CHAPTER 5

The Chinese Response:
The Nuclear Crisis

Next to Taiwan, North Korea is the most significant territory for national security and legitimacy not currently under the control of Beijing. Its location, historical ties, and communist regime make it vital for China’s national interests. Moreover, its centrality for the NEA region—the obsession of South Koreans, the immediate extension of Russia’s coastal corridor linking the main cities of the Russian Far East, and the albatross for Japan in its ambitions to normalize by leaving history behind and establishing secure footing on the Korean peninsula—means that the outcome for the North will shape the emergence of regionalism that matters most for China. Finally, as in the 1950s, North Korea has become a testing ground for the role of the United States in the region.

Chinese and Japanese draw different lessons from the history of Korea. When Korea is divided or under Japanese control, Chinese calculate that their country cannot avoid trouble or even being drawn into war. In the seventh century, sixteenth century, nineteenth century, and again in the 1950s China fought over Korea in such situations. In contrast, Japanese consider that a Korea under Chinese influence leaves their country isolated in Asia. In the 1960s–1980s Japan tried to find leverage on the Korean peninsula, but it was constrained by the dominant U.S. role in South Korea and the difficulty of a breakthrough with North Korea in a cold war atmosphere.¹ The situation for China on the peninsula was rather similar: It could not outflank the Soviet Union as the North’s main security guarantee, and it refused to accept the regional consequences of pursuing normalization with South Korea.² In these

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circumstances when Tokyo and Beijing started to improve their bilateral ties in 1972 they had little reason to be concerned about the other’s influence on Korea or potential for using the peninsula to transform NEA. This situation changed after China’s normalization with South Korea in 1992, which angered the North and, more abruptly, in 2000 with the Sunshine Policy of Kim Dae-jung. It is understood that China gave Ronald Reagan assurances that it would not support North Korea’s reckless behavior, and these were repeated in 1994 during the nuclear crisis. When leaders in Seoul turned to engagement, a new strategy to the peninsula was required.3

For seven years the North’s resentment offered little chance to China. China’s ambassador was not allowed to travel beyond Pyongyang. Its military intelligence was ousted from Panmunjom. When the North convinced China to ship some goods on its ships that had unused space, China found many items stolen and faced frequent nonpayment for contracted shipments of food and fuel. Only the Sunshine Policy created incentives to overcome this trouble. As Tokyo responded defensively with the aim of slowing unification, Beijing shifted to support for a gradual process to prop up the North and use unification as a lever for regional security. A turning point occurred in early June 1999 when Kim Yong-nam, number two in the North Korean political hierarchy, visited Beijing and revived high-level political ties. This encouraged Kim Dae-jung, who turned to China as the indispensable intermediary at the same time as the Perry Process produced multisided consultations.4 Japan scrambled to keep pace, looking to the South to make its alliance with the U.S. triangular as well as pursuing talks with the North that resulted in Koizumi’s September 2002 visit to Pyongyang, but in the nuclear crisis Beijing retained the upper hand.

Having faced the limits of North Korea’s stubborn insistence on non-interference for decades, China’s leaders stress the futility of applying pressure. Recalling how pressure from Nikita Khrushchev in 1959 to abandon nuclear weapons development had only toughened their country’s resolve to go it alone, they assume that the leaders of North Korea are no less stubborn or willing to put their country through sacrifice. In accord with their own country’s history of reforms and open-door policies, they also accept the logic of gradual transformation controlled by the communist leadership. In 1999 they tutored Kim Dae-jung on how to improve ties with Kim Jong-il, in 2000 they answered Putin’s request with advice on how to deal with Kim Jong-il, and in 2003–4 they did not stint in suggesting how Bush should deal with him. The first instance led to the June 2000 inter-Korean summit, the second to the July 2000 success