

CHINA'S COMPLICITY IN NORTH KOREA'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM: HENRY KISSINGER FOR THE DEFENSE

Henry Kissinger is the brilliant archetype of an American foreign policy realist. He is also the co-architect, with Richard Nixon, of the United States' China policy, and has been the most articulate and devoted defender of that policy over the ensuing four decades. As a perennial adviser to government leaders in both Washington and Beijing, his unique experience and insights have earned him the world's respect as the foremost authority on China-U.S. relations. Having started his career as an expert on nuclear weapons and foreign policy, he has taken a special interest in, and expressed special concerns regarding, North Korea's nuclear program. He has returned to the subject frequently in his writings, speeches, and interviews for more than twenty years but has been bedeviled by the role China has played in Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs. He has struggled to reconcile four tenets of his thinking: (1) North Korea's programs threaten China's strategic security interests at least as much as those of other countries in the region; (2) Beijing therefore shares others' concerns about those programs; (3) China has unique economic, political, and diplomatic leverage over the policies of the North Korean regime; (4) China has generally declined to use that leverage to influence Pyongyang's behavior. This article addresses Kissinger's efforts to defend China's posture by offering a series of often inconsistent and contradictory rationales that fall short of the intellectual rigor and strategic coherence that characterizes his work in other policy areas.

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No one in America's foreign policy establishment has been as consistent, persistent, and even prescient in identifying the threat to international peace and security posed by North Korea's nuclear weapons program as Henry Kissinger. However, except for the persistence part, the same cannot be said for his unrelenting and misguided defense of China's support for that dangerous program over the past two decades. In his latest book, *On China*, Kissinger manifests what can fairly be described as pervasive and longstanding credulity regarding China's regional and global rise and its intentions toward the United States. In explaining Beijing's attitudes regarding cooperation with Washington on critical international security concerns, he wrote earlier: "The issue of nuclear weapons in North Korea is an important test case."¹ Kissinger correctly outlines the right standard for judging China, but for almost twenty

years he has struggled to avoid following the facts to their logical but painful conclusion: China is a major part of the problem, not part of the solution.

Having first made his mark in national security affairs with his book *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*, Kissinger's views on the dangers of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in regimes like North Korea's carry great intellectual authority:

The spread of these weapons into hands not restrained by the historical and political considerations of the major states augurs a world of devastation and human loss without precedent even in our age of genocidal killings.²

It is therefore striking that in the 530 pages of Kissinger's memoir he devotes little more than a paragraph to Beijing's complicity in North Korea's development of a nuclear weapons program and the missile technology

¹ "China: Containment Won't Work," Henry A. Kissinger, *The Washington Post*, June 13, 2005.

² Kissinger, Henry, *On China*, (New York, The Penguin Press, 2011), 496.

to deliver them. He first provides an apt context:

[T]he experience with the ‘private’ proliferation network of apparently friendly Pakistan with North Korea, Libya, and Iran demonstrates the vast consequences to the international order of the spread of nuclear weapons, even when the proliferating country does not meet the formal criteria of a rogue state.³

While indirectly, but correctly, criticizing the Pakistani government’s role, Kissinger neglects to mention that the original “proliferating country” and the source of Pakistan’s own nuclear know-how was in fact China. Along with Pakistani protégé A.Q. Kahn, Beijing helped disseminate ballistic missile and nuclear technology directly to North Korea whose government “meets every definition of a rogue regime.”⁴ Pyongyang has proceeded to further spread these lethal technologies to other anti-Western “rogue states.” Moreover, it has often transported the materials through China, which has proven to be both a proliferator in its own right and a proliferator of proliferators.

Kissinger also fails to note Beijing’s critical diplomatic contribution to the successful development of Pyongyang’s nuclear and missile program. China has never wavered from its support of North Korea, which it has called its Communist “little brother . . . as close as the lips and the teeth.” It joined the North in the Korean War against South Korea and the United States, earning United Nations condemnation for their joint “aggression.”⁵ In every available forum--the United Nations, bilateral and trilateral meetings, multilateral conferences, and the endless Six-Party Talks--China has unfailingly shielded North Korea from international pressure to halt and abandon its nuclear weapons program. Beijing weakened the 2006 and 2009 Security Council resolutions condemning North Korea’s nuclear tests and has consistently failed to enforce them. It has also protected

³ Ibid. (emphasis added).

⁴ “America’s Assignment: What will we face in the next four years?”, Henry A. Kissinger, *Newsweek*, November 8, 2004.

⁵ In his meeting with Mao, Kissinger proposed that the UN censure be rescinded: “[T]hat was a long time ago, and our perception has changed . . . we shouldn’t change the UN resolution?” Mao declined the offer: “We have never put forward that request. We have indeed committed aggression . . . I consider that the greatest honor.” Kissinger, *On China*, 311.

Pyongyang from meaningful sanctions for its repeated acts of aggression against South Korea such as the sinking of the frigate *Cheonan*, which caused the deaths of forty-seven South Korean sailors, and the shelling of Yeonpyeong island which killed three civilians.

Almost in parallel with China’s enabling stance toward Pyongyang, Kissinger, in every public and private venue where he has had a voice over the decades, has consistently defended or excused Beijing’s indulgence of North Korea’s dangerous and often criminal behavior. In *On China*, the hardheaded pragmatic “realist” matter-of-factly offers this sweeping dismissal of China’s responsibility for the emergence of the international crisis:

For the first ten years of North Korea’s nuclear program, China took the position that it was a matter for the United States and North Korea to settle between themselves . . . it was chiefly up to the United States to provide [North Korea] with the requisite sense of security to substitute for nuclear weapons.⁶

Kissinger offers no judgment on the moral or strategic merit of China’s adamant position or its irresponsibility in fostering the emergence of a threat of “devastation and human loss without precedent.” According to Kissinger, Beijing eventually awoke to the danger: “With the passage of time it became obvious that nuclear proliferation into North Korea would sooner or later affect China’s security.”⁷ The fact that over that first decade it had already impacted the security of South Korea, Japan, the United States, and other states was of no consequence to China--nor, apparently, was China’s untroubled tolerance of the threat to others a matter of great concern to Kissinger. Moreover, according to his argument, it was not North Korea’s nuclear weapons that eventually aroused China’s concern, but the prospect that others would follow its example:

If North Korea were to be accepted as a nuclear power, it is highly likely that Japan and South Korea and possibly other Asian countries such as Vietnam and Indonesia, would ultimately also join the nuclear club, altering the strategic landscape of Asia. China’s leaders oppose such an outcome.⁸

⁶ Ibid., 496 (emphasis added).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

Yet, even with its supposedly belated recognition of the danger, China's substantive posture has not changed and Kissinger once again lets Beijing off the hook for its continued inaction: "China fears a catastrophic collapse of North Korea, since that could re-create at its borders the very conditions it fought to prevent sixty years ago."⁹ Kissinger has never explained how Pyongyang's striking a lucrative financial deal with the West, trading nuclear weapons for massive economic and technological aid and security guarantees, would jeopardize the regime rather than solidify its hold on power. The claim absurdly seems to suggest that the starving North Korean population hungers more for nuclear weapons and missiles than for rice and fish. Kissinger has offered these arguments and other non-sequiturs on numerous occasions over the years in a continuing attempt to justify or explain China's complicity.

1994

In his 1994 memoir, Kissinger wrote that the danger posed by North Korea's nuclear program was that Japan would either develop its own weapons program or "seek to suppress North Korea's."¹⁰ In an April interview publicizing his book on a Washington, D.C. radio program, Kissinger said the acquisition of nuclear weapons served to enhance North Korea's regional and international stature:

North Korea cannot presently threaten either of its two neighbors, China or South Korea. But if it gets nuclear weapons, it enters into a new category of influence. If it proliferates these weapons it becomes a threat to the United States. Actually, North Korea is a bigger threat to China than to us.¹¹

The interviewer asked whether the United States needed China to negotiate with North Korea. Kissinger responded: "Absolutely, we cannot do it without China." A former student of Kissinger's called in to ask why, if North Korea's nuclear program is so clearly adverse to China's interest, it was doing nothing to stop it. Kissinger then gave a multi-faceted response that introduced

several arguments he had not made previously and has for the most part not made since: (a) "The Chinese are as ambivalent as everybody is." (b) "They're afraid that if they bring too much pressure, the North Koreans may attack SK to escape out of this dilemma before their military forces run down." (c) "They'd prefer to wait until Kim Il Sung dies before they use their full influence." (d) "Maybe the Chinese are acting as they are because they figure we will take care of the problem and they can take a free ride." Kissinger said he himself once believed the United States should unilaterally "knock out the nuclear capability of NK, if necessary even by aerial strikes." He now thought it would be "too dangerous for us to do this alone given the general mentality that now exists in Washington and unwillingness to support it." He said he now believed we should tell China "we are willing to go as far as you are willing to go in doing away with the nuclear capability . . . including a blockade and total economic isolation."¹²

Three months after that radio exchange, Kissinger wrote an op-ed expressing mild exasperation at the failure of multiparty negotiations on North Korea's nuclear program. While he now conceded the oddity that China's behavior seemed contrary to its own presumed interests, at least as he defined them, he still refused to single China out for criticism, instead painting with a broader brush that swept in two American allies:

Though China, Japan and South Korea may be thought to have even more to lose from a nuclear North Korea than the United States, they seem not to perceive their risks in practice.¹³

Kissinger then offered yet another new explanation of China's motivation, for the first time acknowledging not simply that Beijing was insufficiently concerned about Pyongyang's nuclear project, but that it actually perceived some advantage in it. But, again, he placed Beijing in the company of Tokyo: "China and Japan prefer a divided Korea and might see in a modest North Korean nuclear capability a means to guarantee it."¹⁴ Kissinger concluded his analysis by tempering the im-

⁹ Ibid., 497.

¹⁰ Kissinger, Henry, *Diplomacy*, (New York, Simon & Shuster, 1994), 827.

¹¹ The Diane Rehm Show, Interview with Henry Kissinger, WAMU-FM, April 7, 1994.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ "No Compromise, but a Rollback," Henry A. Kissinger, *The Washington Post*, July 6, 1994.

¹⁴ Ibid. (emphasis added).

plied criticism of China he had made on the radio program, wrapping it in a blanket indictment of the three Asian governments:

These countries have been taking a free ride, hoping that America would assume the risks for solving their problems, while being prepared to blame us for an unsatisfactory outcome.¹⁵

Two days after Kissinger's article appeared, and three months to the day after Kissinger's remarkable radio interview, Kim Il-sung died. There has been no perceptible change in China's policy toward North Korea in the years since.

Former President Richard Nixon, Kissinger's senior partner in China realism, was less reticent than his former national security adviser and secretary of state in identifying Beijing as the decisive player in the nuclear drama, beyond being simply a negotiating partner. In his competing book published the same year as Kissinger's, Nixon wrote: "China is the only country that possesses the necessary leverage to rein in North Korea's ominous nuclear weapons program."¹⁶ But he also cautioned that China's support for North Korea had the potential to be intentionally adversarial to U.S. interests:

"We should not underestimate China's ability to disrupt our interests around the world if our relationship becomes belligerent rather than cooperative."¹⁷

2003

Almost a decade later, however, Kissinger was still contending that China shared other nations' concerns about North Korea's nuclear program because "it understands that a permanent Korean crisis would complicate its own domestic reform and political consolidation at a most sensitive time."¹⁸ Kissinger wrote that China wanted to ensure the successful hosting of the Beijing Olympics in 2008 and the World Exposition in Shanghai in 2010:

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Nixon, Richard, *Beyond Peace*, (New York, Random House, 1994), 123 (emphasis added).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ "The Six-Power Route to Resolution," Henry A. Kissinger, *The Washington Post*, August 18, 2003.

Symbols of national consolidation and reform after decades of exertion and turmoil, these projects are threatened by protracted crisis and strategic uncertainty at China's borders, which also risk straining China's relationship with the United States. China's conduct has left little doubt that it seeks a resolution, and urgently. It has declared a North Korean nuclear military program unacceptable and has been the driving force in assembling the new forum.¹⁹

That new forum was the Six-Party talks, which Kissinger saw as "a signal achievement for American diplomacy."²⁰ Denied its goal of bipartisan talks with Washington, Kissinger argued, Pyongyang's options to extract unconditional Western concessions would be limited. "Its most effective bargaining chip is the threat of its collapse -- a strategy that has its limits."²¹ In fact, however, that chip has proved to have unlimited potency, having been played highly successfully, and repeatedly over the decade—by China itself. Kissinger implicitly concedes as much when he states in the same article:

But it can help produce such an outcome only within a political framework that ends Pyongyang's nuclear program without a political collapse. At a minimum, China seeks some control over the political evolution in North Korea.²²

To enlist Chinese cooperation, Kissinger argues, America's part of the deal is "to desist from active measures to destabilize or overthrow the North Korean regime."²³ The United States has upheld its end of the bargain.

2004

The following January, Kissinger reiterated that "eliminating North Korea's nuclear program is overwhelmingly in the Chinese interest. They don't want nuclear weapons on their borders."²⁴ Later that year, he wrote again to sound the alarm regarding "the so-called 'private' distribution of Pakistan's nuclear technology to other countries" and to warn that "this may be the last moment to keep proliferation from spinning out of

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴

control.”²⁵ Specifically, he said “North Korea . . . might find the temptation to trade nuclear material for foreign exchange irresistible.”²⁶ But even without proliferation, he saw Pyongyang’s purpose as ominous:

North Korea . . . seeks . . . a shield behind which it can conduct the revolutionary aspects of its foreign policy while reducing the risk of intervention by great powers.²⁷

Kissinger writes that the response to the growing threat has been tepid and divided, but he again refuses to identify China as the main offender:

The international community has been torn between premonition of nuclear catastrophe and the escapism of treating warnings about proliferation as an example of American bellicosity.²⁸

Without indicating whether he believes China shares that view, he asserts:

[The] special political and strategic objectives . . . China has . . . in the back of its mind [are] concern about nuclear weapons in all of Korea and the deployment of forces in North Korea in case of unification.²⁹

Put another way, even assuming China cares about a nuclear North Korea, it opposes, even more, a unified non-Communist Korea.

2005

The following year, Kissinger again addressed U.S.-China relations and started by objecting to some public criticism of Beijing’s policies, “much of it in a tone implying China is on some sort of probation.”³⁰ He argued that “China, in its own interest, is seeking cooperation with the United States for many reasons.”

³¹ Kissinger publicly recognized for the first time that

²⁵ “America’s Assignment: What will we face in the next four years?” Henry A. Kissinger, *Newsweek*, November 8, 2004.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ “China: Containment Won’t Work,” Henry A. Kissinger, *The Washington Post*, June 13, 2005.

³¹ *Ibid.*

“The issue of nuclear weapons in North Korea is an important test case.”³² He also acknowledged criticism of China’s role and attempted to confront it head-on.

[North Korea] is often presented as an example of China’s failure to fulfill all its possibilities. But anyone familiar with Chinese conduct over the past decade knows that China has come a long way in defining a parallel interest with respect to doing away with the nuclear arsenal in North Korea.³³

It was a curious way of describing China’s behavior vis a vis Pyongyang’s nuclear adamancy over the previous ten years; its “parallel interest” consisted of non-judgmental lip service that continued to equate the North’s nuclear program with American military support for South Korea. Kissinger neatly turned U.S. implied criticism of China back on Washington, suggesting it was somehow rash and unfair when compared to Beijing’s more restrained approach: “[China’s] patience in dealing with the problem is grating on some U.S. policymakers.”³⁴ Kissinger informed his American audience of China’s geopolitical predicament:

[I]t partly reflects the reality that the North Korean problem is more complex for China than for the United States. America concentrates on nuclear weapons in North Korea; China is worried about the potential for chaos along its borders.³⁵

Kissinger saw a way to bridge the gap between U.S. and Chinese interests: “These concerns are not incompatible; they may require enlarging the framework of discussions from North Korea to Northeast Asia.”³⁶ But multilateralization of the issues was hardly a new idea, coming as it did more than two years into the Six-Party Talks. Nor does Kissinger explain what issues the broader framework would encompass. Uniquely to this opinion piece, Kissinger felt compelled to make a personal disclosure regarding his own financial and professional interests in China:

I must point out that the consulting company I chair advises clients with business interests around the world, includ-

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

ing China. Also, in early May I spent a week in China, much of it as a guest of the government.³⁷

2006

After the passage of yet another year of fruitless negotiations in the Six-Party Talks, Kissinger again addressed North Korea's nuclear program: "The world is faced with the nightmarish prospect that nuclear weapons will become a standard part of national armament and wind up in terrorist hands."³⁸ Without naming names, let alone singling out China, Kissinger starkly warned of the worsening situation:

A failed diplomacy would leave us with a choice between the use of force or a world where restraint has been eroded by the inability or unwillingness of countries that have the most to lose to restrain defiant fanatics.³⁹

Kissinger decried "North Korea's tactic of stringing out the period between each session, perhaps to gain time for strengthening its nuclear arsenal."⁴⁰ He saw an additional North Korean objective:

What Pyongyang is attempting to achieve . . . is a separate negotiation with Washington outside the six-party framework, which would prevent other parties in the Beijing process from undertaking joint responsibilities.⁴¹

Kissinger described the potential adverse consequences if North Korea were to succeed in its negotiating strategy:

If bilateral talks replaced the six-party forum, some of America's present partners might choose to place the onus for breaking every deadlock on Washington, in effect isolating the United States.⁴²

But in fact it was China which served as North Korea's advocate for that bilateral approach. Kissinger then came as close as he seemed able in identifying Beijing as part of the problem rather than part of the solution:

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ "A Nuclear Test for Diplomacy," Henry A. Kissinger, *The Washington Post*, May 16, 2006.

³⁹ Ibid. (Emphasis added.)

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid. (Emphasis added.)

⁴² Ibid.

The expectation that China is so reluctant to see nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula -- and therefore ultimately in Japan -- that it will sooner or later bring the needed pressure on North Korea has so far been disappointed.⁴³

But Kissinger then followed that up by issuing his now-ritualistic rationale for Chinese behavior:

This is because China has not only military concerns but also strategic objectives on the Korean Peninsula. It will try to avoid an outcome in Korea that leads to the sudden collapse of an ally, producing a flood of Korean refugees into China as well as turmoil on its borders.⁴⁴

Escalating his concern, Kissinger writes that North Korea's "capacity for procrastination and obfuscation" presents a crisis "similar to what the world faced in 1938 and at the beginning of the Cold War" and argues (as he had in his 1994 radio interview) that the threat to use force should not be taken off the table:

The failure of that test in 1938 produced a catastrophic war; the ability to master it in the immediate aftermath of World War II led to victory without war.⁴⁵

As if to validate Kissinger's dramatic warning, North Korea detonated its first nuclear device on October 9, 2006, prompting Kissinger to return to the op-ed pages. He first described the obstacle to progress in negotiating with Pyongyang:

[The] regime . . . has an extremely limited national interest - if any - in giving up a program it has pursued for two decades or longer while subjecting its population to extreme deprivation and at times starvation.⁴⁶

He then reiterated his explanation of China's role in light of North Korea's action:

Until the North Korean nuclear explosion, China was re-

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ "Denuclearizing North Korea: Diplomacy Has to Keep Up the Pressure on Pyongyang and Avoid the Side Issues," Henry A. Kissinger, *The Washington Post*, November 12, 2006.

luctant to press North Korea, not, as some allege, because it is indifferent to North Korean acquisition of nuclear weapons or sees some benefit in American discomfiture.⁴⁷

Kissinger's explanation for China's pre-explosion attitude was the familiar one:

Rather, it was because China has interests in Northeast Asia that go beyond the denuclearization of North Korea. The Korean Peninsula has been an invasion route to China for centuries. Chaos along its borders and floods of refugees on its territory have unique significance for China.

China has been, in effect, insisting on a recognition of these concerns. But Kissinger declines to explain which nation, exactly, might be planning to utilize the "invasion route" into China or why "chaos" and "floods of refugees" would ensue from Pyongyang's entering into a lucrative deal to give up its nuclear program. He urges the parties:

[M]aintain the sanctions that helped bring a breakthrough and [do] not repeat the mistake of the Korean and Vietnamese wars of suspending pressures as an entrance price into negotiations.⁴⁸

Kissinger repeats his oft-stated warning that the multinational effort to stop North Korea's nuclear program is "imperative for world peace" and that if it cannot prevail "in the face of the defiance of a country with few resources and a relatively small population, then appeals for diplomacy will become increasingly empty."⁴⁹

Kissinger does not inform his readers of how China's attitude toward North Korea after the nuclear detonation will differ from its pre-explosion tolerance. He had already asserted a year earlier that after the first decade of Chinese indulgence, Beijing was now acting "in parallel" with the United States, whose concern about the nuclear threat it supposedly shared. Each successive Chinese epiphany and putative turning-point eventually proved to be as illusory as its predecessor, but Kissinger's assurances of Chinese sincerity and good intentions remained immutable.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

2009

The endless negotiations on North Korea's nuclear program continued through the 2008 election and Kissinger was moved to advise the new administration on the perils it faced:

In a world of multiplying nuclear weapons states, it would be unreasonable to expect that those arsenals will never be used or never fall into the hands of rogue organizations.⁵⁰

Kissinger made clear that time was quickly running out: "The next (literally) few years will be the last opportunity to achieve an enforceable restraint."⁵¹ At some point, Kissinger admonished, fruitless negotiations should not be allowed to continue: "North Korea has recently voided all concessions it made in six years of talks. It cannot be permitted to sell the same concessions over and over again."⁵² Kissinger seemed to describe a reverse David-and-Goliath situation with severe consequences for the world:

If the United States, China, Japan, South Korea and Russia cannot achieve an enforceable restraint vis-à-vis a country with next to no impact on international trade and no resources needed by anyone, the phrase "world community" will become empty.⁵³

Kissinger does not carry this analysis to the point of examining which government was exhibiting the least concern regarding the viability of the "world community." But in several of his other writings, including *On China*, he advances Beijing's view that it has no vested interest in honoring, or being judged by, the norms of an international system that the People's Republic had no part in creating. As shown earlier, China is also the leading proponent of the approach Kissinger condemns in this statement:

Since the Korean nuclear program threatens . . . all neighbors of North Korea more than it does the United States, calls to place the emphasis on bilateral Korean-U.S. talks amount

⁵⁰ "Obama's Foreign Policy Challenge," Henry A. Kissinger, *The Washington Post*, April 22, 2009.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

to a call for isolating the United States.”⁵⁴

Following his well-established pattern, Kissinger does not identify the source of those unhelpful “calls,” thereby continuing to insulate China from criticism for its protection of Pyongyang.

Just three months later, Kissinger penned yet another article expressing his deepening concern about North Korea’s nuclear program:

[T]he signal (and probably sole) achievement of their rule, for which they have obliged their population to accept a form of oppression and exploitation unprecedented even in this period of totalitarianism.⁵⁵

Kissinger’s tone became increasingly desperate as the diminishing prospect of endless talks ever halting Pyongyang’s inexorable movement toward achieving the status of a nuclear power:

[W]ith North Korea kicking over all previous agreements repeatedly, the time has come that process has overwhelmed substance. The negotiating process thereby ran the risk of legitimizing North Korea’s nuclear program by enabling Pyongyang to establish a *fait accompli* by means of diplomacy. That point is fast approaching if it has not already been reached.⁵⁶

Kissinger finally seemed prepared to distinguish China as more than just another member of the regional grouping of countries with equal concerns and equal responsibilities vis a vis a nuclear armed North Korea. He observed that ending the North Korean nuclear program “by a maximum deployment of pressures . . . requires the active participation of Korea’s neighbors, especially China.”⁵⁷ But he quickly diluted the suggestion of a Sino-centric focus by pivoting to a broader regional scenario:

It is not enough to demand unstated pressures from other affected countries, especially China. A concept for the political evolution of Northeast Asia is urgently needed.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ “North Korea’s Nuclear Challenge,” Henry A. Kissinger, *International Herald Tribune*, June 4, 2009.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid. (Emphasis added.)

Kissinger never defined what this amorphous “political evolution” entails. And he returned, inevitably, to a full-throated defense of China’s hands-off approach to North Korea:

Too much of the commentary on the current crisis has concerned the *deus ex machina* of Chinese pressures on North Korea and complaints that Beijing has not implemented its full arsenal of possibilities. But for China, the issue is not so much a negotiating position as concern about its consequences.

China faces challenges perhaps even more complex than America’s. If present trends continue, and if North Korea manages to maintain its nuclear capability through the inability of the parties to bring matters to a head, the proliferation of nuclear weapons throughout Northeast Asia and the Middle East becomes probable. China will then face the prospect of nuclear weapons in all surrounding Asian states and an unmanageable nuclear-armed regime in Pyongyang.⁵⁹

But despite having described the putative dangers a nuclear North Korea presents for China, Kissinger nonetheless explained again why the rest of the world should understand and excuse Chinese inaction:

But if China exercises the full panoply of its pressures without an accord with America and an understanding with the other parties, it has reason to fear chaos along its borders at or close to the traditional invasion routes of China.⁶⁰

Kissinger’s reference to “an accord with America” raises again his earlier references to a “Northeast Asia” solution but he never quite explains what such an arrangement would involve beyond giving Pyongyang security guarantees and economic aid. He also fails again to enlighten his readers on precisely who would take advantage of those “traditional invasion routes”: North Korea? South Korea? Japan? The United States? Or perhaps that flood of refugees escaping from the new infusion of massive Western food, energy, and medical supplies extracted in exchange for abandonment of the nuclear program?

There is a more plausible explanation of Chinese motivation, and that is the impact of a nuclear-armed North Korea on America’s force posture and security

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

thinking. Kissinger describes it well, as a hypothetical situation rather than present reality, and seems not to grasp its import as a factor in Chinese motivation:

[A] North Korean nuclear program would require a re-consideration of current U.S strategic planning. More emphasis would need to be given to missile defense. It would be essential to redesign the American deterrent strategy in a world of multiple nuclear powers -- a challenge unprecedented in our experience.⁶¹

It appears not to have occurred to America's greatest self-proclaimed practitioner of Realpolitik⁶² that China might see it in its own interest to complicate and obstruct

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Instead of confronting that likely reality, Kissinger's prescription for a solution required a "sensitive, thoughtful dialogue with China, rather than peremptory demands."⁶³

Six months later, Kissinger addressed the North Korea nuclear issue yet again and reviewed the negotiating process:

Pyongyang argues that its security concerns must be met first, that the principal threat to its security comes from the United States and that it therefore must gain special assurances from Washington before entering actual negotiations. But what bilateral assurances could possibly serve this purpose?⁶⁴

That North Korean argument is identical to the one Kissinger gave in *On China* to explain China's posture of passivity for the "first decade of North Korea's nuclear program." Interestingly, Kissinger did not find the North Koreans' rationale as objectionable when it came from the Chinese on their ally's behalf. This time

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Discussing *On China* in a recent interview, Kissinger stated: "Let me say a word about 'Realpolitik' which is a term I never use. It's a term my critics use when they want to say 'watch out, he's a German, it's not an American concept.'" C-Span, Afterwords, Monica Crowley interview with Henry Kissinger, June 1, 2011.

⁶³ "North Korea's Nuclear Challenge," Henry A. Kissinger, *International Herald Tribune*, June 4, 2009.

⁶⁴ "How to Make Progress on North Korea," Henry A. Kissinger, *The Washington Post*, December 18, 2009.

he manages to find a basis to distinguish the Chinese and North Korean negotiating postures but the bottom line is that the West should not press China to do more to restrain Pyongyang:

The position of China is more complex. It has strongly condemned Pyongyang's nuclear testing. But it is more sensitive than its partners to the danger of destabilizing the political structure of North Korea. Great respect must be paid to Chinese views on a matter so close to its borders and directly affecting its interests.⁶⁵

Kissinger repeats his warning of the urgency of the situation, apparently clinging to the hope that it is still retrievable despite the number of previous occasions when he described it as in extremis:

The protracted process of opening negotiations runs the risk of becoming a palliative for substance. The test is substantive progress on the key issue: the elimination of a nuclear weapons capability. In view of the continuing technological progress in Pyongyang, which claims to have added a nuclear enrichment facility to its plutonium program, time is of the essence.⁶⁶

In this article, Kissinger does advance a fascinating perspective he had not offered previously: "In the end, the greatest risk to Pyongyang is not foreign aggression but internal collapse caused by its excessive ambitions."⁶⁷ By "foreign aggression," Kissinger presumably means any military conflict with an external power, which Pyongyang would call aggression no matter who fired the first shot and regardless of any U.S. or other legal justification based on preemptive self-defense. So, if Kissinger is indeed not being legalistic, he is effectively saying two important things in this statement. First, he believes Washington and its allies have almost certainly ruled out a military operation to eliminate North Korea's nuclear weapons, contrary to his own recommendation that force should remain on the table.

The second point, however, is pregnant with meaning for his twenty-year defense of China's position on Pyongyang's nuclear project. The one constant

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid. (Presumably, the term "palliative" referred to the lack of "substance.")

⁶⁷ Ibid.

strand in the variegated arguments Kissinger has made to explain and excuse China's hands-off approach was that it somehow feared internal regime collapse—and the much-conjured refugee flow—if North Korea gave up its nuclear weapons. That would come about, supposedly, if China used its economic leverage to pressure North Korea to come to terms with denuclearization and the North refused, thereby causing famine, panic, and pestilence. Since regime change would almost certainly follow in that scenario, it seems highly unlikely that Pyongyang would not yield to its ally and protector to avoid that result. The other, even more implausible, sequence of events, dismissed earlier in this paper, is that the population of North Korea would so object to losing its status as a nuclear power, despite the massive in-flow of economic aid, that it would rise up against its faithless government for making such a deal or flee into China.

But now Kissinger seems to be making quite the opposite argument—i.e. that the regime would collapse not by eliminating its nuclear program but by continuing it. That can be the only meaning of “internal collapse caused by its excessive ambitions” once war with foreign powers is ruled out. In other words, Kissinger now seems to be asserting, the government is totally bankrupting itself and/or the Korean population is nearing the point of desperation. Under this scenario, Pyongyang's grossly wasteful diversion of the nation's resources from even minimal survival consumption levels to fund the reckless nuclear and missile program will bring its demise. If that is indeed Kissinger's new argument, it directly undermines two decades of excuses China has been making for doing nothing to stop Pyongyang—and, of course, Kissinger's own willingness over that long period to represent China's position as legitimate and valid.

Kissinger expresses exasperation with Pyongyang's ongoing, and successful, strategy of delay, and the international community's seeming willingness to tolerate it indefinitely:

It is time to face realities. This is the 15th year during which the United States has sought to end North Korea's nuclear program through negotiations. These have been conducted in two-party and six-party forums. The result was the same, whatever the framework. In their course, Pyongyang

has mothballed its nuclear facilities twice. Each time it ended the moratorium unilaterally. Twice it has tested nuclear explosions and long-range missiles during recesses of negotiations. If this pattern persists, diplomacy will turn into a means of legitimizing proliferation rather than arresting it.⁶⁸

Kissinger closes his article with this call for immediate, but undefined, action against North Korea:

No additional reconnaissance is needed about Pyongyang's intentions: The six-party forum provides adequate opportunity for dealing with the issues. The famous dictum of Napoleon is apposite: “If you want to take Vienna, take Vienna.”⁶⁹

Yet, over the nearly twenty years that North Korea has been developing and testing these weapons and related missile systems, Kissinger has not explicitly called on China to do anything differently from what it has been doing all along—virtually nothing—to curtail Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions. He merely advocates more “Sino-American dialogue and . . . Six Party Talks.”⁷⁰ Kissinger's analysis of the Chinese position seems oblivious to the reality that if Beijing actually opposed North Korea's nuclear program, American prodding and cajoling would be unnecessary since China has never been reticent about acting decisively on security concerns near its borders.

It is long past time to apply Kissinger's clear-headed admonition about North Korea to China's own behavior: “No additional reconnaissance is needed about [Beijing's] intentions.” An honest diplomatic history of this period will show that (a) China knowingly, and for its own purposes, enabled North Korea's emergence as a nuclear power and WMD proliferator, and (b) the indulgence of Kissinger and others in America's bipartisan foreign policy establishment enabled China to succeed in that supportive role. In a recent address, Kissinger repeated his mantra that “China cannot possibly want a nuclear Korea, or Vietnam for that matter, at its borders.”⁷¹ But the evidence indicates, regarding Ko-

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Kissinger, *On China*, 497.

⁷¹ Kissinger, Henry, “Power Shifts and Security,” (Lecture, International Institute for Strategic Studies, Geneva, Switzerland, September 10, 2010).

rea, that that is exactly what China wanted and expected all along. The twenty-year nuclear saga has advanced China's foreign policy and national security objectives in several important ways:

First, it coerced massive Western aid that helped keep in power a close Communist ally and prevented a unified, democratic Korea.

Second, it won China enormous prestige as "a responsible international stakeholder" working within the Six-Party Talks, ostensibly to contain North Korea's nuclear activities.

Third, it greatly enhanced Beijing's negotiating leverage with Washington on trade imbalances, currency manipulation, human rights violations, and Taiwan.

Fourth, it distracted Washington's diplomacy and disrupted its defense planning; diverted attention and resources from Iraq, Afghanistan, and counter-terrorism; and strained the American public's support for overseas commitments.

Fifth, it hindered U.S. counter-proliferation efforts with Iran and spread dangerous technology to other anti-Western regimes and potentially to terrorists.

For decades, Pyongyang and Washington have each relied on Beijing as an indispensable partner in their competing national security objectives--the results are in and they vindicate North Korea's strategy, not the West's. Of course, Kissinger is not alone in averting his gaze from China's subversive efforts on behalf of North Korea's nuclear program. During Jiang Zemin's 1999 visit, President Clinton thanked China for controlling North Korea's nuclear and missile programs. In 2003, President Bush was "heartened" by Jiang's commitment to a nuclear-free peninsula. In 2008, he commended China's "critical leadership role." The Obama administration similarly has bestowed appreciation on China's "constructive" efforts on this issue. So far, no administration has yet demanded that Beijing actually earn that praise by compelling North Korea to eliminate its nuclear program, nor drawn the necessary conclusions about China's regional and global intentions from its refusal to do so.

But it is Kissinger who has chosen repeatedly over the past two decades to defend China's willing complicity as North Korea's missile and nuclear program deepened and expanded, and even as he repeatedly called on "the international community" to take meaningful

steps to halt it. In a remarkable demonstration of cognitive dissonance from a figure known for his intellectual discernment of the most subtle nuances in historical and modern diplomacy, Kissinger adopted a predictable pattern of analysis and advice: (a) He recognized early and addressed often the growing danger of North Korea's nuclear program; (b) he perceived the eventual threat to China as being at least as great as that to other countries; (c) he understood China's unique ability to stop Pyongyang's program, yet (d) he always found explanations—including contradictory ones—for China's protective passivity toward North Korea, and (e) he even mustered, on Beijing's behalf, a degree of indignation when others expressed impatience and mystification by Chinese inaction, criticizing the West for being too "judgmental" and lacking "sensitivity" to China's supposed predicament.

In recent testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta confirmed that China has "clearly assisted" North Korea in its ballistic missile program.⁷² At an East Asia security conference in Washington, Sheila Smith of the Council on Foreign Relations, stated that in light of the Panetta disclosure, "those of us who have long supported policies of engagement with China will have to seriously reconsider our position."⁷³ Kissinger, the foremost exponent of those policies, has given no indication that any such reconsideration is necessary. Nor, despite his long intellectual and rhetorical odyssey simultaneously raising alarms about North Korea's nuclear program while defending China's indulgence of it, does he harbor any doubts regarding China's benign intentions. In what can only be described as massive cognitive dissonance, Kissinger believes China finds Pyongyang's nuclear project "unacceptable"; yet, year after year, decade after decade, Beijing not only accepts, but enables it. It is time for America's leading practitioner of the theology of "realism" in international affairs, to do as he himself advised the world's governments and face reality.

⁷² Testimony of Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, House Armed Services Committee, April 19, 2012.

⁷³ Statement of Sheila Smith at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 26, 2012.