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DPRK Policy in the Context of the Crisis in Ukraine

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Policy Memo

TO: U.S. Department of State
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This memo addresses potential implications on U.S.'s policy toward North Korea in light of the crisis in Ukraine and offers policy recommendations for the U.S. State Department.

Introduction

The ongoing crisis in Ukraine has deepened the divide between the United States and its partners on one side and Russia and China on the other. If this trend continues, it could make any multilateral cooperation on North Korea's nuclear armament challenge that involves Washington, Beijing and Moscow politically untenable.

Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, also referred to as North Korea) has blamed Russia's invasion of Ukraine on the west's "hegemonic policy" and "high-handedness." The DPRK likely views Ukraine's situation as justification for its nuclear program and ballistic missile programs. Recent activities at the Punggye-ri nuclear test site suggest that Pyongyang is preparing for a 7th nuclear weapons test in the near future. In the meantime, North Korea's border closure in response to the Covid-19 pandemic has created economic hardship for ordinary North Koreans, which could encourage Kim Jong Un to use nuclear tests as a distraction from internal problems. Coupled with international sanctions, North Korea could face a serious humanitarian crisis and food shortages, which could harden public opinion against the U.S./west.

Given these developments, the United States should adjust its diplomatic strategy toward North Korea so as to minimize the secondary-order impact that the Ukraine crisis will have on the future of multilateral cooperation toward North Korea's disarmament. Recent statements from Chinese and Russian diplomats suggest that high-level commitment by the U.S. to adopt a more flexible North Korea strategy will be welcomed.

Such a strategy could include the following elements:

- 1. Signal high-level interest in engagement**

The State Department should consider using the Ukraine crisis as an opportunity to call for greater dialogue with North Korea. It can quietly put a concrete proposal on the table, such as a

¹ This memo was written as a requirement of the 2021-2022 Arms Control Negotiation Academy program. Views expressed in the memo are the opinions of the authors and do not reflect the views of their employers.

commitment to lift non-military sector sanctions by the UN Security Council (UNSC) and certain U.S. sanctions in exchange for Pyongyang's cooperation in nuclear disarmament. UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in North Korea Tomás Quintana noted in a report to the UN General Assembly (A/76/392) that "sanctions imposed by the Security Council should be reviewed and eased when necessary both to facilitate humanitarian and life-saving assistance and to enable the promotion of the right to an adequate standard of living of ordinary citizens."² Such a practical approach has the potential not only to improve Washington's relations with Pyongyang but its relations with Beijing and Moscow, the latter of which have proposed a reduction of certain UNSC sanctions against North Korea as part of incentivizing North Korea to restrain its nuclear testing and weapons development.

2. Establish a regional multilateral mechanism

Washington should establish a multilateral mechanism for sustained dialogue with North Korea involving Russia³ and China, such as the Six Party Talks (2003-2009). Such a mechanism will ensure that serious diplomacy can take place, freed from U.S.-China competition or other politicized framings that have impeded cooperation between major powers in the region. South Korea and Japan, which are led by conservative governments, may initially balk at the idea of restarting official talks with North Korea absent initial steps by North Korea toward denuclearization. However, we believe that this can be addressed through frank and open discussions between diplomats in Washington, Seoul and Tokyo, and that U.S. allies would ultimately support U.S.'s strategy, especially if there is bipartisan support in Washington toward de-escalating tensions with the nuclear-armed North.

3. Work on improving the broader US-China-Russia geopolitical context

Improved relations between the United States, China and Russia will be key in sustaining any multilateral framework for addressing instability on the Korean Peninsula. At minimum, a crisis

² United Nations, "Promotion and Protection of Human Rights: Human Rights Situations and Reports of Special Rapporteurs and Representatives: Situation of Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (A/76/392)," October 8, 2021, available at:

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/a76392-report-special-rapporteur-76th-session-general-assembly>

³ Director of the First Department of Asia of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Georgy Zinoviev noted that Russia will continue to actively participate in the search for ways to resolve the problems of the Korean Peninsula by political and diplomatic means and establish a lasting peace in the region. TASS, "Russian Foreign Ministry: Moscow will take into account the support of the DPRK for a special operation in Ukraine in the development of relations" [МИД РФ: Москва учтет поддержку КНДР спецоперации на Украине в развитии отношений], April 13, 2022, available at:

https://tass.ru/politika/14369959?utm_source=away.vk.com&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=away.vk.com&utm_referrer=away.vk.com

communication channel should be established for stakeholders to avoid misunderstanding and miscalculations in a North Korea crisis scenario.

To improve the overall health of U.S.-China-Russia relationship, Washington should consider emphasizing the importance of maintaining strategic stability with China and Russia at the 2022 Review Conference for the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. It should also explore the possibility of working with China and Russia at the UNSC to shine light on positive steps North Korea had taken in the past, such as a moratorium on nuclear testing, and create space for open dialogue about UNSC measures that can be taken to ease the hardship felt by ordinary North Koreans unconnected to the nuclear program.

There is already an indication that China may be supportive of such a calibrated approach toward North Korea. The Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi recently called on the U.S. to take concrete measures to address North Korea's legitimate security concerns and pledged that China will continue to play a constructive role and do what is necessary to facilitate the endeavor.⁴ The State Department should inquire what specific steps Beijing is willing to take on the North Korea issue. The Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Xie Feng stated that China is willing to discuss with the United States effective risk management on the basis of mutual respect, and called on both U.S. and China to increase communication.⁵ While relations between the U.S. and Russia have become extremely strained post-Ukraine invasion, China could play a mediating role to carve out space for trilateral communication and cooperation on the North Korea issue.

Conclusion

Paradoxically, the division between the west and Russia/China provides a unique opportunity for the United States, Russia, and China to pursue diplomacy with North Korea. No side would benefit from heightened tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

We recognize that the strength of our proposal depends in large part by a serious commitment from all sides toward negotiations, and that Washington's resolve to take this path will be weakened if its strategy is framed in a negative light by critics of the U.S. in Moscow, Beijing, or Pyongyang. The road to success is narrow, and all sides will need to compartmentalize the North Korea issue from other geopolitical contestations. Without such a mature outlook to the process, this perilous process will be short-lived.

⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press" March 2022, available at: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjbzhd/202203/t20220307_10648887.shtml

⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "China-U.S. Presidential Meeting: Setting Direction and Providing Impetus for Bilateral Relations — Transcript of Vice Foreign Minister Xie Feng's Interview with the Press," November 2021, available at: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/202111/t20211116_10449035.html

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