

THE NIXON CENTER

The U.S. - China Relationship Facing International Security Crises

Three Case Studies in Post-9/11 Bilateral Relations



**David M. Lampton
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Introductory Note

This Nixon Center monograph entitled *The U.S.-China Relationship Facing International Security Crises* is a timely and rigorous assessment of the extent of Sino-American cooperation with respect to three ongoing critical challenges America confronts—the War on Terror, the Iraq War and the ongoing conflict there, and the thus far slow motion confrontation with North Korea over its nuclear weapons programs. The Bush Administration and many academic and journalistic commentators have characterized the current U.S.-China relationship as more productive than it has been for more than a decade. This monograph tests that proposition in three areas vital to American interests. Moreover, this study assists policy makers and scholars assess the degree to which the security foundation of Sino-American cooperation, severely damaged with the demise of the Soviet Union, has been reestablished.

This document not only points to the important dimensions of current Sino-American cooperation, it also clearly delineates where American and Chinese perceptions and interests diverge. A complex mix of cooperation and mutual anxiety is seen with particular clarity with respect to the unfolding crisis on the Korean Peninsula. Nonetheless, this mix is seen in the other two case studies as well. The report is wise in cautioning policy makers not to uncritically project cooperation in one area (Iraq for example) to other seemingly similar issues (such as Iran). In short, while this research supports the proposition that Sino-American cooperation has great strategic value for the United States, it also acknowledges clearly where the interests of the two nations are distinct. What is described in the pages that follow is a Sino-American relationship that today is not so different from America's ties with other great powers.

The Nixon Center will release another monograph this fall examining U.S-Russian cooperation on similar issues. Written by Geoffrey Kemp and Paul J. Saunders, the paper will assess prospects for U.S.-Russian cooperation in the greater Middle East, such as in Iran and Iraq as well as working together in the war on terrorism. Robert Leiken, the Center's Director of Immigration and National Security Programs, will also complete an assessment of the status of American efforts to adjust immigration policies and practices to improve domestic security.

Dimitri K. Simes
President
The Nixon Center

Preface

This monograph was written and published during a relatively fluid period and we have tried to accurately portray events and trends as they appeared in the fall of 2003. However, the nuclear crisis with North Korea and efforts to restart another round of the six-party talks were happening while this monograph was in its final stages of preparation.

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Executive Summary

The U.S.-China Relationship Facing International Security Crises

This monograph examines developments in U.S.-China relations from September 11, 2001, through late 2003. This period witnessed the fashioning of new overall orientations in American foreign policy, the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the ongoing prosecution of the broader war on terrorism, the formal emergence of a new leadership in China, and the development of a more cooperative U.S.-China relationship. In the following pages, we attempt to answer the deceptively simple question – How helpful has China been to America’s primary national security challenges? The authors have chosen three case studies to examine in this endeavor—the ever-evolving war on terrorism, America’s confrontation with Iraq and its potential future policy toward Iran, and the North Korean nuclear crisis. These cases focus on China’s actions and decision making, shed light on the nature and degree of Beijing’s post-9/11 cooperation with Washington, and offer clues about the extent to which American and Chinese interests and policy are on convergent or divergent paths. We conclude each chapter with policy-relevant observations and recommendations.

The three foreign policy challenges examined within this monograph have contributed to, and benefited from, a gradually improving relationship between Washington and Beijing. In the first nine months of the Bush Administration, bilateral relations between the two nations had been pushed downward with the Administration’s initial labeling of China as a “strategic competitor” and the EP-3 incident, as documented in The Nixon Center’s study entitled *U.S.-China Relations in a Post-September 11th World* (2002). The post-9/11 era, however, has witnessed a significant improvement in ties between the two countries. President Bush has met with China’s leaders extensively in his first two-plus years in office, and he is the first U.S. president to go to China more than once in a term. Moreover, he has met China’s new president, Hu Jintao, on three separate continents up through mid-2003. These meetings, the implicit agreement that neither Beijing nor Washington wants or needs trouble in the Taiwan Strait, and China’s actions in the three cases that are the topic of this study have contributed to what Secretary of State Colin Powell described as the best period in the bilateral relationship in decades.¹

Looking at this monograph’s three cases from a high altitude of generalization, four things are clear. First, the long-standing generalization that Beijing becomes most intensively involved in those issues closest to its borders and most threatening to its interests still holds true. Second, Beijing’s critical interests are moving ever outward from its borders, and as this occurs, the geographic scope of China’s involvement has correspondingly expanded. This process will continue. Third, as China becomes more economically capable and integrated into the world market, it is employing an ever-broader range of tools to protect its interests, including increasingly active participation in multilateral organizations. Finally, the subtext throughout this study is that Beijing

places a very high priority on maintaining constructive ties with Washington and is willing to make compromises both internally and externally to achieve this goal. Thus, Beijing has been directly and constructively engaged in addressing the North Korean crisis, helpful (sometimes very helpful) to Washington as America has sought to thwart terrorism, and willing to avert its eyes as the Bush Administration was determined to topple Saddam Hussein's regime.

Partners in the War on Terrorism

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and Washington's shifting focus from potential long-term threats (a rising China) to immediate threats (the Al Qaeda network) provided a more stable platform for U.S.-China relations than had existed for more than a decade. Since 9/11, the Bush Administration has turned away from viewing Beijing as a long-term "competitor" toward seeing it as a partner in the war on terrorism.² Although the emergence of a sharply defined American foreign policy that embraces the doctrine of preemption and the use of military force to destroy the nexus of failed or rogue states, weapons of mass destruction, and amorphous terrorist groups troubles China's leaders, they have not let those concerns damage the current Sino-American relationship. Moreover, with respect to Afghanistan, Beijing had been troubled by the Taliban regime, which the United States seemingly toppled in short order. Although China had anxieties about the American military presence in Afghanistan and in neighboring Central Asian states, China's leaders shed no tears over the demise of the regime in Kabul.

Though not at the center of events, China has been helpful in the war on terrorism. At the outset, Beijing encouraged Islamabad to cooperate with Washington as the United States moved against the Taliban. Also of critical importance, Beijing helped stabilize the volatile situation between Pakistan and India in late 2001 and 2002, a conflict that some feared might cross the nuclear threshold. After the war in Afghanistan, China offered approximately \$150 million to help rebuild the country. China is also actively promoting the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to become a more effective antiterrorist organization. On balance, Washington finds this multilateral institution, which is directed at preventing the spread of radical Islamic terrorism, to be in U.S. interests, although Beijing's initial impulse was, in part, to use the organization as a bulwark against U.S. influence in the region.

Furthermore, in the wake of 9/11, Beijing has helped Washington build institutions to thwart terrorist activities. Efforts to impede terrorist financing, cooperation with Washington's Container Security Initiative (CSI), and the establishment of a Federal Bureau of Investigation office in Beijing are some of the steps the two nations have taken to chop off the tentacles of terrorism. Although these measures are important, China clearly is not at the center of the war on terrorism. Nonetheless, in the aggregate, these steps have served to anchor the bilateral relationship and to cement a foundation for future cooperation against terror and in other domains, such as organized crime.

Although China has not been a prominent target of domestic terrorism, it has suffered to some extent in this regard. This sense of vulnerability in Beijing has boosted its willingness to cooperate with Washington while also motivating the leaders of the

Peoples' Republic of China (PRC) to equate some political dissidents with "terrorists." This latter move has led Washington to warn Beijing not to use the war on terrorism as an excuse for domestic political repression.

In short, the war on terrorism has forged a limited partnership between the United States and China. This partnership, which has helped consolidate a foundation for positive U.S.-China relations, was perhaps best described by U.S. Ambassador to China Carl T. (Sandy) Randt, Jr., who told a Washington audience in September 2003 that the United States had discovered, in the wake of 9/11, that "we [the United States] have enemies, and China is not among them" and that China is "cooperating not as a favor to the United States but because it also feels vulnerable."³

Beijing and the War against Saddam Hussein

Of the three cases examined in this study, China has been least active and least visible in the run-up to, execution of, and aftermath of the invasion of Iraq, launched by Washington in the spring of 2003. Simply put, Iraq is a comparatively distant concern for Beijing, a place where PRC economic and petroleum interests are currently only modestly involved. This stance differs from the official U.S. view, in which the Bush Administration declared that Saddam Hussein's regime in Baghdad was the primary security concern of the United States—Iraq was perceived by the Administration to be that place where the tri-dangers of weapons of mass destruction, a rogue regime, and terrorist organizations intersected. Because preserving constructive ties with Washington was important to the PRC's leaders, Beijing judged pragmatically that although it could not stop Washington from invading Iraq, it could remain on the right side of the anticipated "winner," hoping to improve U.S.-China ties and share in the spoils of contracts that would follow.

Broadly looking at China's relations with the Middle East, Beijing's influence in the region has been limited, although it has been growing during the past two decades. Negligible in most places during much of the Cold War, Beijing's political influence in the region grew during the 1980s, in part due to its weapons sales, particularly to both Iran and Iraq during their decade-long conflict. In the 1990s, China's interests in the region moved beyond the arms trade and expanded considerably to what they are now.

To start, China's rapidly growing economy has generated an increasing hunger for energy, particularly relatively clean energy. Since 1993, China has become progressively more reliant on imported oil to meet domestic demand. The Middle East has become the PRC's primary source of foreign petroleum, and the time is coming when China will be as dependent on imported oil, in percentage terms, as the United States is today. In addition, maintaining positive relations with the world's approximately one billion Muslims is a significant priority for Beijing—doing so not only enhances China's own diplomatic leverage, it also helps reassure PRC leaders that China will not become a target of Middle Eastern governments or terrorist organizations that might seek to mobilize China's own 19 million adherents to Islam for separatist or other purposes. Lastly, Israel has become China's second-largest source of arms imports and a critical

source of high-technology systems that the modernization-focused People's Liberation Army craves.⁴

For all of these reasons, Beijing sought to keep as low a profile as possible during the run-up to the invasion of Iraq. When forced to choose, it avoided opposing Washington without explicitly endorsing the U.S. use of military force. In November 2002, the PRC supported United Nations (UN) Resolution 1441, which endorsed “serious consequences” if Saddam Hussein failed to comply. In early 2003, however, the PRC was more than happy that Washington's efforts to secure a second UN resolution more explicitly permitting America's drive on Baghdad died. In adopting this strategy, China looked comparatively supportive in contrast to the postures of clear opposition adopted by France and Germany and, to a lesser extent, Russia. By doing so, Beijing hoped to put itself on better footing to secure some meaningful benefits in postwar Iraq and, at a minimum, not alienate Washington.

North Korea's Nuclear Gamble

North Korea's nuclear ambitions have brought it to the brink of conflict with the United States, threatened core Chinese interests, and, in the process, strained Beijing-Pyongyang ties—a relationship that already had a long history of mutual mistrust, rhetoric of “as close as lips and teeth” aside. At the same time, however, Washington's (perhaps now evolving) policy of not providing positive inducements and a security guarantee to Pyongyang until it reverses all the actions Washington believes contrary to earlier agreements strikes Beijing as neither a productive posture nor a realistic policy. Consequently, Beijing sees itself as caught between two drunk drivers on a high-speed freeway, though it is admittedly more worried about the sobriety of Pyongyang than of Washington. China's leaders thus face a series of difficult and unsatisfactory possibilities, with outcomes ranging from a war on the Korean peninsula and a nuclear arms race in East Asia to international embargoes and an uncertain verification regime. China's leaders are reassessing the risks and rewards of their ties to Pyongyang, and Beijing has distanced itself progressively from the North. It is no surprise, therefore, that North Korea sought to have the August 2003 six-party talks held in New York rather than Beijing.⁵

No other nation has as much influence in North Korea as China does. Still, China's relationship with North Korea has been decaying for nearly 50 years, albeit at variable rates. Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms launched in 1978 put China on a path toward a market economy and global integration and away from Kim Il Sung's *juche* ideal of self-sufficiency. China continues to aid its starving neighbor, but more from fear that North Korea will collapse than from a desire to strengthen the nation. It is widely believed in Beijing that the ultimate solution to the North Korean problem would be the society's gradual movement along a development path similar to that followed by the PRC itself. The Chinese now promote for North Korea the “peaceful evolution” that Beijing itself opposed not so long ago.

China has several key interests at stake in the crisis—two are primary. On the one hand, Beijing wants to avoid the kind of social disintegration in the North that war or economic

collapse could precipitate. Breakdown in the North could threaten the general stability of the region upon which China's economic growth depends, and it could spew untold numbers of refugees into a China that needs no more domestic challenges. On the other hand, China sees ever more clearly the dangers of proliferation to its own core interests, not the least of which would be impetus to further military development in Japan and the probable nuclearization of the Republic of Korea (ROK), which sought such weapons in the 1970s. Recent conversations in Taiwan by one of this report's authors leads us to believe that at least some senior Taiwan officials also are considering the implications for the island as well.

Therefore, the bottom-line question is, "In the last extremity, does Beijing fear conflict and instability in the North more than it fears proliferation?" The jury is still out on this question (and there is debate in the PRC on this issue). However, although Beijing clearly prefers an outcome that preserves both stability in the North *and* Pyongyang's non-nuclear status, our hunch is that were Beijing forced to choose, it would reluctantly opt to live with a nuclear North than face societal collapse on its borders. In this respect, Beijing's position is closer to Seoul's than to Washington's. This should alert Americans to the potential risk to the U.S.-South Korea alliance as things unfold on the peninsula. Meanwhile, Tokyo has adopted a tougher stance toward North Korea, although that stance is also closer to Seoul's than to Washington's. As for America, if events force the choice between war and living with a nuclear North Korea, is it self-evident what Washington would choose?

Reflecting Beijing's great desire to avoid both conflict or breakdown in the North *and* proliferation there, Beijing has been engaging in its most active multilateral diplomatic efforts ever, efforts for which Washington has been exceedingly, and appropriately, appreciative. Beijing has eschewed its traditionally low-profile diplomacy for a central role in resolving the standoff, highlighting the importance of this crisis to China's national security. Whether the crisis ends in a diplomatic settlement and renewed inspections or proceeds to an embargo of the North or military conflict, China will play a critical role. In the end, however, if Pyongyang was determined to acquire nuclear weapons as its ultimate deterrent, this would force both Beijing and Washington to determine whether they could live with a nuclear North. It is by no means clear that Beijing and Washington would make the same choice or use the same means, which would have uncertain consequences for U.S.-China relations. Moreover, even if there was an agreement in principle, there could be significant conflict between Beijing and Washington over what constitutes adequate verification of Pyongyang's promises.

For now, however, the Korean nuclear challenge is a common problem to which both Beijing and Washington have responded in compatible and constructive fashion. This challenge has thus far provided a stronger strategic foundation for U.S.-China relations than has existed since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the disintegration of the Warsaw Pact.

Policy-Oriented Observations and Recommendations

Observations

China has national interests at stake. Chinese foreign policy is anchored in an evaluation of its national interests. Although there are debates in Beijing about what constitute those interests, there is widespread agreement on their core elements. Most important, the more proximate to East Asia the conflict is, the more engaged China is likely to become—thus, China cares more about the North Korean situation than about circumstances in Iraq. Superimposed on this geographic assessment is the calculus of economic power. Iraq was simply not very important to China as of late 2002, hence it was not worth China attracting U.S. wrath at the time of the invasion of Iraq. Nonetheless, Beijing anticipated that over time Iraq would become more important to its interests and that the United States would play a decisive role in future economic decisions there—another reason not to antagonize the United States. Moreover, given the importance of the United States to China’s development aspirations, preserving cooperative relations with Washington was worth more to Beijing than ineffectively picking up the cudgels on behalf of an Iraqi regime whose days were numbered. Finally, China seeks to preserve the efficacy of the United Nations, its principal avenue to constraining U.S. power in general.

China has been helpful to Washington. From an American national interest perspective, the PRC has been of great assistance with respect to the North Korean nuclear problem. China has also served as an important player—particularly during the early stages—in the unfolding war on terrorism and in the Container Security Initiative and has proved less troublesome to Washington in the run-up to the Iraq war than some of America’s longtime allies, most notably France and Germany. China, therefore, has exceeded the expectations of most who would have forecast Beijing’s posture and behavior immediately following 9/11.

Changing views of China’s challenge. For its part, in the wake of 9/11, the administration of George W. Bush discarded its initial openly jaundiced view of Beijing and instead has followed a sound course of maintaining high-level dialogue with PRC leaders and of seeking to build lines of communication and cooperation with China’s new, fourth-generation elite. In addition, the U.S. president has reassured Beijing of Washington’s nonsupport of (sometimes expressed as “opposition to”) Taiwan independence, even as Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian has repeatedly pushed the envelope in ways not consistent with U.S. interests. By proposing his “one state on each side of the Strait” (*yibian, yiguo*) theory, seeking and making high-profile presidential visits to the United States, and most recently pushing ideas for referenda and constitutional amendment, President Chen has created anxiety in a Washington that needs no further problems in the world. The existence of this tension between Washington and Taipei is reassuring to Beijing as it shows that Chen has overplayed his hand.

Positive Sino-American relations could contribute to the stabilization of other issues. As a result of the preceding developments, U.S.-China relations are in their best overall health, certainly since 1989 and perhaps before, though some economic frictions (e.g., exchange rate and trade deficit issues) are growing as the United States moves into a general election year. Though beyond the scope of this report, Washington and Beijing should more actively explore how to put the Taiwan Strait on a trajectory of declining militarization, rather than the current upward trend. At the Crawford Summit of October 2002, then-President Jiang Zemin made some suggestions in this respect that, to our knowledge, have not been actively explored by Washington.

China's residual security concerns. Although Sino-American cooperation with respect to the Korean nuclear crisis, the Iraq War, and the more diffuse war on terrorism has been positive overall, it is clear that Beijing has some serious strategic anxieties about Washington's global strategy as put forth in the *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (September 2002) and as manifested by some of America's behaviors in the three cases examined in this study. In this regard, China has concerns not so different from those of many of America's traditional friends and allies. These concerns relate to the willingness of the United States to operate outside many of the post-World War II institutions it helped construct and the mixing of human rights, nonproliferation, and free market and democratic goals in ever-changing rationales for intervention and the employment of muscular policies. If China was alone in this critique, it might be dismissed. When the PRC's concerns mirror those with whom the United States has traditionally cooperated and shared values, however, it is time for reflection on the part of the United States to avoid isolation and carrying unmanageable burdens alone. The Bush administration needs to ask itself three serious questions: Are foreign policy resources limited? Can democracy be built by pointing a gun? Is this a world in which friends and allies are still needed? As this report goes to press, there is some indication that the Administration may be learning the answers to these questions.

Recommendations Germane to the War on Terrorism

The spirit of the law. In August 2002, Beijing issued long-hoped-for export-control regulations germane to weapons of mass destruction and other dangerous technologies. This is to be lauded, but the acid test is not regulations, it is the effective implementation of regulations. The authors are unaware of any single instance in the subsequent 14 months in which Chinese entities have been sanctioned by Beijing under these regulations for transgressions, although Washington has found reason to do so itself—twice with respect to transfers from North China Industries Corporation to Iran.⁶ Though the mere absence of Chinese government-imposed sanctions on its own firms ought not to be perversely interpreted as proof that there have been infractions, if no one is ever prosecuted under China's laws and regulations, this will give rise to legitimate apprehensions.

Securing America's seaports. China's participation in, and cooperation with, the CSI should both be applauded and expanded to other major Chinese ports (e.g., Qingdao, Dalian, Xiamen, etc.). China is becoming such a major source of American imports, and

China's own ports are becoming increasingly diverse, that cooperation in Shanghai, Shenzhen (Shekou), and Hong Kong alone will not be adequate.

Recommendations Germane to the Ongoing Iraq and Iran Problems

For Beijing, Tehran is no Baghdad. One of the most important, policy-relevant observations to be made is that although President Bush has lumped Iraq and Iran together under the "Axis of Evil" moniker, Beijing is likely to prove much more resistant to the use of coercion against Tehran than it was with respect to Baghdad. Not all countries in the Middle East, regardless of how large or how oil rich, are equally important to Beijing. Iraq was at one end of the spectrum of salience, and Iran is at the other. Iran has a deep and long-standing relationship with China and is one of China's primary sources of imported oil in the region and its most substantial regional partner in other regards as well. With Tehran's budding nuclear program coming under increased scrutiny from Washington, European capitals, and the International Atomic Energy Agency, Washington policy makers would be well advised to consider China's interests before counting on Beijing's support of, or even acquiescence to, a tough policy vis-à-vis Iran. China has been willing to undergo repeated U.S. sanctions for its technological ties to Iran over the past two decades. For its part, however, Beijing would be well advised to recognize that in a post-9/11 world, China could easily end up in a major imbroglio with the United States over its relationship with Iran.

Leveling the postwar playing field. Prior to the U.S. intervention, China had economic links with Iraq that it hoped would blossom in the future. Indeed, China's nonobstructive posture in the United Nations was, in part, adopted out of consideration for reestablishing those economic links in the anticipated post-Saddam Hussein period. If Washington now does not create an economic playing field on which China is invited to compete, it will have missed an opportunity to create incentives for further cooperation from Beijing. This observation applies to other countries as well.

Recommendations Germane to the North Korean Nuclear Crisis

China plays an active diplomatic role. China has been extremely helpful to American, South Korean, and Japanese interests in getting North Korea to the negotiating table twice as of the time of this writing. It also has put discreet, but effective, economic, diplomatic, and security pressures on the North to agree to sit at a table where four other states (in addition to the United States) can hear what North Korea is saying. China has also encouraged North Korea to move in directions less self-destructive than its current course. Moreover, by helping convene the six-party talks in August 2003 (with more anticipated sessions in the near future), China has placed the other four nations in the position of having to expend their resources in support of any agreement that may result. If negotiations fail due to North Korea's unalterable desire for nuclear weapons, these nations have some responsibility to move forward with the United States to address this reality. Finally, in the view of this report's authors, China is playing a positive role in pushing the United States to agree on a negotiating strategy that *might* be more productive than the Administration's initial posture.

Uncovering Pyongyang's intentions and getting President Bush to take the lead. No one can be sure whether North Korea will bargain away its nuclear programs in a verifiable way in exchange for security and economic considerations. If it is unwilling to do so, higher levels of conflict are possible, perhaps likely. Having said this, the Bush Administration policy on North Korea until recently has had the problem of adopting a negotiating posture that no government would accept—namely, that Pyongyang concede all the points at dispute before Washington commits to anything, specifically economic resources or a security assurance (note that Pyongyang's policy could be similarly characterized). Indeed, from Pyongyang's point of view, the American posture is designed to produce a collapse in negotiations so that domestic and international support can be marshaled for the Bush Administration's presumed real objective—regime change. Even the appearance of this as an administration strategy has a number of unfortunate effects: It alienates America from a U.S. ally—the Republic of Korea; it makes it very difficult to gain China's support for more muscular means should they prove necessary; and it convinces the North that its only salvation lies in acquiring the nuclear deterrent that Saddam Hussein apparently lacked. Sooner or later, if greater levels of conflict are to be avoided, there will have to be movement toward a reciprocal, staged process in which both Pyongyang and Washington (with the support of the principal nations of the region) gradually allay the principal concerns of the other. President Bush needs to take the lead in adopting such an approach—making this approach clear to America's allies, friends, and Pyongyang—and enforcing it within his own deeply divided administration. In early September 2003, in the period leading up to publication of this report, there were indications that the Administration might be moving in this direction.

Focus on the immediate crisis. There are many things that the Administration and others would like to see change in North Korean behavior, ranging from conventional weapons deployments to missile testing, from illicit drug and counterfeit currency trade to human rights issues. At this point, however, it is important to focus on the core nuclear issue and not overload the negotiating circuits with a broad range of other issues, important and interrelated as they admittedly are.

Rebalance the U.S. position. Focusing on the immediate crisis raises the question of what negotiations should seek to achieve in the short, medium, and long runs. In the short run, the U.S. objective should be to definitively freeze the North Korean nuclear programs. In the medium run, the objective should be to dismantle absolutely those programs and possible weapons and to verifiably monitor the subsequent denuclearized status. In the long run, the objective should be to enmesh North Korea in a fabric of external economic and social development that leads to a gradual change in the character of the regime. This is a broad set and sequence of objectives with which America's friends and allies can agree. At this point, precipitous regime change is a nonstarter with China and South Korea.

If negotiations fail. If Washington moves toward a more balanced negotiating posture and strategy, as suggested in the two preceding points, Beijing needs to recognize that if such an approach fails, Washington almost certainly will seek Beijing's cooperation in

more muscular steps. The call for more robust measures from the United States cannot succeed without the support of China, the Republic of Korea, and Japan, with China unlikely to get too far ahead of the ROK. Were Washington to ratchet up its calls for pressure after having made reasonable proposals in pursuit of objectives others in the region could support, those calls would become a genuine test of U.S.-China cooperation in which America would be on solid ground expecting more than vacuous rhetoric from China. Almost certainly, Washington would expect Beijing's serious help in trying to assure that there was no leakage of weapons of mass destruction out of North Korea.

The problem of verification. Even if a balanced negotiating posture and articulated long-term strategy were adopted by the Administration, the effort could fail for at least two reasons: To start, relinquishing its nuclear deterrent option may not be negotiable for Pyongyang, no matter what it says publicly. Second, even if it seems that Pyongyang is willing to do so, devising acceptable verification means may prove impossible. Certainly, acceptable verification would be very intrusive and exceedingly difficult to agree upon with the North. Beijing needs to recognize that pushing Pyongyang to accept an arrangement that is not verifiable will be inadequate.

Coercion's blowback. Were Washington to try to move toward a highly coercive strategy without having obviously exhausted all reasonable avenues of diplomatic resolution, one of the many damaging outcomes could be the permanent rupture of the U.S.-South Korea alliance. In this event, it is not Beijing that is in danger of being isolated, but rather Washington.

