

1. Professor Shi began by addressing the question of why DPRK was so determined to develop nuclear weapons – was DPRK ‘obsessed with security’? Rather, he suggested the real reasons lay in DPRK’s political culture and system. As China had pointed out to DPRK for many years, nuclear weapons would not improve its external environment. And since China was in fact legally and morally obliged to defend DPRK from unprovoked attack, DPRK did not in any case need nuclear weapons. In reality, the nuclear programme had become embedded in DPRK’s political culture. Living conditions were so poor in DPRK that the government needed to be able to point to some sign of North Korean greatness. Over time, the nuclear programme had become more and more central to the leadership, who refused any genuine prospect of economic reform, and were more and more wedded to ‘military first’. So the nuclear programme was Kim Jong Il’s central legacy, which now could not be abandoned. The Party had become increasingly irrelevant, and the National Defence Commission (NDC) was all that mattered. Moreover, DPRK’s political culture had greatly degenerated over the decades: ‘Stalinist’ in the 1960s, it had become increasingly racist and dynastic.
2. The US had been unconditionally committed to Israel since 1967, and sometimes was unable to control its ally. But relations were much better than Sino-DPRK relations, which were quite different: the key difference was the lack of mutual respect. In Kim Jong Il’s perception, China had not behaved like an ally. The US would always veto anti-Israel resolutions in the UN; so despite some superficial similarities, the fundamental differences with China and DPRK were obvious.
3. Historically, China had faced a profound dilemma: how to peacefully denuclearize DPRK on the one hand, while maintaining basically cordial relations and domestic stability in DPRK on the other? To date, China had never resolved this. From 2003-2009, China’s clear priority was to denuclearize DPRK in cooperation with the US, but it had found again and again that if it applied too much pressure to DPRK, bilateral relations suffered and China lost its influence. Adopting a ‘hard’ stance had failed to influence DPRK; but softness also failed. China had struggled over priorities: should denuclearization or a viable DPRK come first? From 2007, both China and ROK had been essentially marginalized from the denuclearization negotiations by the US and DPRK.
4. Then, from the autumn of 2009 and China’s full realization of the true state of Kim Jong Il’s health, and the fragility of the Succession, China had reversed its policy. From that point, China had set a strategy, but it was still not successful. China had provided economic and political assistance and even contributed to the stability of Kim Jong Un’s succession. This strategy amounted to a policy of ‘appeasement,’ and it also had several phases. Kim Jong Il had been ‘difficult’, but from 2009 until his death, he had at least pushed for warmer bilateral relations (even though there had been ‘difficult moments’, including during his last visit to China).

5. However, probably also under the influence of his aunt (Kim Kyong-hui), Kim Jong Un had adopted a clearly unfriendly policy towards China from the start (NB Shi also claimed that Jang Song-Thaek's influence over Jong Un had been over-stated, and was much less than that of Kim Kyong-hui). DPRK had given China no early warning of any important developments, including Kim Jong Il's death itself, the Leap Day agreement, or the rocket launch. As a result, since Kim's death, China's attitude had progressed from initial expectation, to disillusionment, to anger. This anger had been reflected in China's unconditional support for the text of the UN Security Council Presidential Statement in response to DPRK's missile test, whose toughness had surprised Professor Shi himself as well as other Chinese commentators.
6. But China's dilemma remained: the best that China could hope for was for DPRK to be a little more peaceful and a little more reformist. Chinese philosophy was very different to that of the West. Westerners believed that there was always 'an answer', and a way to persuade DPRK. In contrast, China's approach since 2005 had been to gradually induce change in DPRK through economic incentives. Right now, no solution to DPRK was apparent; but history would have a solution – and it would be unpredictable. The world blamed China for the impasse over DPRK, but this was wrong. China's policy had failed, but this was unsurprising. US policy had failed again and again, and so had ROK's Sunshine and Grand Bargaining Policies. DPRK's cultural uniqueness meant China's influence was very limited: but the gradual increase of China's cross-border influence would have an 'eroding' effect. In the long-run, the greatest influence China could exert might come not from government policy but from the collective impacts of individual, humble Chinese crossing the border.
7. With regard to DPRK's future, it seemed to be continuing down a dangerous path – it had made repeated serious threats to Lee Myung-bok Administration. And it had amended its constitution to call itself a nuclear state - even Kim Jong Il had never gone that far. In short, Professor Shi concluded, 'They have no chance.' Kim Jong Il would never have made a deal with the US only to break it immediately after; he would not have mishandled relations with China so badly; and he would not have invited the global media to a botched satellite launch. All of these mistakes demonstrated that the aunt and son were much less reliable than Kim Jong Il – and China was well aware of this.