

## China's Leaning Towards North Korea, a Possible Trade-Off for Taiwan

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### ABSTRACT:


Since the early 1950s, mainland China and the US have continued to compete for control of the western Pacific region. Washington maintains a strategic alliance with Seoul and Tokyo and enjoys close relations with Taipei. Conversely, China retains its claim over Taiwan as part of its territory. It enjoys leverage over the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) thus, there are prospects of its being used as a bargaining tool with the US to trade-off for Taiwan. The study concludes that Pyongyang's nuclear capability has given it enough leverage over Beijing and Washington. Although DPRK and Taiwan are trying to retain their sovereign positions, in reality, they would be unable to survive without the intimate support from China and the US respectively. The study concludes that despite the claim that 'America is back', in the near term, the status quo in the western Pacific may prevail but in the long term, the situation might change in China's favour. The study suggests that to realize economic prosperity/sustainable peace in the region, China and the US will have to give up their hostile approach by signing a 'new social contract'. The study has been conducted from the prism of neorealism/ neoliberalism theory.

### KEYWORDS:

China, North Korea, Taiwan, US, Bargaining Chip, Perception Problem, The Tragedy of Commons

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## Introduction

North-East Asia is a volatile region, that comprises two declared and two potential nuclear weapons states including China, DPRK, Japan, and the Republic of Korea (South Korea). Besides Taiwan, the US, an outside actor is also the main stakeholder in the region. Since the end of World War II (WW-II), followed by the Korean War, this region remains divided into two blocs, one each led by China and the US. Due to its physical presence, Washington exercises direct influence over Tokyo, Seoul, and Taipei, whereas Beijing retains a close link with Pyongyang.

The US as a superpower and China, as an evolving great power, remain divided due to several contentious issues like the claims/counterclaims over the exclusive right on the East/South China Sea, their outlooks towards the conduct of DPRK, and the status of Taiwan. Ever since Mao Zedong's communist forces took control of China in 1949, officials and troops of the Nationalist government of the Republic of China, fled to Taiwan, and the two sides have been at odds (Robson, [2016](#)).

The geostrategic significance of DPRK is twofold, its location, and behaviors. From a location point of view, it is not important thus, the US continued to ignore it, providing Pyongyang with an opportunity to offset the security

balance in the region by secretly developing its nuclear weapons. Washington realized its slipup only when Pyongyang formally decided to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 2003.

Despite reservations, currently, China does not have the option to annoy its next-door neighbour. Since the start of the 'Six Party' talks, China tactfully managed to outclass the US strategy of isolating the DPRK (Roggeveen, 2018). It is viewed that though Beijing too would wish that Pyongyang should give up its nuclear program, it looks forward to a suitable time to engage the US to trade-off for Taiwan.

Regarding Taiwan, it is strategically important due to its location. It is currently led by the Nationalist government which maintains its independent status, opposed to the Chinese claim. Thus, there is a state of anxiety in the region due to pull and push factors duly caused by China and the US. Albeit, the US continues to extend its moral support to Taiwan, virtually, both China and the US exercise restraints and do not interfere in its internal affairs.

A clash of interests between the two great powers is the main cause of politico-economic uncertainty in the region. The US endeavors to safeguard its sole 'superpower' status across the globe including the Pacific region while China strives hard to achieve a 'balance of power'. It is viewed that both are driven by Kennan Waltz's dictum of 'neorealism'. It is therefore, suggested that the two sides should correct their perception problems, regulate the emerging trends of competition, and be sincerely involved in carving out a 'new social contract' based on neoliberalism theory for sustainable peace/ economic prosperity of the world with a special focus on the region.

Above in view, in this brief study, an effort has been made to analyze how the two great powers would react to each other's strategic moves in dealing with the issue of DPRK/ Taiwan. For easy understanding, the study has been divided into the following sections: One, the strategic significance of DPRK and Taiwan, two, conflicting policies of the great powers to deal with Pyongyang and Taipei, three, DPRK, a possible tradeoff for Taiwan, a larger debate, four, China-US strategic competition in the region, a study from the theoretical prism and the suggested way forward.

### Geo-strategic Significance of DPRK & Taiwan

Both DPRK and Taiwan enjoy strategic significance but the nature of their value is quite different. One is relevant due to its behavior while the other is important due to its location. The same is briefly explained in succeeding paragraphs.

DPRK with a population of around 25.225 million, lies in the northern part of the Korean Peninsula. It shares a land border of around 870 miles with China. It also shares a border with Russia to the northeast. The Yellow Sea lies in its south and southwest while the Sea of Japan lies in its east. The Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) is the buffer zone between Pyongyang and Seoul, running across the peninsula roughly following the 38th parallel. The DMZ is 160 miles long, and about 2.5 miles wide (Britannica, 2009). DPRK provides a buffer between China and South Korea (Boc, 2019). It has a total of 120,538 square km of area ("North Korea maps & facts," 2021). Pyongyang is the capital city of the DPRK.

DPRK's significance in the region is twofold: One, as a historical legacy, it retains aggressive behaviour towards Seoul and Tokyo which are strategic partners of the US. Two, ever since DPRK conducted its nuclear tests, it got the upper hand in dealing with China and the US thus, emerged as a key player to be dealt with. It got the leverage to decide when to negotiate and when to drop out, and then set the terms for returning to negotiations (Ariel & Toby, 2020).

From Beijing's perspective, DPRK remains relevant to China due to multiple factors. It shares around 870 miles of border with China which needs to be protected. Moreover, Pyongyang, a communist state serves as a strategic buffer with South Korea. China is sensible enough to realize that American presence in Asia is by choice, whereas Beijing is Pyongyang's permanent neighbour (Su, 2024).

Regarding Taiwan, it is a small island which is 245 miles long and 89.5 miles wide. It exercises a role in the world far greater than its tiny size would indicate ("Taiwan maps & facts," [2021](#)). Around 100-mile-wide Taiwan Strait, separates it from mainland China. It is surrounded by the North China Sea in the north, the South China Sea in the south, and the Philippine Sea in the east (Horton, [2019](#)). The US military planners considered Taiwan an 'unsinkable carrier tender' (Tkacik, [2007](#)).

From the American perspective, based on strategic factors, except Singapore, no other location in the Far East occupies such a controlling position (Bosco, [2020](#)). Due to its strategic impact, General Douglas MacArthur once called Taiwan America's "littoral defence line in the western Pacific" and stressed that if the US wanted to maintain control over the western Pacific, it must be kept out of the hands of 'Mainland Asia' (Rigger, [2011](#)).

Taiwan is equally important for China. Due to its significance, Zedong decided to invade Taiwan during the latter half of the 1940s but put off his plan due to the outbreak of war on the Korean Peninsula and later due to American influence, could not get a chance to implement his plan (Chenjun & McGregor, [2019](#)). Taiwan is equally vital from an economic perspective. This tiny state maintains the world's 22<sup>nd</sup>-largest economy. Although Taiwan does not enjoy the status of a sovereign state, it is the 11<sup>th</sup> largest trading partner of the US (Huang, [2017](#)). During the last decade or so, Taipei has also been warmly involved in business with mainland China (Schmitt, [2020](#)).

### **Conflicting policies of China and the US to deal with DPRK and Taiwan DPRK, a Tough Nation to Deal with**

As underlined earlier, both Beijing and Washington continue to apply contradictory policies in their dealing with the issue of DPRK and Taiwan. Successive US administrations tried to engage Pyongyang to improve relations and end its offensive behaviour towards South Korea and Japan (Joel Wit, [2016](#)). Due to its fast progress in developing intercontinental ballistic Missiles (ICBM) and nuclear capability, Pyongyang has become a top national security priority for the US. Because of this concern, the Pentagon once even planned a possible military strike against Pyongyang (Noland, [2003](#)).

Washington continues to exercise its all available options including 'maximum pressure', sanctions, technology denial, and other covert means (Hill, [2024](#)). The US also tried to push the DPRK to roll back its nuclear program in return for aid, trade, and diplomatic benefits. Despite his repeated efforts, Trump failed to convince Kim Jong Un for a negotiated settlement, over a long list of conflicting issues (Tiezzi, [2019](#)). Still, the US remains as focused as ever on undercutting the financial lifelines of the Kim regime (Taylor, [2020](#)).

Though the basic aim to compel DPRK to give up its nuclear option is unchanged, yet, with the change of command in the White House, the Biden administration decided to look for a middle ground between the policy pursued by his predecessor. Jennifer Rene Psaki, the White House Press Secretary explained that the US will pursue a "calibrated practical approach that is open to and will explore diplomacy with" North Korea and making "practical progress" that increases the security of the US and its allies (Einhorn, [2022](#)).

Though Beijing has been willing to ease tensions on the Peninsula, it has yet to seriously consider America's future role in the region, Joel Wit opined (Dwivedi, [2012](#)). For Beijing, "the greatest threat to its national security is not the Kim regime but the US", Anny Boc opined (Boc, [2019](#)). A peaceful settlement of DPRK's nuclear issue on the US term, especially if this meant the presence of around 28000 US troops, next to its borders is not in China's national interests. Besides, China considers that in recent years, it has been encircled by a chain of US/ its allies' air and military bases, aimed at weakening its nuclear deterrence capability.

To pressurize Pyongyang, Beijing would not toe its line with Washington. Under the 1961 accord, the two sides were bound to oppose any country or coalition that might attack either nation. The accord still carries symbolic values though China has already denied extending its support if a conflict is initiated by Pyongyang (Su, 2024). Nonetheless, in 2017, their relations were severed in the backdrop of the Chinese decision to vote in the UN Security

Council, imposing sanctions against the DPRK. Though Beijing did not fully cooperate to implement the US-sponsored sanctions still, it did realise the cost of losing a neighbour and quickly restored its relations with the DPRK (Kang, [2020](#)).

While the 'blood alliance' of the China-DPRK, as claimed by Kim during his meeting with President Xi is a "thing of the past", China's generous support to its neighbour will stay intact into the near future (Chenjun & McGregor, [2019](#)). Shannon Tiezzi views that "A situation where war is off the table, but the United States and North Korea remain divided, would fit Beijing's interests perfectly (Tiezzi, [2019](#)). DPRK is considered a bit like a "belligerent little brother, causing trouble for China" (Ellyatt, [2017](#)). Hence, Beijing may have no love for Pyongyang, still, it would not let a strategic card slip away from its orbit.

Despite reservations, China is seen as DPRK's 'lifeline'. Being its next-door neighbour, Beijing would see Pyongyang economically viable because it is not in the Chinese interest to see the Kim regime collapsing and the resultant refugees' influx along its 870-mile border (Albert, [2019](#)). As highlighted earlier, China's primary interest is to ensure stability on the Korean Peninsula even if it is achieved at the cost of living with a nuclear neighbour (Park & Park, [2017](#), p. 377).

### Taiwan, Trapped between the Two Great Powers

Since October 1, 1949, China has maintained that Taiwan is an inalienable part of mainland China under its 'one China principle'. "Beijing...has never sworn off the use of military power to bring Taiwan under its undisputed sovereignty and authoritarian system", Walter Lohman said. Despite their warm relations over the last 8 years, the only factor that has changed on the military side of things is the magnitude of the underlying threat to Taiwan (Wang, [2019](#)). If Taiwan does not come back through free will, China has made it clear, it will use force (Buckely & Horton, [2019](#)).

Ever since Taiwan separated from mainland China, it has ruled itself effectively. The latest surveys show some 80 percent of Taiwanese reject political union with China (Campbell, [2020](#)). During the last election, Taiwanese voters re-elected Tsai Ing-Wen as president in a landslide victory that was not well received by the Chinese leadership (Kuo, [2020](#)).

Despite tall claims to protect Taiwan as a sovereign state (Bosco, [2020](#)), the US continued to maintain a middle ground while taking due care of Chinese concerns. It is not ready to support Taiwan for sparking conflict by overtly declaring independence" (Rehman, [2014](#)). In 1972, the US withdrew all troops from Taiwan under the Shanghai Communique (Methews, [1978](#)). Later, in 1979, it also withdrew from the Sino-American Mutual Defense Treaty and recognized Beijing by abandoning official diplomatic ties with Taipei (Robson, [2016](#)). The US including the Biden administration continues to maintain 'strategic ambiguity' on the future status of Taiwan (Kuang, [2020](#)).

Above arguments, due to its strategic interests in the region, the US still maintains close liaison with Taipei. Under the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) and Ronald Reagan's 'Six Assurances' (1982), Washington maintains unofficial relations with Taipei. The military assistance provided to Taipei under the TRC terms helped Taiwan to "resist intimidation and coercion and engage with the mainland with continued confidence" (Bush, [2022](#)). Presently, over 400 American diplomats and staff are based in Taiwan for liaison and coordination purposes, under the cover of a research center called the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) (Seth Robson, 2016).

Nevertheless, Parris Chang opined that to appease China, in past decades, the successive US administrations have "failed to fully and faithfully implement the provisions of the TRA and the 'six assurances'" (Chang, [2018](#)). As highlighted earlier, though the Biden administration has taken a tough statement to protect Taiwan (Brook, [2021](#)), if we go by the US track record, there is anxiety in Taiwanese over whether the US would flip on Taiwan against Chinese aggression (Campbell, [2020](#)).

## DPRK, a Possible Trade-Off for Taiwan, a Larger Debate

DPRK's nuclear issue and Taiwan are two distinctive subjects. From the Chinese official stance, no inference can be drawn that these two themes have ever been clipped together for a trade-off with Taiwan. China's priority is to maintain regional as well as domestic stability. Thus, despite differences on some contentious issues, Beijing continues to ensure the stability of the DPRK since preserving the economic and security interests of the region is contingent on its behaviour (Nanto & Manyin, [2011](#), p. 94).

DPRK remains the centrepiece of strategic competition between China and the US. Denuclearization of the DPRK is not China's priority in the region. Beijing's policy towards Pyongyang is based on three nos: no war, no instability, and no nuclear weapons, it is clear that those priorities are ranked in that order of precedence (Wertz, [2019](#)). Although, China supports a nuclear-free Peninsula to avoid an arms race strategists believe that the Chinese greatest priority is to prevent regime collapse which has security/economic implications for China (Chandran & Tan, [2018](#)). Beijing is likely to resist any attempt by the US, to bring the Kim regime down (Park & Park, [2017](#), p. 377).

During Trump's visit to China in November 2017, there was a fear that the two leaders might talk about DPRK's nuclear issue clipping it with Taiwan as a bargaining chip however, at the end of their talks, they avoided talking about Taiwan. At the end of the talk, they did not even ask questions (Taylor, [2017](#)). However, later on, the Chinese Foreign Ministry revealed that President Xi reiterated the Chinese position on Taiwan during his meeting with Trump. It is believed that the Trump-Xi meeting ended up in Chinese favour.

Alexander Huang has initiated an interesting debate. He opined that China is strong enough to deal with the Taiwan issue independently without involving DPRK in debate with the US. Huang writes, that even if Trump had made such an offer, Xi would have said no: 'Taiwan is not in your hands, it's in mine" (Taylor, [2017](#)). It was a strong statement that is not without substance. The following developments duly prove that China is getting the upper hand in the region and will be in the lead role soon.

One, since the early 1970s, step by step, China gained ground by putting the US on the defensive. Many people in Taiwan lack trust in Washington's credibility as a friend. Two, with time, Taiwan's stance over its stated position has gone weak due to multiple factors including China's direct influence in its internal politics. Three, though, currently less in number still, sufficient voices from within the public support the reunification of Taiwan with mainland China. Above all, in the military domain, Taiwan has no match with China.

Fourth, the Chinese business community enjoys sufficient clout in Taiwan. Presently, around one million Taiwanese run their business in China with a total investment of around \$60 billion (Schmitt, [2020](#)). Hence, it is viewed that sooner or later, Taiwan might willing to opt to join mainland China, following the model of 'one country two systems as suggested by President Xi (Buckely & Horton, [2019](#)). Yet, Beijing's harsh reaction to recent unrest in Hong Kong will have a bearing on the reunion process which might take much longer than what Chinese leadership could expect.

Above besides, as concluded in theoretical debate, the two great powers continue to do real politics. China's mainland security and economic growth hinge upon its direct control over Taipei and overall stability in the Korean Peninsula. Conversely, the US and its allies' interests in the western Pacific are linked with Taiwan as a sovereign state, denuclearization of DPRK, and reunification of two Koreas under one flag, duly backed by the US.

The long-term objectives and the 'redlines' of the two great powers are clearly defined and contradictory. Although the issue of DPRK and Taiwan are two different subjects still, it has been observed that somehow, China and the US use them as bargaining chips against each other to realize their strategic objectives. It is believed that by design, President Xi did not fully cooperate with the US during the Trump-Kim parleys. Without mincing words, Trump has already protested at least three times, that China was behind North Korea's defiant behavior (Seong-hyon, 2019).

The trade war between the two has also been tied down with the progress on the Korean Peninsula. As stated by Lee Seong-Hyon, China and the US feign political correctness (Panda, [2018](#)). During the Trump-Xi meeting in Florida (April 2017), Trump pressed Xi for his support on the DPRK issue. In a tweet, he suggested that China's help to DPRK would ease their trade tensions (Revere, [2019](#)). Trump floated the possibility of dropping Washington's 'One China' as a tool to bargain for balanced trade and containing China's expansion in South China. Yet, China rebutted such intents by stating that "One China is a non-option and explicitly saying that if the policy was ever placed on the negotiating table, talks over all other issues would immediately come to an end" (Aleem, [2017](#)).

On Taiwan's matter, DPRK is a readily available tool with China to keep the US and its allies under pressure. China would wish to see a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula on its terms without compromising on Taiwan's status. It is also concluded that despite its claim; with the American presence in the region, China would avoid taking the risk of seizing Taipei forcefully. However, since China is well known for its vast patience in dealing with its friends/foes, thus, it will not be in a hurry to annex Taiwan soon. By using the DPRK card, it would maintain the status quo in Taiwan and wait for a suitable time to realize its dream of one China, following the philosophy of Confucianism.

### China-US Strategic Competition in the Region, a Study from the Theoretical Prism

The above debate amply proves that in pursuit of their respective national goals in the western Pacific region and beyond, China and the US, follow the neo-realist approach with its two broad strands, 'defensive and offensive realism', coined by Kenneth Waltz, John J. Mearsheimer. At the higher level, they are involved in balancing/rebalancing games and at the lower level, they are backing their allies in a balance-of-threat role.

As understood by the author, in simple terms, the key variance between the two concepts i.e., the balance of power and balance of threat theory is that in the balance of power, the states/ allies continue to monitor the activities of their rivals and react to change in relative capabilities whereas, in case of balance of threat theory, states create balance not simply against superior power but the perceived threat. In the real world, the nature and quantum of threats keep on shifting, obligating states to make adjustments accordingly.

In the subject context, the balance of power theory is more relevant to China-US strategic competition while the balance of threat theory applies to the alliance between China-DPRK, the US-Taiwan, and US-South Korea/Japan. Fritz and Sweeney found that "Great powers pursue costly balancing policies only when they are forced to counter significant external threats" (Fritz & Sweeney, [2004](#)). It is believed, that China is currently involved in pursuing costly balancing policies.

There is yet another simple definition of the term balance of threat in which "states form alliances to protect themselves from states or coalitions whose superior resources pose a threat to their national sovereignty." States ally to balance against threats rather than against a nation's power alone (Dwivedi, [2012](#)). Yet, from the author's perspective, addressing the perception problem is a real test because retaining sufficient military power by a state does not mean that it will always use it.

In the balance of power theory, state/states attempt to prevent a potential hegemon by balancing against it. According to Robert J. Art, 'Balancing' refers to behaviour designed to create a better range of outcomes for a state vis-à-vis another state or coalition of states by adding to the power assets at its disposal, in an attempt to offset or diminish the advantages enjoyed by that other state or coalition (Bock & Henneberg, [2013](#)).

In the near term, China has no motivation to undermine the US role in the global arena (Spangler, [2013](#)). In one of his statements, Chinese President Xi opposed the outdated zero-sum game mentality and declared that China will continue to implement a "win-win strategy" of opening up economies while advancing multilateralism, global cooperation, and economic globalization (Andornino, [2017](#)). However, an in-depth analysis of the behaviour of the two great powers proves that in the regional context, despite its claim of peaceful rise, Beijing is unprepared to accept any role of extra-regional and regional states in its contested areas of the South China Sea.

Conversely, in his policy statements, Biden repeatedly declared that 'America is back' and also hinted to re-establish America's leadership in the Indo-Pacific region. Yet, consciously, he clarified that Washington would not break its link with Beijing, it would engage it when it was in 'America's best interests' (Goodman, [2021](#)). Biden's policy statements were not well received by the Chinese leadership (Moritsugu, [2021](#)). It is viewed irrespective of the future status of DPRK/Taiwan, neither side would be ready to give up its desire to dominate the Western Pacific region. Hence, despite complex economic interdependence, in the long term, the behaviour of both China and the US can be studied in terms of the 'relative and absolute gains' theory.

Since 1949, Beijing continues to refuse to admit Taiwan as a sovereign state. It has already put the US on the defensive which is maintaining 'strategic ambiguity' with regards to its policy to defend Taiwan against Chinese aggression. In the absence of a clearly defined policy by the US on Taiwan, China might take a calculated risk to launch a physical attack against independent activists to realize its goal of unification of Taiwan with mainland China.

Likewise, for the last two decades, China has been providing economic and diplomatic support to DPRK intending to use it as a proxy against the US interests if so required. In the same context, Nyshka Chandran opined that the Chinese see geopolitics as a very zero-sum game, so any progress in relations between DPRK and the US will, "from a Chinese perspective, mean a loss for China" (Chandran & Tan, [2018](#)). China and the US are involved in real politics, applying both forms of neorealism theory. In the regional setting, China applies 'offensive realism' while in the global arena, it follows 'defensive realism'. On the contrary, Washington is taking a careful line in the regional context and is flexible in dealing with Beijing on matters like the South China Sea, Taiwan, and DPRK. However, since the Seoul-Washington alliance is the 'linchpin' of America's Indo-Pacific strategy, hence, even in the regional context, the US would not let China assert influence beyond a certain level (Work, [2020](#)). With regard to open seas, the US is in an authoritative position. Yet, it is believed that China's acceptance of the US control in the global arena would be a short-term measure and the situation would change with the advancement of Chinese military capabilities vis-à-vis that of the US.

The author is of the view that the current approach pursued by the two sides could end up in a 'lose-lose' situation, ultimately leading to a 'tragedy of the commons' as explained by Garrett Hardin, an evolutionary biologist. In the current scenario, there is a possibility of a direct clash between the great powers which will have grave consequences for the entire world, and the survival of over 7.3 billion people would be at stake. It is because of this precise reason that the author has termed the outcome of their clash as a 'tragedy of the commons'.

### Suggested Way Forward

The Korean Peninsula issue is too complex to be resolved so easily. After conducting an in-depth analysis of the issue, the author stands even more confused and unable to offer solid options because it is hard to forecast the behaviour of the two sides correctly. When Joseph Nye was asked a question by Chinese officials as to what the US would do if they attacked Taiwan, he replied, "We don't know and you don't know. It would depend on the circumstances" (Whiton, [2019](#)).

To date, the endless, academic deliberation could not suggest a out the of the box solution to the subject, however, it does not mean that the academic circle should give up its input to create the chances of peace and prosperity in the region. Thus, even at the cost of repetition, the following options are presented for consideration by the relevant quarters:

A detailed analysis of the geostrategic situation reveals that to avoid the challenges of 21<sup>st</sup>-century war in the region, a 'new social contract' must be evolved and signed by the two great powers by adopting a comprehensive approach towards all outstanding issues. Such an ideal model for lasting peace in the region can only be evolved in a peaceful environment through table talk. The key areas which must form part of the 'contract' may include: The Korean Peninsula must be de-nuclearized to avoid a costly arms race in the region.

To develop mutual trust and harmony within the region, American forces must leave South Korea and Japan. The absence of an outside power from the region would build confidence and stabilize the region on permanent grounds.

China and the US should jointly give a guarantee to ensure peace in the region by taking DPRK, South Korea, and Japan in confidence.

The 'new social contract' must also protect the core interests of Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Singapore by resolving the irritants related to their claims/counterclaims in the western Pacific region including the South China Sea.

South Korea and Japan may be encouraged to have reasonably strong independent conventional military to ensure their domestic and border security.

Both China and the US should evolve a joint mechanism to protect the SLOC against piracy/pirates and other terrorist groups. The joint security mechanism should include the entire Indo-Pacific region. India and Pakistan may also be given the role in the joint mechanism which will help, reduce tension in South Asia.

The package deal cannot come so easily. A step-by-step approach would enable them to carve the way forward. Thus, to build the trust and confidence of all stakeholders, the following measures through well-focused diplomacy are recommended:

Washington should not jump to the conclusion by adopting traditional approaches towards fully verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, it must give up its aggressive behaviour and create goodwill towards Pyongyang before taking the next step.

The steady diplomatic moves must also include a sufficient 'credible assistance package' as well as relief from the UN Security Council sanctions which would help Pyongyang change its behaviour.

In phase one, Pyongyang may be persuaded to cap its nuclear and missile development program at its existing level, even capping its nuclear capability at the present level would be a diplomatic success.

The next phase of the complex dialogue can go on for a longer period. Beijing's role in the talks has always been sensitive thus, to consolidate the step towards a 'new social contract', the two sides must develop mutual trust and confidence.

The author believes that no amount of trust between China and the US would pay off unless a solid pledge is made by the US on two fronts: One, the US should formally endorse that it will not encourage Taipei in any form to contest for its 'sovereign status'. Two, Washington should also give a pledge that it will minimize its role in the Korean Peninsula. However, it is believed that Taiwan matters more for its people than China and the US therefore, Taiwanese must be given the option to exercise their 'free will' to decide their future.

## Conclusion

The price that the US is likely to pay for its nuclear nonproliferation policies of the last three decades is now very clear. Presently, the US homeland faces threats from nuclear-armed DPRK with greater accuracy and lethality, having no room for error or magical thinking to deal with this problem. Irrespective of whether or not Pyongyang would pick up the courage to target the US mainland directly, it has achieved sufficient flexibility to engage with China, the US, and other regional countries from a position of strength.

Washington is well aware that the route to resolving the nuclear issue of DPRK goes through Beijing but it will have cost. It is no more an illusion that Pyongyang has become an asset as bargaining leverage concerning other conflicts between China and the US including the maritime disputes in the western Pacific as well as the



long-pending issue of Taiwan. Thus, to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula and remove the ICBM threat to its mainland, the US may have to agree to pull out its forces from the Korean Peninsula to reduce the security concerns of the DPRK as well as that of China. This might be the minimum price that the US administration may have to pay if it wishes to ensure peace and prosperity in the region and protect its homeland from the projected threats of nuclear weapons/ICBMs launched by the frustrated DPRK.

Finally, the author believes that the western Pacific region is passing through a very crucial time. China is moving fast to bridge the gap in its defence capability to gain the balance of power in the region while the US is striving hard to maintain the status quo by upholding and expanding its alliances with extra-regional countries like India and Australia. This balance of power and balance of threat game between the two great powers could one day turn into physical hostilities, turning the whole region into its flame. This worst-case scenario could lead to a lose-lose situation, putting the entire world at stake, ultimately leading to the 'tragedy of the commons'.

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