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COMMENTARY

China takes a bow

By Jing-dong Yuan

With the fourth round of six-party talks finally under way in Beijing after 13 months of hiatus, commentators are attributing their resumption to the intensive diplomatic maneuvering in the past few weeks in which Washington recognized North Korea as a sovereign country, Seoul offered supplies of electricity to the North should nuclear disarmament work out, and even Pyongyang showed some signs of flexibility.

Yet China deserves credit for the resumption of the talks to end the nuclear stalemate on the Korean peninsula. In particular, Beijing should be praised for its persevering and calm diplomacy during a period of uncertainty and difficulties; its counsel for political and diplomatic solutions to the nuclear issue; its behind-the-door efforts at persuading Pyongyang to return to the talks; and its resistance to the threat of sanctions should the talks fail as these would not guarantee success, and could be highly counterproductive.

Over the past 13 months that the talks - involving North Korea, South Korea, China, Japan, the US and Russia - have been stalled, Chinese officials continued working tirelessly with all the relevant parties in an effort to work toward the eventual denuclearization of the Korean peninsula.

China was fully cognizant of but not deterred by the difficulties and the huge gap between the North Korean and American positions. Beijing repeatedly emphasized the importance of seeking a political and diplomatic solution. It is clear that the Libyan solution - in which that country voluntarily gave up its

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weapons program - would be wishful thinking, while the Iraqi solution - invasion - would be too dangerous.

While there were suggestions, and indeed preferences, for further isolating North Korea in certain quarters, China has adopted a policy of engaging Pyongyang and serving as intermediary in good faith, relaying messages between North Korea and the US and providing venues for limited contacts between them. Indeed, the early July announcement of North Korea's return to the talks was made after a meeting in Beijing. In addition, China also has sent envoys to and received dignitaries from Pyongyang seeking clarification and looking for opportunities.

China has resisted pressure to apply coercive measures to force North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons programs. While maintaining a nuclear-free Korean peninsula has always been and remains a goal, Beijing is opposed to the threat of sanctions and use of force. This is as much out of concern over the consequences for China's security interests as it is for regional peace and stability. Already paranoid and feeling extremely isolated, North Korea could react strongly and even irrationally if pushed to the corner.

As the host of the multilateral process and a former ally of North Korea, China has been under the spotlight since the nuclear crisis broke in October 2002. There have been unrealistic expectations as well as unfounded allegations regarding what Beijing should and could do. It is time to dispel these myths.

One such unrealistic expectation was that since China provided most of the food aid and energy supplies to Pyongyang, and because of its long-standing special relationship with North Korea, Beijing had special leverage over the Kim Jong-il government, and should make the maximum of this leverage to bring it back to the talks.

True, China now carries a big portion of North Korea's total two-way trade and provides large amounts of economic assistance. But for these to translate into leverage requires North Korea to completely change its own rationale for developing nuclear weapons. As long as Pyongyang considers nuclear weapons as critical for its very survival, withholding economic benefits for a country that has little external economic interaction would not be effective, and would earn China animosity. In this regard, China's ability to use economic leverage

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would at best be quite limited and at worst counterproductive.

Another allegation was that China cared more about the peninsula's peace and stability than it did about nuclear proliferation, as it would suffer massive refugee flows, economic disruption, environmental degradation, and perhaps even military confrontation.

This is as unfounded as it is ill-intended. The Korean peninsula could never achieve long-term peace and stability with a nuclear North Korea, which in turn could lead to a nuclear-armed Japan and South Korea, gravely complicating China's security environment in the region. What Beijing seeks is both denuclearization and peace and stability on the peninsula; the two are inseparable.

China's security is possible only within the broader context of a peaceful and stable Northeast Asia. In this regard, Chinese interests in resolving the North Korean nuclear issue are as much driven by its own security interests as out of concern over the implications for regional security and the international nuclear non-proliferation regime should the crisis be allowed to escalate. All interested parties need to make their contribution toward the ultimate goal of a nuclear-free Korean peninsula; and each party can play its role in the process. China deserves credit for its role so far.

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