

China's Nuclear Umbrella for Ukraine: Implications for Northeast Asia

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Rarely mentioned in Western media, Ukraine has been under a Chinese nuclear umbrella since December last year. China offered a negative security guarantee to Ukraine back in 1994. Last December, in a joint-statement by Chinese President Xi Jinping and then Ukraine President Viktor Yanukovich, China upgraded her pledge by offering security guarantee for Ukraine if Ukraine came under nuclear attack or threat of nuclear attack.

Prior to Ukraine, China had never offered a nuclear umbrella. Not only unprecedented, China's nuclear umbrella is also puzzling. Who would have thought that China was going to extend nuclear protection to an Eastern European country, sharing 2,295 kilometer-long border with Russia? If not against Russia, China's "most important strategic partner," who would China's nuclear umbrella be against?

Some argue that China's security guarantee can be explained by Ukraine's importance as an economic and military technology partner. This view is not without merit. For instance, Ukraine sold China jet engines for Chinese J10 and J11 fighters she also sold China the former Soviet navy's aircraft carrier Varyag, which China converted into the Liaoning, China's first aircraft carrier. Moreover, Ukraine's large and highly profitable agricultural sector is certainly a huge attraction to a populous China.

One would be hard pressed to explain China's decision in terms of economic cooperation or military technology transfer. A nuclear umbrella is too serious a commitment to be used as an instrument to promote economic or technological interests. If the goal is economic or technological, there are other

instruments that are safer and more practical. It is therefore not unreasonable to assume that China's nuclear umbrella for Ukraine is driven by more important but unstated motives.

What would be then ulterior motives behind China's decision?

If one looks at the U.S. nuclear umbrella for South Korea, they will find that it has been effective in deterring attacks from the North as well as in persuading the South to restrain her nuclear ambitions. Its effects have been two-fold: deterrence and non-proliferation. Could a nuclear umbrella be a new tool in China's tool box for denuclearizing North Korea?

There are strong reasons why the answer may be yes. With the failure of past attempts to denuclearize North Korea (including the Six Party Talks), China has been looking for new ways to make her nuclear neighbor nuclear free. Her search has become all the more intense as North Korea now poses a nuclear threat potentially, to China herself. Since North Korea's official rationale for her nuclear weapons is the need to deter United States' nuclear attacks, China may have reasoned, if wishfully, that China's larger and better nuclear arsenal would protect North Korea against external nuclear attacks just as well and could therefore persuade North Korea to denuclearize.

If this was the reasoning behind China's decision, why did China first offer nuclear umbrella to Ukraine? It actually makes a lot of sense to apply the new tool to Ukraine before applying it to North Korea. Having returned Soviet-era nuclear weapons to Russia and joined the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), Ukraine is a non-nuclear state in good standing. While China's nuclear umbrella for Ukraine might be perceived as a surprise or even a mystery, it would be hard to criticize her decision, given the reputation of the Ukraine as a model non-nuclear state. As a test case, China might have thought that Ukraine was a safe choice. Once a good precedent was established, China would then be ready to extend its nuclear umbrella to the next country.

The unfolding crisis in Ukraine, however, has changed all that. There are now a lot of uncertainties that had not been foreseen at the time of the nuclear pledge.

What would be the implications of the Ukraine crisis for China and North Korea?

For North Korea, the key implication of Ukraine crisis would be that nuclear umbrella does not protect territory or sovereignty. It is ultimately up to oneself to defend her vital interests. It is not

only positive security guarantee that is ineffective. Russia's negative security guarantee for Ukraine was also not upheld, even though Russia did not technically violate Ukraine's territory and sovereignty with nuclear weapons. This means among others that security guarantees to North Korea, be they positive or negative, need to be more binding and more credible than those offered to Ukraine by China and Russia. Otherwise, North Korea would not feel secure, let alone denuclearize. In order for security guarantees to be convincingly binding and credible, it would be necessary for them to be in the form of treaties as opposed to memorandums or statements. This requirement is not limited to a Russian or Chinese security guarantee. If the United States is to offer security guarantee to North Korea, its guarantee will need to be particularly binding and credible. Whether it is politically possible for the United States to offer such guarantee to North Korea is an important but separate question.

For China, the key lesson from the Ukraine crisis would be that nuclear umbrella does not work for a country in a political and economic crisis. Such a country needs life support rather than just an umbrella, figuratively speaking. The crisis in Ukraine might have made China re-prioritize "stability" and "denuclearization" as China's objectives in North Korea it may also influence the future direction of its nuclear policy towards North Korea.

If we can generalize from China's experience in Ukraine, denuclearization through nuclear umbrella requires the existence of a stable state, unified nation, and a healthy economy. Because these conditions were lost in Ukraine, China's nuclear umbrella was made irrelevant almost as soon as it was pledged.

If domestic conditions are right, and if a nuclear umbrella is binding and credible, will China's nuclear umbrella lead North Korea to abandon nuclear weapons?

Even in this best hypothetical case scenario, the answer critically depends on the true motivation behind North Korea's nuclear decision.

If the real reason for North Korea's nuclear decision is nuclear deterrence, China's nuclear umbrella can reduce, if not completely remove, North Korea's need for nuclear arsenal, contributing to denuclearization or at least nuclear disarmament.

If North Korea's real motivation is not nuclear deterrence rather something else, China's nuclear umbrella is not likely to lead to denuclearization however, a binding and credible guarantee may be. If nuclear deterrence is not the real motivation, one can argue that China's nuclear umbrella was destined to fail as a tool to denuclearize North Korea from the beginning, regardless of what would happen in Ukraine.

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