

**THE ART OF MEDIATING REGIONAL CONFLICT IN ASIA**

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

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

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

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

### **Motivation to be a Mediator**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Twists and Turns of Mediation**

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

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

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

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

### **Mediation of Asian Characteristics**

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

Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Wang Yi described China's role as "active mediation" in the following terms: "*Conducting active mediation means continually making positive efforts to promote peace and talks in an objective and just attitude and see to it that all parties will (1) enhance contacts, (2) build trust, (3) seek common grounds while reserving differences, and (4) expand consensus.*" The dominant philosophy that governed China's concept of conflict resolution and subsequent mediation behavior can be seen in retrospect to have been Confucian, emphasizing harmonious relationships.

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

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