



 **A turning point for Beijing**
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Tuesday, September 2, 2003

Shuttle diplomacy

MONTEREY, California The six-party talks in Beijing last week over the North Korean nuclear crisis ended in a barrage of bluster from Pyongyang officials and doubt over whether a further round of talks would go ahead. But the meeting was only able to take place because of active diplomacy by Beijing over the last few months that marked a turning point in China's foreign policy.

Beijing's initial responses to the revelation of North Korea's covert uranium enrichment program were rather passive. During a summit meeting with President George W. Bush last October, Jiang Zemin, then president, did state that China opposed nuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. But official Chinese statements emphasized the importance of stability and the need for Washington and Pyongyang to resolve the nuclear issue by themselves.

As the North Korean nuclear crisis deepened, Beijing began to consult more often with Washington and neighboring capitals. China even temporarily suspended its oil supplies to North Korea to signal its impatience with Pyongyang's recalcitrance.

At the trilateral meeting in Beijing last April between North Korea, the United States and China, North Korea offered to trade away its nuclear weapons program if the United States would agree to sign a nonaggression pact and resolve the nuclear issue in a comprehensive package deal. But Washington rejected this as a nonstarter, demanding that Pyongyang unconditionally dismantle its nuclear weapons program in a complete and verifiable fashion before any negotiations could be considered.

As the specter arose of a nuclear North Korea - and a military confrontation on the Korean Peninsula - Beijing began to realize that it would have to undertake more active diplomacy if it was to protect its fundamental interests and avoid some of the worst-case scenarios.

An insecure North Korea would have even greater incentives in developing and holding onto nuclear weapons as an insurance against possible regime change. A nuclear North Korea could well trigger a domino effect, with Japan, South Korea and even Taiwan following it into the nuclear club.

Military confrontation could become a real possibility, with disastrous consequences in human, economic, ecological and geostrategic terms. Thousands would die in another Korean war, refugees would flood across North Korea's border into China.

The most serious consequence for China would be geostrategic. While no one would expect Beijing to shed tears should Kim Jong Il's regime be toppled in a military conflict, China would lose a security buffer, and the U.S. military could end up just across the Yalu River from China. What would the resulting Northeast Asian geostrategic alignment look like?

The need to avoid these worst-case scenarios prompted China to undertake more active diplomacy. Beijing adopted a three-pronged strategy.

First, China worked out a format to jump-start dialogues that would be acceptable to both Pyongyang and Washington. What followed was intense shuttle diplomacy, something never seen before in Chinese foreign relations. Two of China's most senior diplomats relayed messages between Pyongyang and Washington, and held consultations in Seoul, Tokyo and Moscow.

Second, China began to exert pressure on North Korea. President Hu Jintao reportedly sent personal messages to Kim Jong Il that North Korea must give up its nuclear weapons programs in exchange for China's continued economic assistance.

Third, Beijing aligned itself with the more moderate and pragmatic South Korean and Russian positions, which aim at defusing the nuclear crisis rather than regime change or coercion. China and Russia continue to block any UN Security Council resolution that could further provoke North Korea.

China's active diplomacy leading up to the six-party talks shows that it is learning how to play the games that great powers play - and to be more forthcoming in defending its fundamental national interests.

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