

Here comes trouble

China's little brother is a big headache



Reuters

A blue-water navy in the making

WHEN North Korea lobbed a handful of missiles into the Sea of Japan last summer and then exploded a nuclear device beneath a mountain in October, its putative enemies, South Korea, Japan and America, had good cause for alarm. Yet the chief victim of North Korea's nuclear shenanigans appeared to be China, the obstreperous country's socialist ally and long-time big brother.

For a start, there was the loss of face. The tests made a mockery of the idea that China's policy of good neighbourliness could win over Kim Jong Il and his brutal regime. The Beijing government's credibility as a mediator—it had been the host of six-nation talks designed to get Mr Kim to disarm—was knocked. So China's decision to back United Nations resolutions condemning North Korea, imposing sanctions and even opening up the possibility of using force broke cleanly with the past. Despite a friendship treaty going back to 1961 which provides for both sides to come to each other's aid in danger, China made it clear it was no longer the North's protector. The North Korean regime chose to present this change of mind as an act of treachery.

Yet much to everyone's relief, North Korea soon sent out signals suggesting that it might sit down again at the six-party talks first convened in 2003 (and also including South Korea, America, Japan and Russia) from which it had flounced out in September 2005. In mid-February, against most gloomy predictions, a conceivably historic deal was struck and China regained a good deal of the face it had lost.

The deal cleared the way for international nuclear inspectors, kicked out in 2002, to return to North Korea. It also laid out a path for the country's nuclear facilities to be dismantled, normal relations between North Korea and America to be established and permanent peace to be declared on the peninsula at long last, more than half a century after the end of the Korean war. At each step of the way North Korea is to be rewarded for doing the right thing. Bank accounts in Macau are to be unfrozen, and North Korea is to get fuel oil or "equivalent" aid.

Nobody believes Mr Kim can be trusted to stick to the bargain without the closest supervision. Yet there is some cautious optimism that he can be tempted away from his nuclear ambitions. For President George Bush—who in early 2002 had included North Korea in his "axis of evil" and who had called Mr Kim a "pygmy"—putting faith in the deal marks an about-turn. He had been strongly critical of a similar bargain struck in 1994 by his predecessor, Bill Clinton, which later unravelled.

To judge by conversations in Beijing, China is the most sceptical, even pessimistic, about the deal with North Korea. Officially the tone is upbeat. Below the surface, however, run deep concerns.

North Korea-watchers in America, Japan and South Korea tend to suggest that Mr Kim's decision to go nuclear was a response to Mr Bush's axis-of-evil speech. The lesson that North Korea drew, this argument goes, is that if you do not want to be invaded by America, as was Iraq, then it is best to get your weapons of mass destruction up and running. Once your own security is assured, you can bargain from a position of strength.

Many Chinese disagree. Zhang Liangui, professor of international strategic research at the Party School of the China Communist Party Central Committee and a former student in Pyongyang, says that the Kim dynasty's quest for nuclear weapons has been relentless over two generations, beginning (with Russian help) with Mr Kim's late father, Kim Il Sung, in the early 1950s. Mr Zhang says the regime's motives are twofold. One is to strengthen internal legitimacy. The second is to transform strategic relations with all its surrounding powers, and particularly with China and Japan: the Korean psyche is deeply sensitised to a history of neighbours invading the peninsula. Meanwhile the regime can see for itself that the Bush administration is hugely stretched in Iraq and Afghanistan and does not believe America has the will for intervention (it may be wrong). North Korea might well want detente with America, says Mr Zhang, but that is a separate matter.

What's the deal?

It follows from this reasoning that not all policymakers in Beijing expect North Korea to give up its nuclear capability. The February agreement certainly leaves room for doubt. The government in Pyongyang is committed to freezing swiftly its main nuclear facility at Yongbyon, where, among other things, plutonium is extracted from spent fuel rods. But the deal mentions only an initial "disablement" of facilities, not their abandonment. Uncertainties remain about whether the regime will come clean about its uranium enrichment. There is nothing in the agreement to stop North Korea from conducting another test (though Mr Kim presumably knows that that would blow up the deal with it). Lastly, the deal does not make clear what will be done about North Korea's existing nuclear weapons, thought to number eight to ten. Mr Zhang thinks that the regime will want to hold on to its existing weapons but explains that "for China, this would be unacceptable."

The pessimism runs deeper than not taking Mr Kim at his word. It has to do with how the Chinese think events on the Korean peninsula might affect the region's strategic balance, and how that, in turn, might affect the future of Taiwan. It helps to remember that whereas in economic terms China and America have a mutually beneficial, even symbiotic relationship (America buys Chinese exports, China recycles the dollars to help fund the American current-account deficit), in strategic terms Chinese policymakers see the rivalry as intense. America has military alliances that surround China, with troops in South Korea and Japan and powerful seaborne forces. Moreover, however much China might wish Taiwan to be an "internal" matter, America underwrites the island's security, through the Taiwan Relations Act (which commits it to helping Taiwan defend itself) and through the sale of weapons systems for defence against a Chinese attack.

All this explains why some policymakers in Beijing can see no satisfactory outcome to the nuclear crisis. Writing in *China Security*, a Washington-based journal, Shen Dingli, a prominent strategist at Fudan University in Shanghai, says that whether China likes North Korea or not, the country has for 50 years served as a strategic buffer, keeping tens of thousands of American troops pinned down and allowing China to deploy more force directly opposite Taiwan to dissuade the island from declaring independence. A nuclear North Korea would further help contain America, deterring it from intervening in any hypothetical conflict across the Taiwan Strait. North Korea, then, is China's "guard post," Mr Shen writes. "This is the link between North Korea and Taiwan."

And what if North Korea dismantles its nuclear programmes, exchanging weapons for American friendship, rather as Libya has done? Or if it keeps its nuclear weapons and thus provokes America into toppling the regime? For China, many strategists think, this would be disastrous, putting Japan, South Korea, North Korea and Taiwan—"a part of China", after all—all firmly in the American camp.

"In this case, China's security pressure regarding Taiwanese independence would be far more severe a burden, [one] that would be hard to bear." It's a hard life being a Chinese strategist, obliged to look at the world in zero-sum terms.

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