The North Korean Missile and Nuclear Crises: China’s Historic and Strategic Stakes on the Korean Peninsula

Eric Teo Chu Cheow

Abstract

The article analyzes the recent troubled relationship between China and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), following the July missile tests and the October nuclear test. One would wonder if Pyongyang was countering a potential Sino-Russian-Japanese rapprochement in the making, given the fortuitous timing of the nuclear test. One could also wonder if Pyongyang was playing a “provocative role” against a relative Sino-South Korea “rapprochement,” as Pyongyang may fear being “nailed” by all this rapprochement, thus losing its own diplomatic hand eventually on the Korean Peninsula. A recap of the tumultuous history of Sino-Korean relations could offer some clues, as Pyongyang would have attempted to play traditional power politics, like in the past 320 years, whereas China would ensure not being “sucked” into conflicts and controversies over Korea, as history has shown. The entree of the United States into the Korean fray via the Portsmouth Treaty (September 1905) and the Taft-Katusra “Agreement” (July 1905) was significant, as Washington had then joined Beijing, Tokyo and Moscow in “balancing” Korean forces on the Peninsula, a fact that has not changed fundamentally till today. But there is also a fundamental shift operating, as Seoul further distances itself from Washington’s hard-line policy and “shifts” toward a softer line espoused by Beijing vis-à-vis Pyongyang, clearly for commercial and affinity-related issues. Finally, Beijing could have been deemed to have scored a diplomatic triumph from its “initial disappointment” and Pyongyang’s “hanran” (meaning brazen or flagrant) action, following its missile and nuclear tests; the DPRK will likely return to the Six-Party Talks in December, thus giving Beijing a decisive diplomatic triumph on the Korean peninsula.
On October 9, 2006, North Korea performed its first nuclear test to the genuine disapproval of its neighbors and major powers; South Korea, China, Japan and the United States had repeatedly warned Pyongyang against such a move, but to no avail. After the test, China called it “brazen,” South Korea insisted it would “sternly respond,” Japan warned of harsh sanctions to come, just as the United States termed it “a provocative act” and Russia called it “unacceptable.” Overall, amidst the wide condemnation of the test, it is widely acknowledged by the international media that both Washington and Beijing suffered blows to their North Korean strategies, as Pyongyang defied everyone involved in the stalled Six-Party Talks to conduct the tests.

After agreeing to “appropriate United Nations (UN) action,” China insisted that there should be “no use of force by the UN,” presumably because of China’s 1961 Mutual Defense Treaty with the DPRK. Meanwhile, Beijing has insisted that all parties concerned return to the Six-Party Talks, since Pyongyang “abandoned” them in November 2005, after having accused Washington of having unreasonably imposed financial sanctions on it; the United States (in the Bush-Roh meeting in the White House in September) agreed to strive for a “diplomatic solution” out of this current impasse, though its neighbors, China and the Republic of Korea (ROK), would prefer not to “push Pyongyang into a corner,” thus provoking further hostility.

United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1718 had in fact called for a vast array of economic sanctions linked to the transportation of possible nuclear materials between North Korea and other possible “traders” (of such dangerous materials), thus confirming the international community’s resolve to “contain” Pyongyang’s nuclear consequences (if the measures are stringently implemented by all concerned) rather than attempting to destroy its nuclear capability, which would be near impossible under present circumstances. In this regard, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was sent on a Northeast Asian shuttle diplomacy in mid-October so as to shore up “coordinated action” against Pyongyang. But key to all this diplomatic coordination would undoubtedly be China’s ultimate position on the DPRK.
Diplomatic sources in China recently indicated that Beijing may have been extremely disappointed—not just once, but twice—with Pyongyang, with a real plunge in Sino-DPRK relations; the first blow came with Pyongyang’s July missile tests, to which Beijing had already reacted very negatively. The second came with the nuclear test in October; but these relations could dip even more seriously should the DPRK choose to conduct further tests. In an unprecedented strong criticism from Beijing, North Korea is accused of having “brazenly” tested its nuclear bomb, though small, despite general international disapproval and expressions of concern. UNSC Resolution 1718 of October 14 was especially telling, as the spotlight today appears to be shifting toward Beijing and its eventual application of the approved UN sanctions, a diplomatic problem that Pyongyang may have inexorably “added to Beijing’s plate.”

More importantly, what is at stake is the Pyongyang-Beijing relationship, which appears to have been severely shaken. But has it really amounted to a rupture between the two “allies”? Developments in July and early October may indeed prove illuminating and provide the ultimate key to future Sino-DPRK relations.

The second week of July already appeared crucial for the ties, after Pyongyang test-fired a barrage of seven missiles (including the long-range Taepodong-2) on July 5, probably also as a “warning gift” to Washington on its Independence Day, undoubtedly defying Beijing. The international media had in general then portrayed the missile crisis as either a “strategic Chinese game” to protect Pyongyang, or one whereby Beijing may have lost control over its “client state.” But the basic truth is perhaps that it was also a total “loss” for Pyongyang, after having over-played its hand against its “mentor” by putting undue pressure on Beijing to protect it from Washington, Japan and the EU.

Beijing then “turned on the heat” against Kim Jong Il, a scenario which the latter may not have predicted in its own strategic tussle with the West and notably, the United States and Japan. Wanting to use Beijing (and Moscow) to force Washington’s hand into de facto recognition of the regime and “softening” U.S. financial sanctions, Pyongyang may...
indeed have antagonized its two big neighbors, and may thus have to “pay the price” for its insolence.

Between July and the October 9 nuclear bomb test, Beijing “turned the tables” against Pyongyang, when it allowed first, the earlier UNSC Resolution 1695 to pass, albeit without invoking Article 7 on UN sanctions or a “forced intervention,” which Beijing is clearly in principle opposed to. As a follow-up to this resolution, the Bank of China (BoC) reportedly froze North Korean accounts at its Macau branch, like in the earlier case of Washington’s clampdown on the Macau-based Banco Delta Asia.

It was indeed a wrong strategic calculation on Pyongyang’s part that Beijing (and Moscow) would ultimately shield it from the West; there was already an appeal from Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao himself not to proceed with the July missile tests, when he met Australian Prime Minister John Howard in Guangdong to inaugurate a gas pipeline. Not only did Pyongyang ignore the appeal, but also failed to alert the Chinese and Russians in a timely manner before test-firing the missiles—though abortive, as the Taepodong-2 fell into the sea just minutes after its launch. Russian President Vladimir Putin reacted negatively in a televised interview, by calling it a “disappointment;” the timing was then particularly bad for Russia, as the G-8 was gathering at Saint Petersburg barely 10 days after that.

Even worse, in Chinese eyes, was the regrettable timing of this crisis for Beijing. The week of July 10 was celebrated as the 45th anniversary of the PRC-DPRK Friendship Treaty, which then-Premier Zhou Enlai had signed with Kim Il Sung in 1961. A Chinese delegation, led by Vice Premier Hui Liangyu was in Pyongyang that whole week, just when Yang Hyong-sop, Vice-Chairman of the DPRK Supreme People’s Assembly was on a visit to Beijing. But Hui was not even received by “Dear Leader” Kim Jong Il, whereas Yang was received by President Hu Jintao in person in Beijing, who then appealed to Pyongyang to return to the Six-Party Talks.

According to a senior academic, an editor of a major Chinese daily and an official at the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, whom the author of this paper had met in Beijing casually that week, the incident was “a total embarrassment” and perceived as “undue pressure” on China to defend the DPRK at all costs. It was probably also perceived
by the Chinese leadership as an open challenge to them to “toe Pyongyang’s line,” whilst another academic saw it as “North Korean leaders holding the Chinese leadership hostage,” with Beijing having no means to soften Pyongyang’s hard-line stance against rejoining the Six-Party Talks, stalled since November 2005.

This gesture could have also been interpreted by China as a “loss of face,” especially after Hu’s personal appeal to Yang to rejoin the Six-Party Talks, which Beijing regards as its diplomatic initiative and trump-card par excellence. As the two delegations returned home after festivities in both Beijing and Pyongyang (with Hui’s apparent failure to convince Pyongyang not to “stray” too far), it was then that the Chinese consented to passing UNSC Resolution 1695 over that same weekend (July 14–15), catching Pyongyang by surprise, judging from its strong reaction thereafter.

But in the intermediate period between July and October, Beijing sought to repair its damaged ties and strengthened consultations with Pyongyang, despite the initial dip in relations. In fact, Pyongyang appeared to have relented too after severely criticizing Beijing—as China Daily reported that Kim Yong-Nam, Pyongyang’s top legislator, when receiving the credentials of the new Chinese Ambassador to the DPRK Liu Xiaoming, declared at the ceremony that it was “a firm policy of the DPRK to make efforts to strengthen the traditional friendship with China.”

But when news was filtering out of Pyongyang again of the most-recent nuclear test, Beijing increased its consultations and pressure, and preached prudence to Pyongyang, apparently without any avail, for a second time. This time, the Chinese reaction to the nuclear test was even stronger, given its description of “brazen” (hanran) for this latest action by Pyongyang. The rupture between Pyongyang and Beijing appeared consummated this time, as Beijing lost all hopes of convincing Pyongyang to “climb down” from its utter defiance. In the two cases, Chinese leaders probably felt that “using” the 45th anniversary in July and “brazenly” (hanran) is the Chinese word, which is translated by the official China Daily and Xinhua English service as “brazen”)

---

2 China Daily, Oct. 10, 2006, and quoting an official Xinhua English service transla-
ignoring China’s incessant appeals in September, ultimately constituted a complete “loss of face” for China.

It was only after the nuclear test that Beijing “delayed” the September shipment of oil to Pyongyang and then insisted that Kim receive Hu’s personal representative, State Councillor Tang Jiaxuan, which finally took place; Kim then pledged that there would be no further tests for now. A decision was also taken subsequently for Pyongyang to return to the stalled Six-Party Talks, probably in December 2006, an undoubted diplomatic triumph for Beijing.

What then happened between the July and October tests, which took Beijing by a second nasty surprise with October’s “brazen” act? Perhaps, the testy relations could be analyzed from a longer historical perspective, whereby Korea, a smaller and “dependent” power on China, had always played power politics in the region. History would indeed be a good guide to such a tumultuous relationship between Koreans and Chinese, especially if one recalls how the Koreans played off the Chinese against the Russians and Japanese, as had been the case throughout history in Northeast Asia.

Is Pyongyang Countering the Strategic Sino-Russian-Japanese Rapprochement? Or a Beijing-Seoul Entente on the Korean Peninsula?

A recapitulation of history in this region would be useful to highlight the “ups and downs” of tumultuous Sino-Korean-Japanese-Russian relations in the past 320 years, and thereby draw lessons from them for the present missile and nuclear crises as well as the future of the Six-Party Talks.

In fact, Korea’s own fate has historically been intermittently linked to the rise and fall of Sino-Japanese relations, as well as Russo-Japanese and Sino-Russian relations. In more contemporary history, Korean-Japanese relations have been inexorably tied to souring Sino-Japanese relations, culminating in Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s most
recent symbolic and spectacular visit to Beijing (coincidentally on the same morning of the nuclear test); the currently stalled Six-Party Talks and the present “rapprochement” between Beijing and Seoul seem to confirm history’s drift toward a better entente between South Korea and China (perhaps even against North Korea) on one hand, versus Japan and the United States on the other, with Russia playing a “stalking game” in the middle, as a French caricaturist had rightly portrayed it at the turn of the last century.4

Moreover, throughout history, the Koreans have often been split and divided as a nation—even before the 1953 division of the Korean peninsula—as the ancient Three Kingdoms of Goguryeo, Silla and Baekje had battled each other out,5 with foreign assistance and complicity, notably the Chinese and Japanese. It is a fact of history that the Koreans’ power-plays and internal divisions had in fact sparked conflicts and confrontation amongst its immediate neighbors in Northeast Asia.

Beijing’s “subtle shift” in relations from Pyongyang to Seoul may be taking place discreetly (at least from Chinese calculations), although there is definitely no alliance in the making between China and South Korea in any envisaged form in the future. This may probably be the most important cause and consequence of the recent nuclear test, which, in a way, also confirms the historically testy relations between China and Korea. Significantly, the nuclear test also came just days before the arrival of President Roh Moo-hyun on a visit to Beijing. Equally significant was that this nuclear test came right on the heels (and probably in direct defiance too) of the “great turning point” in relations6 between Japan and China, following Abe’s spectacular visit to Beijing to meet all three of the top Chinese leaders (President Hu Jintao, Premier Wen Jiabao and top legislator Wu Bangguo) within a day.

Vis-à-vis Japan, Pyongyang would have most probably evaluated

4 This cartoon caricature is available at http://www.grips.ac.jp/teacher/oono/hp/lecture_J/lec06.htm under the “Meiji” section.
6 China Daily, Oct. 9, 2006 used this phrase, whereas Japan Times reported that Hu and Abe would seek “strategic ties.”
that its own relations with Tokyo were already at such a low level that there was no real possible prospect of rapprochement left; in this regard, a nuclear test, despite Japan’s strong warnings and threats of economic sanctions, would have made no difference thereafter. On the other hand, Japanese fears of Pyongyang were already heightened by the 1998 missile-firing over Japan, as well as the outright admission by North Korean leaders of the “abductees” issue in 2002, which then confirmed in the minds of most Japanese North Korea’s “terrorist state” status and their need to oppose the regime stringently.

The ultimate question in these intriguing circumstances was whether Pyongyang was really out to defy Beijing, as Sino-Japanese ties warmed up, Sino-South Korean relations warmed too and Sino-Russian views converge further on the international stage—most seemingly to the detriment of Pyongyang. The North Koreans may have a hunch that that they would have to play their “provocative role” again, like in traditional Korean history, so as to ensure that all these different attempts at rapprochement do not necessarily “nail” them completely into a position of “non-maneuverability” and political stalemate on the peninsula, which the Koreans have proven quite astute and adept at exploiting to their own benefits throughout history.

In fact, Sino-Korean affinities have been all along a powerful historical determinant on the Korean peninsula over the past 2,000 years; the first Sino-Korean alliance brought together in A.D. 663 the Tang and Silla navies against the Japanese and Baekje navies, which de facto ended Japanese influence on the Korean peninsula, at least till the two subsequent Korean expeditions by Japan in 1592 and 1597 during the Azuchi-Momoyama period under Regent Hideyoshi, when Japan actively sought lucrative trade exchanges, as it “opened up” to the outside world.7 Hence, for more than 900 years, the Chinese evicted the Japanese from the Korean peninsula and in fact, it was in 1274 that the Mongols (under China’s Yuan Dynasty) then attempted to invade Japan, via the Korean peninsula, thus “bringing Korea back” into the Sino-Japanese clash. However, Japan was saved from the Mongol invasion, thanks to a typhoon, which then bestowed upon the Japanese the perception of their “invincibility” in history ever since. Historically,

---

7 Sakamoto, Japanese History by International Society for Educational Information Inc.
Korea has thus always been profoundly implicated in the traditional Sino-Japanese rivalry in Northeast Asia, and in fact, even brought about the first Sino-Japanese War in 1894–95.

Hence, the crucial question that still remains today is whether the intriguing relations on the Korean peninsula may be going one full cycle from 320 years ago, when the Korean Kingdom was the premier tributaire to the Chinese Empire, then acquis for a short period of time towards the Czarist Empire, coalesced to move closer under and was then completely colonized by Japan, South Korea then being allied to the United States after World War II, and now, with talks of possible reunification again (at least till the nuclear test), the future Korea (North and South) could be moving again “closer back” to a more neutral position or even towards China, or eventually, even staking to a position of traditional “power-play” once again. A meticulous recap of Korean history, especially from the geo-political angle, would be most illuminating to understand Korea’s own future.

The Historical Context of the Tumultuous Sino-Korean Relationship

Historically, it was the Treaty of Nerchinsk of August 27, 1689 that had “clipped” Russian influence in the Far East, when Qing forces wiped out Russian colonies on the Amur, destroyed the Russian fort at Albazin and forced the Russians to withdraw north into Siberia, away from the Amur River. The Korean Kingdom was thus safely secured as a tributary state of the Chinese Emperor, with the Russians pushed safely back to the North.

---


9 This section is taken from numerous sources, notably Taro Sakamoto’s “Japanese History”; the Internet East Asian History Sourcebook available at http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/eastasia/eastasiabooks.html; Zhang Xiaoming’s, China’s Peripheral Security Environment (published in Mandarin only by Beijing University’s press); Marie Soderberg, Chinese-Japanese Relations in the 21st Century:
But in September 1875, the Koreans fired mistakenly on the Japanese naval vessel Un’yo and the first clash between Japan and Korea took place in contemporary times; the Japanese then forced the Koreans to sign the Treaty of Kangwha, whereby Korea was coerced into granting trading concessions to Japan, thus inaugurating the Japanese “penetration” of Korea. Between the summers of 1882 to 1886, the bitter factional infighting in Korea were exacerbated by Japanese, Chinese and Russian interference; Qing China supported the Korean conservatives, whereas Japan supported the reformists.

But the first Sino-Japanese War in 1894–95 became the real turning point for Qing China and Korea itself. When the royalist government of Korea asked the Chinese to help quell a peasant revolt, the Japanese took the occasion to dispatch its own troops to Korea to “protect its community,” and after a Japanese coup had ousted the pro-Chinese faction in Seoul on July 23, 1894, Japanese forces attacked the Chinese Qing troops on July 25 by surprise, thus launching the first Sino-Japanese War. This was the prelude to a string of Japanese victories from September 1894 till February 1895. By the Treaty of Shimonoseki (April 17, 1895), China had to (after its humiliating defeat at the hands of the Japanese), amongst a string of concessions, drop its claims to the Korean peninsula, pay Japan 310 million yen in gold and cede the Liaodong peninsula to Japan; Japan thus drove the Chinese and Qing forces out of Korea and took for themselves a key dominant position on the peninsula. (The Japanese were however humiliated by Western powers subsequently in the last days of April 1895, when the Triple Intervention of Russia, France and Germany forced Japan to give the Liaodong peninsula back to Qing China; the revised Shimonoseki Treaty of May 10, 1895 then relinquished Japanese control over Liaodong, to the anger of the Japanese general public.)

But with full control over Korea, Japan began to control Korea even more fully. After the Sino-Japanese War, the Korean King and Queen

---

*Complementarity and Conflict* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

10 A DPRK publication, *Korea in the 20th Century: 100 Significant Events* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2002). Provided this “perhaps slanted” perspective on the tussle between reformist and conservative forces in Korea in the 1880s.
Min, who had maintained power in the Korean Court began to rely more and more on Russian troops against Japan. The ascendancy of the pro-Russian faction (centered on Queen Min) alarmed Japan and the pro-Japanese faction; they mounted a coup on October 8, 1895, to brutally exterminate Queen Min and her entourage. The rise of the pro-Russian faction became obvious to Seoul, as they trained the Korean army and gained many concessions from the King, to the general irritation of Japan.

Russian domination over Korea was thus confirmed in 1896 and lasted from 1897–98, and in May 1896, the Korean Court even unsuccessfully asked to become a Russian protectorate. But Russia and Japan then signed the Lobanov-Yamagata Convention in June 1896, attempting to organize joint dominance over Korea, whilst a weakening Qing China watched on. But by April 13, 1897, Japan managed to persuade Russia to sign the Rosen-Nissi Convention, whereby Russia yielded its dominant position in Korea to Japan, so as to concentrate fully on Manchuria, seen by the Russians then to be more key and important than Korea for their vital interests.

Following the “anti-foreigner” Boxer Rebellion of 1900 in China, Russia then occupied the whole of Manchuria from the Qing and became more and more absorbed there to leave Japan to its own dominance over Korea. Japan had then signed the Anglo-Japanese Alliance of 1902, principally to counter Russian expansion into China. By April 8, 1902, Russia—under pressure from Western powers—agreed to recognize Chinese sovereignty over Manchuria and a phased withdrawal within 18 months, which the Russians then stalled by late 1902. This set the stage for the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05 and the Taft-Katsura Agreement, which then followed in 1905.

Japan then forced the Korean government to sign the “Japan-Korean Protocol” on February 23, 1904 (despite Seoul’s proclamation of neutrality”) and then the “Japan-Korea Agreement” on August 22 in the midst of the Russo-Japanese War; and these two documents paved the way for direct Japanese rule over the Korean peninsula.

The Japanese victory over Russia at the naval Battle of Tsushima (May 1905), after routing the Russians on land at Mukden/Shenyang (in March 1905), was finally sealed with the Portsmouth (New Hampshire) Peace Treaty on September 6, 1905, thanks to American President
Theodore Roosevelt’s mediation between Russia and Japan between August 9 and September 6. Under this Treaty, Japan gained control of Liaodong (and Port Arthur) and the South Manchurian Railroad (which led to Port Arthur), as well as half of the Island of Sakhalin. Russia agreed to evacuate southern Manchuria, which was restored to China, and Japan’s control of Korea was finally recognized and sealed officially. Within months of this Portsmouth Treaty, Czarist Russia was to be seized with the Bolshevik Revolution and plunged into violent internal chaos.

**The U.S. Entrance into the Regional Sino-Korean-Japanese-Russian Strategic Balance**

But prior to the Portsmouth Treaty there was another important secret “agreement;” namely, the Taft-Katsura Agreement,\(^{11}\) which also probably altered the fate of Korea vis-à-vis Japan and the United States, as well as with regards to China and Russia.

William Howard Taft, the U.S. Secretary of War met Katsura Taro, Prime Minister of Japan, in Tokyo on the morning of July 27, 1905 for a long confidential discussion, which then resulted on July 29, in a memorandum detailing these discussions, and then sent to U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt; this memorandum, which later became known as the “Taft-Katsura Agreement.”\(^{12}\) It was neither a secret treaty nor an officially signed diplomatic document, but the contents of the memorandum (which amounted to an understanding) were approved by Roosevelt himself in his reply to Taft dated the same day from Washington, DC.

In this “Agreement,” three significant issues were “agreed upon” between Taft and Katsura with regard to “peace in East Asia”: Firstly, a good understanding between the United States, Britain and Japan

---

\(^{11}\) The controversial portrayal of the Taft-Katsura Agreement could be found in at least two sources, namely the Wikipedia summary of the Agreement, as well as a more critical assessment (as a betrayal of the United States against Korea), available at http://www.geocities.com/mlovmo/temp25.html.

\(^{12}\) A copy of this Agreement is kept at the Washington University Far East Library and reproduced on the “Geocities” Web page.
(with Britain and Japan being allies under the 1902 Alliance Treaty) would best “seal” the peace in East Asia, which in turn, according to Katsura, was the fundamental principle of Japan. Secondly, Taft observed that Japan’s only interest in the Philippines would be to have them governed by a strong and friendly nation like the United States, to which Katsura confirmed clearly Japan’s views, as “not having any aggressive designs on the Philippines.”

Lastly and more importantly, Katsura observed that Korea was a matter of absolute importance to Japan, as it was perceived as the direct cause of Japan’s war with Russia (and its earlier war with China, a point which was however not reiterated between the two men) and a “complete solution of the Korean problem would be the war’s logical consequence.” In this regard, Katsura argued that if left alone, Korea would “continue to improvidently enter into agreements/treaties with other powers” (meaning with the Chinese or the Russians), which had created the “initial problems.” Therefore, Japan would have to take steps to prevent Korea from again establishing the conditions, which had then forced Japan into fighting another foreign war on its immediate periphery. Based on this, Taft agreed that the establishment of Japanese suzerainty over Korea to prevent foreign treaties and power play without Japan’s consent would be the logical result of the Russo-Japanese War and would therefore logically secure “permanent peace in East Asia.”

However, this “arrangement” between Taft and Katsura could also be seen to have violated the spirit of the previous “good offices” clause in the “Korean-American Treaty of Amity and Commerce,” signed in Incheon, Korea on May 22, 1882. The Joseon government then had considered this Treaty as some sort of a Mutual Defense Treaty between Korea and the United States, whereas Washington had interpreted it as only “good offices,” amounting to no obligations on the part of the Americans. Their protests went unheeded by the U.S. Administration and the Korean King’s envoy was reportedly rebuffed by Washington.

Many Koreans could therefore see this “agreement” and the Portsmouth Treaty as having paved the way for the “formal and official recognition of Japanese interests in Korea,” laid out in the November 17, 1905 Protectorate Treaty (which dismantled the Korea Foreign Affairs Office completely); it reportedly led to the unfortunate “colo-
“Meiji Restoration” of the Korean peninsula by Japanese military forces for 35 years, from 1910 till 1945. However, some Koreans have also admitted recently that the corruption and inability of the Joseon Royal Court had actually contributed to Korea’s helplessness and incapability to defend itself from encroachment by outside forces and governments. Both the Joseon and Qing then went into a similar spiral of dynastic decline and national decay again like China in the last years of the Qing Dynasty, which was then forced to accept “unequal treaties” and foreign concessions on its territory. This similarity between the Joseon and the Qing Dynasties was telling, as the last attempt by the Chinese Empire to support and shore up the Korean Kingdom had really taken place in 1884-85, after which both went into their final phases of dynastic decline and national decay. By 1895, the defeated Qing was clearly routed and ousted from Korea by the stronger modernizing Japan under the Meiji era, just as the Joseon was to be completely over-run by Meiji Japan, as well as by internal Korean divisions.

In fact, Japan, under the “Meiji Restoration” (and contrary to the Qing and Joseon in China and Korea respectively) had modernized the economy and embarked on “guarding its national interests by constructing its line of interest beyond its national border and sovereignty.” This novel line on “national interests of Japan” was already enunciated by Prime Minister Aritomo Yamagata in his famous speech to the first imperial parliament in 1890 as follows:

“There are two ways to secure national independence and defense. The first is to protect the line of sovereignty. The second is to protect the line of interest. The line of sovereignty means the nation’s border whereas the line of interest includes the areas closely related to the safety of the line of sovereignty. There is no country that does not defend both lines. Under the present circumstance, to maintain our independence and stand against Western powers, defending the line of sovereignty is not enough. We need to protect our line of interest as well.”

It is clear that Japan’s “line of interest” would a priori include Korea

and then later, Manchuria; this concept was then extended to the whole of Asia (China and Southeast Asia) with the Sphere of Asian Co-Prosp-erity during World War II. This doctrine had inexorably led to the first Sino-Japanese War, as China had then considered Korea its tributary state then and its rights of protection over Korea. Therefore, Korea (and Manchuria) were clearly Meiji Japan’s “coveted prizes” in its “line of interest” philosophy and decidedly, a major issue in Sino-Japanese rela-tions, especially in the last 120 years.

History, Redressing Past Humiliations and Rising Nationalism: A Tactical Sino-Korean Rapprochement Against Japan?

In fact, the Joseon literature had always portrayed China in favorable terms; Beijing was then widely recognized as the intellectual, architectural and civilizational (and inspirational) model for Korea, although Seoul today has a bitter historical contention with Beijing over the ancient Kingdom of Goguryeo, which Koreans claim to be their ancestors, whereas China lays claims to it as part of its historical territory and ancestral history under the Hans. But China has since toned down this controversy, so as not to complicate Sino-South Korean relations.

On the other hand, the old “occupational” memories in South Korea against Japan are resurfacing violently, as Koreans and Chinese tactically joined forces to deny Tokyo a permanent member seat in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

Also, Seoul and Beijing appear much closer than had been expect-ed to oppose Tokyo over Pyongyang and myriad issues and positions in the stalled the Six-Party Talks. Moreover, the rallying of China quite automatically toward South Korea’s Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon as the new UN Secretary-General (2007-2011) was significant.

A greater Sino-South Korean rapprochement and complicity today could be understood, not only from a historical point of view, but also because current economic and internal societal developments in all three countries are converging emotionally and psychologically at the end of the Cold War to produce the strains of rising nationalism there, as well as growing demands in China and South Korea to seek redress
for the humiliation afflicted upon them historically by “imperialistic Japan,” viz. for its occupation of Korea (1910–45) and its “military expansion” into China, beginning with Manchuria/Manchukuo in 1930 till 1945.

Humiliation is key, now that the shackles of the Cold War have been broken. Moreover Beijing and Seoul are also “linked up” against Tokyo over the “textbook row” (over the Japanese portrayal of World War II history), islets disputes (between China and Japan over Diaoyu/Senkaku and between Korea and Japan over Dokdo/Takeshima and the UNSC feud. These “convergences,” though tactical, dominated the headlines in 2005 and would most likely continue to dictate geo-political interests of Seoul, Pyongyang and its bigger neighbours.

As this “common cause” is emotionally uniting China and Korea against Japan, the North Korean missile and nuclear bomb crises fit into a complex Northeast Asian situation of history, rising nationalism, a profound humiliation “unrighted thus far” and geo-politics. Pyongyang may also be playing its strategic game here in exploiting the already tenuous relations amongst the other five parties to the stalled Six-Party Talks. Moreover, thanks to the increasing strategic dispute between China and Japan, the latter is invariably being pushed into consolidating its own strategic alliance with the United States, which is complicating the Korean issue further; furthermore, Beijing (as well as Seoul and Washington) may also fear the growing spectre of Tokyo’s nuclear armament (although Abe had pledged not to draw Japan into a nuclear arms race), owing to mounting rightist forces, who have been infuriated by Pyongyang’s nuclear bomb test. This tectonic shift could thus be provoking a dramatic revision of the existing regional alliance pattern in Northeast Asia.

South Korean Attempts at Rapprochement with the North:
In the Shadows of China and With Misgivings Against the United States

These disputes between South Korea and Japan also come in the wake of Seoul’s “sunshine diplomacy” approach toward Pyongyang between 2000 till today (under Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-
hyun), just as Tokyo has stiffened its own position against North Korea’s non-satisfactory accounting of Japanese “abductees” and its missile/nuclear threats.

Pyongyang must have calculated that Seoul was perhaps moving too close to Beijing strategically. But it now remains to be seen if Seoul would still engage its “soft” diplomatic track with Pyongyang after the nuclear test (and the UNSC Resolution 1718), which clearly shocked South Korean public opinion; it also remains to be seen if Washington and Tokyo could ultimately “stiffen” Seoul’s resolve against appeasing Pyongyang in the aftermath of the nuclear crisis, although latest indications by President Roh have given indications that Seoul’s two key projects with Pyongyang would not be affected.

However, as Seoul moves progressively toward a more “neutral” position (vis-à-vis a looming U.S.-China tussle and competition worldwide), there are also concerns for stability in Northeast Asia under the American security umbrella, especially when both Tokyo and Seoul are allies of Washington. Moreover, there are indications that Washington is also becoming more wary of being caught between Tokyo (its ally) and Beijing (a rising world power) should they engage in an “accidental conflict.” On the other hand, Seoul may have to continue to “hedge” against China, the United States and Japan in order (for a smaller power) to survive, as in classical geo-political theory.

Indeed, these latest feuds between Japan and its neighbors have driven China and South Korea relatively closer together, tactically and strategically, just as Seoul’s relations with Washington progressively distance somewhat. As Seoul shifts closer to Beijing (in positions of the Six-Party Talks, as organized by China), a fundamental shift in Northeast Asia’s alliances could be in the making. The recent boosting of Seoul’s defense ties with Beijing is a small, ominous indication of this new tectonic shift. Moreover, Seoul had also announced that it intended to scrap OPLAN 5029, whereby the ROK Armed Forces would be put under U.S. operational control to move upward into the North, if and should the Pyongyang regime collapse, just as Roh, whilst championing Seoul’s “sunshine policy” has become critical of Washington’s hard-line policy against Pyongyang.

Perhaps, a victory by the opposition Conservatives in the ROK in 2007 could reverse this trend. But Seoul may be clearly in a growing
bind as its commercial and cultural ties deepen with Beijing and Pyongyang. On the other hand, Pyongyang is clearly not oblivious to this strategic shift operating in the South and seeks to exploit the “sunshine policy” to wean the South away from Americans and Japanese.

It was thought that if this potential tectonic shift actually were to take place, the two camps could be entrenched in Northeast Asia under the aegis of a growing U.S.-China competition and rivalry. It then begs the fundamental question if the recent nuclear tests by Pyongyang could have in fact moved Beijing and Moscow closer to Seoul, Tokyo and Washington in one blow, which could eventually create new uncertainties in the Northeast Asian pattern of alliance tomorrow, or on the other hand, “warm” the Beijing-Seoul rapprochement even further versus the “harder” Washington-Tokyo axis.

This shifting alliance would also inexorably complicate the budding East Asian regionalism, which was symbolized by the inaugural East Asia Summit (EAS), launched last December in Kuala Lumpur. According to ASEAN organizers, the EAS should logically be built on Southeast and Northeast Asia “coming together” as two sub-regions; but with the Northeast caught in a furious nationalistic upheaval and a potential tectonic shift in traditional alliances, it has undoubtedly become less obvious today how the EAS could effectively take off and an East Asian Community could be founded, along the lines of the European Union today.

But, it may also bring to the fore the future role of Washington in this unfortunate regional configuration, whereby the United States remains ironically the most influential non-East Asian member that could probably still “hold the peace regionally” and thus bringing the region together, a haunting reminder of the 1905 Taft-Katsura Agreement, whereby Japan’s avowed objective was to “guarantee permanent peace in Asia.”

Beijing’s Diplomatic Score After Pyongyang’s Crises and Six-Party Talks: A Rightful Conclusion at Hand?

But beyond the current Sino-Korean “rapprochement” against Tokyo, Beijing appears to have played its diplomatic card relatively
well during both the July missile and October nuclear crises for at least four reasons.

Firstly, Beijing has never taken it well, when smaller countries try to defy it, exert “undue pressure” on its diplomacy and take Beijing either hostage or for granted; under these circumstances, China has always acted like a “big power” against such acts and perpetrators of defiance. Chinese leaders have probably felt that “using” the 45th anniversary in July and “brazenly” ignoring China’s incessant appeals in October ultimately constituted a complete “loss of face” for China, which is increasingly important to the top Chinese leadership and its foreign policy.

Secondly, it also clearly showed China’s three real goals for the Six-Party Talks and the ultimate denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. Beijing fears that Pyongyang’s nuclearization would spark similar moves by Japan to nuclearize, China’s ultimate nightmare! It also seeks to avoid a socio-economic catastrophe of North Korean refugees rushing across their common border into China’s present “rustbelt” of Manchuria, which is already facing mounting social unrests amidst its socio-industrial restructuring. Beijing also wants to score a diplomatic triumph in its Six-Party Talks, which Pyongyang had denied Beijing the ultimate privilege.

Thirdly, Beijing has however used this occasion to emerge, not only as a big Asian power, but also as an internationally responsible player, which fits in well with Washington’s requested “stakeholder theory,” and reiterated as a “co-partnership” during Hu’s April 2006 visit to the White House. In fact, by ultimately allowing two UNSC resolutions through with conditions, Beijing also ultimately showed its “Perm-5 status” clearly to Pyongyang, Tokyo, Washington and the rest of the world.

Lastly, Beijing may also have raised its own stakes in the Six-Party Talks and further engaged Moscow in facing off Washington and Tokyo. Moreover, it would also have scored a vital point with Seoul, as this incident made it clear to Seoul that it could ultimately “outweigh” Pyongyang in Beijing’s strategic calculations on the Korean peninsula; South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun’s visit was a clear indication of this too, as Beijing may seek to ultimately wean Seoul away from Washington. Beijing’s relative tilt from Pyongyang to Seoul may have
truly begun.

Based on the above four factors, it could be analyzed that Beijing had probably made a good strategic calculation and regained some diplomatic initiatives, just as Pyongyang may have faltered by overplaying its own hand and embarrassed China, exerting “undue pressure” in strong defiance and “holding the Chinese leadership hostage.” More significantly, Seoul seemed to have supported Beijing’s stance all the way through, just as Pyongyang saw Beijing’s “true colors” and wrath as a regional power and an international actor.

The ultimate stage is now set for an effective return of Pyongyang to the Six-Party Talks in Beijing, as announced, probably after Beijing’s “show of strength” against and outright condemnation of Pyongyang, its close collaboration with Moscow in tackling the DPRK, and the latter’s painful lesson learnt (from Beijing). In fact, there is perhaps a useful strategic and diplomatic lesson to take from this incident that “one could indeed get badly scorched by tugging too hard at the dragon’s tail.” But the real victors could indeed emerge now as the Six-Party Talks and their host, Beijing!

History is thus perhaps coming round one full circle after 320 years, when the Chinese had a pre-eminent position on the Korean peninsula. But Beijing may also still have to choose sides on the Korean peninsula (Seoul or Pyongyang), instead of being “led by the nose all the way” by North Korea, as history may be once again proving amply and strongly today.