CHAPTER 7

THE NORTH KOREA NUCLEAR CRISIS AND U.S.–CHINA COOPERATION

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This whole Six-Party process has done more to bring the United States and China together than any other process I’m aware of,” stated Christopher Hill, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State and the top negotiator at the Six-Party Talks, in a media interview after agreement was reached on the Initial Actions for the Implementation of the Joint Statement in Beijing on February 13, 2007.¹ This remark, along with countless accolades praising Beijing for its cooperation on the North Korea nuclear issue, is a telling indication of the positive impact that the Six-Party Talks have had on the bilateral relationship between the United States and China.² Analysts may rightfully note that expressions of appreciation for Chinese cooperation from the United States have been partly intended to press Beijing to do more. Yet, there is little question that successful cooperation on the North Korea nuclear crisis has provided a boost to the U.S.–China bilateral relationship.

The threat posed by North Korea’s nuclear programs presented a rare strategic opportunity for close U.S.–China cooperation that would prove to be the first successful comprehensive collaboration on an international security issue of critical importance to both countries since the collapse of the Soviet Union.³ Determined that the North Korea nuclear issue should be addressed multilaterally rather than bilaterally, the Bush administration sought to involve China from the inception of the crisis in the fall of 2002.
At the outset of the crisis, China preferred to remain uninvolved. Beijing did not view the situation as presenting an opportunity to strengthen ties with the United States or enhance its role in Northeast Asia. Worried by the unraveling of the Agreed Framework, an agreement that Washington and Pyongyang had reached in October 1994 to prevent North Korea from developing nuclear weapons, the Chinese urged the United States to resolve the tense situation through bilateral dialogue with North Korea. Nevertheless, due to domestic and foreign policy concerns in China and external pressure from the United States, Beijing agreed to host multilateral talks.

Over time, China’s role evolved from a passive onlooker, to a reticent host, and finally to a “chief mediator” and “honest broker.” Today, even though the crisis is far from resolved, and it remains uncertain whether the pronounced goal of denuclearization will be realized, an examination of the process from the beginning of the crisis in 2002 to the February 13 Agreement in 2007 offers a useful framework to examine U.S.–China cooperation on a critical security issue and its impact on the broader bilateral relationship.

This chapter attempts to analyze the influence of cooperation between Washington and Beijing on the North Korea nuclear issue, on the broader bilateral U.S.–China relationship, and on the United States’ policy toward China. It begins with an overview of Sino-American ties in the early years of the first presidential term of George W. Bush to provide a backdrop for subsequent bilateral cooperation on the North Korea nuclear challenge. The chapter then traces the initiation and evolution of U.S.–China coordination to respond to Pyongyang’s provocations. Next, it explains how the two countries were able to effectively cooperate, despite sharply differing perspectives on North Korea and divergences in their preferred approaches to persuade Pyongyang to abandon its pursuit of a nuclear deterrent.

The chapter then examines whether and how U.S.–China cooperation on North Korea influenced U.S. policy decisions on other issues, including Taiwan. Finally, it explores lessons that can be drawn from U.S.–China cooperation on the North Korea nuclear crisis that might be applicable to other instances of potential Sino-American cooperation.

U.S.–China Relations in the Early Years of the Bush Administration

Cooperation between Washington and Beijing on the North Korea nuclear issue must be examined in the context of the broader development of U.S.–China relations. Essentially, cooperation on North