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Why Does China Claim that North Korea's Provocations are "Legitimate Security Concerns?"

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During a United Nations Security Council meeting held on July 13 on the North Korea's test launch of a 15,000km range intercontinental ballistic missile, the Chinese Ambassador to the United Nations, Zhang Jun, stated, "The US and other countries have long regarded the DPRK as a security threat and are obsessed with the sanctions and pressurization, which has put the DPRK under enormous security threat and existential pressure. The DPRK's 'legitimate security concerns' have never been addressed." Ambassador Zhang's assertion presupposes that North Korea is a 'rational organization' and that the cause of North Korea's provocations lies in the hostile policies of external powers, including the United States. It is an unfounded assertion, "putting the cart before the horse." China's position is that North Korea is not bad and that we should sympathize with her and give in to her demand.

North Korea has been arguing that its nuclear development was aimed at acquiring "nuclear deterrence for self-defense." That is, North Korea needs nuclear weapons because South Korea, by carrying out combined military exercises, is colluding with the United States which is bent on attacking North Korea with nuclear weapons. North Korea believes that Libya and Iraq collapsed because they did not have nuclear weapons, and China seems to share a similar stance. However, the underlying reasons for the downfall of these regimes primarily originate from internal repression through fear, economic inability to overcome poverty, and the erosion of legitimacy in maintaining power, while externally their actions challenged the international order based on universal values and norms like liberal democracy and human rights.

The international community's position on the North Korea's nuclear problem is different from China's claim. After North Korea conducted an intercontinental ballistic missile test in 2006, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1695, which urged the international community to impose sanctions on North Korea; the subsequent ten resolutions

that have been adopted to address North Korea's nuclear and missile provocations condemn its actions and include sanctions measures. On August 10, the First Preparatory Committee Meeting for the 11th Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) was held in Vienna, Austria. At this meeting, 74 countries, including the Republic of Korea, France, the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Japan, Switzerland, Finland, Hungary, Poland, Argentina, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Turkey, adopted a joint statement stating that “the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’s (DPRK) continuous development of its unlawful nuclear and ballistic missile programmes, including ballistic missile launches at an unprecedented frequency and in an unprecedented manner since 2022 and the so-called satellite launch using ballistic missile technology, which are in clear violations of multiple United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions.” It went on to state that “We condemn the continued escalatory actions taken by the DPRK through a record number of unlawful ballistic missile launches [...] threatening the safety and sovereignty of neighbouring countries, and undermining regional and international peace and security [...] [We] reaffirm that the DPRK cannot and will never have the status of a nuclear-weapon State in accordance with the NPT.”

Whenever there is a military provocation by North Korea, China, instead of telling North Korea to stop the provocation and accept denuclearization talks, urged South Korea to exercise patience and self-restraint, while criticizing South Korea for taking minimum self-defense measures. In 2017, when the decision was made to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile system to safeguard South Korea against North Korea's nuclear and missile threats, China responded with economic and cultural retaliatory measures such as boycotting South Korean products and banning South Korean TV dramas and music.

China argues that joint ROK-US military exercises provoke North Korea and elevate the regime’s concerns about its security. However, despite the suspension of major joint exercises until mid-2022 following President Trump’s announcement after the Trump-Kim summit in Singapore in June 2018, North Korea persisted in developing nuclear weapons and missiles. Throughout 2022, North Korea conducted a record-breaking total of 40 missile tests, launching 65 missiles. China, along with Russia, has consistently blocked discussions on North Korean provocations at the United Nations Security Council. Despite being a permanent member of the Security Council, China is suspected of obstructing the enforcement of U.N. sanctions on North Korea. Observing China’s stance, it is difficult to dismiss the notion that their intention is not the denuclearization of North Korea, but rather achieving the reunification of the Korean Peninsula under the Communist flag.

China has been insisting on ‘parallel progress’ and ‘dual suspension’ policies as a solution to North Korea's denuclearization. While ‘dual suspension’ indicates the suspension of both the ROK-US joint military exercises and North Korea’s nuclear and missile activities, Pyongyang clearly violated this arrangement, but China has not criticized North Korea for it. Since the primary goal of the ROK-US joint military exercises is to deter and defend against North Korean aggression, the need for such exercises will be reduced if North Korea reduces its conventional threats, including the 1.3 million soldiers and over 7 million reserve troops. China is showing a contradictory posture, ignoring Pyongyang's military threat to South Korea while arguing only for the suspension of the ROK-US joint military exercises.

China lacks an objective stance regarding who disrupts peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. The Armistice Agreement of July 1953 was intended to create a framework for an armistice by specifying the “cessation of hostilities and of all acts of armed force,” but North Korea has violated the Armistice Agreement over 430,000 times since its entry into force up to the present, and also carried out a number of serious provocations that could have escalated into a war. North Korea’s provocations include the 1968 Blue House raid by 31 armed North Korean infiltrators; the seizure of the US Navy intelligence gathering vessel, USS Pueblo in international waters; the infiltration by over 120 armed North Korean commandos in Uljin-Samcheok who massacred dozens of civilians; the 1969 shootdown of a U.S. Navy EC-121 surveillance aircraft over international airspace; the 1976 Panmunjom Axe Murder incident that claimed the lives of two UN-affiliated U.S. officers while overseeing tree-trimming operations in the southern sector of the Joint Security Area (JSA); the deadly 1983 Rangoon bombing in Burma orchestrated by North Korean agents resulting in the deaths of 17 high-ranking South Korean officials, including Foreign Minister Lee Beom-seok; the 1996 Gangneung submarine infiltration incident, during which 26 North Korean special operation forces infiltrated the Gangneung area and killed 18 South Korean military personnel, police officers, and civilians; the 2010 sinking of the ROKS Cheonan corvette in a North Korean torpedo attack, leading to the deaths of 46 South Korean sailors; the 2010 shelling of Yeonpyeong Island resulting in four fatalities; and the 2015 incident in which North Koreans laid wooden box land mines on the southern side of the DMZ, resulting in the maiming of two South Korean soldiers on patrol. China's acknowledgment of North Korea's responsibility in these incidents has been exceedingly rare. China instead advocated "exercising restraint" by both sides. China's "parallel progress" aims to pursue the denuclearization of North Korea and the establishment of a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula simultaneously, yet for a peace regime to be realized, the Armistice must first be upheld. China's adoption of a "bothsides-ism" stance regarding North Korea's overt provocations that directly threaten the Armistice framework is a denial of historical facts.

North Korea's development of nuclear weapons is not aimed at self-defense. North Korea's 2022 adoption of a Nuclear Forces Policy Law stipulates the pre-emptive use of nuclear weapons without being attacked, effectively declaring its intent to use nuclear weapons to attack South Korea, Japan, and the United States.

China does not seem to want to ease North Korea's "legitimate security concerns" but rather has something else in mind. What China really wants is the withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Korea and the dismantlement of the ROK-US alliance under the excuse of North Korean demands. China will be giving up its responsibilities and stature as a permanent member of the UN Security Council if it persists in achieving its selfish aims by advocating North Korea's demand for "easing its legitimate security concerns." Such a position held by China may destabilize the South Korea-China diplomatic relations of the past 31 years. If China ignores South Korea's 'legitimate security concerns' while solely focusing on its own interests, it is difficult to expect South Korea-China relations to develop based on mutual respect.