

CHINA'S ROLE IN KOREAN REUNIFICATION: WHAT CAN CHINA DO?

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This article is a new interpretation of Chinese foreign policy in general more specifically Chinese policy towards North Korea and its role in the Korean Unification. After discussing the dramatic changes that took place in China in 1978 during the transition from Maoism to Deng's reform program based on "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics" which in turn brought about changes in North Korea's domestic and foreign policy this article analyses North Korea's adoption of Chinese model of development in the context of the Sino-Soviet disputes. For a quarter of a century after the Korean War, China adopted a rigid posture on Korean policy in the diplomatic, military, and economic fields. However, in the 1970s and 1980s China stepped up its economic aid and trade relations with North Korea. Moreover, the Chinese leaders visited North Korea and North Korean leader visited China more than 40 times and had summit meetings with many Chinese leaders which the indication of close relation between China and North Korea. When Kim Il Sung's 44-year rule was over, China expected that his successor would pursue a pragmatic and open-door foreign policy and improve inter-Korean relations. China invited Kim Jong Il to visit Beijing to attempt to convince the younger Kim

to accept the Chinese model of reform and open door policy. Kim Jong Il visited China three times and expressed his interest in China's model of economic development. The successful summit of the North-South Korean leaders on June 13-15, 2000 yielded a number of strategic implications for Chinese policy toward the two Koreas. China welcomed the inter-Korean summit. China may have influenced North Korea to open its doors to the outside world but it did not pave the road to reunification of the two Koreas since it is in China's interests to maintain the status quo of the two Koreas for the peace and stability of the Korean peninsula.

Most of the writings about China's relations with North Korea and its policy towards the Korean peninsula during the Cold War period focused on the issues of the Sino-DPRK friendship treaty, the alliance system, and security issues in the Sino-Soviet conflicts.¹ However, the end of the Cold War and the passing of North Korean leader Kim Il Sung from the political and diplomatic scene in 1994 ushered in some new interpretations of Chinese policy towards North Korea and its role in the Korean reunification.

In the 1990s North Korea decided to expand its contacts with the West, especially with the United States, Japan and South Korea, which was an indication of policy change from the hard line and isolationism. Domestically, North Korea launched economic and political reform and opened itself to the international economic and political arena. To expand foreign trade and also induce foreign investment in North Korea, the Pyongyang government established a free and special

1 Koh Byung-chul, *The Foreign Policy Systems of North and South Korea* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

economic zone in the Rajin and Sonbong area. In 1992 the North Korean leadership began high level meetings with the United States and Japan and signed with the South the Declaration of a Nuclear-free Korean peninsula. The DPRK became a member of the United Nations along with the Republic of Korea, abandoning its "One-Korea" policy in 1992.

Kim Jong Il began to consolidate power in the Korean Workers' Party as well as in military and government institutions in the 1990s, and ruled North Korea by the will of Kim Il Sung, who died in 1994. Thus, by 1997 Kim Jong Il consolidated his power and maintained domestic stability. However, nuclear and missile issues exploded when North Korea decided to withdraw from the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1993. After a series of negotiations on the nuclear and missile issues of 1993 and 1994, the United States and the DPRK concluded with the Agreed Framework at Geneva in 1994. North Korea also declared a moratorium on testing long-range missiles in September 1999.

The purpose of this paper is not necessarily to summarize other scholars' writings nor to reinterpret their analysis on the subject of Sino-North Korean relations but to speculate on what China can or cannot do to help the Koreans in their effort to achieve the goals of national unification. The main focus of this paper, therefore, is on the role of Chinese national interest in the process of formulating Korea policy, which may or may not be compatible with the aspirations of Koreans for national unification. It is therefore the thesis of this paper that national interest plays an important role in China's foreign policy-making with respect to the Korean peninsula and China's national interest changes when the international environment changes and the new international order emerges. Thus, the national interest of China may be incompatible with those of the two Koreas, which may lead to certain misunderstandings and conflicts. China and North and South Korea's common interest of peace and stability has become the most

important element in their foreign policy-making at the turn of millennium, placing the reunification issues of the two Koreas on the backburner.

Political Changes and their Impact on Korea Policy

Ever since the People's Republic of China (PRC) was established on October 1, 1949, the Mao Zedong government upheld his ideology, "Maoism," as the guiding principle during three decades of revolutionary struggle for the eradication of feudalism, imperialism, and legacies of Guomintang nationalism. After the three decades of rigid and repressive rule by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) it was inevitable that the successors of the Mao Zedong leadership changed the CCP's domestic and foreign policies. Deng Xiaoping took over the CCP leadership and successfully purged the attempts of Hua Guofeng and the Gang of Four to persist in the Maoist ideology and continue Mao's radical policies. He was thus able to introduce a new policy of reform to the Chinese political and economic system and open the door to the outside world, which constituted a 180-degree turnaround in Chinese foreign policy.

The dramatic changes that took place in China in 1978 during the transition from Maoism to Deng's reform program based on "Socialism with Chinese characteristics" in turn brought about changes in North Korea's domestic and foreign policies.

When the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) was established on September 9, 1948, it adopted the Soviet model of socialism and followed Soviet-style foreign policy in the 1950s within the context of the Cold War. North Korea shifted its policy during the Sino-Soviet conflicts in the 1950s, however, emulating the Chinese style of leadership structure and accepting the Chinese model of development policy to meet economic requirements, the analysis of which had

been presented by many North Korean specialists in the West.²

North Korea's rejection of the revisionist model of the Soviet Union resulted in an independent policy of Kimilsungism with Korean characteristics in the post-Korean War years of the 1950s and 1960s. This is commonly known as the policy of self-reliance based on Kim's Juche ideology, similar to the Maoist model of development. The North Korean leadership thus implemented the hard line policy of three great revolutions—the ideological revolution, the cultural revolution, and the technological revolution—in order to resolve the economic problems that North Korea encountered during the period of Sino-Soviet disputes over the Communist ideology. This policy was in many respects a compromise that assigned an important role to ideology on the one hand, but on the other hand upheld expertise, the issue of which was debated in China during the height of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in the late 1960s and early 1970s.³ The changes in the policy of economic development in the 1980s caused political changes in China, which in turn brought about changes in China's policy toward North and South Korea in the 1990s. Thus, China convinced North Korean leaders to abandon their one-Korea policy and join the United Nations along with South Korea in 1991, and China was thus able to establish diplomatic relations with the Republic of Korea, the result of which was a dramatic change in Chinese policy from the one-Korea policy that upheld North Korea as the only legitimate government in the Korean peninsula to the two-Korea policy that recognized the reality of two Koreas in the peninsula.

North Korea relied heavily on its close allies, China and the Soviet Union, for economic and security assistance during the Cold War era.

2 "North Korea Between Moscow and Peking" in Ilpyong J. Kim, *Communist Politics in North Korea* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1975), pp. 93-115.

3 Ilpyong J. Kim, "Reform in North Korea," Jane Shapiro Zacek and Ilpyong J. Kim, eds., *Reform and Transformation in Communist Systems: Comparative Perspectives* (New York: Paragon House, 1991).

The establishment of diplomatic relations between China and South Korea, however, changed the configuration of power relations in the Korean peninsula. It was China that dispatched armed forces to fight in the Korean War in October 1950, when North Korea was on the verge of collapse and being overwhelmed by the United Nations' forces under the direction of the U. S. Army. China also prevented the U. N. Security Council from taking sanctions against North Korea when the North declared its withdrawal from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in March 1993. The North Korea-China Friendship Treaty, a virtual security pact concluded in July 1961, was designed to enable China to offer military assistance to the DPRK; it is still in effect.

For a quarter of a century after the Korean War, the PRC adopted a rigid posture on Korean policy in the diplomatic, military, and economic fields. During the post-Korean War period, Beijing provided Pyongyang with generous grants and loans and engaged in bilateral trade. China was the major donor of economic and technical assistance to North Korea during the post-Korean War reconstruction of its country. When Kim Il Sung led an eight-member delegation to China in November 1953, the two governments signed an agreement on economic and cultural cooperation, stipulating that both sides "shall extend to each other all possible economic and technical aid, carry out the necessary economic and technical cooperation and endeavor to promote cultural exchanges between the two countries." The PRC provided a grant of 800 million yuan to restore North Korea's war-torn country. North Korean leader Kim Il Sung was thus able to negotiate successfully to receive in 1976 an estimated \$967 million in grants and loans from China.⁴

North Korea's trade with the PRC accounted for 20 percent of its total foreign trade throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Since North Korea

4 Lee, Chae-Jin, *China and Korea: Dynamic Relations*. Stanford (CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1996).

does not produce a single drop of oil, its major import item from China was crude oil. The China-Korea Friendship Pipeline, which was completed by joint efforts in January 1976, transported oil from Daqing to North Korea. When Premier Hua Guofeng visited North Korea in 1978, China agreed to increase its annual oil export by one million metric tons at the “friendship price” (\$4.50 per barrel). It then sent engineers and technicians to construct oil refineries, petrochemical plants, and other related industries in North Korea. The PRC also signed long-term trade agreements for the periods of 1982-86 and 1987-91, which helped the DPRK’s Third Seven-Year Economic Development Plan (1987-93). Pyongyang and Beijing held numerous economic meetings and formed agreements in a variety of fields such as trade, hydroelectric power, navigation, railways, civil aviation, communication, publications, educational exchanges, public health, and science and technology. A large number of North Korean students, scientists, technicians, bureaucrats, and other professional personnel including military staff officers visited China each year and studied at Chinese universities and research institutes, or initiated scientific and technical exchange programs with their Chinese counterparts.⁵

North Korean leader Kim Il Sung visited China more than 40 times and had summit meetings with many Chinese leaders, including Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Deng Xiaoping and other successive leaders. The Chinese leaders also reciprocated those visits to Pyongyang to consolidate diplomatic and security relations between the two countries. When Kim Il Sung died in July 1994, Deng Xiaoping extended condolences to the Korean Workers’ Party Central Committee and expressed his “deep grief” at the loss of a “close comrade in arms.” China also recognized Kim Jong Il as the new supreme leader in North Korea to assist in the smooth transition of power. When Kim Il Sung’s 44-year rule was over, China expected that his successor would pursue a

5 *Ibid.*

pragmatic and open-door foreign policy and improve inter-Korean relations. However, Kim Jong Il was not able to meet the expectations of the Chinese leadership, and China invited Kim Jong Il to visit Beijing to attempt to convince Kim to accept the Chinese model of reform and open door policy.

Kim Jong Il visited China in January 15-20, 2001—his third visit, the others occurring in June 1983 and May 29-31, 2000. During his previous visit he met with the top leaders of the PRC and expressed his interest in China's model of economic development. During his January 15-20, 2001 visit, Kim toured the Pudong industrial complex in Shanghai, inspecting the \$1.5 billion Buick plant and other flagship Sino-foreign joint ventures such as NEC's \$1.2 billion semiconductor foundry in Shangjiang High Tech Park. He also participated in summit meetings with the Chinese leader Jiang Zemin in Beijing on January 20, 2001. Kim was obviously impressed by the economic achievements China had made following its adoption of reform and an open door policy.⁶

Chinese leader Jiang Zemin also visited North Korea from September 3-5, 2001, accompanied by over 100 various officials from the PRC government, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the military and economic sectors. Jiang's aides included Zeng Qinghong, head of the CCP Organization Department; Qian Qichen, Vice Premier and Foreign Minister of the State Council of the PRC; Zeng Peiyan of the State Development Planning Commission; and top members of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). The summit conference between Jiang Zemin and Kim Jong Il took place in Pyongyang. The DPRK and the PRC have gained full momentum in making various levels of exchanges since the DPRK- PRC summit talks in Pyongyang. However, some observers of North Korea doubted the Chinese commitment of massive economic assistance, since China was more interested in

6 Ilpyong J. Kim, *Historical Dictionary of North Korea*. Lanham (MD: Scarecrow Press, 2002) (forthcoming).

helping the North Korean leaders to learn from the experiences of Chinese reform and economic development.

This was Jiang Zemin's second visit to North Korea since his visit in March 1990, when he was the General Secretary of the CCP. Strains and stresses had developed in PRC-DPRK relations following the establishment of diplomatic relations between the PRC and the Republic of Korea (ROK) in August 1992, and the formerly high numbers of visits have been greatly reduced. Western observers of North Korea asserted that China established diplomatic relations with the ROK to serve its economic and trade interests as well as to encourage North Korea to break away from her economic and trade dependency upon China, which also encouraged North Korea to diversify its diplomatic relations with other countries such as Japan and the United States as well as to improve its relations with South Korea.⁷

The diplomatic normalization between the PRC and the ROK removed political barriers and brought about a "great leap forward" in bilateral economic cooperation between the two independent countries. The trade volume increased from \$5.81 billion in 1991 to \$8.22 billion in 1992, \$9.08 billion in 1993, \$11.66 billion in 1994, \$16.54 billion in 1995, \$19.92 billion in 1996, \$23.60 billion in 1997, and \$25 billion in 1999.⁸

Moreover, the ROK's investment in China also increased dramatically after the normalization of diplomatic relations. From 1993 to 1996, the ROK invested more funds in China than in any other country, and the total amount of ROK investment in 1996 reached \$1.36 billion, which accounted for 20% of the ROK's overseas investments. Ever since the normalization of diplomatic relations, the ROK has been one of the major investing countries in China. The economies of China and South Korea are complementary and still have great potential for

7 *The Korea Herald*, March 16, 1998.

8 Zhang Xiaoming, "China's Relations with the Korean Peninsula: A Chinese View," *The Korea Observer*, Vol. 32, No. 4, Winter 2001, pp. 481-500.

further economic cooperation in the future. The continued development of economic cooperation serves the interests of China's modernization drive and of security in East Asia and, more specifically, of the national security of the two Koreas.⁹

The reciprocal visits between Kim Jong Il and Jiang Zemin restored close friendly relations between the two allies in the latter half of the 1990s. By recognizing the reality of the two legitimate governments of North and South Korea in the Korean peninsula, China was in a better position to encourage North Korea to accept China's two-Koreas policy and also to help North Korea pursue a more self-reliant policy in economic and trade relations with other nations instead of depending solely upon China for its economic assistance, which was the characteristic feature of their bilateral relations during the Cold War era.

China's policy toward the two Koreas since 1992 has been to deter North Korea's military adventurism as well as to counter interventions from South Korea in alliance with foreign powers such as the United States and Japan. The Chinese leadership declared publicly that China would not support a North Korean attack on the South and revealed its intention that it would not tolerate any peninsular threat to China's national security. If North Korea were to initiate an armed conflict in the Korean peninsula, China would not honor its security treaty with the DPRK. However, if North Korea were attacked and invaded by the South or its allies, China would not stand idly by, but would send in troops to protect the security of its ally as stipulated in the Sino-DPRK treaty. China still values the Sino-North Korean security treaty in the post-Cold War era for several reasons: the treaty has helped to prevent war on the Korean peninsula and maintain the military balance in the region; despite China's economic and security burden, the treaty serves

9 For missile negotiation between the U. S. and the DPRK, see Leon V. Sigal, *Disarming Strangers: Nuclear Diplomacy with North Korea* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998) and also see his "Cooperative Security in Korea," in *Great Decisions 2002* (New York: Foreign Policy Association, 2002).

as leverage for China to maintain a channel of communication with the North Korean leadership during crisis situations; in competing with such major powers as the United States and Japan, China can use the treaty as a means to retain continued influence in Pyongyang; and finally, the treaty would discourage radical factions in South Korea, the United States and Japan from military intervention in the event of a civil war in North Korea.

Nuclear and Missile Issues

China continues to maintain its military and security relations with North Korea during the height of nuclear and missile crises. Therefore, President George W. Bush called on China to convince the DPRK to have dialogue with the United States to resolve the security issues of the Korean peninsula when he visited South Korea for summit meetings with President Kim Dae Jung in March 2002. President Bush denounced North Korea as an axis of evil along with Iran and Iraq when he delivered his State of the Union message in February 2002.

The history of nuclear development in the DPRK is 50 years old. North Korean scientists began theoretical study of nuclear energy in the early 1950s, when they started their practical training in the Soviet Union. They were interested in studying electronic physics, radiochemistry, high-energy physics, and other subjects. The training of North Korean specialists in the Soviet Union was carried out in the interests of the peaceful use of atomic energy. Soviet-North Korean agreements signed in this connection specifically stressed the peaceful nature of bilateral cooperation in the development of nuclear energy.

Other North Korean scientists received their training in Japan, East Germany, and West Germany, and some underwent practical training at Chinese nuclear centers as well. The scientific and experimental infrastructure in the nuclear field was built with Soviet technical assis-

tance. Soviet technicians took part in the construction of the nuclear facilities in Yongbyon, 92 kilometers north of Pyongyang, which was suspected of having produced sufficient plutonium to make two or three nuclear bombs. The Geneva Agreed Framework of 1994 froze the nuclear program in Yongbyon. Thus, on October 21, 1994, representatives of the United States and the DPRK signed an agreed framework for resolving the nuclear issue after a series of negotiations.

North Korea also developed missiles. Rodong Missile No. 1 is a ballistic missile with a maximum firing range of 1,000-1,300 kilometers, developed by North Korea and based on the Soviet Scud-B. North Korea test-fired it in May 1993 in Hwadae County, North Hamgyong Province. North Korea is reported to have the capability of producing 100 missiles per year. They are usually called Scud-Ds. In November 1997, the South Korean defense minister said North Korea began to develop the Rodong No. 1 missile in 1988 and test-fired it once in 1990 and again in 1993. The North Korean army is likely to be armed with the missile in the 21st century. However, subsequent to negotiations with the United States in 1997 and 1998, North Korea has frozen its missile test and production until 2003.¹⁰

China continues to be involved in the security issues of North Korea even after the freeze of nuclear and missile development. At the time China and South Korea normalized diplomatic relations in August 1992, China and North Korea maintained frequent and high-level military contacts with each other. Several high-ranking Chinese officials, including defense minister Chi Haotien and Commander of the Shenyang Military Region in June 1994, foreign minister Qian Qichen in May 1993, politburo member Hu Jintao (who is successor designate to Jiang Zemin as secretary general of the CCP) in July 1993, visited Pyongyang and consolidated bilateral relations. At the time of the U.S.-

10 Bermudez, Jr. Joseph, *A History of Ballistic Missile Development in the DPRK*, Center for Nonproliferation Studies (Montrey Institute of International Studies, November 1999), pp. 29-30.

DPRK negotiations at Geneva for the Agreed Framework, several senior PLA officers, including the regional commander and political commissars, visited Beijing to assure the security of North Korea after the freeze of nuclear and missile development.

Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan visited Pyongyang in October 1999 to discuss the issue of bilateral relations with North Korea, which had become strained following the normalization of diplomatic relations with South Korea. North Korean Foreign Minister Paik Nam Sun paid a return visit to Beijing to strengthen PRC-DPRK relations in view of growing concern on the part of China about U.S.-DPRK negotiations on missile development. It was reported that China assisted North Korea's missile designers and engineers of the Rodong missile program with professional training and, possibly, technological exchanges throughout the 1990s. North Korea received considerable assistance from the Chinese Academy of Launch Technology in designing the Kwangmyong 1 satellite. Such technical assistance, according to Joseph Bermudez Jr. helped North Korea to develop the Kwangmyong 2 satellite project and would eventually extend to other satellites, including a crude reconnaissance satellite.¹¹

The U. S. policy also shifted from undermining North Korea to cooperating with South Korea to end the nuclear weapons and long-range missile-related activities of the DPRK, which was crystallized in former secretary of defense William Perry's review process. In the past, U.S. policy toward North Korea had been to enhance the collapse of, or encourage the DPRK to implement the reform program in, its political and economic system. The U.S. subsequently changed its policy, expecting the DPRK to accept the policy of ending nuclear weapon and long-range missile development that also served the interests of China, the foreign policy objective of which was peace and stability in the

11 "DPRK media call Kim Jong Il's visit to the PRC fruitful," in FBIS-CHI-2002-0602. "China Supports Reunification of the Korean Peninsula," *Beijing Review*, June 12, 2000.

Korean peninsula so that it might successfully execute its own reform and open door policies. Thus, China was willing to cooperate with the U. S. to halt nuclear and missile-related activities in North Korea so long as the peace and stability of the Korean peninsula was assured.

Thus, China's balancing act in dealing with the North Korea's nuclear and missile issues was compatible with U. S. interest in 1993-94. China encountered a policy dilemma between the desire to deter U. S. coercive strategy toward the DPRK on the one hand, and on the other hand the desire to advise the North Korean government to take a flexible response toward U. S. approaches. China and the U. S. shared a common security interest that a nuclear weapon-free North Korea would contribute to the stability and peace in East Asia in general and more specifically in the Korean peninsula. China was thus able to encourage both North Korea and the U. S. to open a dialogue instead of pursuing drastic measures of confrontation so that the nuclear issues might be resolved peacefully, the outcome of which was the Agreed Framework at Geneva in 1994.

North-South Korean Summit and China Policy

The successful summit of the North-South Korean leaders on June 13-15, 2000 yielded a number of strategic implications for Chinese policy toward the two Koreas. First of all, the inter-Korean summit served the common interest of China and North Korea to restore their political and economic relationship, which had been strained following the Chinese-South Korean normalization of diplomatic relations in 1992. Kim Jong Il, Chairman of the North Korean Defense Commission, paid an unofficial visit to the PRC from May 29-31, 2000, to consult with the Chinese leadership prior to the summit. Jiang Zemin and Kim Jong Il agreed that the two nations would inevitably "strengthen ties in the best interests of both countries at the time when international

situations are complicated and in flux” and that “the ties will also be conducive to peace and stability in the region and world.” It was reported that Jiang spoke highly of Kim’s visit to China, stressing that it was of great significance for the deepening of understanding, trust, friendship and cooperation between the two parties and countries. Moreover, after the talks, the two leaders agreed that meetings between the leaders of the Korean Workers’ Party and the Chinese Communist Party, as well as between the leaders of the two countries, should continue.

What did Jiang Zeming advise Kim Jong Il to do during their talks? Whether the five-point agreement was leaked deliberately or speculated upon by the analysts in Beijing, it is quite plausible that Jiang proposed a five-point proposal, which was accepted by Kim Jong Il for implementation. The five points of the proposal were that (1) the two sides’ leaders should hold regular meetings for information exchange and policy consultation; (2) it is necessary for North Korea to pursue multifaceted diplomacy with all countries in the world in order to counter its image of being reclusive and hard-lined in the international community; (3) the DPRK should implement economic reforms to overcome its economic difficulties and place economic reconstruction on the priority list; (4) North Korea should improve diplomatic relations with the U. S., Japan, and Western countries and normalize diplomatic relations with the United States; and finally (5) the two sides should seize the opportunity to resolve the urgent need for capital and technology by improving North-South relations, which the Kim Dae Jung government has put forward in the form of engagement policy ever since it was inaugurated. It is plausible that Jiang persuaded Kim Jong Il to accept South Korea’s proposal to improve inter-Korean relations by pledging South Korean capital and technology to aid North Korea’s economic recovery. The subsequent policy of North Korea moved to implement economic reform, about which Kim Jong Il had some reservations, and accept economic assistance from South Korea.

However, Kim Jong Il was more interested in the economic reform process in China, since he expressed openly that China was able to achieve greatly by its economic reform and opening to the outside world, thus achieving comprehensive national power and improving its international power status. During his stay, Kim visited for the first time since his 1982 China visit the Legend Group, a computer giant in China that has captured 23 percent of China's computer market. It was reported that Kim even asked China to advise North Korea on suitable locations for industrial parks for medium and small enterprises. Chinese Prime Minister Zhu Rongji suggested Haeju for an Industrial park, and North Korea seems to have accepted the suggestion: Haeju might attract 850 medium and small enterprises and may expect export earnings of more than U. S. \$206 billion annually.¹²

China welcomed the inter-Korean summit, the results of which was very successful. Chinese President Jiang Zeming wrote two congratulatory messages to the two leaders of North and South Korea, in which he suggested that China take a balanced approach to and maintain influence with both sides respectively. A commentator in the *Beijing Review* applauded several positive implications of the North and South Korean summit, which has advanced peace and stability on the Korean peninsula, which in turn serves the best interests of China. North Korea has thus moved away from ideology-based foreign policy to a more pragmatic policy, which was the main characteristic of China's reform and open door policy in the 1980s.

Convergence of Chinese and North Korean Interest

It was during the height of the Cold War years that the ideological interests of China and North Korea became compatible, which brought

12 Xinhua: "More on Kim Jong Il Visits," FBIS-CHI-2000-0601.

about a close alliance. However, the dramatic changes in the international environment in the post-Cold War world ushered in differences in Chinese and North Korean interests. Chinese interest focused on economic reform and the opening of its doors to the outside world, which brought about the normalization of relations with the United States, while North Korea maintained hostility toward the U. S. and opted for the reunification of the two Koreas by expelling U. S. troops from South Korea. North Korea advocated the withdrawal of U. S. troops from Korea as a precondition for the reunification of the two Koreas, whereas Deng Xiaoping of China was willing to accommodate the presence of U. S. troops in Korea as long as the peace and stability was maintained and continued to serve the interests of the PRC.

During the reform era of Deng Xiaoping, Hu Yaobang, Zhao Ziyang, and Jiang Zemin, Chinese policy toward North Korea was ambivalent despite North Korean leader Kim Il Sung's frequent visits to China and willingness to serve the ideological interest of China. China was lukewarm in endorsing the succession Kim Il Sung to his father as the top leader of the DPRK when the younger Kim was designated at the Sixth Congress of the Korean Workers' Party in 1980. In June 1982, Kim Jong Il made an unofficial trip to China to impress Chinese leaders, including Deng Xiaoping, Hu Yaobang, Zhao Ziyang, and others, and attempted to learn from the Chinese experience of reform and open door policy. North Korean leaders at that time attempted to portray Kim Jong Il as Deng Xiaoping of North Korea. Kim was physically short like Deng and also possessed Deng's very dynamic and outgoing personality. However, the question lay in Kim's ability to introduce the reform and open door policy in North Korea in the same ways in which Deng had introduced them in China in 1978. It was too early to introduce such a drastic change in the very conservative and Confucian society of North Korea, and the younger Kim had even confessed to a South Korean actress that "if we open our society and carry out the reform our system will collapse" in the 1980s.

However, dramatic changes in the international environment in the 1990s, when South Korea normalized diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union in 1990 followed by the two Koreas' membership in 1991 and the Chinese normalization of diplomatic relations with South Korea in 1992, coupled with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the demise of the communist system in East Europe, forced the North Korean leadership to recognize and adapt to the changing international environment in order to sustain its own system. The process of accommodation to the changing international environment provided Kim Jong Il the opportunity to consolidate his own power in North Korea by 1997 and launch a new constitution to revamp North Korea's economic and political systems.

Subsequently, North Korean leader Kim Jong Il had three summit meetings — with Chinese President Jiang Zemin in a secret visit Beijing in late May, 2001; with South Korean President Kim Dae Jung in June, 2000; and with Russian President Vladimir Putin in July, 2001—and also received a series of diplomatic missions to Pyongyang, including those of U. S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and Chinese Defense Minister Chi Haotian in October 2001, and a European Union delegation in November 2001, all of which influenced Kim Jong Il to think globally, following the diplomatic practice of Deng Xiaoping, who opened the Chinese door to the outside world.

It is the conclusion of this paper that China may have influenced North Korea to open its doors to the outside world but it did not pave the road to reunification of the two Koreas because it is in China's interests to maintain the status quo of the two Koreas for the peace and stability of the Korean peninsula.