nuclear ambitions and brinkmanship behavior. While summarizing three policy options for the U.S., this paper will also take into consideration strategic goals and capabilities of both China and the U.S. in order to create a policy that is advantageous to both countries in addition to effecting a positive North Korean response.

Status of Sino-U.S. relations on the topic of North Korea

“If there is no exit strategy on the part of Washington or Seoul, the Cheonan incident might become a defining moment for the prolonging of inter-Korean confrontation and the opening of a collision course between the United States and China in the years ahead.” Tong Kim, University of North Korean Studies

Recent events on the Korean peninsula have escalated tensions not only between the two countries directly involved, North and South Korea, but also between tertiary countries that have a stake in the region’s security. China’s position as the growing regional superpower and as the country with perhaps the most influence over Pyongyang makes it a crucial ally in preventing North Korea’s combative actions and nuclear ambitions. America’s role as a long-standing provider of security in Asia since the conclusion of World War II has solidified its approach of taking proactive measures regarding North Korea’s belligerent actions. While the U.S. and China may differ on exact goals and timelines regarding the DPRK, the overall aim for both countries is to ensure peace on the peninsula.

Establishing the best course of action for China and the U.S. regarding North Korea is a vital and urgent matter for several reasons. The critical nature of North Korea’s nuclear development, weapons proliferation and sporadic attacks against South Korea require a serious and timely response. North Korea’s actions have brought the security balance of East Asia to a turning point, in that China’s aspirations of increasing its military presence in the region and America’s well-established Asian security alliances could potentially come into direct conflict as a result of destabilization on the peninsula. This
situation has further exacerbated Sino-U.S. relations, which are already fraught with tensions over currency valuation, human rights issues, and trade relations.

A recent example of the disconnect between Washington and Beijing’s approach to North Korean actions can be seen in the response by each country following the sinking of the *Cheonan*. In addition to publicly condemning Pyongyang’s actions against the South Korean corvette, the U.S. joined forces with South Korea and conducted military exercises in the East Sea. China, on the other hand, skirted acknowledging North Korean complicity in the event and vehemently opposed U.S.-ROK actions near China’s waters. Clearly there is a division between Washington and Beijing’s policy towards Pyongyang, and this division has the potential not only to allow North Korea to commit more aggressive actions, but also allow for a direct conflict between the U.S. and China over how to respond to unrest on the peninsula. Friction over how to deal with North Korea has the potential to be a make-or-break issue between Washington and Beijing. It is paramount that the U.S. follow a policy that engages China proactively on the North Korean situation.

In elaborating different policy proposals, it is important to consider the differences and similarities of China and the U.S.’s goals regarding North Korea. China is widely agreed to have the most influence over North Korea, as it is the country’s largest economic trading partner and provider of aid. Yet while China does publicly state that it is committed to the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, as a country that shares a long border with North Korea, Beijing’s interests may be more complex. Despite differences in approaching Pyongyang, it is imperative that the U.S. and China find common ground in which to jointly address the North Korean crisis.

**Research Methods**

Archival, U.S. Department of State publications, speeches by both U.S. and Chinese leaders, Chinese newspaper articles and opinion pieces, policy institutes and think tanks, and scholarly journals.

**Policy Options**

There are three policy options: status quo; a hardline approach toward China over North Korean issues; and a Sino-U.S. strategic dialogue policy.

1) **Status quo:** The present policy is best described as reactionary, in which there is limited collaborative efforts by Washington and Beijing to confront Pyongyang. Currently, Beijing and Washington each follow their own respective North Korean policies. This creates a situation in which the U.S. responds to a provocation by the North, then demands that China follow suit. In both the case of the *Cheonan* and Yeonpyong Island shelling, the U.S. reaffirmed its condemnation of North Korean actions and strengthened its military presence in the region. Meanwhile, China dodged harshly denouncing Pyongyang while concurrently protesting U.S. military presence in China’s purported sphere of influence. This disparity in response is typically accompanied by Sino-U.S. dialogue stating converging interests in the peace on the peninsula, but limited tangible results in the form of joint action. This current policy is reactionary, in which the U.S. and China are ostensibly committed to reigning in North Korea, but substantial joint engagement remains limited due to Chinese concerns regarding overall U.S. intentions in East Asia.

2) **Hardline approach:** Another interpretation of the pattern of behavior exhibited by China in dealing with North Korean provocations, reveals that intense pressure by the U.S. does result in Beijing reprimanding Pyongyang. The International Crisis Group asserts that the U.S.’s staunch commitment to strengthening ties with South Korea through joint military exercises following the *Cheonan* and Yeonpyong incidents has forced China to publicly pressure Pyongyang as well as concede to military exercises in the Yellow Sea. The argument is that if the U.S. remains strong in voicing public condemnation of North Korean actions in addition to strengthening alliances with South Korea and Japan, China will be forced to participate. If Beijing continues to ignore demands for action on the peninsula, then China risks undermining its own regional security and damaging its international
Moreover, the American Enterprise Institute contends that by the U.S. taking a hard line on military alliances and sanctions, Washington gains further leverage over China in order to demand that Beijing take a more proactive role in the North Korean crisis. This policy advocates that Washington take a stern position in reaffirming its commitment to peace on the peninsula through diplomatic or military means in order increase pressure on Beijing to play a more palpable role in dealing with Pyongyang.

3) **Strategic dialogue:** A policy approach promulgated by the Center for Strategic and International Studies recommends that the U.S. and China move discussions to a more strategic level. This strategy takes into consideration the possibility of a North Korean collapse and aims to assuage China’s chief fears, namely refugee influxes and U.S. military presence on the peninsula. Additionally, the U.S. would need to understand, through further discussions, what Washington can expect of China in terms of “deliverables,” that is, identifying realistic and tangible areas in which Beijing does have leverage over Pyongyang instead of assumed influence. Furthermore, an enhanced dialogue would identify areas in which Washington and Beijing could agree on in order to present a united front toward Pyongyang. This could include possible conditions for the continuation of the Six Party Talks.

**Outline**

I. Introduction
   A. Overview of North Korean situation
   B. China’s relationship/North Korean policy
   C. U.S. goals regarding North Korea

II. Sino-U.S. relations over North Korea
   A. Current issues
   B. U.S. policy towards China regarding North Korea

III. Policy Option 1: Status quo
   A. Advantages
   B. Disadvantages

IV. Policy Option 2: Hardline
   A. Advantages
   B. Disadvantages

V. Policy Option 3: Strategic dialogue
   A. Advantages
   B. Disadvantages

VI. Recommended Policy Option

VII. Implementation and Conclusion

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3 Ibid.


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Chang, Gordon G. “Implications of China’s Economic Penetration of North Korea,” *The Jamestown Foundation* [Online]; 15 July 2011. Article accessed on 10 August 2011: [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=38181&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=517](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=38181&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=517)


