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Has China Had Enough? *The Relationship between China and North Korea*

In a relationship once described by Chairman Mao Zedong to be as close “as lips and teeth”, China shares a closer relationship to the semi-reclusive state North Korea than any other in the world. This partnership, initiated by mutual heritage, shared communist philosophies, and solidified by partnership in the Korea War, is facing a new junction. This paper will address the question of whether the partnership can remain intact during China’s rise on the world stage and North Korea’s increasingly antagonist behavior. To better understand the current situation, we will first look at the history of the Sino-North Korean relationship. Next, we will explore the motivations on each side for sustaining this partnership and discuss three major issues concerning both sides. Last, we will explore the strains of the last decade focusing on China’s increasing difficulty with keeping North Korea in line. As we will see, the challenges in the Sino-North Korean relationship are great especially regarding the issues of nuclear proliferation. However, literature supports China’s desire to maintain the status quo as the benefits of the partnership outweigh the consequences of aligning with one of the world’s most notorious pariah nations.

History

Although the connection between North Korea and the People’s Republic of China can be traced back thousands of years, a reasonable era to begin when examining the two countries’ modern relationship is the period surrounding the Korean War. The Korean peninsula has long been a strategic location for its more powerful neighbors and dominance of it has been passed through various states including China, Japan and Russia. Japan ruled the Korean peninsula from 1894 until its defeat in World War II. After the war, the United States proposed a joint trusteeship of the Korean peninsula between

the democratic United States and communist USSR and China. This agreement split influence over Korea into two sections much like the Soviet and American division of post-war Germany. The parties agreed that the Soviets would assume influence north of the 38th parallel, or latitude 38° N, and the United States would focus on the area south of that demarcation line. According to William Stueck in *The History of the Korean War*, both parties provided poor leadership and set-up proxy governments that were incompatible with each other¹. In other words, they created a situation where war between the two Koreas was inevitable. The Soviets created a new Korean communist government, later named the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea), and placed Chinese educated Kim Il-Sung as chairman. At the same time the United States pushed for democratic elections for leaders of the new Republic of South Korea. Since both Koreas wished for sovereignty over the entire Korean peninsula, a peaceful status quo indeed proved impossible². In 1950, with the blessing of the Soviets, Kim Il-Sung attacked South Korea, beginning the Korean War.

During the war, which lasted until 1955, the Chinese supported North Korea with thousands of troops while the Soviets provided material assistance and air support. This structure of roles in the war was designed by the Soviets who had the upper hand in the state trio. Although the two countries were allies, China and the Soviet Union competed for favor with North Korea both during and after the Korean War³. This competition was motivated by each side's desire to keep the other from dominating North Korea more than by their own wish to control it⁴. By the end of the war, which ended at a draw, the Chinese emerged stronger politically and militarily for having confronted the United States⁵. This gave China equal footing with the Soviet Union resulting in an opportunity for greater influence in North

¹ William Stueck, *The Korean War: An International History* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995) 19.

² Ibid. 21.

³ Ibid. 23.

⁴ Robert G. Sutter, *Chinese Foreign Relations: Power and Policy Since the Cold War*, Second (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2010). 203.

⁵ Stueck, *The Korean War: An International History*. 362.

Korea. In 1953, Kim Il-Sung led a large delegation to China to thank Mao for China's support and to negotiate long-term agreements for military, economic and cultural cooperation between the two communist governments⁶. Enabled by the Korean War, these negotiations and further agreements in the early 1960s set a precedent for the unique relationship between the two nations as well as supply a life-line that China has continued to provide to North Korea ever since⁷.

The common acceptance of communism as the DRPK's and the PRC's chief ideology solidified and sustained their relationship through much of the second half of the twentieth century. For the first 5 years after the Korean War, both countries believed that they belonged to a single socialist brotherhood which included the Soviet Union and its protectorates. However, national interests did not align for long. The growing tension resulted in the Soviet-Sino split of 1961 even though North Korea remained mostly neutral. North Korea's relationship with both the Soviet Union and China remained relatively consistent for the following decade notwithstanding some short periods of disagreement. In the 1980s and 1990s, the North Korean-Soviet relationship diminished greatly. The Soviet Union's normalization of relations with capitalist South Korea was perceived by North Korea as an abandonment of both communist principles and past commitments⁸. When the Soviet Union fell in 1991, it was no longer able to send financial support to North Korea or spend diplomatic energy on the international affairs of other nations⁹. This left China in the position as North Korea's main ally, trading partner, and philanthropist.

However, the Sino-North Korean relationship has also sustained gradual transition particularly from a partnership of military and ideological alliances to one of economic and geopolitical necessity¹⁰.

⁶ Ibid. 363.

⁷ Ibid. 363.

⁸ Tae-Hwan Kwak and Seung-Ho Joo, eds., *North Korea's Foreign Policy Under Kim Jong Il: New Perspectives* (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009). 162.

⁹ Ibid. 163

¹⁰ Gloria Koo, "China and North Korea: A Changing Relationship," *Stanford Journal of International Relations* 6, no. 1, Emerging Powers (Winter 2005), <http://sjir.stanford.edu/6.1.toc.html>. 1.

After the departure of Mao in the 1970s, China evolved from an isolated state to one pursuing a position as an influential international actor. This plan included joining international organizations and participating in other arenas that would elevate China on the world's stage. As in the case of Russia's rise on the world stage, this expansion of China's foreign relations further estranged North Korea¹¹. Besides feeling that China was abandoning the principles of the communist brotherhood, China's increased cooperation with capitalist nations raised North Korea's concern that China's actions in the interest of their other partners would lie contrary to North Korea's interests. Most notably, Beijing's improved diplomatic relations with Seoul in 1992 soon resulted in higher trade profits and increased regional influence for China. This Sino-South Korean relationship has remained strong as China is now South Korea's largest trading partner¹². Naturally, this particular relationship between its two border countries has amplified North Korea's concerns over outside intrusion.

Motivations for sustaining the relationship

Although the Sino-North Korean relationship has evolved over the last 60 years, the partnership has continued to provide three main advantages for China: provides a buffer zone from threats, provides China with an area with which to exert international diplomatic influence, and provides an economic area which supports China's economic development¹³.

First, the Chinese depend on North Korea to act as a barrier in the case of attacks and other incursions by the United States, Japan, or South Korea. In fact, there are approximately 29,000 US troops and marines at the border of North Korea and South Korea¹⁴. The buffer zone that North Korea provides China from this American military stronghold allows China to reduce its military presence on its south

¹¹ Kwak and Joo, *North Korea's Foreign Policy Under Kim Jong Il: New Perspectives*. 173.

¹² Koo, "China and North Korea: A Changing Relationship." 2.

¹³ Ibid, 180.

¹⁴ "20 Facts About North Korea," accessed June 15, 2013, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2013/04/13/north-korea-factoids/2078831/>.

eastern border and permits it to strategically use the military resources elsewhere¹⁵. Indeed, China depends on a peaceful regional environment in order to build further economic development and modernization¹⁶. War in East Asia would likely halt China's stunning economic rise. Chief among China's concerns is North Korea's potential for bankruptcy and governmental breakdown¹⁷. In the event of a collapse of North Korea, thousands of Korean refugees will pour into China and create an enormous drain on resources and stability. Regardless, China prefers to maintain peace and stability in North Korea rather than see a united Korea under American economic and political influence¹⁸.

Second, China uses its unique relationship with North Korea to its advantage in international negotiations. For example, China has exerted its influence in the six party talks on North Korean nuclear arms proliferation as it is geographically and politically best suited to negotiate directly with North Korea on the issue. Since China is a vital component to negotiations with North Korea, it can use the leverage of its importance to its advantage in other international affairs. For example, China is an important player in many multipolar negotiations on North Korea including the six party talks on nuclear proliferation. Therefore, other states that rely on China to continue its role as a middleman will be willing to compromise on other interstate issues in order to keep China leading on international challenges with North Korea.

Third, although China provides hefty sums of food aid and oil to North Korea, there is much to receive in return. China has unrivaled access to North Korea's iron and coal supply and most of North Korea's trade debt is owed to China for consumer goods. Of course, it unclear whether or not North Korea has any means or intentions for paying off this debt. Either way, China sold \$2.03 billion in goods to North Korea in 2008 and imported \$750 million worth of North Korean resources including iron and

¹⁵ Jayshree Bajoria and Beina Xu, "The China-North Korea Relationship," *Council on Foreign Relations*, accessed June 11, 2013, <http://www.cfr.org/china/china-north-korea-relationship/p11097>. 3.

¹⁶ Kwak and Joo, *North Korea's Foreign Policy Under Kim Jong Il: New Perspectives*. 167.

¹⁷ Bajoria and Xu, "The China-North Korea Relationship." 3.

¹⁸ Ibid.

ore around the same time¹⁹. China has also increased its use of North Korean ports and rail to transport goods to a substantial market in South Korea²⁰.

North Korea's incentives in its relationship with China are slightly simpler. In many ways, China acts as a political and physical life-line to the North Korean regime. In international negotiations, China is typically a strong dissenter on any policies designed to reprimand North Korea for its belligerence or non-cooperation. For example, China has historically voted against sanctions, nuclear non-proliferation actions or military actions towards North Korea. Additionally, regardless of whether the motivations are humanitarian or strategic, China provides 90% of North Korea's energy imports, 80% of its consumer goods, and 45% of its food assistance²¹. China likely learned a valuable lesson regarding North Korea's vulnerability during its devastating famine in the 1990s. By then, a combination of economic mismanagement, poor weather, and recent loss of Soviet support caused a famine that killed an estimated two million North Koreans. This period of desperation motivated many starving North Koreans to escape into China causing a humanitarian crisis in China's border region. Naturally, this predicament provided China a glimpse into a future that it is trying to avoid by circumventing the collapse of North Korea.

Chief themes and challenges for North Korea and China

Border

China's concerns about the influx of North Korean defectors are already becoming a reality in the border region of North East China. The flow of refugees overpopulates the boundary areas with hungry and homeless in an already economically weak area. This desperation attracts contraband smugglers and human traffickers. In 1999, over 200,000 North Koreans lived illegally in China²². In order

¹⁹ Ibid. 3.

²⁰ Kwak and Joo, *North Korea's Foreign Policy Under Kim Jong Il: New Perspectives*. 168.

²¹ Bajoria and Xu, "The China-North Korea Relationship." 3.

²² Andrei Lankov, "Asia Times Online :: Kim Cracks Open Refugee Issue," *Asia Times*, January 5, 2013, <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Korea/OA05Dg01.html>.

to curb the flow of defectors, in 2006 China began construction of a barbed wire fence along vast sections of its eight hundred mile border with North Korea²³. In an effort of diplomacy with North Korea, China intercepts refugees that do make it over the border and returns them to the custody of North Korea. These defectors are often tortured, killed, or sent to dangerous work camps. Family members can also be punished whether or not the defector is returned to North Korea. Regardless of whether it soothes problems with North Korea, this deportation policy has cost China a firestorm of international admonishment.

Economic Reform

In an effort to financially stabilize North Korea, China has pushed North Korea to institute major economic reforms especially through special economic zones and agricultural reforms. Although North Korea is still hesitant to open its society to international trade for fear of the destabilization of its political system, it has implemented many of China's development suggestions over the last 20 years. For example, the Rason Special Economic Zone in northeastern North Korea was created in 1990 to provide North Korea the ability to experiment with market economics in a controlled region²⁴. The zone includes a port for export processing, manufacturing complexes for foreign companies, mineral production facilities, and a transportation infrastructure for goods²⁵. In 2010, China pledged to invest \$10 billion in North Korea's development bank for infrastructure development. In addition, many Chinese companies have made substantial investments developing mineral resources in North Korea's northern region²⁶. In order to comprehensively explain motivations for the Sino-North Korean relationship, it is important to note that similar to Chinese mineral expeditions in Africa, the main

²³ Bajoria and Xu, "The China-North Korea Relationship."

²⁴ Andray Abrahamian, *A Convergence of Interests: Prospects for Rason Special Economic Zone*, Academic Paper, Korea Economic Institute Academic Paper Series (Korea Economic Institute, April 24, 2013), http://www.keia.org/sites/default/files/publications/rason_sez_paper.pdf.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Dominik Mierzejewski, "Idealism Under Pressure: China's Foreign Policy Principles and the Korean Peninsula," *China: An International Journal* 1560, 9/1/11 (n.d.).

operation of these companies is to extract the minerals for use in China leaving little benefit for the local economy. These mineral and energy acquisitions are a large boon to the continually resource poor northeastern provinces of China²⁷. Furthermore, since North Korea has been unable to feed itself for decades, China provides agricultural assistance by providing farm equipment and fertilizer, teaching modern farming techniques, and proposing farming policies. For example, North Korea announced a plan in 2012 to allow farms to keep or sell 30% of their crops²⁸. However, this minor capitalist strategy meant to incentivize farmers has not yet been implemented.

Nuclear

Like many countries throughout world, China's largest concern regarding North Korea is the latter's nuclear proliferation activities. With support of the Soviet Union, North Korea began its nuclear program in 1959 in order to develop nuclear energy²⁹. The two countries built the Yongbyon nuclear complex which began operation in 1965³⁰. In 1984, the Soviet Union agreed to help North Korea expand nuclear power capabilities and to train North Korean scientists on the condition that North Korea sign the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT)³¹. The partnership ended after the fall of the Soviet Union but by then, North Korean had developed its capabilities enough to cause international concern over the potential danger. During the great famine in 1993, North Korea initiated its notable first nuclear provocation by refusing to allow the International Atomic Energy Agency to inspect two unregistered nuclear waste facilities³². In a belligerent stance which is now quite familiar, North Korea announced its departure from the NPT; North Korea is the first and only state to back out of this high stakes international agreement. However, the following year North Korea agreed to end its nuclear reactor

²⁷ Bajoria and Xu, "The China-North Korea Relationship."

²⁸ Troy Strangarone, "Why North Korea Isn't Interested in Economic Reform | The Peninsula," accessed June 13, 2013, <http://blog.keia.org/2013/04/why-north-korea-isnt-interested-in-economic-reform/>.

²⁹ Mun Suk Ahn, "What Is the Root Cause of the North Korean Nuclear Program?," *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 38, no. 4 (October 2011): 175–187, doi:10.1080/00927678.2011.604287. 180.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

program in exchange for desperately needed food aid. Additionally, in this deal called the Agreement Framework, the United States provided two light water reactors which ran on non-weapons grade plutonium that North Korea could use for energy production.

The new century marked the return of North Korean nuclear threats. North Korea announced in 2002 that it had secretly continued uranium-enrichment after the Agreed Framework. Notably, the United States did not hold up to portions of the deal either³³. Some scholars claim that the failing of the United States to stop North Korea's nuclear activities created an opening for China to become more involved in non-proliferation talks³⁴. The following year, North Korea announced that it had enough weapons-grade plutonium to make six nuclear bombs³⁵. The states involved in proliferation negotiations also have varying opinions on a nuclearized North Korea. Some, such as China and Russia, are fine with North Korea obtaining nuclear energy as long as it does not produce weapons. However, the United States and South Korea do not want North Korea to have any nuclear capacity. The concerns of the latter parties include a potential arms race between all the states in Asia as well as fears that North Korea will sell the nuclear technology to both state and non-state actors. North Korea has already sold missiles to Pakistan, Iran, and Syria³⁶.

It is important to note why nuclear proliferation is so important to North Korea. First, it believes that having a stock of weapons will deter a United States attack. Second, it thinks that nuclear possession will give North Korea leverage in international negotiations and especially help ensure food and other aid in an otherwise failing economy. This has so far turned out to be an accurate gamble. North Korea also believes that China will continue to support North Korean leadership on the

³³ Greg Theilmann, *Sorting Out the Nuclear and Missile Threats From North Korea*, Threat Assessment Brief (The Arms Control Association, May 21, 2013), http://www.armscontrol.org/files/TAB_Sorting_Out_North_Korea_2013.pdf.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Graham T. Allison Jr, "North Korea's Lesson: Nukes for Sale," *The New York Times*, February 12, 2013, sec. Opinion, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/12/opinion/north-koreas-lesson-nukes-for-sale.html>.

international stage in nuclear discussions; this has so far been the case. China's role in the nuclear negotiations is best exemplified by the six party talks which are multilateral negotiations between China, Japan, North Korea, Russia, South Korea, and the United States. The off and on talks over dismantling North Korea's nuclear program began in 2003 and are hosted by China³⁷. Of the group, only China and Russia have direct diplomatic relations with North Korea. There has since been six rounds of talks, the last in 2009. Some rounds have led to agreements only for the following set of meetings to result in further provocations. A round of negotiations in 2005 was especially productive resulting in North Korea's pledge to ban all nuclear weapons and nuclear programs and return to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty³⁸. In the sixth round, North Korea also committed to refrain from transferring nuclear technology or expertise to other actors³⁹. North Korea requested that the U.S. remove its nuclear weapons from South Korea; the U.S. refused stating only that it had no intentions to attack North Korea. Notwithstanding the breakthroughs, North Korea's first nuclear test in 2006 and subsequent missile tests further delayed talks and voided previous progress⁴⁰. Furthermore, in 2012, North Korean commitments to once again suspend nuclear operations, allow nuclear inspectors inside its facilities, and stop missile tests was soon followed by the satellite launch⁴¹. It then once again pulled out of the six party talks and committed more unprecedented provocations in late 2012.

The shift

Although Chinese support for North Korea has remained strong, both the PRC government and populous have demonstrated signs of impatience. A well-known signal of strain came in 2006 when Pyongyang tested its first nuclear weapon⁴². In response, China backed a UN security resolution which

³⁷ Xiaodon Liang, "The Six-Party Talks at a Glance | Arms Control Association," *Arm Control Association*, May 2012, <http://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/6partytalks>.

³⁸ Theilmann, *Sorting Out the Nuclear and Missile Threats From North Korea*. 2.

³⁹ Liang, "The Six-Party Talks at a Glance | Arms Control Association."

⁴⁰ Theilmann, *Sorting Out the Nuclear and Missile Threats From North Korea*.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

imposed sanctions on North Korea. This was a major shift in its policy on North Korea. China also made public statements rebuking North Korea for its “brazen” actions regarding nuclear proliferation⁴³. China supported more sanctions after North Korea’s second nuclear test in 2009. This time, China kept its reaction more guarded by lobbying North Korea to stop the antagonizing and nuclear threats but not speaking publicly on China’s concerns. After North Korea’s third nuclear test earlier in 2013, Chinese representatives quietly visited Pyongyang to negotiate a resolution with little avail but also verbally registered its displeasure on many public and private forums⁴⁴.

Indeed, the past year has been one of historical belligerence on the part of North Korea. In October 2012, North Korea launched a satellite into orbit going against the United Nations (UN) ban on North Korean ballistic missile tests⁴⁵. After the UN condemned the launch, Pyongyang announced plans to test more missiles. North Korea’s third nuclear test in March 2013 was twice as big as the last in 2009⁴⁶. In April 2013, North Korea announced intentions to restart activities at the Yongbyon nuclear complex that were halted in 2007 and withdrew its workers from Kaesong joint industrial park on the North-South Korean border. Furthermore, North Korea declared an end to the 1953 armistice and proclaimed that North Korea once was again at war with South Korea⁴⁷. In a symbolic move, North Korea then closed the joint border crossing with South Korea and unplugged the phone connecting the two countries’ border stations. North Korea then warned all foreigners on the Korean peninsula that they should leave in order to avoid being caught in a war between Pyongyang and Seoul though few heeded that warning.

North Korea has operated with antagonism even towards its closest allies for some time going so far as to continually ignore warnings from a state which North Korea depends on heavily for support.

⁴³ Bajoria and Xu, “The China-North Korea Relationship.” 2.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ “North Korea Profile - Timeline,” *BBC*, June 7, 2013, sec. Asia-Pacific, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-15278612>.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Theilmann, *Sorting Out the Nuclear and Missile Threats From North Korea*.

While some analysts believed that the ascendance of the new leader, Kim Jung-Un, might result in a calmer North Korea, the opposite seems to be occurring. Although the new leader is different than his predecessor, the disparity is less related to restrained foreign relations skills than it is to his inexperience. Kim Jong-Il, North Korea's leader from 1994 to 2011, had decades to train for his position under his father, North Korea's first leader Kim Il-Sung. Although the grandson and current leader, Kim Jung-Un, has also been raised to lead Korea, he has not had nearly the time to learn the intricacies of North Korean diplomacy. Therefore, Kim Jung-Un might be overestimating his diplomacy skills and risks going too far. For this reason, Chinese leaders might not have the same tolerance for the new inexperienced leader who likely has not yet gained the full support of the North Korean populous. Until he has supreme rule like his predecessors, Kim Jung-Un will be a less than valuable ally for China.

In 2013, Chinese leaders have shown some loss of patience for Korean antics. In February, President Xi Jinping said that no country "should be allowed to throw a region and even the whole world into chaos for selfish gain"⁴⁸. Other ministry spokesmen have also expressed concern over potential conflict and their desire for North Korea to restrain itself⁴⁹. Also in February, China signed another UN security resolution tightening sanctions. After North Korea balked at Chinese abandonment of "even elementary principles", a Chinese government-sponsored newspaper reprimanded North Korea for its ungrateful response to Chinese efforts to soften the UN resolutions and maintain border peace⁵⁰. The paper then added that China will continue to reduce assistance if North Korea continues nuclear provocations⁵¹. Has North Korea pushed China too far? Opposition in China to continued support of North Korea is rising and the potential payoff for limiting that backing is increasing. If China chooses to enforce the latest UN sanctions, its power to devastate the North Korean economy can strongly

⁴⁸ Ian Williams, "China Grows Weary of North Korea's 'Chaos and Conflict'," *NBC News*, April 11, 2013, http://behindthewall.nbcnews.com/_news/2013/04/11/17701725-china-grows-weary-of-north-koreas-chaos-and-conflict.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ "On the Naughty Step; China and North Korea," *The Economist*, February 2, 2013.

⁵¹ Ibid.

influence change. Therefore, leading a solution on North Korea will provide China a reputation as a contributor to regional peace and as a tough but fair world power⁵². This improved status would be perfect timing in a period of difficult territorial disputes with Japan and the Philippines⁵³.

As China continues to view itself on the international stage, it will need to weigh its options. Is maintaining the buffer zone of North Korea worth the trouble in a period of good relations with South Korea and increased trade and political openness with the west⁵⁴? It is time for China's past fears of a stronger South Korea to be replaced with a fear of a nuclearized North Korea and the resulting arms race⁵⁵?

The question remains whether China will drop its close ties and support of North Korea. It appears that China will do so only if North Korea leaves it no other choice by continuing provocations to the point that war or other military actions is inevitable. If China is set to lose the benefits of its North Korean relationship, it will at least need to salvage its international standing by opposing the hostilities before it is too late. Either way, North Korea can be sure of one thing: next time it starts a war, no communist brothers will be rushing in to help.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Kathrin Hille, "China Adjusts Approach to North Korea," *FT.com* (March 10, 2013), <http://search.proquest.com.mutex.gmu.edu/pqrl/docview/1315547548/13E9E584DD75BB072C5/39?accountid=14541>.

⁵⁵ Fareed Zakaria, "Time for China to Step Up," *Newsweek*, March 3, 2003.

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