



Why does the People's Republic of China continue to support the Democratic People's Republic of Korea?

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Abstract

This paper analyses the relationship between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). It contends that the PRC's national focus on economic growth has translated into a deliberate, 'geopolitical stability' strategy to maintain the status quo of a divided Korean Peninsula, with reunification and denuclearisation as secondary policy objectives.

It concludes that even though there are economic, diplomatic and credibility costs for the PRC in continuing to support the DPRK, it will continue to do so for as long as Beijing assesses that support for the DPRK will maintain the status quo on the Korean Peninsula and that the status quo is required to underwrite the PRC's ability to grow its economy and military power, and resolve internal issues.

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Introduction

The People's Republic of China's (PRC) economic rise over the last 35 years has seen it transition from its post-World War 2 hardline socialist ideology and isolation into a prosperous, market-based economic powerhouse that is now one of the key geopolitical players in East Asia. On the opposite end of the spectrum is the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), which shares a 1416-kilometre land border with the PRC. It remains an isolated and autocratic communist state, ruled by a repressive regime, and with an economy which has largely regressed since the end of the Korean War. The DPRK's nuclear ambitions, brinksmanship and poor economic management have contributed to its isolation and reliance on the PRC for diplomatic support, food, fuel and economic aid. However, that support arguably incurs significant and ongoing financial, diplomatic and credibility costs for the PRC.

This paper will analyse the DPRK-PRC relationship and contend that the PRC's national focus on economic growth has translated into a deliberate, 'geopolitical stability' strategy to maintain the status quo of a divided Korean Peninsula, with reunification and denuclearisation as secondary policy objectives. The shared history of the PRC and DPRK will be analysed to provide an understanding of the depth and genesis of the current relationship. The PRC's policies and methods will also be examined to illustrate the benefits the PRC is seeking to gain through its support to the DPRK. Finally, the economic, diplomatic and credibility costs of this support will be analysed in order to understand the costs borne by the PRC. The paper concludes that the cost/benefit calculations will likely see the PRC continue to provide support to the DPRK, particularly as Beijing remains focused on economic growth and internal issues.

'As close as lips and teeth' - 2000 years of shared history¹

The connection between China and Korea can be traced back to the 8th century BCE. The relationship in ancient times existed under a suzerainty system, with Korean kingdoms as tributary states of successive Chinese dynasties. The suzerain relationship lasted through to the shared fight against Japanese invaders in 1592, after which China formed the concept of the 'interdependence of two neighbouring states (if the lips are gone, the teeth will be cold)' which, at the time, China interpreted as meaning that defending the Korean Peninsula was the same as defending China.²

The interdependent relationship endured through to the subsequent Japanese invasion and occupation of the Korean Peninsula from 1910 to 1945, and China between 1931 and 1945. During this difficult period, the shared struggle against Japanese invaders and the rise of communism in the two countries occurred in parallel. As such, the modern Sino-DPRK Communist Party bond, while based on shared history, was 'forged during the wars against Japanese occupation and Chinese nationalists in the 1930s and 1940s'.³

The bond between the two countries, based on their shared history and communist ideologies, was firmly cemented in the PRC's national psyche through the commitment of Chinese troops in support of North Korea during the Korean War. The PRC committed some 2.97 million troops to fight alongside the North Korean military against UN forces, and a further 600,000 civil workers to support the war effort on the Korean Peninsula. This commitment of troops and resources proved highly costly for the PRC, with personnel losses conservatively estimated at 148,000 killed, 380,000 wounded and 21,400 prisoners of war, while direct financial costs were estimated at 6.2 billion Yuan (>US\$1 billion), with a further US\$1.3 billion owed to the Soviet Union.⁴ The Korean War, which was fought in the formative years of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), was recently described by China's President Xi Jinping as a 'great victory in the pursuit of world peace and human progress'.⁵ The fight against US-led UN forces has always been, and remains, a 'central legitimising story for the Chinese Communist Party, [and] the People's Liberation Army',⁶

as well as a tangible link to the DPRK in the psyche of the Chinese people and the CCP's leadership.

Despite their common ideology and Korean War history, the PRC-DPRK relationship has waxed and waned since. In 1961, the two countries signed the 'Sino-North Korean Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance'.⁷ The relationship then became strained during China's so-called 'Cultural Revolution' in the 1960s, when the Red Guard lost patience with the regime of North Korean leader Kim Il-sung, denouncing it as revisionist.⁸ The relationship recovered in the 1970s when the PRC was seeking strong bilateral relationships during a period of hostile relations with the Soviet Union. However, the PRC once again moved away from the DPRK in the early 1980s when it commenced economic reforms and moves towards a free market economy, further souring when the PRC established diplomatic relations with the Republic of Korea (ROK) in 1992.

The current 'positive' phase of the PRC-DPRK relationship began in 2000, after a seven year period of no top-level engagement, with a visit to China by Kim Jong-il, then Supreme Leader of the DPRK, to re-establish the relationship. This phase continues to the present, having survived 14 years of DPRK recalcitrance, nuclear tests and brinksmanship on the world stage, and has led to the PRC providing a significant and growing level of support to the DPRK.⁹

A deliberate strategy to maintain the divided Koreas

It is generally assumed that the PRC's preferred long-term outcome is a unified, de-nuclearised Korean Peninsula, without US troops, and with a government that is friendly or at least neutral towards China.¹⁰ However, an analysis of the policy and methods employed by China in its bilateral relationship with the DPRK, and in the UN, would seem to suggest that such an outcome is not being actively sought by Beijing at this time.¹¹ Indeed, China's continued diplomatic, economic and military support for the DPRK, and its lack of punitive action against the regime in Pyongyang, would seem to suggest that its current strategy is to maintain geopolitical stability on the Korean Peninsula in order to underpin its own economic growth.

Such a strategy, which is effectively the maintenance of the divided Koreas, is presumably based on policy objectives that are fundamentally designed to meet the PRC's current and short-term geopolitical and economic requirements.¹² Maintenance of the status quo on the Korean Peninsula provides the PRC with a number of strategic and economic benefits. The divided Koreas, with a regime in the north that is friendly towards China, give the PRC an important geographical buffer between US troops stationed in the ROK and its northeastern border. A divided Korean Peninsula also negates any prospective relocation of US troops towards the existing Sino-DPRK border, which might occur should a reunified Korea adopt the ROK's current political and alliance structures.¹³

The provision of financial and food aid to maintain the status quo also mitigates the risk of instability in the DPRK leading to an uncontrolled flow of refugees across the Sino-DPRK land border into the northern provinces of China—and the subsequent economic and political costs associated with managing such an influx.¹⁴ Further, the provision of support reinforces 'Beijing's [broader] credibility as a patron and ally'.¹⁵ Finally, the status quo allows the PRC to maintain its military focus on internal security, the reunification of Taiwan and military expansion without being distracted by the requirement to conduct military operations on the Korean Peninsula (which it would be obligated to conduct under the terms of the 1961 Sino-North Korean Treaty should the DPRK be subjected to armed attack).¹⁶

To that end, the PRC would seem to be maintaining a level of influence with the DPRK that will support its strategic intent to sustain geostrategic stability. It is doing this through the maintenance of close diplomatic and military ties with the DPRK, and through the provision of food aid, economic aid, energy assistance, trade and investment in order to help underpin regime stability. Uniquely, diplomatic engagement between the two countries is coordinated through party-to-party links—between the CCP and Workers Party of Korea—rather than through the Chinese Foreign Ministry. This is evidence of the special status of the PRC-DPRK diplomatic relationship and the priority placed on the relationship by the PRC's leadership.¹⁷

The PRC also seeks to influence and stabilise the DPRK regime through the provision of a significant and growing level of foreign aid. Food, fuel and monetary aid are provided to mitigate

the risk of a hunger-fuelled popular uprising, a rise in the number of refugees entering China, and in an attempt to provide the PRC with a degree of leverage to moderate DPRK actions.¹⁸ PRC trade and investment have risen on an annual basis, particularly after DPRK trade with Russia—and Russian support—collapsed at the end of the Cold War.¹⁹ PRC trade with the DPRK is highly significant as it has mitigated the effectiveness of UN sanctions imposed as a result of the DPRK conducting nuclear and ballistic missile tests in contravention of international laws and norms.²⁰ PRC actions to minimise the economic cost of sanctions have helped to sustain the DPRK regime and are indicative of the PRC's deliberate strategy to maintain leverage and the status quo.

But it comes at a cost

The PRC's strategic policy of maintaining stability and the status quo on the Korean Peninsula incurs significant ongoing economic, credibility and diplomatic costs. Real costs include the actual expenditure on economic, fuel and food aid. Credibility and diplomatic costs are that China's leaders can be accused of being unduly lenient towards North Korea and, at times, risk condemnation because of Beijing's support for what is widely seen as a 'pariah' state.

Certainly, the DPRK is generally regarded as a failing state with an economy that 'is one of the world's most isolated and bleak'.²¹ It is reliant on food and economic aid for regime survival and to mitigate the starvation and suffering of a large proportion of its population.²² The PRC is the DPRK's principal aid donor and is effectively responsible for the survival of the DPRK regime. Although the actual costs are not disclosed, reports suggest that the economic assistance being provided to the DPRK equates to half of the PRC's total annual foreign aid budget.²³ Additionally, Beijing provides up to 45 per cent of North Korea's food requirements, which included 500,000 tonnes of rice in 2012. Economic aid, food aid, and shipments of fuel—which are estimated to account for 90 per cent of the DPRK's annual requirements—arguably provide a significant and ongoing cost to the PRC economy but do so without achieving the influence in Pyongyang that Beijing would ideally be seeking.²⁴

The limits of China's influence are evident in DPRK actions in relation to its nuclear and ballistic missile programs. The DPRK has caused the Chinese leadership to 'lose face' on numerous occasions through its repeated conduct of nuclear and ballistic missile tests, against the implicit advice and wishes of China. A recent example of DPRK defiance and disrespect was the conduct of the DPRK's third nuclear test in February 2013, during the Chinese New Year.²⁵ This test, which was conducted against PRC wishes, and at a time when many Chinese officials were on holidays, was seen as a sign of open disrespect by Kim Jong-un towards China's President Xi Jinping; Chinese officials reportedly felt that President Xi Jinping 'lost face' on the world stage due to his inability to influence the DPRK's leadership over the conduct and timing of this test.²⁶

A further diplomatic and credibility negative for the PRC is that its unwillingness to use economic instruments to apply pressure to modify DPRK behaviour, and set the conditions for reunification, are well documented and understood by world leaders.²⁷ A key example is how the PRC dealt with the DPRK's nuclear tests of 2006 and 2009. On one hand, China publicly condemned the tests and, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, helped to develop and then voted for sanctions against the DPRK. However, in each case, the PRC ensured that the UN sanctions did not include the threat of military enforcement or a mandatory requirement for member states to inspect goods en route to the DPRK.²⁸

Furthermore, the PRC established new bilateral aid and trade ties, both at government-to-government level and commercially, that effectively circumvented UN sanctions and diminished their usefulness to the point that the sanctions became ineffective.²⁹ Indeed, it has been contended that the PRC is 'in fact enabling North Korean despotism' by effectively compensating the DPRK for the reduction in trade from other countries.³⁰ Certainly, the PRC's actions with respect to sanctions have impacted its credibility on the world stage.

A further diplomatic issue for China, stemming from its support to the DPRK, is that its active 'refoulement' of North Korean refugees (forcing them back to their place of origin) contravenes its obligations as a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention.³¹ The PRC has consistently refused to accept North Koreans who cross the border illegally as refugees, terming them 'illegal economic migrants' and forcibly deporting those who are captured on Chinese territory. As a result of its failure to follow international conventions on refugees, Beijing was accused of aiding

and abetting DPRK crimes against humanity in a 2014 report of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the DPRK.³² This is a further example of China's links to, and support of, the DPRK diminishing its credibility on the world stage.

The critical reliance by the DPRK on PRC aid and diplomatic support means that China has the power to sustain or bring down the current regime.³³ However, its ongoing provision of aid, and its continual acceptance of the diplomatic and credibility costs, would seem to indicate that the PRC's actions 'are designed to manage not punish'.³⁴ Moreover, its acceptance of the costs would seem to affirm that China is not willing to accept the risks and costs associated with the collapse of the North Korean regime or reunification of the Korean Peninsula, preferring instead the maintenance of the somewhat uneasy status quo.

Conclusion

This paper has assessed why the PRC continues to support the DPRK. It has analysed the shared history of the two countries to provide an understanding of the depth and genesis of the current relationship, as well as highlighting both the benefits the PRC seeks and gains from supporting the DPRK, and the significant economic, diplomatic and credibility costs endured by China as a result.

The paper has argued that the PRC's leadership maintains a deliberate, geopolitical stability strategy for the Korean Peninsula, notwithstanding these ongoing costs. Although the economic and diplomatic costs are high, China's ongoing support would suggest it assesses that the 'potential consequences of cutting Pyongyang loose are unacceptable' and that the costs are outweighed by the benefits achieved from maintaining the status quo on the Korean Peninsula.³⁵

Beijing's past and current actions similarly suggest that it will continue to provide sufficient aid, trade and investment to diplomatically and economically prop up the DPRK regime in order to avoid destabilising factors that would likely inhibit China's economic growth. Moreover, it can be expected that Beijing will do this for as long as it assesses that support for the DPRK will maintain the status quo on the Korean Peninsula and that the status quo is important in underwriting the PRC's ability to grow its economy and military power, and to resolve internal issues within China.

Notes

1 The term 'as close as lips and teeth' is often attributed to China's Prime Minister, Mao Zedong, in a telegram to DPRK President Kim Il-Sung on the withdrawal of Chinese volunteers from Korea in 1958. However, Zhihua notes that there were numerous articles in (China's) *People's Daily* that used the phrase 'tooth and lips' to describe the Sino-North Korean relationship as early as 1950-52: see Shen Zhihua, 'Alliance of "Tooth and Lips" or Marriage of Convenience? The Origins and Development of the Sino-North Korean Alliance, 1946-1958', Working Paper, US-Korea Institute: Washington DC, 2008, footnote 2, p. 24, available at <<http://uskoreainstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/USKI-WPS08-09.pdf>> accessed 9 July 2014.

2 Debin Zhan and Hun Kyung Lee, 'Chinese People's Understanding of the Korean Unification Issue', *Asian Social Science*, Vol. 8, No. 3, March 2012, p. 65.

3 Walter C. Clemens Jr., 'North Korea's Quest for Nuclear Weapons: new historical evidence', *Journal of East Asian Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1, January-April 2010, p. 130.

4 Xu Yan, 'Korean War: in the view of cost-effectiveness', PRC New York Consulate website, 21 October 2003, available at <<http://www.nyconsulate.prchina.org/eng/xw/t31430.htm>> accessed 23 March 2013.

5 John Garnaut, 'China, North Korea - Close as Lips and Teeth', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 February 2013.

6 Garnaut, 'China, North Korea - Close as Lips and Teeth'

7 Chinese and DPRK Governments, 'Treaty of Friendship, Co-Operation and Mutual Assistance between the People's Republic of China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea', Beijing, 11 July 1961. The Treaty, created in accordance with Marxist-Leninist principles, declares respect for state sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference in each other's internal affairs and requires either country to immediately render military and other assistance if the other is subjected to armed attack.

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- 8 Clemens, 'North Korea's Quest for Nuclear Weapons', p. 127.
- 9 Dick Nanto and Mark Manyin, 'China-North Korea Relations', Congressional Research Service: Washington DC, 28 December 2010, p. 6.
- 10 Zhan and Lee, 'Chinese People's Understanding of the Korean Unification Issue', p.63.
- 11 Zhan and Lee, 'Chinese People's Understanding of the Korean Unification Issue', p.64.
- 12 Nanto and Manyin, 'China-North Korea Relations', p. 6.
- 13 Zhan and Lee, 'Chinese People's Understanding of the Korean Unification Issue', p.65.
- 14 Jooyoung Song, 'Understanding China's Response to North Korea's Provocations', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 51, No. 6, November/December 2011, p. 1138.
- 15 Nanto and Manyin, 'China-North Korea Relations', p. 6.
- 16 Song, 'Understanding China's Response to North Korea's Provocations' p. 1138.
- 17 Bates Gill, 'China's North Korea Policy: assessing interest and influences', Special Report 283, US Institute of Peace: Washington DC, 2011, p. 6, available at <http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/China's_North_Korea_Policy.pdf> accessed 29 July 2014.
- 18 Nanto and Manyin, 'China-North Korea Relations', p. 7.
- 19 Stephen Haggard and Marcus Nolan, 'Engaging North Korea: the role of economic statecraft', East-West Center: Honolulu, 2011, p. 18.
- 20 Haggard and Nolan, 'Engaging North Korea', p. 19.
- 21 Nanto and Manyin, 'China-North Korea Relations', p. 21.
- 22 A number of factors contribute to the perilous state of the DPRK economy, including: a corrupt, autocratic, hereditary regime that ensures that party loyalists live in comfort at the expense of the 'common people'; *juche* (the self reliance strategy) that retains the DPRK as a closed state; *songun* ('military first strategy') that sees 15-25 per cent of the nation's GDP directed to the military annually; environmental conditions, such as extreme drought and flood events; centralised means of production and antiquated agricultural production systems; lack of free market mechanisms and UN sanctions that have been imposed to punish the DPRK for its nuclear and ballistic missile adventurism. The critical state of the economy is illustrated by the World Food Program, which estimates a food deficiency of 414,000 tonnes in 2012, with malnutrition leading to stunting in 28 per cent of children as a result of severe malnutrition: see UN World Food Program, 'Overview of Needs and Assistance: The Democratic People's Republic of Korea', UN, New York, 2012, available at <<https://www.wfp.org/sites/default/files/DPRK%20Overview%20of%20Needs%20And%20Assistance%202012.pdf>> accessed 28 July 2014.
- 23 Nanto and Manyin, 'China-North Korea Relations', p.17.
- 24 Justin McCurry, 'No End in Sight for North Korea's Malnutrition Crisis', *The Lancet*, Vol. 379, February 2012, p. 602.
- 25 The Lunar New Year is the most important holiday on the Chinese calendar where most Chinese take leave to spend time with family.
- 26 Clemens, 'North Korea's Quest for Nuclear Weapons', p. 132.
- 27 Haggard and Nolan, 'Engaging North Korea', p. 19.
- 28 Clemens, 'North Korea's Quest for Nuclear Weapons', p. 127
- 29 Gordon G. Chang, 'Fatal Attraction: China's strengthening partnership with North Korea', *World Affairs*, Vol. 174, No. 1, May/June 2011, p. 49
- 30 Chang, 'Fatal Attraction', p. 49.
- 31 Victor Cha, *The Impossible State*, Ecco: New York, 2012, p. 178.
- 32 UN General Assembly Human Rights Council, 'Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea', UN: New York, 2014 warns that Kim Jong-un and his henchmen could one day face prosecution by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity. A UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights states that the North Korean leader uses murder, torture, slavery, sexual violence, mass starvation and other abuses to prop up the regime and terrorise 'the population into submission': see UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 'Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea', UN: New York, 2014, available at <<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/CoIDPRK/Pages/ReportoftheCommissionofInquiryDPRK.aspx>> accessed 28 July 2014.
- 33 Chang, 'Fatal Attraction', p. 47.
- 34 International Crisis Group, 'Fire at the City Gate: why China keeps North Korea close', Asia Report No. 254, International Crisis Group: Brussels, 2013, p. 1, available at

<<http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/north-east-asia/china/254-fire-on-the-city-gate-why-china-keeps-north-korea-close.aspx>> accessed 28 July 2014.

35 ICG, 'Fire at the City Gate', p. 14.

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