

Sino-North Korean Relations in the Post-Kim Jong-il Era: U.S. Perspectives*

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Pyongyang's nuclear and missile tests have put China in a somewhat awkward position, causing tension between China's role as an emerging global actor with increasing international responsibilities and its commitment to North Korea as an ally. Beijing has adopted a "measured policy" toward North Korea, balancing efforts to both constrain Pyongyang's belligerence and sustain its system. Such a measured response has often raised skepticism in the United States about China's willingness to resolve the issue of North Korean provocations, but this clearly reflects Beijing's ambivalence on these matters in deference to its own intrinsic national interests. This paper examines opinions and analyses by U.S. experts and policy-makers in order to better understand how the United States perceives the Sino-North Korean relationship, particularly after the death of Kim Jong-il.

Key Words: Sino-North Korean relationship, Chinese interests in North Korea, U.S.-Sino relationship, Chinese foreign policy, North Korea

Introduction

The People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) are allies with long historical and ideological ties dating back to the Korean War. Today, the PRC-DPRK relationship is essential to the survival of the North Korean regime. China is the

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DPRK's largest trading partner and its main source of food aid, arms, and fuel. It also regularly opposes "harsh international economic sanctions against the DPRK in the hope of avoiding regime collapse and an uncontrolled influx of refugees across its eight-hundred-mile border with North Korea."¹ However, Pyongyang's nuclear and missile tests have put China in a somewhat awkward position, creating tension between China's role as an emerging global actor with increasing international responsibilities and its commitment to North Korea as an ally. Beijing has responded to this situation by adopting a "measured policy," balancing efforts to both constrain Pyongyang's belligerency and sustain its system.² Beijing, either intentionally or unintentionally, has failed to show an effective capacity to restrain provocations by Pyongyang. Nevertheless, most U.S. analysts and government officials believe that Beijing holds more leverage over Pyongyang than any other country and that its cooperation is essential in coping with North Korea.

The death of Kim Jong-il in December 2011 and the subsequent power succession to his son, Kim Jong-un, has raised numerous concerns within the international community about the country's future. Can the state survive a third generation transition of power? Will the new regime continue to demonstrate belligerence toward the international community, or will it attempt to improve its relationships with the outside world? While little is known about what type of leader Kim Jong-un will be, the response by the international community (including the United States) to the extreme uncertainty of the situation has been to cautiously seek ways to re-engage with Pyongyang, with a particular expectation of Beijing's involvement in the process.

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1. Jayshree Bajoria, "The China-North Korea Relationship," Council on Foreign Relations, October 7, 2010, <http://www.cfr.org/china/china-north-korea-relationship/p11097> (Accessed on April 10, 2012).
 2. A "measured policy" means a planned, strategic response to others' actions displaying consistent and clear aims. China, as will be seen below, has responded cautiously and strategically to North Korea. It has basically supported Pyongyang to prevent its collapse, while firmly opposing its nuclear and missile development.

However, Pyongyang's attempt to launch the Kwangmyongsong-3 satellite into orbit on April 13, 2012 (commonly believed to be a disguised attempt to test the DPRK's long-range missile capabilities), despite its failure, has chilled what seemed to be a warming of U.S.-DPRK relations and further complicated the political dynamics between Washington and Beijing. The White House's response was to immediately condemn North Korea's rocket launch, characterizing it as "a provocative act undermining regional security," and "violating international law." It also warned of a halt to delivery of U.S. food aid.³ In contrast, China avoided making an immediate response, opting instead to urge the international community to exercise restraint so as not to disturb stability on the Korean peninsula. Such a measured response has often raised skepticism in the United States of China's willingness to resolve the issue of North Korean provocations, but clearly reflects Beijing's ambivalence on these matters in deference to its own intrinsic national interests. The consistency of Chinese responses to North Korean actions raises certain questions: Is Beijing willing to protect Pyongyang? How much influence does it really have over North Korea? What are the constraints on its power over its smaller, weaker ally? This paper examines opinions and analyses by U.S. experts and policy-makers in order to better understand how the United States perceives the Sino-North Korean relationship, particularly focusing on how Beijing may react to North Korean provocations after the death of Kim Jong-il.

Chinese Influence over North Korea

The question of how much influence Beijing has over Pyongyang is a common discussion topic among Korea experts. Expert opinions in the United States tend to fall into two major schools of thought on

3. Anne Gearan, "White House: Failed North Korean Rocket Launching 'Provocative'," *Associated Press*, April 13, 2012, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/white-house-failed-north-korean-rocket-launching-provocative/> (Accessed on April 13, 2012).

this subject: One segment believes China protects North Korea at all costs, while the other believes that China has no real (or very little) tangible influence over it. While there is ample evidence to support either view, the opacity of Chinese decision-making processes makes it difficult to verify which view more accurately reflects reality. U.S. Senator Jim Webb, chair of the East Asia and Pacific Affairs Subcommittee of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, represents the first camp. He argues, “The whole region would benefit from the Chinese government being more open and visible in assisting us with international situations such as the stand-off with North Korea.”⁴ Webb’s view suggests that Washington tends to rely heavily on Beijing’s potential role in convincing Pyongyang to abandon its controversial weapons programs and return to the Six-Party Talks. However, a growing number of U.S. analysts and officials are reaching the conclusion that China has little, if any, influence over the DPRK. Alan Romberg, a former U.S. State Department official and Stimson Center expert, suggests, “Pyongyang has spit in the [People’s Republic of China’s] eye, and despite the historical and ideological alliance between the two, Beijing has little control over Pyongyang.”⁵ For example, in the context of North Korea’s recent rocket launch attempt—touted by North Korea as a part of a peaceful space program but viewed by the international community as an illegal long-range missile test—China proved unable to compel Pyongyang to forego the launch. The American news media reported, “China, North Korea’s closest ally and largest provider of aid, has expressed concern about the planned launch. Beijing says it has held talks with Pyongyang on the matter, but they appear to have had little effect on the North’s plans.”⁶

4. Justin McCurry, “North Korea’s Missile: China’s Problem?” *Global Post*, April 6, 2012, <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/asia-pacific/120405/north-korea-missile-launch-senator-webb> (Accessed on April 13, 2012).

5. Bajoria, “The China-North Korea Relationship.”

6. Paula Hancocks and Jethro Mullen, “North Korea Planning New Nuclear Test, South Korean Intelligence Report Says,” *CNN*, April 9, 2012, http://edition.cnn.com/2012/04/09/world/asia/north-korea-launch/?hpt=hp_t2

Daniel Pinkston, Northeast Asia deputy director for the International Crisis Group, echoes this notion, saying, "In general, Americans tend to overestimate the influence China has over North Korea."⁷ Some American scholars almost sympathize with what they see as a tough position for China to be in. Temple University's Robert Dujarric insists that "[China] doesn't want to give the impression it's supporting what North Korea is doing... It's tough for Beijing. They have to criticize it, but they can't do much more."⁸ He suggests that it may be possible that China has strong economic influence but rather weak political clout with its longtime ally. A 2010 Congressional Research Service report summarizes the situation:

In the case of North Korea, however, no one knows what kind of leverage Beijing actually has with Pyongyang. It may be that PRC leaders are uncertain as well, given North Korea's penchant for the unexpected and its demonstrated willingness at times to reject Chinese overtures, carrot and stick alike. If Chinese leaders are, in fact, unsure of the extent of their own leverage, they appear unwilling to be more assertive in testing what those limits might be.⁹

However, some experts contend that Chinese security interests with North Korea constrain Beijing from exercising its influence over Pyongyang to a full extent. According to Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt, Northeast Asia director for the International Crisis Group, "China has less influence than we think, but more than it uses." She points to the disparity between what the international community expects China to do versus what China believes is in its own national interests. The

(Accessed on April 11, 2012).

7. Bajoria, "The China-North Korea Relationship."
8. Andy Sharp, "N. Korea Rejects Rocket Launch Criticism as China Cautions," *Businessweek*, March 19, 2012, <http://www.businessweek.com/news/2012-03-18/china-presses-n-dot-korea-on-rocket-launch-as-japan-weighs-options> (Accessed on April 11, 2012).
9. Mark E. Manyin and Dick K. Nanto, "China-North Korea Relations," Congressional Research Service, December 28, 2010, p. 7, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R41043.pdf> (Accessed on April 11, 2012).

U.S. priority, for instance, is for Pyongyang “to stop threatening its neighbors and end an illegal nuclear program that is suspected of transferring nuclear technology to other states, such as Syria.” On the other hand, the Chinese priority is “to ensure the impoverished dictatorship does not erupt in revolution or uprisings.” Thus, she asserts, “China fears a flood of refugees more than North Korea’s uranium-enrichment program or missile technology, and sees the North as a useful buffer between it and U.S.-backed democratic South Korea.”¹⁰

U.S. and Chinese Responses to North Korea’s Power Succession and Provocations

If China intentionally avoids confrontation with North Korea over its provocations, what is Beijing’s eventual purpose in regard to the Korean peninsula? If it unintentionally avoids confrontation, what is restraining the Chinese from adamantly and assertively reacting to North Korean provocations? An examination of U.S. and Chinese reactions to North Korea’s power succession and provocations provides clues to better understand Beijing’s lukewarm and ambivalent posture.

Right after the death of Kim Jong-il, the White House announced, “The president reaffirmed the United States’ strong commitment to the stability of the Korean peninsula and the security of our close ally, the Republic of Korea.” President Obama immediately called for cooperation from Japan, China and Russia. The primary U.S. concern in this situation was to prevent North Korea from provoking a military conflict on the Korean peninsula which could spread into Northeast Asia. As such, Washington also expressed a hope for re-engaging Pyongyang. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated, “We reiterate our hope for improved relations with the people of North Korea and remain deeply concerned about their well-being.” Bill Richardson,

10. Calum MacLeaod, “North Korea’s Impending Missile Launch Puts Focus on China,” *USA Today*, April 13, 2012, <http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/story/2012-04-11/north-korea-missile-launch-china/54187674/1> (Accessed on April 13, 2012).

the former Governor of New Mexico who once visited North Korea as an unofficial envoy, expressed “extreme concerns,” especially about any instability the power succession in North Korea could cause, and described conditions on the Korean peninsula as a “tinderbox.” However, he also suggested that he would “lean in favor of engaging North Korea,” stressing that “when we isolated them, it didn’t work.” In general, the United States did not believe there would be a sudden upheaval or a drastic change in the near future. Former State Department Spokesman P.J. Crowley predicted, “As was the case with [Kim Jong-un’s] father, this transition will go on for months, maybe even a year or two. So I don’t know that there will be a whole lot of change in the short term.”¹¹ With that sentiment in mind, Washington has cautiously cultivated opportunities to open a dialogue with Pyongyang. China has also shown deep concern about a potential disturbance in North Korea that could destabilize the Korean peninsula. However, unlike Washington, Beijing’s prime focus lay in supporting the new regime in order to prevent a drastic change in the region. Praising Kim Jong-il as a “great leader” who made “important contributions” to relations with China, the Chinese Foreign Ministry confirmed “the traditional friendship between the two parties” and said it was committed to preserving peace and stability on the peninsula. This measured response affirmed the legitimacy of North Korea’s power succession and reaffirmed China’s commitment to continuing economic and diplomatic support to solidify the regime’s stability.¹² Just prior to his death, Kim Jong-il travelled to China, primarily to confirm Beijing’s support of the transition of power to his son. Upon Kim’s death, Chinese President Hu Jintao issued a condolence statement expressing his wish for North Korea to build a strong socialist country under this

11. M.J. Lee, “Hillary Clinton: Concerns with North Koreans.” *Politico*, December 19, 2012, <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/1211/70634.html> (Accessed on April 12, 2012).

12. Alan Cowell, “Kim’s Death Inspires Worry and Anxiety,” *New York Times*, December 19, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/20/world/asia/kim-jong-ils-death-inspires-anxiety.html?pagewanted=all> (Accessed on April 12, 2012).

new leadership, further strengthening the legitimacy of Kim Jong-un's succession.¹³ What we see in both Washington and Beijing's responses to the death of Kim Jong-il is a common desire to prevent military clashes and maintain stability on the peninsula. However, the United States seeks to change North Korea's behavior and prevent its provocations by engaging the new regime, while China basically aims to preserve the status quo on the Korean peninsula by consolidating Kim Jong-un's power.

In terms of responding to North Korean provocations, Beijing has over the years crafted a cautious and measured strategy for addressing the situation that still allows for the expression of a certain degree of condemnation when it feels it necessary—that is, when North Korea's behavior encroaches on Chinese national security interests. For the most part, Beijing maintains careful control over its public statements and actions regarding North Korea. A brief analysis of these reveals what Beijing may or may not want from its relationship with Pyongyang. When tensions rise on the Korean peninsula, as they did with the North Korean attack on Yeonpyeong Island and the sinking of the ROK naval vessel Cheonan in 2010, as well as over the continued development of North Korea's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs, China has routinely issued statements urging restraint and peaceful discourse. However, Beijing's responses have varied when such provocations have threatened Chinese national security interests. It is clear that China supports Pyongyang through trade, economic development projects, aid, and security agreements, but at times North Korea has incited harsh responses from Beijing. China has tried to balance its alliance with North Korea with its acknowledgement of U.S. and ROK concerns.

In 1994, when the United States tried to pass UN sanctions against North Korea for illegally withdrawing from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, China firmly vetoed the measure. At that time, North

13. Young Hyun Yoon, "China Supports Kim Jong-un," *SBS News*, December 20, 2011, http://news.sbs.co.kr/section_news/news_read.jsp?news_id=N1001049390 (Accessed on April 12, 2012).

Korea's economic situation was deteriorating and its diplomatic capacity was severely impeded by Seoul's *Nordpolitik*. Wary of the potential fallout that would result from the regime's collapse, Beijing provided enormous amounts of assistance to Pyongyang to help it recover from that period of decline. In this instance, Beijing's preference was to maintain political stability on the Korean peninsula even despite North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons. After the first Inter-Korean Summit in 2000, Seoul's economic assistance to Pyongyang grew rapidly, while DPRK continued to expand trade and economic ties with Beijing. In Washington, hawkish neoconservatives pushing for regime change in North Korea retreated, and U.S. policy toward the DPRK softened. North Korea seemed to have survived its most critical phase and muddled through for a substantial period. However, after Pyongyang tested a nuclear weapon in October 2006, China agreed to pass UN Security Council Resolution 1718, which placed sanctions on Pyongyang. American analysts saw this action as a strong shift in the Sino-DPRK relationship from diplomacy to punishment.¹⁴ Less worried at the time about the imminent possibility of regime collapse in Pyongyang, Beijing demonstrated a greater concern that North Korea's nuclear capability might weaken Chinese leverage over the country and eventually disrupt stability on the Korean peninsula. Thus, this time Beijing decided to constrain Pyongyang.

In May 2009, Pyongyang tested a second nuclear device. Once again, China agreed with U.S. and ROK condemnations of the test and responded by supporting UN Security Council Resolution 1874, which placed stricter sanctions on the regime. However, "China also insisted on language in UN Resolution 1874 that allowed for sanctions to be lifted if the DPRK returned to the negotiating table."¹⁵ This allowed China to send a strong message to North Korea, one that the U.S. and ROK overwhelmingly supported, while limiting the damage caused to the Sino-North Korea relationship. What can be surmised from China's reactions to North Korea is that China will

14. Bajoria, "The China-North Korea Relationship."

15. Nanto and Manyin, "China-North Korea Relations," pp. 11-12.

not risk jeopardizing its relationship with DPRK because in the end, Beijing wants to maintain some level of influence on the Korean peninsula and, more importantly, the Sino-DPRK relationship is critical to China's supreme interest of national and territorial integration. The rocket launch by the Kim Jong-un regime on April 13, 2012 put the U.S.-China relationship to the test once again. Pyongyang's announcement of the planned rocket launch reignited tensions and fears that the uncertain, worrisome, and tenuous regime would continue down a path of escalating provocations, becoming a powder keg in the region. The rocket launch was also seen as a blatant breach of the "Leap Day" agreement made between Pyongyang and Washington (which placed a moratorium on nuclear and missile tests and halted the uranium enrichment program at Yongbyon in exchange for 240,000 tons of food aid), and it reversed the U.S. and its allies' willingness to engage North Korea.¹⁶ The White House said that China had, in principle, agreed with the United States to "co-ordinate their responses to any 'potential provocation' if North Korea goes ahead with a planned rocket launch."¹⁷ However, despite President Obama's criticism of China for not being tough enough with North Korea, the Chinese response to the launch turned out to be very measured. China's twin concerns with regard to North Korea—denuclearization and stability—present it with a dilemma, requiring "strategic maneuvering" in order to achieve the seemingly contradictory goals of preventing North Korean collapse while also preventing it from becoming too strong. So while the United States and its allies may want China to conform to a more critical stance toward North Korea, Chinese national interests prevent Beijing from fully cooperating with the international community on North Korean affairs.

16. Kate Andersen Brower and Juliana Goldman, "North Korea Missile Launch Would Be 'Provocative' Act, U.S. Says," *Bloomberg*, April 9, 2012, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-04-09/north-korea-missile-launch-would-be-provocative-act-u-s-says.html> (Accessed on April 12, 2012).

17. "Obama and Hu to Co-ordinate on North Korea Rocket Launch," *BBC News*, March 26, 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-17509349> (Accessed on April 12, 2012).

China's Interests in North Korea

American analysts and government officials have little trouble discerning what China wants from North Korea. The number one objective for China in this relationship is maintaining stability and ensuring that North Korea is not hostile to Chinese interests. Daniel Sneider, an associate research director at Stanford University, suggests, "For the Chinese, stability and the avoidance of war are the top priorities. [...] From that point of view, the North Koreans are a huge problem for them, because Pyongyang could trigger a war on its own."¹⁸ It is clear that the potential for a widespread humanitarian crisis with thousands of North Korean refugees flooding across the border into China is a major concern for Beijing. A 2010 Congressional Research Service report explains:

However unpredictable and annoying the North Korean government may be to Beijing, any conceivable scenario other than maintaining the status quo could seriously damage PRC interests. [...] Within this context, Beijing's continuing economic assistance to North Korea can be easier to explain. Rather than a deliberate attempt to sustain North Korea's nuclear weapons program or undermine an ultimate resolution to the Six-Party Talks, as some have suggested, China's food and energy assistance can be seen as an insurance premium that Beijing remits regularly to avoid paying the higher economic, political, and national security costs of a North Korean collapse, a war on the peninsula, or the subsuming of the North into the South.¹⁹

Maintaining and maximizing Chinese influence over North Korea is an essential component of achieving the goal of stability on the Korean peninsula. China is a major proponent of the Six-Party Talks. The denuclearization of North Korea is in China's national security interests and it uses the Six-Party Talks process to bolster its standing with the United States and South Korea, while still maintaining influence over Pyongyang. The talks allow "Beijing to expand on its mediating

18. Bajoria, "The China-North Korea Relationship."

19. Nanto and Manyin, "China-North Korea Relations," p. 7.

role and offe[r] it the potential, however slight the prospect of a successful conclusion to the talks, of being an original crafter of a key international agreement.”²⁰ As an added benefit, “Continuation of the process provides a more neutral forum for regular conversations with Japan tha[t] might otherwise not be possible given lingering Sino-Japanese tensions and the 2010 clash over the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands.”²¹ It is important to note that China has other interests in Northeast Asia than merely protecting an ideological ally. To date, the Six-Party Talks have been an effective tool for China to elevate its standing as a gateway and mediator into the opaque world of North Korean foreign relations. In addition, Beijing has leveraged the talks in dealings with the United States and South Korea. Moreover, it expects the multilateral security arrangement to act as an instrument to stabilize the Northeast Asian geopolitical environment, which in turn serves its prime national interests.

Beijing’s economic aid to Pyongyang is also intended to promote Chinese economic and geopolitical interests both in North Korea and in Northeast Asia as a whole. Despite North Korea’s fragile economy and urgent need for international aid, China recognizes the commercial and economic advantages to be had in North Korea, especially for its small and medium enterprises. According to a Council on Foreign Relations report, the number of Chinese firms investing in North Korea has been growing rapidly, gaining such economic concessions as preferable trading terms and port operations. In particular, Chinese companies have been aggressively pursuing extraction rights to mineral and energy resources from North Korea’s northern region. The energy resources provided from these mining contracts are essential for developing China’s poorer northeastern provinces (which are predominantly ethnic-Korean populated areas) and for supporting its ever-growing economy. Victor Cha, Korea Chair at the Center for International and Strategic Studies, explains, “What China loses in economic handouts to the North, it is rapidly making back in a series of lucrative mining

20. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

21. *Ibid.*

contracts.”²²

China sees economic development and cooperation as the best means of achieving stability and maintaining the status quo in North Korea. A January 2010 Congressional Research Service report suggests that this must be understood as “part of a Chinese strategy” of stabilizing the border region it shares with North Korea, lessening the pressure on North Koreans to migrate to China, and raising the general standard of living in North Korea.²³ This “buffer zone” strategy is one of the cardinal principles underpinning Beijing’s North Korea policy—a policy designed to manage the border areas while limiting the spread of separatism among ethnic minorities. North Korea is not the only case in which China has demonstrated such concerns. For example, China has expanded its economic presence into Central Asia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. This expansion was driven, in part, by a desire to preclude both Islamic militancy and the incipient nationalism of the newly independent states from penetrating the Chinese border and spreading ethno-nationalism to the Uighurs, Kazakhs, Kirghiz, Uzbeks, and other Muslim ethnic groups in China. Chinese efforts to control these border areas included both the use of force and the intentional migration of Han Chinese into the region in order to dilute the non-Han presence there. Another motive for this economic expansion into Central Asia was to secure Xinjiang’s internal stability by expanding its sphere of influence and fueling its economic development. This build up of “soft power” in the region through economic development and prosperity helped prevent Islamic penetration into China.²⁴ Similarly, underpinning China’s efforts to help maintain stability in North Korea

22. Victor Cha, “Why China Can’t Cut Off North Korea,” *Huffington Post*, April 6, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mobileweb/victor-cha/china-north-korea-relations_b_1404178.html (Accessed on April 12, 2012).

23. Nanto and Manyin, “China-North Korea Relations,” pp. 3-8. Recited from Bajoria, “The China-North Korea Relationship.”

24. S. Enders Wimbush, “Great Games in Central Asia,” in Ashley J. Tellis, Travis Tanner, and Jessica Keough (eds.), *Strategic Asia 2011-21: Asia Respond to its Rising Powers: China and India* (Seattle and Washington, DC: The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2011), pp. 265-267.

is the desire to prevent the consolidation of ethnic Korean influence in the region—fueled by a North Korean regime collapse and absorption by South Korea—that could ultimately lead to pan-Korean nationalism and irredentism in China’s three Northeastern provinces (what the Koreans would call “Manchuria”), triggering a domino effect on other minority groups within the territory.

More immediately, North Korea offers China a security buffer from U.S. and ROK forces on the Korean peninsula. Counterterrorism expert Adam Segal asserts, “The Chinese are most concerned about the collapse of North Korea leading to chaos on the border [...] If North Korea does provoke a war with the United States, China and South Korea would bear the brunt of any military confrontation on the Korean peninsula.” In this context, Beijing has tried to constrain Pyongyang’s provocative actions and at the same time strengthen its sustainability. China’s measured reaction to the April 13 rocket launch can be understood in the same vein. And while China had joined Japanese and South Korean attempts to dissuade Pyongyang from going through with the launch, it failed to reach a consensus with its regional neighbors on how to respond to the launch itself.²⁵ Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi released a statement a week before the launch, stating, “China calls upon relevant parties to focus on the overall situation and look in the long-term, and to remain calm and exercise restraint and to use diplomacy and peaceful means to adequately resolve relevant problems.”²⁶

Because of the complex and somewhat conflicting interests China has in North Korea, Beijing has adopted measured strategies aimed at not only maximizing its security and economic benefits, but also minimizing Pyongyang’s antagonistic actions, including its nuclear

25. “Japan, China, South Korea urge North Korea to cancel rocket launch,” *The Japan Times Online*, April 9, 2012, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/nn20120409a1.html> (Accessed on April 12, 2012).

26. Yoshihiko Noda, “China ‘worried’ about N. Korea rocket launch,” *The Economic Times*, April 5, 2012, <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics/nation/China-worried-about-N-Korea-rocket-launch/articleshow/12593951.cms> (Accessed on April 11, 2012).

and missile development. For instance, in 1961, China and North Korea signed the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance. This bilateral agreement committed both parties to rendering military and other assistance against any outside attack. However, while North Korea portrays this as a defense treaty, Chinese scholars place less emphasis on the military assistance. According to Lu Chao, director of the Korean Research Center at Liaoning Academy of Social Sciences in China's northeastern region, "The treaty was created during the time of the Cold War. Friendship and mutual assistance is the key. It is the most important, not the military aspect."²⁷ Shi Yinhong, a North Korea expert at Renmin University in Beijing, asserts, "China's emphasis is not on the military commitment. Today, China treats it more of a symbol of comradeship. But North Korea treats it as a 100% military alliance."²⁸ China has sent clear signals to the international community that it does not support North Korea's provocative and antagonistic behavior. Beijing has publically urged North Korea to show restraint and has joined international condemnation of North Korea's nuclear adventurism. Having an unpredictable and uncontrollable nuclear-armed North Korea in China's backyard is counter-intuitive to Chinese national interests. And while both South Korea and Japan are technically covered under the U.S. nuclear umbrella, a nuclear-armed North Korea could drive its neighbors to develop their own nuclear deterrents, which could exacerbate the security dilemma in Northeast Asia, causing further destabilization. China's acceptance and support of international sanctions following North Korea's two nuclear tests demonstrate Beijing's displeasure with Pyongyang on the nuclear issue.

Furthermore, Pyongyang's erratic behavior could also endanger China's own economy as well as its economic interests, particularly access to energy and mineral resources, in North Korea. A Bloomberg

27. Sunny Lee, "China, North Korea: Unlikely Friends," *Asia Times*, July 21, 2011, <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Korea/MG21Dg02.html> (Accessed on April 11, 2012).

28. *Ibid.*

report from April 2012 cites North Korea's preparation for a rocket launch and a nuclear test as the reason for Chinese emerging market stocks falling to a two-month low.²⁹

Conclusion

From a U.S. perspective, it is difficult to see much change in the Sino-DPRK relationship in the Kim Jong-un era. China will likely continue with a status quo policy that ensures relatively consistent bouts of stability and maintains a geographic buffer zone between the Chinese border and U.S. and ROK troops. As discussed, China's "strategic interest" forbids it from condemning North Korea harshly or breaking away from the alliance relationship.³⁰ Wikileaks cables have revealed that China considered abandoning its alliance with North Korea in 2010.³¹ A British report on the leaks stated, "In highly sensitive discussions [...] the-then South Korean vice foreign minister, Chun Young-woo, told the U.S. ambassador, Kathleen Stephens, that younger generation Chinese Communist party leaders—no longer regarded North Korea as a useful or reliable ally—and would not risk renewed armed conflict on the peninsula."³² Though it is understandable why China may be frustrated with North Korea's belligerence, it is difficult to envision a scenario in which China completely abandons its long-time friend and ally. Cha describes this precarious relationship:

29. Zachary Tracer and Gan Yen Kuan, "Emerging Stocks Fall to 2-Month Low on U.S. Job Growth," *Bloomberg*, April 9, 2012, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-04-09/emerging-stocks-fall-to-2-month-low-on-u-s-jobs-north-korea.html> (Accessed on April 11, 2012).

30. Lee, "China, North Korea: Unlikely Friends."

31. Simon Tisdall, "Wikileaks cables reveal China 'ready to abandon North Korea'," *The Guardian*, November 29, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/nov/29/wikileaks-cables-china-reunified-korea> (Accessed on April 11, 2012).

32. *Ibid.*

For all of these reasons, China has worked itself into an uncomfortable corner when it comes to North Korea. It can't stand the way Pyongyang drags China's name through the mud with every provocation. Is Beijing more comfortable with a friendly yet weak and sometimes embarrassing North Korea on its southern flank than they would be with a rich, powerful, democratic, U.S.-aligned, unified Korea? You bet.³³

The necessity of North Korea as a security buffer zone is further illustrated when taking U.S. strategy toward Northeast Asia into account. The 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance issued by the Obama administration clearly articulates that China must clarify its strategic intentions with regard to the growth its military power and assures that the United States will continue to engage Northeast Asia and "make the necessary investment to maintain regional access and the ability to operate freely in keeping with our treaty obligations and with international law." The report also regards as critical to U.S. national interests the area "extending from the Western Pacific and Eastern Asia into the Indian Ocean region and South Asia," and asserts that the United States "*will of necessity rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region.*" China has interpreted this as a strategy to contain China, and both powers view the Korean peninsula as the front line in Northeast Asia.³⁴ If the U.S.-Sino relationship deteriorates and descends into conflict, North Korean instability could serve a lethal blow to China. Therefore, during this transitional period, as the young Kim Jong-un struggles to consolidate his legitimacy and power, China will likely work to strengthen its ties with the DPRK rather than trying to constrain it. In the face of uncertainty about North Korea's future, the relationship between Beijing and Pyongyang is bound to get deeper and stronger.

At the same time, if Pyongyang continues to destabilize the security situation on the Korea peninsula through its erratic and provocative behavior, the nature of Sino-DPRK relations could fluctuate. The

33. Cha, "Why China Can't Cut Off North Korea."

34. "Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense," Department of Defense, January 2012, p. 2, http://www.defense.gov/news/Defense_Strategic_Guidance.pdf (Accessed on February 21, 2012).

United States will surely pressure China into supporting international measures that admonish North Korea's behavior, such as additional UN sanctions. The future of relations between Beijing and Pyongyang could be further complicated by the emergence of a new Chinese leadership in 2012, coupled with presidential elections in both the United States and South Korea. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that we will see any dramatic changes in Beijing's attitude toward North Korea in the near future. What is likely is that Beijing will continue efforts to foster stability on the Korean peninsula by bolstering Kim Jong-un's transition to power and encouraging economic development. The precariousness of the situation on the Korean peninsula demands what Bates Gill, director of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, calls "an even more hard-nosed recognition of Chinese interests in North Korea and the kind of partner Beijing is—or is not—likely to be in supporting U.S. and allied priorities on the Korean peninsula."³⁵

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