SMALL STATE, BIG INFLUENCE: CHINA’S NORTH KOREA POLICY DILEMMA

A Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Master of Arts
in Asian Studies

By

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Washington, DC
November 25, 2013
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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to analyze why China is reluctant to significantly change its North Korea policy despite continued North Korean nuclear provocations that have hindered China’s own strategic and security interests. The conventional understandings of China’s desire for a strategic buffer zone, fear of refugee influx, ideological affinities with the Korean regime, and desire for trade with North Korea are insufficient explanations for China’s policy rigidity. Instead, taking literatures on behaviors of small and big powers during the Cold War period as theoretical framework, this article finds that North Korea is able to influence China’s policy options more than China is able to influence North Korea. China is bound by the de jure alliance with North Korea and the alliance is asymmetric in terms of power. As a small power, North Korea can ignore its influence on the international society and pursue parochial interests. On the other hand, China must consider various aspects of policy influence before it reacts to North Korea’s behavior.
The research and writing of this thesis are dedicated to my parents, my advisor at Georgetown University, as well as everyone else who helped along the way.

Many thanks,
Tianyi Wang
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INTRODUCTION

On February 12, 2013, North Korea conducted its third underground nuclear test, potentially improving its capacity to develop miniaturized nuclear devices for possible delivery on intercontinental ballistic missiles. In response to yet another nuclear provocation, the then Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi summoned the North Korean ambassador to China to express China’s strong dissatisfaction and opposition. On March 7, the Chinese government supported the passage of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2094 (UNSCR 2094), which authorized new sanctions designed to dissuade North Korea from conducting additional nuclear and ballistic missile activities. On the same day, officials of the Communist Party of China (CCP) debated over whether to keep or abandon its relationship with North Korea at a session titled “Friendship with Foreign Countries,” a side session of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference that was open to news media. To many analysts, these messages indicate that China, while not yet ready to abandon North Korea, is at least recalibrating its interests and has signaled a potential shift in policy should North Korea not refrain from continued nuclear provocations.

However, Yang Jiechi, the then China’s Foreign Minister claims that China’s support for stricter sanctions on North Korea should not be viewed as a shift in direction on China’s North Korea policy. Moreover, trade along the Chinese border seems to continue as usual. The public bus service between Yanbian, China and North Korea is still running. The bus runs from Yanji,
the capital of Yanbian, to Rason, a free-trade zone jointly developed by China and North Korea.Officials in Dandong, a city of China’s northeast province Liaoning that shares borders with North Korea, confirmed that border trade policy remained the same and trade did not seem to have slowed down. In an interview with China News Network, People’s Liberation Army (PLA) General Liu Yuan supported the UN sanctions on North Korea, but meanwhile showed understanding for “North Korea’s need for self-protection against the United States.” Similarly, Luo Zhaohui, Director-General of the Department of Asian Affairs and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stated during an interview with the Xinhua Net that “we [China] resolutely oppose North Korea’s nuclear test but also recognize that North Korea has a reason to be concerned about its security.” Why does the Chinese government endorse such a perplexing approach to North Korea? Why does China's North Korea policy seem so rigid despite the fact that North Korea's provocations hinder China's security and economic interests?

This article analyzes China’s North Korea policy dilemma. It agrees with conventional understandings that the view of North Korea as a strategic buffer zone still endures to some extent, while also acknowledging that the influence of such thinking is becoming less pronounced in policy decision-making. It recognizes the concern that an influx of refugees could be a potential problem. However, this concern alone is not sufficient to maintain China’s current support for North Korea because the regime’s nuclear provocations are far more threatening to China’s regional security environment. China and North Korea may have initially shared ideological affinities, but the deeply rooted historical problems and the widening ideological gap

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Ben Blanchard, “China steps up customs checks, but North Korea trade robust,” Reuters, April 30, 2013.
since China’s economic reform suggest that China is not likely to support North Korea just because they both follow communist political systems. Although China is North Korea’s largest trading partner, China benefits much more from trading with South Korea. Hence, none of the conventional understandings are sufficient to explain China’s rigid North Korea policy.

This article employs literatures on small and big power behaviors, mainly by Rothstein and Keohane, as a theoretical framework for analyzing China’s North Korea policy rigidity. My argument is premised on three points. First, as a small state, North Korea cares little about the influence of its belligerent and provocative actions on the structure of the international system and can actively use its leverage to bargain with China through their de jure alliance. Second, as a major power, China has much more to lose than North Korea does should there be another spate of military conflict on the peninsula. This unbalanced relationship essentially makes China a hostage of North Korea. Third, the lack of strategic trust between China and the United States and the United States’ increasing presence in the Asia-Pacific reinforces China’s policy dilemma. China views the purpose of U.S. presence and adjustments in policy toward the Asia-Pacific with doubts and concerns. The U.S. response toward North Korea provocations complicates China’s policy calculation. In the next section, I will provide conventional understandings of China’s continued support for North Korea despite North Korea’s increasingly provocative posture toward the region. I examine these conventional understandings and provide counterarguments. I then move on to apply the theoretical framework on the behaviors and influence of big and small states to answer the question that I previously raised. This article ends with China’s recent adjustment in North Korea policy and implications for future policy changes.

CONVENTIONAL ANSWERS:
I. NORTH KOREA AS A STRATEGIC BUFFER ZONE

One of the conventional understandings holds that China remains supportive of the North Korean regime because North Korea serves as a buffer zone between China and South Korea, a U.S. ally that provides bases for the U.S. military presence on the Korean peninsula. China fears that in the case of a North Korean regime collapse, a strong and unified Korea would present a direct military threat right on its border.\(^i\) Historically, the Korean peninsula has been a sensitive region for China. China shares an 870-mile long border with North Korea.\(^j\) In the early 20\(^{th}\) century, Japan invaded China through the peninsula. In late 1950s, a potential invasion by the United States posed a serious security threat for China.\(^k\) The alliance between China and North Korea began during the Korean War. China’s decision to enter the war was not made easily: although Mao Zedong was determined to dispatch troops across the Yalu when the Korean War broke out, other senior Chinese leaders initially opposed the decision to intervene.\(^l\) Yet the view of North Korea as a buffer zone prevailed. By the end of the Korean War, more than half a million Chinese lives had been lost defending North Korea. The huge cost of the Korean War reinforces the Chinese view of North Korea as a strategic buffer zone.

However, the value of North Korea as a buffer zone has been declining since the end of the Korean War. In 1979 China normalized diplomatic relations with the United States. In 1990 the Cold War ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union. And in 1992 Northeast Asia witnessed

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\(^k\) Andrew Scobell, *China and North Korea: from Comrades-in-Arms to Allies at Arm’s Length* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2004), 17.

\(^l\) Scobell, *China and North Korea*, 1.
the diplomatic normalization between China and South Korea.\(^m\) Meanwhile, China has achieved rapid economic growth and military modernization. Although strategic mistrust still lingers, China’s regional security environment has substantially improved from the Korean War and the Cold War period.

Moreover, North Korea’s continued nuclear tests have made the country a direct security threat to China. With North Korea’s third nuclear test, the regime has potentially improved its capacity to develop miniaturized nuclear devices for possible delivery on an intercontinental ballistic missile.\(^a\) A nuclear North Korea helps strengthen the U.S.-Japan-ROK alliances; increases the U.S. military presence on the Korean peninsula and commitment to missile defenses; enhances North Korea’s capability to deter foreign powers, including China; and bolsters the potential threat of a North Korean cross border artillery attack against China.\(^o\) None of these serve China’s interest. These consequences directly challenge China’s security interests in Northeast Asia.

In addition, the third nuclear test took place right along China’s border. According to the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test Ban Treaty Organization, the magnitude of the 2013 nuclear test was about twice that of the 2009 test, causing a seismic event of 5.1 magnitude.\(^p\) The potential environmental contamination has led to growing Chinese public concern about China’s domestic security and social frustration with both the North Korean regime and Beijing’s inability to

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persuade Pyongyang. Small-scale protests and demonstrations took place all around China in days following the test. Supporting North Korea has not only failed to ensure China’s security interests, but also imposed new challenges for the domestic legitimacy of the Chinese leadership. The buffer zone has therefore become a trouble zone for China.

II. FEAR OF THE REFUGEE INFLUX

The second conventional understanding of China’s North Korea policy holds that the Chinese government fears that the flood of refugees will cause an unprecedented humanitarian crisis once the regime collapses and therefore props up the North Korean regime to avoid instability. Estimates are that about 200,000 to 300,000 North Koreans have escaped North Korea’s stringent control and entered China since the late 1990s in search of food, employment, or opportunities to defect to South Korea. As economic collapse and food crises keep haunting North Korea, the number of North Koreans crossing Chinese borders keeps increasing. Although North Korea has been strengthening patrols and border inspections, the Chinese government still worries that in the event of a North Korean regime collapse, there will be even more North Korean refugees escaping to China and destabilizing the security of Northeast China.

Although China has legitimate concerns over the refugee issue, these concerns insufficiently explain the rigidity of China’s North Korea policy in the face of a more direct and severe nuclear threat posed by North Korea. The Chinese government’s treatment of North Korean defectors has not been the most welcoming. More than 75 percent of North Korean refugees in China are women, and many of them are forced to engage in prostitution or sexual

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4 Wang, “Chinese Public Opinion toward North Korea’s Nuclear Test.”
5 Xie; Berry, 55; Chance and Kim (Reuters); Jeffries, 522.
Some female North Korean escapees were forced to live as “live-in-maids” of Chinese farmers living along China’s northeastern borders. The conditions of living are often too inhumane to bear, driving these women to escape to distant regions in China or travel through China’s neighboring countries such as Mongolia, Cambodia, Vietnam, etc. to defect to South Korea. In 2004, 468 North Koreans travelled through China and reached Vietnam, where they turned to the South Korean Embassy and defected to South Korea. Infuriated, the DPRK leadership pressured China to classify North Korean defectors as economic migrants rather than political refugees. This classification allows China to repatriate North Korean refugees back to North Korea for punishment instead of offering protection to North Koreans, as they previously did to meet obligations under international law. These policies mean that in the case of a North Korean regime collapse, North Koreans are likely to defect to South Korea through various routes rather than permanently stay in China.

Even if the regime collapses and large numbers of North Koreans flee to China, China as well as other regional powers has potential means to deal with the situation. First, the PLA can close the border or dispatch troops to North Korea for humanitarian purposes and set up shelters along the border to stem the flow of refugees. Second, other powers in the region such as the United States, South Korea, Japan, and Russia also cannot afford a destabilized Northeast Asia. China and Japan are the world’s second and third largest economies driving global development. Their entrapment by a collapsed North Korea would hinder economic interests of the rest of the

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Ibid.


Berry, *Global Security Watch Korea*, 55.
world. Therefore, rather than letting China take the burden of refugees alone, the United States and other powers would cooperate with China on humanitarian issues.

III. IDEOLOGICAL AFFINITIES

The third conventional understanding of China’s seemingly unconditional support for North Korea is that both China and North Korea are communist countries. Both China and North Korea refer to the Sino-DPRK relations as grounded in the life and bloodshed of the revolutionary pioneers. As two of the world’s “Last Leninists,” Beijing and Pyongyang went through the collapse of the Soviet Union during 1989-1991 together. For China, North Korea is more than just a country that shares common political views and systems. North Korea’s survival is also associated with the political legitimacy of the Chinese regime. If communist regimes continue to collapse globally, it will become more difficult for the remaining communist countries to justify their own rule. Therefore, Beijing would like to see the North Korean regime continue indefinitely.

However, ideological affinity between China and North Korea seems to be a myth at best. China and North Korea had deeply rooted historical problems with each other dating back to the founding period of the DPRK. Early DPRK political leaders were based either in China or the Soviet Union. During Kim Il Sung’s power struggle for leadership in the mid-1940s, Kim first rallied behind the pro-China factions. After he became the national leader, he purged leaders from the China factions with the help from elites in the factions associated with the Soviet Union.

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2 Scobell, China and North Korea, 2.
8a Scobell, China and North Korea, 2.
9 Scobell, China and North Korea, 2.

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The PRC’s founding leaders thus became greatly dissatisfied with Kim.\textsuperscript{bb} Moreover, while the Kim family showed pictures of the Chinese People’s Volunteer Army’s (CPV) sacrifice during the Korean War when Chinese leaders visited Pyongyang, the North Korean government mentioned little about China’s contribution to the North Korean populace.\textsuperscript{cc} North Korea’s ideology of \textit{Juche} emphasizes self-reliance. Many Chinese feel this is an insult given that North Korea relied heavily on China for economic and political support.\textsuperscript{dd}

As China continues with economic development and modernization, the ideological gap between China and North Korean leaders has become increasingly obvious. When China reformed its economy and opened up the market to the rest of the world, North Korea viewed this as a betrayal of communism.\textsuperscript{ee} When Kim Jong Il visited China in 1983, Deng took him to Shenzhen hoping that Shenzhen’s rapid development would inspire Kim Junior to learn from China’s reforms and conduct economic reform in North Korea as well. However, Kim never revisited Shenzhen and rather chose to criticize almost every major reform policy China adopted.\textsuperscript{ff} Therefore, the ideological affinities between China and North Korea have faded to an extent that cannot explain China’s support for North Korea.

\section*{IV. TRADE}

The fourth conventional understanding of China’s position on the Korean peninsula is that China benefits significantly from its trade with North Korea and therefore would not take any action that could disrupt that trade. China is the North’s largest trading partner and most generous aid donor. Recently, China has also become an emerging investor in North Korea, the

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{bb} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{cc} Myers, B.R., \textit{The Cleanest Race}, (New York: MelvilleHouse, 2010), 130.
\textsuperscript{dd} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{ee} Ibid, 389.
\textsuperscript{ff} Ibid.
\end{flushleft}
bulk of which has been in natural resources. Over the past decade, China’s trade with and investment in the North has expanded substantially, rising from roughly $1 billion to more than $6 billion.

However, the North Korean economy in total has a nominal GDP of only $28 billion,\(^{gg}\) which is much smaller than China’s trade with South Korea. As China’s fourth largest trading partner, South Korea’s trade volume with China reached $207 billion in 2010.\(^{hh}\) China benefits significantly more from South Korea just in terms of trade volume. Moreover, investors and businessmen have found that doing business with North Korea is increasingly frustrating, even for ethnic Koreans living along China’s border with North Korea.\(^{ii}\) Numerous Chinese businessmen have lost money due to broken promises and double-dealing by the North Korean regime.\(^{ii}\) The more provocative North Korea becomes with its nuclear program, the less confidence Chinese investors have in the North Korean economy. In addition, Chinese investment projects in North Korea are small in scale. Most investments in North Korea involve low-level technology and labor-intensive industries. Big companies that are supported or subsidized by the Chinese government rarely invest in North Korea.\(^{kk}\) Given these difficulties, the limited benefits that China gains from trade with North Korea is the least convincing among the conventional wisdom on why China keeps supporting North Korea.

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\(^{ii}\) Ian Jeffries, Contemporary North Korea (London: Routledge, 2010), 543.

\(^{kk}\) Ian Jeffries, Contemporary North Korea, 542.
That being said, there is some truth to these conventional arguments. The buffer zone mentality has remained powerful among some Chinese senior leadership, especially the conservatives in the PLA. The scenario under which the regime would collapse or the Korean peninsula would unify still remains obscure; hence refugees could be a problem. While limited in scope, there are some remaining ideological similarities. And while China’s national economy is not greatly affected by trade with North Korea, some individuals in Northeast China benefit significantly from cross-border trade, though not nearly as much as they would from trading with South Korea. However, as North Korea's provocations continuously hinder China's security interests, China has already started reconsider its political and economic security calculations on the Korean Peninsula. Continuing to sustain a North Korea that may threaten China with its nuclear weapons is not an option. Recent ongoing debate among scholars and officials confirms that the Chinese government is indeed reconsidering its policies toward North Korea.

None of the conventional understandings sufficiently explain why China is reluctant to restructure its North Korea policy. If continued North Korean provocations have pushed China to a point where China has to reconsider its North Korea policy, and if none of the above explains the rigidity of China's North Korea policy, the puzzle then remains why China finds it so hard to change its position on North Korea.

**SMALL STATE, BIG INFLUENCE**

Literatures that cover the behavior and influence of small allies on U.S. foreign policy-making during the Cold War period, particularly during the 1950s and 1960s, contribute to the understanding of China’s paradox of absolute and actual influence on North Korea and help

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explain why China seems to be restricted in terms of its North Korea policy options and is reluctant to make changes. These literatures on the influence of small states mainly seek to explain how small allies of the United States were able to bargain with superpowers such as the United States to alter U.S. policies and achieve the political ends of the small powers. While specifically designed around the U.S. alliance system, the theory can be applied in many situations because the calculation of interests, policy options, and toolkit for small powers are not unique to allies of the United States.

In his 1971 article, “The Big Influence of Small Allies,” Robert Keohane offers a detailed analysis on how small allies of the United States were able to affect American policies by examining interactions between the United States and Israel, Spain, Philippines, and Taiwan. The United States is the central power of the West and seems to possess immense power and resources to influence its small allies. However, Keohane’s study illustrates that small states can pursue “active, forceful and even obstreperous policies of their own.” Keohane finds that small states can “concentrate on a narrow range of vital interests and ignore almost everything else” and that they could "take large-scale patterns of international politics for granted, since nothing [they did could] possibly affect them very much.” On the other hand, beset by a variety of problems, a great power must carefully choose the issues on which it will use strong political, military, or economic pressure. And even if it wishes to act, it may discover that the force at its disposal is inappropriate to the goals it seeks.

\[\text{Robert Keohane, “The Big Influence of Small Allies,” Foreign Policy, No 2 (Spring 1971), 161.}\]

\[\text{Ibid, 164.}\]

\[\text{Ibid, 162.}\]
When analyzing the conspicuousness of small states despite increasing military and power disparity between big and small states in a nuclear age, Robert Rothstein provides a definition of “small power,” based on which he analyzed behaviors of small power. Rothstein proposed three unique aspects of a small power situation: 1) outside help is required; 2) the state has a narrow margin of safety, with little time for correcting mistakes; 3) the state’s leaders see its weakness as essentially unalterable. In addition, Rothstein focused his analysis on two types of small-state behavior: behaviors in international organizations and actions taken in "balance-of-power" situations. In his framework of analysis Rothstein found that small states tended to focus on current “imperatives of immediate security” rather than long-term consequences. Rothstein and Keohane’s findings on small and big power behaviors will serve as the theoretical framework of the analysis that this paper presents.

I. NORTH KOREA: INDIFFERENT TO THE INTERESTS OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

My argument is premised on three points. First, as a small power, North Korea cares little about its influence on the structure of the international system. Therefore, North Korea is able to employ brinkmanship strategy to the full measure and forcefully continue its nuclear tests and missile development to ensure its own safety and interests despite international pressure.

According to Rothstein:

“A Small Power is a state which recognizes that it cannot obtain security primarily by use of its own capabilities, and that it must rely fundamentally on the aid of other states,

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institutions, processes, or developments to do so; the Small Power's belief in its inability to rely on its own means must also be recognized by the other states involved in international politics.”

The definition of a small power also requires that the security environment of the state is highly unstable, and that the leaders of the state do not think that they can change the situation. North Korea fulfills all three requirements of the small power definition. It is highly dependent on China and other donors for food and energy, both of which are necessary to sustain the regime. Since the Korean War ceasefire, South Korea has achieved rapid economic development and built diplomatic relations globally while North Korea remains isolated, implements problematic economic policies, and lags further behind. In addition, South Korea’s cooperation with the United States and gradual infiltration of information about the outside world all make the North Korean leadership feel extremely insecure about the control and survival of the regime. And the North Korean leadership knows that it cannot alter the situation: if North Korea chooses to reform and open, it is only a matter of until the Northern regime is absorbed by the South.

North Korea thus is able to follow its own interest without consideration for its responsibility in the international system. As a small power, North Korea considers going nuclear its best strategy for regime survival. Nuclear weapons increase North Korea’s deterrence capability in a way that no other weapons can. At this point, the motivation for nuclear tests has strengthened because the North Korean leaders believe that they will soon succeed in obtaining

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Ibid, 29.
Ibid.
usable nuclear weapons technology. North Korea has incorporated nuclear technology as an integral component of the regime’s survival. The smaller the state in terms of its power, the more it can ignore the patterns of international politics to advance its own vital interests, since nothing it does can possibly affect the international system to a substantial extent. Thus, however much North Korea depends on an external ally such as China, China will never have enough leverage to stop North Korea from developing nuclear weapons because the Kim family has no other successful options to sustain the regime. Even knowing that a nuclear attack on any power would be suicidal, the North Korean leadership is committed to doing so should it perceive that the regime’s survival is threatened.

II. CHINA: CONCERNED ABOUT COMPLICATED REGIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Unlike North Korea, China is a major global power and has to view the de jure Sino-DPRK alliance in the context of its regional and global security environment. A big power has diverse and complicated interests to consider, and therefore must “carefully choose the issues on which it will use strong political, military, or economic pressure.” Such powers must consider that the actions they take or the leverages that they use may result in outcomes that do not serve their interests. While a big power possesses more military and economic tools in comparison to a small power, the possession of more power does not necessarily transfer into the ability to effectively use it. In terms of North Korea provocations, China is currently in such a big power that has to make foreign policy decisions with extra caution.

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y Ibid.
As a big power with more influence on North Korea than any other country, China has the most leverage to pressure North Korea. However, as a country that is much more advanced than North Korea in terms of economic development and quality of life, and as a rising power that aims for national rejuvenation and recognition as a global player, China also has much more to lose than North Korea does should there be another military conflict on the peninsula. North Korea is well aware of China’s concerns and actively takes advantage of China’s security interests in bargaining sessions. For instance, in early 1996 North Korea asked China for a large amount of grain. China offered only one tenth of the requested amount in return. Kim Jong Il, infuriated by the Chinese response, threatened the Chinese leadership that Pyongyang would initiate talks with Taiwan unless China offered an amount of grain even larger than the amount originally requested. This strikes at a component of China’s core interests, the return of Taiwan to mainland China. Although Beijing did not meet all of Pyongyang’s requests, the Chinese government did offer a more substantial food aid package to North Korea in order to avoid prompting discussions between North Korea and Taiwan. Such has been the way that Pyongyang negotiates with China on many fronts.

The Sino-DPRK relation is largely an asymmetrical one with China meeting North Korean needs and not able to gain much in response. For the previous two North Korean nuclear tests, China did follow the international community in condemning the North Korean actions but only partially supported the sanctions precisely due to China’s vested security and economic interests in Northeast Asia. China has become a hostage of North Korea. China has leverage over North

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23 Scobell, China and North Korea, 5
24 Ibid.
Korea but is unable to use that leverage without harming its own interests in other arenas. It is due to the big power’s intensive investment and involvement in the alliance that the small state is able to influence the big state’s policy decisions.\textsuperscript{ccc} China fears that changing its North Korea policy without careful calculation could incur greater cost for China, particularly that if it punishes North Korea too severely North Korea will retaliate against China before it acts against the U.S. or its allies.

With North Korea’s success in its third nuclear test, the situation becomes even more complicated for China. The continued nuclear provocations have interrupted China’s hierarchy of interests on the Korean peninsula, putting China into a policy dilemma. China advocates for the stability of the Korean peninsula, peaceful unification between North and South Korea, and denuclearization of the peninsula.\textsuperscript{ddd} The top priority is still maintaining stability. However, the definition of "stability" is changing. Previously it was easy for China to support North Korea because maintaining stability on the Korean peninsula meant sustaining the North Korean regime. With North Korea's development of nuclear capabilities, it has become difficult for China to define what "stability" means. It raises discussion over what is more destabilizing: North Korea having nuclear weapons or the collapse of the regime?

In addition, China's own foreign policy-making structure makes it hard for the Chinese government to change its North Korea policy even when it wants to do so. The International Department of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) manages China’s relations with Pyongyang, not the Foreign Ministry. Staffed mostly by CCP conservatives, the

\textsuperscript{ccc} Keohane, “The Big Influence of Small Allies,” 162.
department still views the Korean War as “the war to resist America and aid Korea.”\textsuperscript{6}\textsuperscript{ee} This skews perceptions of the security environment and causes a rift between the Foreign Ministry and those responsible for relations with Pyongyang, making it hard for experienced diplomats to exert influence on China’s North Korea policy.\textsuperscript{ff}\textsuperscript{f}

III. THE U.S.: LINGERING STRATEGIC MISTRUST WITH CHINA

The Obama administration’s recent effort to strengthen U.S. diplomatic and military relations with the Asia-Pacific, also referred to as the “Pivot to Asia,” has triggered great anxiety in China. Many Chinese people, whether experts in international relations or members of the general public, worry that the U.S. “pivot” seeks to limit China’s rise in the international system. For example, as part of the “Pivot to Asia,” in 2011 the U.S. and Australia initiated plans for rotational deployments of U.S. Marines to Darwin, Australia. Through rotational deployments, the U.S. is able to expand its presence in Asia beyond traditional allies.\textsuperscript{gg}\textsuperscript{g} When asked about China’s response to the Marine deployment, a spokesperson from China’s Defense Ministry stated that the US-Australia military deployment “does not help to enhance mutual trust and cooperation between countries in the region, and could ultimately harm the common interests of all concerned.”\textsuperscript{hh}\textsuperscript{h} In addition, he commented that “any strengthening and expansion of military alliances is an expression of a Cold War mentality.”\textsuperscript{ii}\textsuperscript{i} The recent increase in U.S. military


\textsuperscript{ff}\textsuperscript{f} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{hh}\textsuperscript{h} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{ii}\textsuperscript{i} Ibid.
presence in the Pacific has fostered strategic mistrust between China and the United States, making cooperation on the Korean peninsula difficult.

Within this context, China views the purpose of U.S. presence and adjustments in policy toward the Asia-Pacific with doubts and concerns. In terms of North Korea, neither the United States nor China has chosen an enduring solution to counter North Korean provocations. China views the United States as both a stabilizer and a destabilizer on the Korean peninsula. The majority of Chinese analysts argue that the United States would intervene to prevent allies and partners, such as Japan, South Korea or Turkey, from obtaining nuclear weapons in response to Pyongyang or Tehran’s nuclear provocations. However, some Chinese scholars also view proliferation threats as excuses for the United States and its allies to engage in provocative actions, compromising Beijing’s greater security interests and limiting China’s growth. The insufficient strategic mutual trust between China and the United States serves as an intervening factor, making China even more reactive on the North Korean provocations and bound to let North Korea take advantage.

CONCLUSION: A CHANGING FUTURE?

None of the traditional views—Cold War strategic mentality, potential humanitarian crisis, ideological similarities, or trade—are convincing reasons as to why China has continued its support for North Korea. Due to the asymmetric nature of the alliance between China and North Korea, North Korea is able to pursue parochial interests and ignore its influence in the international system, while it remains challenging for China to easily change its position. China

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ikk Ibid.
has been bound by North Korea’s huge leveraging power given that it has the option of either bargaining with China or switching sides to bargain with the United States.

China’s recent adjustments in North Korea policy continue to challenge conventional understandings. These policy shifts also entail a different scenario for the China-DPRK alliance. A small state such as North Korea can take the institutions and environment supported by the big power for granted only so long as the big power remains committed to its initial policies and strategies. iii As North Korea moves forward with its nuclear programs and provocative behavior, China, although not ready to break the tie with its unruly neighbor, becomes less dedicated to the alliance and more willing to assert pressure on North Korea. Many prominent Chinese scholars on North Korea issues have suggested a change in China’s policy priority on the Korean peninsula. Zhang Liangui, one of China’s most well-known North Korea experts from the Party School of the Central Committee, argues that “the former administration always put ensuring the peace and stability of the Korean Peninsula in first place, while the current administration sets the denuclearization of the peninsula first.” mmm Shen Dingli, Vice President of the Institute of International Studies, Fudan University, argued in a Foreign Policy article that “Let's face it: China has reached a point where it needs to cut its losses and cut North Korea loose.” nnn

In addition to fervent scholarly arguments, the Chinese government has also take further actions in response to North Korea’s third nuclear test. Following China’s support of UNSCR 2094, the Bank of China halted all dealings with a major North Korean bank in early May. ooo

Second, on June 7 and 8, U.S. President Obama and China’s new President Xi Jinping had

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informal meetings at Sunnylands, California. Although the two leaders still hold drastically different opinions on cyber-espionage, arms sales to Taiwan, and the territorial disputes in the South China Sea, they were able to agree with each other on dealing with a provocative North Korea.\textsuperscript{ppp} China and the United States reached consensus that North Korea must abandon its nuclear program and that the two countries will cooperate with each other towards this common goal. Another strong indicator of China’s frustration with North Korea’s nuclear provocation shows in Xi Jinping’s recent joint declaration with South Korean President Park Geun-hye. The joint statement dedicates a single section to express Beijing and Seoul’s shared position on opposing North Korean nuclear development.\textsuperscript{qqq} During an interview after the joint declaration, President Park said “We shared an understanding that North Korea’s possession of nuclear weapons cannot be tolerated under any circumstances.”\textsuperscript{rrr} Xi’s meeting with Park further illustrates China’s concern that a North Korea armed with nuclear weapons imposes a serious threat to China’s security environment.

These recent moves by the Chinese government leave China’s future North Korea policy an open question. In the past, China supported North Korea due to its calculation of security interests. Currently, China is adjusting its North Korea policy with great caution for the same reason. In the future, China may become more adamant on the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and further normalize relations with North Korea, moving away from an alliance. Progress of these trends may not be rapid, as the progress changes with China’s foreign policy strategy, security environment, and what it considers the most threatening to China’s security.

\textsuperscript{rrr} Ling Yuhuan, “Xi, Park share nuke position,” \textit{Global Times}, June 28, 2013.
and economic interests at an international level. However, it is certain that China no longer wants to be a hostage of North Korea.
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