Small State, Big Influence: China’s North Korea Policy Dilemma

Tianyi Wang

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 literature on behaviors of small and big powers during the Cold War period as a 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’s conduct. As a small power, North Korea can ignore its influence on international society and pursue parochial interests. On the other hand, China must consider the global implications of its policies before it reacts to North Korea’s behavior.

On 12 February 2013, North Korea conducted its third underground nuclear test, potentially improving its capacity to develop miniaturized nuclear devices for delivery on intercontinental ballistic missiles.¹ In response to yet another nuclear provocation, then Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi summoned the North Korean ambassador to China on the same day of the test in order to express China’s strong dissatisfaction and opposition, reiterating China’s consistent stance on “de-nuclearization and maintaining [the] peace and stability of the Korean peninsula.”² On 7 March 2013, 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 Chinese Communist Party (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 has signaled a shift in its North Korea policy and may abandon North Korea as its long-term ally.

However, the Chinese government rejected interpretations that China may have significantly changed its North Korea policy. At a press conference during the plenary meeting of the National People’s Congress in March 2013, Yang Jiechi claimed that China’s support for stricter sanctions on North Korea should not be viewed as a fundamental shift in the direction of China’s North Korea policy. In addition, trade along the Chinese border has continued as usual and the public bus service between Yanbian Autonomous Prefecture, China, and North Korea is still running. The bus runs from Yanji, the capital of Yanbian, to Rasong, a free-trade zone jointly developed by China and North Korea. Officials in Dandong, a city in China’s northeast which borders North Korea, confirmed that border trade policy remained the same and trade did not appear to have slowed down. In an interview with China News Network, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) General Liu Yuan supported UN sanctions on North Korea, but meanwhile recognized “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 Xinhua, “[China] resolutely opposes North Korea’s nuclear test, but also recognizes that North Korea has a reason to be concerned about its...

---

5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.

security.” Why does the Chinese government endorse this 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. The article endorses conventional perceptions that North Korea endures as a strategic buffer zone to some extent (particularly when there is no ongoing nuclear provocation), but also acknowledges that such thinking is becoming less influential in policy decision-making. While recognizing an influx of refugees into China as a potential problem, this paper asserts 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. Initially, China and North Korea shared ideological affinities, but deep-rooted historical problems and the widening ideological gap since China’s economic reform suggests China is not likely to support North Korea simply because both states follow communist systems. China is North Korea’s largest trading partner, but China derives more benefit from trade with South Korea. Hence, none of these conventional understandings adequately explain China’s rigid North Korea policy.

This article employs literature on small and large power behaviors as a theoretical framework to analyze China’s North Korea policy rigidity. My argument is premised on three points. First, as a small state, North Korea cares little about the effects of its belligerent and provocative actions at the international level. Thus, North Korea actively uses its leverage to bargain with China through the states’ de jure alliance. Second, as a major power, China has more to lose than North Korea in the event of military conflict on the peninsula. Given this unbalanced relationship, China is essentially held hostage to North Korea. Third, as the United States increases its presence in the Asia-Pacific, the lack of strategic trust between China and the United States reinforces China’s policy dilemma. China is concerned with the purpose of a strong U.S. presence in and policy adjustment towards the Asia-Pacific region. In this context, the U.S. response to North Korean provocations complicates China’s policy calculation. In the next section, I discuss conventional views of China’s continued support for North Korea, despite North Korea’s increasingly provocative posture toward the region. I assess

---

these conventional understandings and provide counterarguments. Next, I apply the theoretical framework on the behaviors and influence of big and small states to determine why China is reluctant to significantly change its North Korea policy in the face of continued North Korean nuclear provocations. Finally, this article examines China’s recent adjustment in its North Korea policy, as well as implications for future policy changes.

Conventional Answers for China’s Rigid North Korea Policy

North Korea as a Strategic Buffer Zone

One conventional understanding asserts 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 a U.S. military presence on the Korean peninsula. China fears that in the event of a North Korean regime collapse, a strong and unified Korea would present a direct military threat on its border. Historically, the Korean peninsula has been a sensitive region for China. China shares an 870-mile long border with North Korea. In the early twentieth century, Japan invaded China via the peninsula. In the late 1950s, a potential invasion by the United States posed a serious security threat to China. The China-North Korea alliance 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. Yet, the view of North Korea as a buffer zone prevailed, and Chinese “voluntary” forces were sent to defend North Korea as a buffer zone prevailed, and Chinese “voluntary” forces were sent to defend North Korea. By the end of the Korean War, more than half a million Chinese had lost their lives. The Korean War’s huge cost made it difficult for Chinese leadership at the time to make public changes to their policy of maintaining North Korea as a buffer zone.
strategic buffer zone. In 1961, China and North Korea signed the Sino-Korean Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance, resulting in the *de jure* alliance between the two countries and obligating China to defend North Korea against unprovoked aggression.¹⁵ The treaty institutionalized and reinforced the view of North Korea as a valuable strategic buffer that China must defend.

However, the value of North Korea as a buffer zone has declined since the end of the Korean War. China normalized diplomatic relations with the United States in 1979. In 1991, the Cold War ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Finally, Northeast Asia witnessed the normalization of Sino-South Korean relations in 1992.¹⁶ China has since achieved rapid economic growth and military modernization. Although strategic mistrust still lingers, China’s regional security environment has substantially improved from that of the Korean War and Cold War period.

North Korea’s continued nuclear tests have made the country a direct security threat to China. North Korea’s third nuclear test indicates the regime has potentially improved its capacity to develop miniaturized nuclear devices for possible delivery on an intercontinental ballistic missile.¹⁷ A nuclear North Korea helps strengthen the U.S.-Japan-ROK alliances to counter provocations; increase the U.S. military presence on the Korean peninsula and commitment to missile defenses; enhance North Korea’s capability to deter foreign powers, including China; and bolster the potential threat of a North Korean cross border artillery attack against China (even though North Korea’s ill will and military power is concentrated more on the United States and South Korea).¹⁸ On 6 March 2014, the South Korean government reported a North Korean artillery launch minutes before a Chinese commercial plane flew in the same airspace.¹⁹ Though the incident appeared to be a

coincidence and did not endanger the safety of Chinese flights, similar events could increase security risks in China’s Northeast region. None of the aforementioned situations serve China’s security interests.\(^\text{20}\)

In addition, the third nuclear test took place 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 on the Richter scale.\(^\text{21}\) The potential for environmental contamination has led to growing Chinese public concern over China’s domestic security and social frustration regarding both the North Korean regime and Beijing’s inability to persuade Pyongyang.\(^\text{22}\) Small-scale protests and demonstrations took place all around China in days following the test. On 16 February 2013, ten protestors gathered outside a shopping mall in Guangzhou with slogans accusing North Korea of “[harming] Chinese land and [destroying] the world environment.”\(^\text{23}\) On the same day, residents living near the North Korean border protested outside a North Korean consular office in Liaoning Province. During the protest, the demonstrators shouted, “[We] urge the international community to impose harsher economic and military sanctions on North Korea’s autocratic government, and we call on the Chinese government to suspend aid for North Korea.”\(^\text{24}\) Supporting North Korea has not only failed to ensure China’s security interests, but also imposed new challenges for the domestic legitimacy of Chinese leadership. Thus, the buffer zone has become a trouble zone for China.

\(^{20}\) Some may argue that North Korea’s nuclear provocations distract major powers’ attention away from China’s military spending and regional aggressiveness and provide justification for China’s increase in military spending. However, in the aftermath of the third nuclear test, China’s military spending budget was not ignored by major powers but instead closely followed and widely reported. China’s role in the region has also been highlighted often as “Chinese aggression” in the Western media: China’s responses to the Philippines’ legal challenge over the maritime disputes was filed within a week of North Korea’s February 2013 test. The widespread coverage of China’s stepped-up patrols in disputed regions of the East and South China Seas and the occasional issues that emerge between Chinese air force and sea patrols and the U.S. military vessels traveling through China’s EEZ were also widely discussed. There is no public record in which China claims that a planned increase in military spending is due to North Korea’s nuclear provocation. As long as China stays in its de jure alliance with North Korea, it is unlikely that China will ever use North Korea’s nuclear provocations as a tool to justify increased military expenditures.


\(^{23}\) Ibid.

\(^{24}\) Ibid.

Fear of the Refugee Influx

The second conventional understanding of China’s North Korea policy contends that the Chinese government fears a flood of refugees would result from North Korea’s regime collapse, which would cause an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. Thus, China props up the North Korean regime to avoid this instability.\textsuperscript{25} Since the late 1990s, an estimated 200,000 to 300,000 North Koreans have escaped North Korea’s stringent control and entered China in search of food, employment, or opportunities to defect to South Korea.\textsuperscript{26} The number of North Koreans crossing the Chinese border has increased as economic collapse and food crises continue to haunt North Korea. Although North Korea has strengthened patrols and border inspections, the Chinese government worries that regime collapse could result in even more North Korean refugees escaping to China and destabilizing security in Northeast China.\textsuperscript{27}

Although China’s concerns over the refugee issue are legitimate, these concerns insufficiently explain the rigidity of China’s North Korea policy given the more direct and severe nuclear threat North Korea poses. 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 slavery.\textsuperscript{28} Some female North Korean escapees were forced to live as “live-in-maids” of Chinese farmers living along China’s northeastern borders.\textsuperscript{29} 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, including Mongolia, Cambodia, and Vietnam, to defect to South Korea.\textsuperscript{30} In 2004, 468 North Koreans travelled through China and reached Vietnam, where they turned to the South Korean Embassy and defected to South Korea.\textsuperscript{31} Infuriated, the North Korean leadership pressured China to classify North

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{25}Xie; Berry, 55; Chance and Kim (\textit{Reuters}); Jeffries, 522.
\item \textsuperscript{26}William E. Berry, \textit{Global Security Watch Korea} (London: Praeger Security International, 2008), 60.
\item \textsuperscript{27}Korea Institute for National Unification, \textit{White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea} (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2011), 496.
\item \textsuperscript{28}Marcus Noland, \textit{Avoiding the Apocalypse} (Washington DC: Institute for International Economics, 2000), 189.
\item \textsuperscript{29}Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{30}Korea Institute for National Unification, \textit{White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea}, 496.
\item \textsuperscript{31}Berry, \textit{Global Security Watch Korea}, 55.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Korean defectors as economic migrants rather than political refugees.\textsuperscript{32} This classification allows China to repatriate North Korean refugees back to North Korea for punishment, rather than continue to offer them protection in order 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 instead of permanently staying in China.

Even if the regime collapses and large numbers of North Koreans flee to China, China and other regional powers have potential means to manage the situation. First, the People’s Liberation Army (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. Since China and Japan are the world’s second and third largest economies, their deceleration following a North Korean collapse would hinder global economic growth. Therefore, rather than letting China alone shoulder the burden of refugees, the United States and other powers would cooperate with China on humanitarian issues.

\textit{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 relationship as grounded in the life and bloodshed of the revolutionary pioneers.\textsuperscript{33} As two of the world’s “Last Leninists,” Beijing and Pyongyang jointly experienced the collapse of the Soviet Union from 1989 to 1991. For China, North Korea is more than simply 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 regimes to justify their rule.\textsuperscript{34} Therefore, Beijing would like to see the North Korean regime continue indefinitely.

\textsuperscript{32} Berry, \textit{Global Security Watch Korea}, 55.
\textsuperscript{33} You, “China and North Korea: a Fragile Relationship of Strategic Convenience,” 388.
\textsuperscript{34} Scobell, \textit{China and North Korea}, 2.
However, ideological affinity between China and North Korea seems to be, at best, a myth. China and North Korea have deeply-rooted historical problems with each other dating back to North Korea’s founding period. Early North Korean 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 Kim became the national leader, he joined forces with elites from the factions associated with the Soviet Union to purge leaders from the China factions. The People’s Republic of China’s founding leaders thus became greatly dissatisfied with Kim. Moreover, the Kim family showed pictures of the Chinese People’s Volunteer Army’s (CPV) sacrifice during the Korean War when Chinese leaders visited Pyongyang, but the North Korean government mentioned little about China’s contribution to the North Korean populace. North Korea’s ideology of Juche emphasizes self-reliance. Many Chinese feel this is an insult given that North Korea relied heavily on China for economic and political support.

As China continues with economic development and modernization, the ideological gap between China and North Korean leaders has become increasingly obvious. North Korea viewed China’s economic reform and opening up to global markets as a betrayal of communism. When Kim Jong Il visited China in 1983, Deng Xiaoping took him to Shenzhen, hoping that Shenzhen’s rapid development would inspire Kim Jong Il to learn from China’s reforms and conduct similar economic reform in North Korea. However, Kim never revisited Shenzhen, and instead criticized almost every major reform policy China adopted. Therefore, ideological affinities between China and North Korea have faded to such an extent that they cannot explain China’s current support for North Korea.

**Trade**

The fourth conventional understanding of China’s position on the Korean peninsula is that China benefits significantly from trade with North Korea and, therefore,
would not take any action that could disrupt China-North Korea 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 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 gross domestic product (GDP) of only $28 billion, which is much smaller than China’s trade with South Korea.\(^4\)\(^1\) As China’s fourth largest trading partner, South Korea’s trade volume with China reached $207 billion in 2010.\(^4\)\(^2\) China benefits significantly more from South Korea purely 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.\(^4\)\(^3\) Numerous Chinese businessmen have lost money due to broken promises and double-dealing by the North Korean regime.\(^4\)\(^4\) 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, and big companies that are supported or subsidized by the Chinese government rarely invest in North Korea.\(^4\)\(^5\) Given these difficulties, the limited benefits that China gains from trade with North Korea is the least convincing among the conventional explanations for why China keeps supporting North Korea.

Nevertheless, there is some truth in these conventional arguments. The buffer zone mentality has remained powerful among some members of the Chinese senior leadership, especially the conservatives in the PLA.\(^4\)\(^6\) The scenario under which the regime would collapse or the Korean peninsula would unify still

\(^4\)\(^4\) Ian Jeffries, Contemporary North Korea (London: Routledge, 2010), 543.
\(^4\)\(^5\) Ibid., 542.
remains obscure; hence, refugees could be a problem. While limited in scope, there are some remaining ideological similarities. Although China’s national economy is not greatly affected by trade with North Korea, some individuals in North-eastern 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 to reconsider its political and economic security calculations on the Korean peninsula. Continuing to sustain a North Korea that could threaten China’s national security with nuclear weapons is increasingly viewed as a less viable 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 reconsider its North Korea policy, and if none of the above alone adequately explain the rigidity of China’s North Korea policy, then the question remains as to why China finds it so difficult to alter its position on North Korea.

**Small State, Big Influence**

Literature that covers the behavior and influence of small allies on U.S. foreign policymaking during the Cold War period, particularly during the 1950s and 1960s, contributes to the understanding of China’s paradox of absolute and actual influence on North Korea. This literature also helps explain why China seems to be restricted in terms of its North Korea policy options and is reluctant to make changes. Literature on the influence of small states mainly seeks to explain how small allies of the United States were able to bargain with superpowers such as the United States in order to alter U.S. policies and achieve the small powers’ political ends. While specifically designed around the U.S. alliance system, the theory can be applied in various situations because the calculation of interests, policy options, and toolkit for these 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, the Philippines, and Taiwan. As a central power of the West, the United
States 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.

When analyzing the conspicuity 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” as the basis for his analysis of small power behaviors. Rothstein proposes 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; and 3) the state’s leaders see its weakness as essentially unalterable. In addition, Rothstein focuses 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 finds that small states tend to focus on current “imperatives of immediate security,” rather than long-term consequences. Rothstein and Keohane’s findings on small and big power behaviors serve as the theoretical framework for this paper’s analysis.

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:

48 Ibid, 164.
49 Ibid, 162.

[16] Georgetown Journal of Asian Affairs
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, 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.52

The definition of a small power also requires that the state’s security environment is highly unstable, and that the state’s leaders do not think they can change the situation.53 North Korea fulfills all three requirements of the small power definition. North Korea 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 global diplomatic relations. On the other hand, North Korea remains isolated, implements problematic economic policies, and lags increasingly far behind South Korea. Additionally, South Korea’s cooperation with the United States and the gradual infiltration of information from the outside world into North Korea make the DPRK leadership extremely insecure regarding the control and survival of the regime. Furthermore, 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 time until the Northern regime is absorbed by the South.

North Korea thus is able to act in 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.54 At this point, the motivation for nuclear tests has increased because the North Korean leaders believe they will soon succeed in obtaining usable nuclear weapons technology.55 North Korea has incorporated nuclear technology as an integral component of the regime’s survival.56 The smaller the state’s power, the more it can ignore patterns of

---

53 Ibid.
of international politics and advance its own vital interests; a small state’s actions cannot substantially affect the international system.\textsuperscript{57} Thus, no matter how 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—precisely because these weapons are the Kim family’s only option 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 a threat to the regime’s survival.

\textit{China: Concerned About Complicated Regional Dynamics}

Unlike North Korea, China is a major global power and must view the \textit{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.”\textsuperscript{58} Such powers must consider that the actions they take or the leverage they use may result in outcomes that do not serve their interests.\textsuperscript{59} 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 Korean provocations, China is currently such a big power that it must make foreign policy decisions with extra caution.

As a big power with more influence over North Korea than any other country, China has the most leverage to pressure North Korea. However, as a country more advanced than North Korea in terms of economic development and quality of life, and as a rising power seeking national rejuvenation and recognition as a global player, China also has 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.\textsuperscript{60} For instance, in early 1996 North Korea asked China for a large amount of grain.\textsuperscript{61} China offered only one-tenth of the requested amount in return. Kim Jong II, infuriated by the Chinese response, threatened the

\textsuperscript{57} Keohane, “The Big Influence of Small Allies,” 162.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 164.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{60} You, “China and North Korea: a Fragile Relationship of Strategic Convenience,” 391.
\textsuperscript{61} Scobell, \textit{China and North Korea}, 5.

[18] Georgetown Journal of Asian Affairs
Chinese leadership that Pyongyang would initiate talks with Taiwan unless China offered an amount of grain even larger than the amount originally requested. Since the return of Taiwan to mainland China remains a component of China’s core interests, this threat struck a chord with Beijing. Although Beijing did not meet all of Pyongyang’s demands, 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-North Korea relationship is largely asymmetrical, with China meeting North Korean needs and gaining little 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 Korea, but is unable to use that leverage without harming its 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.  

China fears that changing its North Korea policy without careful calculation could incur greater cost for China; Beijing is particularly concerned that if it punishes Pyongyang too severely, North Korea will retaliate against China before it acts against the United States or its allies.

The situation became even more complicated for China following North Korea’s successful third nuclear test. The continued nuclear provocations have interrupted China’s hierarchy of interests on the Korean peninsula, forcing 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.  

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 questions regarding what is more destabilizing: North Korea having nuclear weapons, or the collapse of the regime?

---

62 Scobell, China and North Korea, 5.
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 Politburo Standing Committee has overall control over China’s North Korea policy, although they regularly consult with the Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group. Policy is implemented largely through the International Department, PLA, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Staffed mostly by CCP conservatives, the International Department still views the Korean War as “the War to Resist America and Aid Korea.” This skews perceptions of the security environment and causes a rift between the Foreign Ministry and those responsible for relations with Pyongyang, making it difficult for experienced diplomats to exert influence on China’s North Korea policy. The PLA also helps protect and manage Sino-DPRK relations. The majority of the Chinese military believes that “North Korea is a strategic piece of territory for China, not in the sense that it is intrinsically valuable, but in the sense that Beijing can never allow it to fall into the hands of another.” Influential stakeholders’ decision-making process and divergent strategic mindsets regarding China-North Korea relations does, to some extent, inhibit the evolution of a more adroit approach to North Korea.

The United States: 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 contain China’s rise in the international system. For example, as part of the “Pivot to Asia,” in 2011 the United States and Australia initiated plans for rotational deployments of U.S. Marines to Darwin, Australia. Through rotational deployments, the United States is able to expand its presence in Asia beyond traditional allies. When asked about China’s response to the Marine deployment,

66 Ibid.
a spokesperson from China’s Defense Ministry stated that the U.S.-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.”  

In addition, he commented, “Any strengthening and expansion of military alliances is an expression of a Cold War mentality.” The recent increase in U.S. military presence in the Pacific has induced strategic mistrust between China and the United States, making practical cooperation on the Korean peninsula difficult.

Within this context, China views the purpose of the U.S. presence and adjustments in the Asia-Pacific with doubts and concern. 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; others view proliferation threats as excuses for the United States and its allies to engage in provocative actions, thereby 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?

Taken alone, none of the traditional views—Cold War strategic mentality, potential humanitarian crisis, ideological similarities, or trade—sufficiently explain why China has continued to support North Korea. Due to the asymmetric nature of the China-North Korea alliance, Pyongyang 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 on North Korea. North Korea’s

70 Ibid.
72 Ibid.
significant leveraging power—the ability to bargain with China or switch sides and bargain with the United States—continuously binds China. Recent Chinese scholarly discussions and diplomatic actions—or the lack there-of—regarding North Korea continue to challenge the aforementioned conventional understandings because they reflect not so much the four interpretations of why China has to support North Korea, but rather China’s response to the evolving and complicated security environment that China sits in today. These actions also hint at a different scenario for the China-North Korea alliance. A small state such as North Korea can take the big power’s supported institutions and environment for granted only so long as the big power remains committed to its initial policies and strategies. As North Korea moves forward with its nuclear programs and provocative behavior, China, although not ready to break ties with its unruly neighbor, has become less dedicated to the alliance and more willing to assert pressure on North Korea. In the academic sphere, many prominent Chinese scholars on North Korea issues have suggested that China change its 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 “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.” Shen Dingli, Vice President of the Institute of International Studies at Fudan University, argued in a Foreign Policy article, “Let’s face it: China has reached a point where it needs to cut its losses and cut North Korea loose.”

Meanwhile, the Xi administration has employed a firm and pragmatic approach that prioritizes denuclearization in managing relations with North Korea. Since the third nuclear test, Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokespersons and officials have started to put denuclearization ahead of maintaining peace on the Korean peninsula when addressing North Korea related

---

issues. Following China’s support of UN Security Council Resolution 2094, the Bank of China halted all dealings with a major North Korean bank in early May 2013. During the Xi-Obama meeting at Sunnylands, California in June 2013, the two leaders reached consensus that North Korea must abandon its nuclear program and agreed to jointly cooperate towards this shared goal. The same month, Xi Jinping and South Korean President Park Geun-hye issued a joint declaration during their first summit in Beijing, which dedicated an entire section to express Beijing and Seoul’s shared position on opposing North Korean nuclear development. When Xi met with North Korean envoy Choe Ryong-hae, Xi told Choe, “The denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and lasting peace on the peninsula is what the people want and also the trend of the times.” Xi’s maiden trip to the Korean peninsula as President in 2014 was to South Korea, breaking from Chinese leaders’ traditional decision to always visit the North first. During the second Xi-Park summit, the two leaders issued a joint communique that once again emphasized denuclearization and promoting Sino-South Korean relations. While engaging with the United States and South Korea, Xi also raised important issues unrelated to North Korea. However, the emphasis on denuclearization and the lack of direct high level engagement between Xi and

---


North Korean leader Kim Jong Un thus far indicate that while China is unable to completely cut off support for the North Korean regime, China is willing to be less committed should Pyongyang further hinder China’s national security interests.

China’s future North Korea policy remains an open question. In the past, China supported North Korea due to its calculation of security interests. For this same reason, China is currently rearranging policy priorities on the Korean Peninsula with great caution. In the foreseeable future, China may become increasingly adamant about the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, and pragmatically manage and further normalize relations with North Korea. Yet, the material support that has helped the regime to last may still continue. China’s North Korea policy will not fundamentally and rapidly change. Progress will come alongside changes in China’s foreign policy strategy, security environment, and what Beijing considers most threatening to China’s security and economic interests at an international level. However, if Pyongyang intends to sustain the North Korean regime using Chinese support, then it must not pose a threat to China’s security environment. Given North Korea’s determination to develop nuclear weapons, its ability to avoid appearing threatening to Beijing is increasingly compromised. China must prepare for a scenario in which North Korea’s threat to China’s security interests overrides the benefits that China derives from assisting in sustaining the regime.

Tianyi Wang recently received her M.A. in Asian Studies from the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University, where she specialized in Asian political and security issues. Ms. Wang’s research interests include Sino-U.S. relations, Sino-Korean relations, and interactions between politics and economics in Asia.

References


