



# How China Sees North Korea: Three Critical Moments in History and Future Directions

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The North Korean nuclear crisis that we face today is, at its core, a struggle over the regional balance of power. Beijing's deep fear of destabilizing the Kim regime and facing the rise of a unified, pro-US Korean Peninsula at its doorstep, continues to hold it back from fully unleashing its coercive leverage over North Korea. Washington has yet to persuade Chinese leaders that joining the United States to pressure Pyongyang, even at the risk of the Kim regime's collapse, is better for China's short- and long-term security interests than continuing with the status quo.

Securing Beijing's cooperation on denuclearizing North Korea requires a clear understanding of Chinese strategic thinking on the Korean Peninsula. This paper will provide a brief overview of three critical points in the evolution of China's policy toward North Korea: the Korean War and the origins of Beijing's view of North Korea as a buffer state; the second North Korean nuclear crisis of the early 2000s and Beijing's decision to play an active role in the Six Party Talks; and the present era of Xi Jinping, in which a lively debate has emerged on China's long-standing prioritization of stability over the denuclearization of North Korea. The paper will conclude with recommendations for how the United States should approach China to obtain its full cooperation on a strategy of maximum pressure and diplomatic engagement to denuclearize North Korea.

## The Origins of North Korea as a 'Buffer State' in Chinese Strategic Thinking

China and North Korea's complex relationship stretches back to the beginning of the Cold War. In September 1948, Kim Il-sung established the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in territory which had been under the Soviet Union's provisional control since the end of World War II. Both Kim and his rival, Syngman Rhee, the leader of the Republic of Korea (South Korea), sought to unify the entire peninsula under their respective governments. In early 1949, Kim began to urge his

Soviet and Chinese counterparts to support his efforts to launch a military offensive against the South, even before the Chinese communists had consolidated their own victory. Kim finally won their approval in May 1950, despite Soviet and Chinese concerns that Kim's offensive would trigger US intervention on the peninsula. The following month, on June 25, 1950, Kim launched an invasion of South Korea, starting a bloody and destructive war which would end in a stalemate at the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel three years later.

Mao Zedong was initially a reluctant partner in Kim's war of unification. The People's Republic of China had just been established in October 1949, and the Chinese communists had much to do at home. Mao was also worried about the safety of China's strategically important industrial centers located in the northeast, which could become targets if the war were to spill over the Sino-Korean border. Moreover, by agreeing to aid the North Koreans Mao had to set aside his own plans to invade the island of Taiwan—the last stronghold of the Chinese Nationalists.

Despite these great costs, Mao supported Kim's war because he was forced into a difficult position by Stalin and Kim. As Thomas Christensen argues, the new Chinese leader was eager to prove his communist credentials to Stalin and the rest of the world, and could not refuse to back what was billed as a revolutionary cause.<sup>1</sup> And once US troops began to cross the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel in October 1950, Mao directly intervened by sending in Chinese troops to ensure that the United States would not push into Chinese territory. The slogan employed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) during the war, "Resist America, Aid North Korea, and Defend the Chinese homeland" [抗美援朝, 保家卫国], captures Chinese strategic thinking at the time.

Despite the fact that an estimated 180,000 Chinese soldiers were killed,<sup>2</sup> and the PRC gave about 7.3 trillion yuan in aid to North Korea during the Korean War, the Chinese agreed to provide North Korea with another 8 trillion yuan for North Korea's reconstruction efforts once the war ended.<sup>3</sup> This significant aid package, granted when China itself was poor, understandably stirred discontent among the Chinese public. In response, the Central Committee of the CCP issued a document to all party organs that explained why it was necessary to continue to help North Korea. This document also illuminates the Chinese leadership's strategic thinking about the Korean Peninsula from the early days of the Cold War and through the subsequent decades, and is worth quoting at length here:

Those who believe that Chinese-[North] Korean cooperation is one-sided assistance and it is just China aiding [North] Korea are fundamentally wrong. Those who believe the aid to [North] Korea will affect our own economic

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed analysis of this topic, see Thomas J. Christensen's *Worse Than a Monolith: Alliance Politics and Problems of Coercive Diplomacy in Asia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011) pp. 44-62.

<sup>2</sup> "[180,000 Chinese soldiers killed in Korean War](#)," China.org.cn, "June 28, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> "[CCP Central Committee Propaganda Instructions for the Signing of the Sino-Korean Economic and Cultural Cooperation Agreement](#)," December 10, 1953, from the Shanxi Provincial Archives, published by the Cold War International History Project and the North Korea International Documentation Project, Wilson Center Digital Archive.

construction are also fundamentally wrong...to defeat American aggression against the Korean people is not just a matter for the Korean people, but is for all peace loving people around the world, particularly the Chinese people, who have a close interest in the matter. The slogan “to resist America and aid Korea and defend the country” fully embodies this sense... The American imperialists fought to the Yalu River. If they hadn’t been pushed back, there would be no guarantee for China’s construction. If the enemy’s aggressive schemes hadn’t been curbed, peace in the Far East and throughout the world would not have been ensured...Because the dividing line at the 38th parallel is a common line of defense for the Chinese and Korean peoples, it also the common line of defense in defending peace in the Far East and throughout the world. In the struggle over this common line of defense, Korea is situated at the first line and China is at the second line. The strong consolidation of the first line has direct and great significance for the second line. The restoration of every village in [North] Korea and every factory is a force for growth and is closely connected to us. Thus, helping the Korean people to heal the wounds of war and restore their national economy is an important task for the consolidation of our common defense.<sup>4</sup>

As illustrated in this quote, Chinese leaders firmly believed that the defense of North Korea was absolutely necessary for China’s own security and independence. Providing aid to help secure and stabilize North Korea, even when China itself was underdeveloped and war-torn, was seen as worthy cause.

Despite China’s critical help in the Korean War and its generosity in the aftermath, the relationship between North Korea and China was not as warm as one might imagine. While Kim Il-sung had partnered with the Chinese out of necessity, the North Koreans fundamentally distrusted their larger neighbor, and had their own set of grievances against Beijing. For instance, they believed China had been too concerned with its own interests at the expense of North Korea’s during the ceasefire negotiations, and bristled at what they saw as Chinese overreach and violation of their independence. In the years following the Korean War, Beijing and Pyongyang experienced ongoing disputes with Kim purging pro-Chinese members of the North Korean leadership during the 1950s and the two sides engaging in ideological battles throughout the 1960s. Beijing and Pyongyang grew even further apart during the 1980s as China set aside its pursuit of communist revolution and embraced economic development under the pragmatic leadership of Deng Xiaoping. From Pyongyang’s point of view, the ultimate betrayal came when Beijing officially recognized the Republic of Korea in 1992 in its bid to fully engage with and integrate itself into East Asia.

### **From a Passive to Active Diplomatic Approach on North Korea**

When the first North Korean nuclear crisis emerged around the early 1990s, Beijing stood largely on the sidelines. While Chinese leaders agreed in principle to the idea of a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula, they took a hands-off approach to the crisis by simply supporting North Korea’s wish to negotiate bilaterally with the United States.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

China's reluctance to participate in the efforts to denuclearize North Korea in the early 1990s were rooted in two primary reasons: its long-standing belief that the stability of the North Korean state was essential to China's security interests, and its opposition to international sanctions in the name of non-interference. In fact, Beijing had experienced its own sanctions after its brutal crackdown on the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989, and was especially sensitive to US-sponsored sanctions against another communist state.

As a result, the Clinton administration engaged in direct negotiations with Pyongyang, signing the Agreed Framework in 1994. China was not a signatory in the deal, nor was it a part of the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) that was created to administer the agreement. However, the Agreed Framework fell apart with accusations of noncompliance on both sides and mounting frustrations with North Korea's continued missile tests. In 2002, the George W. Bush administration came into office skeptical of the Agreed Framework and determined to take a tougher stance on Pyongyang, famously designating North Korea as part of the "axis of evil." Along with the hawkish shift in the new administration, any possibility to continue where the Clinton administration had left off disappeared when the US intelligence community determined that North Korea was harboring a covert highly enriched uranium (HEU) program in violation of the Agreed Framework in the summer of 2002.

The Bush administration was determined not to negotiate on a bilateral basis with Pyongyang this time, and insisted that China had to be a part of the solution because of its close ties to North Korea. Beijing was indeed a critical player in any multilateral approach because it had become Pyongyang's lone patron following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Intense lobbying by the Bush administration, as well as China's fears of military action in North Korea after witnessing the US invasion of Iraq, spurred Beijing to finally set aside its traditional hands-off approach to North Korea. It agreed to take on a significant role in the multilateral efforts to denuclearize North Korea.

As its opening move, China cut the flow of oil to North Korea citing technical difficulties in the early spring of 2003. Being North Korea's primary oil supplier, China's actions were seen as a sign to Pyongyang to follow Beijing's lead. Then on March 8, 2003, Qian Qichen, then vice premier of the State Council, traveled to Pyongyang to convince Kim Jong-il to take part in a three-party dialogue with the United States and China. Kim refused at first, but finally agreed after Qian emphasized that the United States would have it no other way. The Three Party Talks were held in Beijing in April 2003. Although the meetings did not accomplish much, they set the foundation for future multilateral rounds and evolved into the Six Party Talks later that year.

With China as the host nation, the six parties, which included the United States, China, North Korea, South Korea, Japan, and Russia met in several rounds from 2003 to 2009. The negotiations progressed in fits and starts, with a promising breakthrough in late 2005 when Pyongyang agreed to abandon its nuclear program in exchange for food and energy assistance, and ultimate steps toward a peace agreement with the United States. But the talks broke down again when the United

States placed sanctions on a bank in Macau that was suspected of laundering millions of dollars for North Korea. Pyongyang followed with vehement protests and its first nuclear test in 2006. Despite all parties coming back to the table several times after the first test, progress was continually dashed by North Korea's missile tests and provocations. Beijing, however, continued to shield its ally from tough sanctions with the hope that the Kim regime would moderate its behavior and follow in China's footsteps by engaging in economic reform and opening, but to no avail.

## **The Xi Jinping Era and Growing Chinese Debate on North Korea Policy**

Since Xi Jinping's rise to power in 2012, Beijing has taken less pains to hide its disdain for Pyongyang. Xi notably visited South Korea for his first trip to the Korean Peninsula as president, and has yet to meet with Kim Jong-un. The two states maintain only minimal contact through routine bureaucratic exchanges and formal letters. And Beijing refers to its relationship with Pyongyang as "normal state-to-state relations," as opposed to a "blood alliance"—the term normally used in the past. Furthermore, China implied recently that it will not come to the defense of North Korea if it launches a unilateral attack on the United States, as reflected in a *Global Times* editorial published in August 2017.<sup>5</sup>

North Korea's open disregard for China's interests, as reflected by missile tests that coincide with important Chinese diplomatic occasions, and the testing of nuclear weapons close to China's northeastern border, have increased Beijing's frustration with its ally. Pyongyang's behavior has sparked a lively debate in China on the wisdom of shielding North Korea in the name of stability. High-profile scholars like Shen Zhihua, Zhu Feng, and Jia Qingguo have begun calling on their government to rethink its long-standing policy toward North Korea.<sup>6</sup> These scholars, as well as many others, question whether North Korea is still an essential buffer state and see Pyongyang as a liability rather than an asset.

Not everyone, however, is calling for a major shift in policy. While most observers have no sympathy for Pyongyang, some believe Beijing should continue to take a moderate approach on North Korea to prevent Pyongyang from turning its nuclear weapons on China. Other more hardline voices claim that it is in China's strategic interest to leave the United States tied up with the nuclear crisis. Finally, there are a shrinking number of people who still believe that the historical ties between China and North Korea should not be forgotten and that Beijing should stand by its communist ally.

## **The Need for Smart Diplomacy to Secure China's Cooperation on North Korea**

The fact that these debates can now take place in the open and even within the state-controlled media is notable, and reflects the top leadership's acknowledgement

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<sup>5</sup> "[Reckless Game Over the Korean Peninsula Runs Risk of Real War](#)," *Global Times*, August 10, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Shen Zhihua, "The "THAAD" Issue from the Perspective of Sino-North Korean Relations," Lecture at Dalian Foreign Studies University, March 19, 2017; Zhu Feng, "[China's North Korea Liability: How Washington Can Get Beijing to Rein In Pyongyang](#)," *Foreign Affairs*, July 11, 2017; Jia Qingguo, "[Time to Prepare for the Worst in North Korea](#)," East Asia Forum, September 11, 2017.

of the need for new ideas on North Korea. The most important question, however, is where Xi will position himself in this ongoing debate. It remains to be seen whether he will accelerate China's pressure campaign vis-à-vis North Korea, relaxing long-standing limits to protect the Kim regime's stability, or if he will continue with minimum gestures to keep the Trump administration placated. To ensure Xi chooses the former approach, smart diplomacy by the Trump administration is necessary.

If we draw lessons from China's about-face from the first to second North Korean nuclear crisis, when it shifted from its hands-off approach to convene and actively participate in the Six Party Talks, we can see two major factors that precipitated this policy shift: fear of an American attack on North Korea, and persistent lobbying by the Bush administration on the need for China play a role in denuclearization talks. US leaders should, therefore, both raise the credibility of US military action in North Korea, while continuing to urge Beijing that its unrestrained participation in the pressure campaign is the only hope for a diplomatic path to denuclearize North Korea.

Pursuing these two methods require a measure of finesse that has been missing in some aspects of the Trump administration's handling of the situation. While threatening "fire and fury" and trading insults with the Kim regime heightened concern in the region about the possibility of war, these actions also unnerved US allies and raised concerns about whether President Trump understands the gravity of war. The Trump administration should instead issue firm and unambiguous statements on what kinds of limited military responses Pyongyang should expect to see if it conducts a missile test, a nuclear test, or if it attacks South Korean, Japanese, or US territory. Such controlled declarations could be useful for communicating to Pyongyang, Beijing, and American allies that the United States has a purposeful plan of military action in place—that it will not escalate unnecessarily, for instance, over a war of words between the American and North Korean leaders, but that it will indeed take action when North Korea engages in provocations. The Trump administration should match these warnings with a continued increase in the presence of US military assets and exercises in the region to demonstrate US capabilities and readiness to engage in any military action.

Second, the Trump administration should continue to stress to Chinese leaders that until Kim feels he must make a choice between nuclear weapons and regime survival, he has no reason to give up his nuclear weapons. Confronting North Korea with this choice requires China's willingness to exercise the full extent of its coercive leverage vis-à-vis the Kim regime. President Trump should take care not to show satisfaction with nominal measures by Beijing. He should continue to stress to President Xi that his desire for stability and his country's long-term security interests will be better served by working with the United States to push North Korea to come to the negotiating table with the serious intent to denuclearize. Furthermore, as I have argued elsewhere, the two states, along with South Korea, Japan, and Russia, must engage in serious conversations about a mutually acceptable framework for the Korean Peninsula in case the North Korean regime collapses as an unintended result of the pressure campaign.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Patricia Kim, "[A Grand Bargain for the Long Game on the Korean Peninsula](#)," *Asia Unbound*.

Freezing and ultimately dismantling North Korea's nuclear arsenal is unlikely to be achieved in the short-term, but a tightly coordinated campaign of economic pressure, carefully calibrated military threats, and diplomatic assurances led by the United States, China, and South Korea, along with the support of Japan and Russia, is the only means to a peaceful solution on the Korean Peninsula. Securing China's cooperation in this endeavor is critical for its success. Today, Beijing stands at a crossroads with regards to its North Korea policy. It is imperative to seize this opportunity to urge Chinese leaders to make the right choice, through persistent diplomacy and demonstrations of US resolve, informed by an understanding of China's strategic thinking on the Korean Peninsula. ■

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