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USA – China: Who Is Responsible for North Korean Nuclear Weapons Programme Development?

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North Korea's announcements of the completion of its Nuclear Weapons Development Programme have caused an outburst of discussion on "who is to blame". More accurately, it concerns who is primarily responsible for the escalation of the situation to its current level.

Against the backdrop of growing USA-China opposition, now Beijing has even been accused this, with accusations varying from “did nothing, although it could” to “actively assisted”.

Let's start with statements made by US presidential candidate Hillary Clinton. On October 13, 2016 the Associated Press, referring to WikiLeaks, reported that in June, 2013, during a lecture to Goldman Sachs officials, Hillary Clinton pointed out that the Chinese People's Liberation Army is the main sponsor of North Korea. It was at that time when she stated her position – if Beijing is not able to keep North Korea from creating an intercontinental ballistic missile capable of carrying nuclear weapons, the USA may encircle China with a ring of missile defence systems and naval bases.

Sankei Shimbun (Japan) quotes the US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter: “China is a primarily responsible for North Korea's current actions. It covers up the dangerous behaviour of this country”. It presents readers with the idea that Beijing is engaged in an obvious plot. Having been on the receiving end of criticism from Washington for its great-power policy, it has decided respond in this way. As proof, the Japanese refer to Chosun Ilbo, which reported that, according to a former employee of the United States Defense Intelligence Agency, Bruce Vector, whose opinion was published on September 1, the North Korean rocket is an exact copy of the Chinese Tszyuylan-1 two-stage solid-propellant ballistic missile, which is designed to be placed on submarines.

Giving a lecture at the Seoul National University, the United States Deputy Secretary of State, Tony Blinken, also announced that the North Korean economy can not be discussed without mentioning China. Pyongyang is totally dependent on cooperation with Beijing, so China is particularly responsible for the implementation of sanctions against North Korea.

The goal of such accusations is to force China to be “more constructive.” Meanwhile, Chinese politicians constantly state that the Nuclear Issue on the Korean Peninsula is not caused by Beijing's actions, and China cannot wave a magic wand and resolve the situation. The roots of the issue stem from conflicts between the USA and North Korea, and it is America who should demonstrate a constructive approach. On September 12, 2016, China's Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying, noted that the core of the Nuclear Issue on the Korean Peninsula is in the conflict between the USA and North Korea, and it is America who should take responsibility. “We once again call upon all the parties to look at the overall situation, to act with caution, to avoid mutual provocations, as well as to jointly promote denuclearization, and to make real efforts to achieve peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula”, said the Chinese diplomat, noting that the current situation is testament to the real importance and urgency of returning to the six-party negotiations as soon as possible.

On September 14, 2016, American suggestions that China should actively participate in isolating North Korea were rejected in Renmin Ribao Newspaper (China). The newspaper states that the prime responsibility for the current situation cannot be placed on North Korea, but on the United States. On September 21, in his speech at the UN, the Prime Minister of China, Li Keqiang, also did not mention sanctions.

On November 2, 2016, Hua Chunying once again announced that it is not possible to achieve the fundamental solution of the Nuclear Issue on the Korean Peninsula by sanctions and pressure alone. Commenting on the recent meeting of the heads of delegations from the USA and the Republic of Korea at the six-party negotiations, during which there were repeated calls to tighten sanctions and increase pressure against North Korea in the hope that the new resolution of the UN Security Council would introduce the forced restriction of North Korean coal exports, Hua Chunying said that the UN Security Council was considering and discussing the North Korean nuclear issue. However, a substantial part of UN Security Council Resolution 2270 refers to the need to resume the six-party negotiations and to seek to reduce tension in North-East Asia via political and diplomatic means. This is how a meaningful solution to the North Korean nuclear issue can be found.

Two days later, on November 4, she stated that the deployment of the US Missile Defense System on the Korean Peninsula would undermine the strategic balance of forces in the region, and Beijing reserves the right to take the necessary measures to protect its own safety. The actions of the USA run contrary to the efforts to ensure peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, said Hua Chunying, calling on relevant parties to take China's legitimate concerns into account.

The heart of China's policy is both the THAAD issue (seen by China as aimed at containing its missile capabilities) and the broader perception that US military preparations against North Korea are actually directed against China. As a result, despite a number of serious differences between the countries, relations between Beijing and Pyongyang are based on the principle of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend". It is easier to support North Korea, rather than risking more serious consequences that may occur if it were pressed too hard. China's willingness to investigate illegal trade links between a number of Chinese companies and North Korea shows that "the window is not completely closed", and it can be seen as an attempt to weaken US efforts to impose sanctions against Chinese companies that do legal business with North Korea.

China and North Korea are simultaneously expanding economic cooperation despite the effects of international sanctions. According to the Rodong Sinmun newspaper, the third meeting of the Intergovernmental Commission of North Korea and China was held in Pyongyang on October 25 where border issues were discussed. The Chinese party headed by the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs – Liu Zhenmin, and the North Korean – the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs – Pak Myong-guk. Organising a new border crossing was discussed as a bridge between Sinuiju city (North Korea) and Hunchun city (China) was built this September. In addition, in the near future a bridge between Sinuiju city and Dandong city (China) will be opened.

Besides, the trade turnover between North Korea and China in the third quarter of this year increased by 3.4% compared to the same period of last year. The Chinese are building new warehouses and offices in the Rason Special Economic Zone which means an inflow of investments. The import of cars from North Korea into China increased sharply.

The import of Chinese rice also increased. According to the Customs Administration of China, in September 2016 18,477 tons of grain crops were delivered from China to North Korea. This is 2.7 times higher than in August, and 6 times higher than last September. In September, 16

thousand tons of rice were imported (2 thousand tons more than from January to August). Although South Korean experts explain this fact by the decision made by the North Korean leadership to stabilize prices for rice, as rice stocks in the past year have worn thin, any fact related to North Korea has been solely considered a sign of imminent starvation and collapse for some time now.

In general, while one party is accusing the other and bearing its weapons, the other is looking for ways to resolve the issue, which clearly shows who could encourage dialogue but does not want to do so.