

Policy Memo for “Security Competition and Denuclearization: The North Korean Nuclear Crisis and International Strategic Choices”

Zhong Zhenming

Associate Professor, School of Political Science and International Relations, Tongji University, Shanghai, 200092, China

The North Korean Nuclear Crisis is a manifestation of the security competition among the key stakeholders, especially the two Koreas, the United States and China. In this paper, I argue that the competing vision of national security interests/objectives and the existence of “security competition” by major players in Northeast Asia under the particular international structure provide both constraints and opportunities for the formation of this re-emerged stalemate and the potential resolution of the nuclear crisis. Failure to moderate security competition among the four key players, i.e., DPRK, ROK, China and the U.S., is the real reason that leads to the deadlock.

The four key players have competing visions of national security interests/objectives, ranging from regional peace, regime stability, alliance relationship, security assurance, to denuclearization. Some security objectives of one country are shared by the other one or more parties, while other security objectives of one country might be conflicting with the other one or more parties. For some countries, its pursuit of some security interests might even conflict with its pursuit of other security objectives. Besides, these major parties in the nuclear crisis tended to have different hierarch of preferences when they pursued those different security objectives, thus making it difficult to reconcile and achieve their common objectives. In many cases, one country’s misperception and suspicion of other countries’ security objectives would lead to confrontation and conflicts.

A closer exploration of the past rounds of nuclear crises could find that the four key players of the North Korean Nuclear Crisis did have some competing visions of security interests in addressing the crisis and that they did face a series of contradictions as indicated in the hypothesis of security competition, in their ways to address the nuclear crisis. The past experience told us that it was possible for all these key players to cease competitive ways so as to reach security cooperation and avoid a transformation from security competition to security dilemma, only if they could reconcile their competitive security interests. However, an abrupt change of policy approaches or misperception and suspicion of the other players’ security interests/objectives is highly likely to propel the situation into crisis stalemate.

My analysis suggests the following policy implications for the international community to address the North Korean Nuclear Crisis. First, it is imperative for the key players in the nuclear crisis to forge mutual trust in their perceived security interests/objectives so as to avoid misperceptions and suspicions. Second, a combination of carrots and sticks would be conducive to induce North Korea to

accept denuclearization after its rational calculation of costs and benefits. Third, a stable and coordinated moderation of security competition would be helpful in forging an international coalition to persuade Pyongyang to accept denuclearization. Fourth, it is practical for the key players in the nuclear crisis to return 6PTs and set the “September 19 Agreement” as a new starting point of the multilateral negotiation. Finally, it is necessary for the key players in the nuclear crisis, especially the United States and China to initiate discussion on how to cooperate and control some future contingency scenarios so that those scenarios could not bring about even more adverse consequences.