

# LIPS AND TEETH: REPAIRING CHINA-NORTH KOREA RELATIONS

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

China has reset its ties with North Korea and repaired a relationship that had suffered its most severe downturn ever. The Beijing-Pyongyang relationship, long called as “close as lips and teeth,” took a decidedly negative turn in 2017 as Pyongyang’s confrontation with the United States appeared to be pushing the Korean Peninsula to the brink of war. Through its actions, North Korea seemed to willfully ignore China’s interests. Beijing responded with stark warnings and support for tougher U.N. Security Council sanctions.

The year 2018 brought a remarkable turnabout on the peninsula, including historic new U.S. and South Korean dialogues with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. But as diplomacy accelerated, concern was mounting in Beijing that China was being left out of the game and North Korea was drifting out of its orbit. China moved decisively to reassert itself and repair relations with North Korea through an unprecedented series of summits between President Xi Jinping and Kim Jong Un, the first visit by a Chinese leader to North Korea in 14 years, and renewed contacts between party and military officials.

Beijing’s initiative has laid the foundation for more stable and predictable bilateral ties. But North Korea shows no sign of abandoning the nuclear and missile programs that constitute the main source of instability so close to China’s border.

In fact, North Korea is probably now a permanent nuclear-armed state, giving Pyongyang useful leverage in its relations with all its neighbors, including China, and constraining Beijing’s ability to influence North Korea.

With U.S. influence in Northeast Asia waning, signs of trouble in the U.S.-South Korea alliance, eroding U.S.-South Korea-Japan trilateral security cooperation, and a more passive U.S. approach to its regional alliances, Beijing may see an opportunity to use its stabilized relationship with North Korea to accelerate these trends. All may not be harmonious in China-North Korea relations, but on these points, Beijing and Pyongyang share similar goals. For China, even a problematic partnership with North Korea has strategic value, although the partnership would be at risk again if Pyongyang resumes nuclear or long-range missile testing.

China’s revitalized relationship with North Korea means the United States can no longer rely on Beijing to support increased sanctions and pressure on Pyongyang. China will also demand a seat at the table at discussions of a peninsular peace regime or a treaty to end the Korean War, where, like North Korea, it hopes to weaken the rationale for the U.S. military presence in Korea.

The “normalization” of Beijing-Pyongyang ties poses a new challenge as U.S. policymakers deal with North Korea’s nuclear threat. To contend with this new reality, policymakers will need to refocus the current U.S. policy approach, including by doing a more effective job convincing Beijing that Pyongyang’s weapons of mass destruction programs are a threat to Chinese interests. Washington should also prioritize the establishment of stable, predictable relations with Beijing, dissuade China from offering uncoordinated incentives to North Korea, and revitalize and be prepared to lead the international coalition to maintain tough-minded sanctions and other pressures on North Korea.

With Beijing's reset of ties with Pyongyang, China's posture on North Korea is shifting, including signs that it is prepared to live with a nuclear North Korea. The common goal of denuclearization that once inspired U.S.-China cooperation on North Korea is disappearing. Uncertain times lie ahead.

## INTRODUCTION

Relations between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the People's Republic of China (PRC) have often been called as "close as lips and teeth" by those seeking to describe the traditional solidarity and warmth of bilateral ties. But there has always been more to this phrase than meets the eye. It is a reworking of the Chinese proverb, "if the lips are gone, the teeth will get cold," and was used to justify Chinese intervention in the Korean War because of the fear that the defeat of North Korea (the "lips") would have negative consequences for China. The phrase also rankled Pyongyang, since it relegated North Korea to a subordinate position vis-à-vis China. But for China, North Korea has not just been a buffer and shield against hostile foreign forces, it has also been a vulnerability. That duality continues to shape PRC policy towards the DPRK.

In recent years, China's perception of North Korea as a source of vulnerability has increasingly driven its thinking – with good reason. Since Pyongyang's first nuclear weapons test in 2006, North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons and ballistic missile delivery systems, military provocations, and confrontational posture towards South Korea and the United States have escalated tensions on the Korean Peninsula. These tensions peaked in 2017, as Pyongyang demonstrated new and more dangerous missile and nuclear weapons capabilities. With U.S. President Donald Trump and North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un trading threats and insults amidst high military alertness, relations between Washington and Pyongyang deteriorated to the point that military confrontation seemed possible.

China's fears of instability on the Korean Peninsula spiked in 2017 as Beijing realized that its North Korean ally was creating the conditions for a conflict that could end the North Korean regime, bring chaos to China's border, reunify the Korean Peninsula under a U.S. ally,

and expose China's "teeth" to the consequences of all this. This concern prompted a shift in Chinese policy. Beijing distanced itself from North Korea, criticized Pyongyang, and increased its support for international sanctions on Kim's regime. China's shift had significant consequences for bilateral relations with North Korea, and those ties reached a new low in 2017.

## 2017: A VERY BAD YEAR

**Escalating Tests.** North Korea actually began laying the foundation for a confrontational 2017 a year earlier. On January 6, 2016, Pyongyang announced that it had successfully tested a hydrogen bomb. Just weeks later, North Korea launched a satellite using long-range rocket technology similar to that required for its intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) program. On March 9, the North claimed it had miniaturized nuclear weapons to be carried on its long-range missiles. And on April 9, Pyongyang successfully tested what it claimed was an ICBM engine.

On August 24, 2016, the DPRK launched the Pukguksong-1 (also called the KN-11), a submarine-launched missile that Pyongyang said was capable of reaching the United States. Then, on September 9, the North punctuated the year by conducting its fifth underground nuclear test. The test, estimated to have a yield of around 20-30 kilotons of TNT, was North Korea's largest to that point and Pyongyang claimed it could now produce "standardized" warheads to be mounted on "strategic ballistic rockets."<sup>1</sup>

Coming during the U.S. presidential campaign, the tests provided a blunt reminder that the next American president would face a greater North Korean challenge than ever. In case the new U.S. president missed this point, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un used his 2017 New Year's message to warn President-elect Trump that the North had "entered the final stage of preparation for the test launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile," prompting Trump to declare on Twitter, "It won't happen."<sup>2</sup>

Early in the Trump administration, North Korea tested several land-based versions of the Pukguksong/KN-11, with mixed results. But on July 4, 2017, North Korea successfully launched an ICBM, the Hwasong-14. Kim Jong Un described the launch as a "gift for the American bastards" as the United States celebrated

its Independence Day.<sup>3</sup> North Korea launched another Hwasong-14 on July 28 and followed it with a test of an even more sophisticated Hwasong-15 on November 28, further evidence that North Korea could probably reach targets in the continental United States.

**Fire and Fury.** The new U.S. administration responded to Pyongyang's tests with tough rhetoric, including President Trump's now iconic threat to meet the North Korean challenge with "fire and fury." Days later, Trump declared that the U.S. military was "locked and loaded" should North Korea act unwisely.<sup>4</sup> But when North Korea detonated a 250-kiloton hydrogen bomb on September 3, 2017, U.S. threats escalated to a new level.



**Senior American officials discussed possible military action and hinted that a 'bloody nose' strike against North Korea was being considered.**

President Trump used his maiden speech at the United Nations on September 19, 2017 to say that the United States might have no choice but to "totally destroy" North Korea.<sup>5</sup> To demonstrate determination and capabilities, the U.S. began to publicize periodic flights of B-1B bombers, including the fact that a September mission had flown closer than ever to North Korean territory. At the same time, senior American officials, including the U.S. national security adviser, discussed possible military action and hinted that a "bloody nose" strike against North Korea was being considered.<sup>6</sup>

North Korean rhetoric in response to these threats was no less ominous. Kim Jong Un used an unprecedented television appearance to describe Trump as "mentally deranged" and said the U.S. president would "pay dearly" for his threats. Following Kim's speech, the DPRK foreign minister declared North Korea might detonate a hydrogen bomb over the Pacific Ocean.<sup>7</sup>

**China Reacts.** As the crisis intensified, so did Chinese concerns. Beijing criticized Washington's martial rhetoric and urged the United States to seek a diplomatic solution with North Korea. But China was clearly more worried about the North Korean actions that had accelerated the crisis and were driving it towards conflict.

On April 7-8, 2017, when President Trump hosted Chinese President Xi Jinping for their first summit at Mar-a-Lago, his club in Florida, he pressed Xi for support on North Korea. Reports suggest some initial understandings were reached. But a Trump tweet suggesting that Chinese help on North Korea would ease U.S.-China trade tensions and a telephone conversation between the two leaders on April 12 appear to have had a significant impact on Xi. Almost immediately, PRC official media began to carry criticism directed at Pyongyang.<sup>8</sup>

On April 12, 2017, the Global Times declared that China "can no longer stand the continuous escalation of the North Korean nuclear issue at its doorstep." The paper, published by the People's Daily, the official organ of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), cautioned North Korea to "avoid making mistakes" and warned, "If the North makes another provocative move this month, the Chinese society will be willing to see the (U.N. Security Council) adopt severe restrictive measures that have never been seen before, such as restricting oil imports to the North."<sup>9</sup> The next day, an editorial in the Global Times urged North Korea to denuclearize in accordance with China's "declared advice" and suggested that the PRC was prepared to provide security assurances to a non-nuclear DPRK. Pointing to North Korea's isolation, the editorial said, "A modern state cannot continue to exist like this."<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, authorities allowed a leading Chinese scholar to deliver a speech questioning China's traditional relationship with North Korea. The scholar, Shen Zhihua, voiced a concern probably widely shared: "China's fundamental interest lies in achieving a stability on its borders and developing outward. But since North Korea acquired nuclear weapons, that periphery has never been stable, so inevitably Chinese and North Korean interests are at odds." In unusually direct terms, Shen declared, "We must see clearly that China and North Korea are no longer brothers in arms."<sup>11</sup>

Shen would normally not have been able to speak so frankly, or post his remarks on his institution's website, without official approval. Knowing that North Korea follows closely the comments of prominent Chinese experts, Beijing likely authorized his speech as a way of signaling its displeasure to Pyongyang.

To reinforce the point, a Chinese foreign ministry spokesman declared on April 20, 2017 that China was “gravely concerned” about the North’s nuclear and missile tests while complimenting the “positive and constructive remarks” U.S. officials had made in calling for a peaceful resolution of the crisis. Referring to a particularly strong statement from a North Korean foreign ministry official, the Chinese foreign ministry spokesman said, “China firmly opposes any words or actions that would escalate rivalry and tension.”<sup>12</sup>

**Pyongyang Responds.** North Korea delivered a blistering response to China. Referring to the PRC by name, the DPRK’s official news agency on May 1, 2017 accused Beijing of making “a string of absurd and reckless comments.” The Korea Central News Agency commentary declared that, “China had better ponder over the grave consequences to be entailed by its reckless act of chopping down the pillar of the DPRK-China relations,” adding that the DPRK “...will never beg for the maintenance of friendship with China.”

Beijing dismissed the North Korean reaction. “Beijing does not need to engage in a tit-for-tat argument with Pyongyang,” the *Global Times* wrote “However, it should express its own opinions regardless of what Pyongyang has said.”<sup>13</sup>

North Korea’s massive September 2017 nuclear test intensified Beijing’s anger with Pyongyang, particularly since the blast was felt in northeast China. The September 3 test came just hours before Xi Jinping was scheduled to speak at a BRICS summit in Beijing and undoubtedly embarrassed the Chinese leader.

The timing may well not have been coincidental. Pyongyang had launched ballistic missiles before Xi’s April summit with President Trump and again as Xi was preparing to host the Belt and Road Forum in Beijing in May. The Chinese foreign ministry reacted quickly to the nuclear blast, expressing “grave concern” and underscoring that China “resolutely opposes and strongly condemns” the test.<sup>14</sup>

**China Plays the Sanctions Card.** Beijing’s ire at North Korea behavior was also being manifested in its support for a series of increasingly tough U.N. Security Council (UNSC) resolutions designed to isolate and punish Pyongyang. China supported the unanimous U.N. Security Council move to impose sanctions on

North Korea on November 30, 2016, in response to Pyongyang’s September 9 nuclear test. Those sanctions, which then-U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called the “toughest ever,” focused on restricting the North’s coal and mineral exports and its links to the international banking system.<sup>15</sup>

During the course of 2017, China voted in favor of four UNSC resolutions, each of which intensified economic and trade pressure on North Korea. The resolutions included provisions to limit exports of oil and refined petroleum products to North Korea; restrict Pyongyang’s export of textiles, machinery, and food; cap the number of North Korean laborers earning hard currency overseas; freeze the assets of North Korean banking officials and military officers; ban the export of industrial equipment, machinery and vehicles to North Korea; and authorize the seizure of vessels suspected of illicitly providing petroleum to the Pyongyang regime.<sup>16</sup>



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China’s willingness to support UNSC sanctions won Beijing praise from the international community, though it had actually sought to water down some of the more aggressive sanctions sought by the United States before finally voting in favor of a compromise draft resolution. China’s action was in keeping with its long-standing fear that excessive pressure on North Korea could lead to the collapse of the regime. Beijing’s attempt to moderate the pressure on Pyongyang got it no credit from North Korea. Neither did the fact that, even as Beijing was voting in favor of sanctions, Chinese ships were continuing to transfer oil to North Korea in apparent violation of UNSC restrictions.<sup>17</sup>

North Korea was outspoken in its reaction to the U.N. measures adopted in 2017, directing some of its sharpest criticism at China and Russia. In August, North Korea’s official news agency said China and Russia should “pay dearly” for having supported new UNSC sanctions and promised “physical action” by the North Korean military in response to the new

measures.<sup>18</sup> When the Security Council unanimously voted in December to further strengthen sanctions and called for countries to expel North Korean workers, the DPRK foreign ministry criticized “the U.S. and its followers,” implicitly including China and Russia. A defiant statement called the new measures “an act of war,” a characterization that was in keeping with the incendiary atmosphere as the year drew to a close.<sup>19</sup>

## 2018: A NEW GAME, WITH CHINA ON THE OUTSIDE

As 2018 began, PRC-DPRK ties were at their nadir. China’s support for international sanctions angered North Korea’s leadership, which understood the implications of having its treaty ally, main trading partner, and economic lifeline play a key part in the sanctions regime. The fact that China was allowing only incremental increases in sanctions-related pressure in the U.N. Security Council did not ease Pyongyang’s concern.

Beijing’s approach reminded Pyongyang that undermining China’s interests would only encourage the PRC to support more sanctions. In retrospect, China’s willingness to support sanctions and the burden these measures placed on the North Korea’s economy may have contributed to Pyongyang’s dramatic shift from confrontation to dialogue in early 2018.

The February 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, South Korea occasioned a remarkable turnabout in the situation on the Korean Peninsula. Pyongyang’s participation in the Olympics and dispatch of a high-level delegation to attend the opening ceremony launched a dialogue process between the two Koreas that led quickly to a North-South summit in April, agreements between Seoul and Pyongyang to reduce military tensions, an offer by Kim Jong Un to meet the U.S. president, and President Trump’s surprising acceptance of that invitation in March.

By the time Trump and Kim met in Singapore in June 2018, the diplomatic and security atmosphere on the peninsula had shifted markedly and the rhetorical temperature between the United States and North Korea had dropped. A peninsula that only weeks earlier seemed headed for confrontation was now focused on dialogue, diplomacy, and prospects for reconciliation.

In the view of some observers, North Korea seemed serious about denuclearization. And the fact that an American president and a North Korean leader were preparing to meet face to face to discuss denuclearization and other issues created hope in some quarters that U.S.-North Korea ties, and relations between the two Koreas themselves, were now on a more hopeful track.

In Beijing, these developments prompted both relief and concern. For the first time in months, the U.S. and North Korea were not hurling insults at each other, and fear of military conflict was waning. However, the upsurge in North-South and DPRK-U.S. diplomacy left no role for Beijing, which traditionally viewed itself as a central actor on Korean Peninsula issues. China had been a key player in the Six-Party Talks and Beijing’s efforts were key to concluding the September 19, 2005 denuclearization agreement with Pyongyang.

Now, despite its major stake in peace and security on the peninsula, Beijing found itself on the outside looking in as a new diplomatic game was being played.<sup>20</sup> China faced a situation in which the major issues on the peninsula – denuclearization, peace and stability, military confrontation, tension reduction, and reconciliation and reunification – would be discussed at fora in which its interests were not represented.

Of particular concern was the possibility that the U.S. and the two Koreas might discuss an agreement to formally end the Korean War and replace the Korean Armistice Agreement with a peace mechanism. For many Chinese, such a discussion without the participation of China, a major combatant in the Korean conflict, was unacceptable.<sup>21</sup>

Underlying these and other concerns was the fear by some in Beijing that North Korea, having successfully defied Chinese efforts to prevent it from developing nuclear weapons, was now in a position to cut its own deals with the United States and South Korea.<sup>22</sup> The prospect of China’s sole treaty ally negotiating without reference to Chinese interests was deeply unsettling. As a senior Chinese official remarked at a private meeting in late 2018, “We were concerned that North Korea was drifting away, our influence in Pyongyang was declining, and our interests were not being protected.”<sup>23</sup>

## BEIJING SHIFTS INTO DIPLOMATIC OVERDRIVE

China's stake in peninsular developments required it to reassert its role in Korea-related matters, rehabilitate its troubled relationship with North Korea, and remind Pyongyang that the PRC was the DPRK's only treaty ally and only reliable source of economic, agricultural, and energy assistance. It was equally important that China, locked into a growing rivalry with the United States, lay down a marker with Washington about its interests. Beijing quickly went about doing all of these things.

Beijing launched its diplomatic initiative with an invitation to Kim Jong Un to visit the PRC, March 25-28, 2018. This began an unprecedented series of meetings between the Chinese and North Korean leaders that saw them meet five times in 18 months.

The initial encounter between Xi and Kim was the latter's first foreign trip since assuming the leadership in 2011. In an indication of his expectations for the eventual trajectory of DPRK-PRC relations, Kim used the meeting to invite Xi Jinping to pay his first visit to North Korea as Chinese leader.

Coming only days after President Trump had accepted Kim Jong Un's invitation to meet, and as Pyongyang and Seoul were planning their late-April summit in Panmunjom, North Korea, the timing of the Xi-Kim meeting was hardly coincidental. Indeed, each of the five meetings between Xi and Kim in 2018 and 2019 took place in close proximity to a U.S.-North Korea or an inter-Korean summit, underscoring that Beijing was eager to use the meetings both to coordinate views with and obtain first-hand readouts from Pyongyang.

The first Xi-Kim meeting was followed by the April 14, 2018 visit to Pyongyang by Song Tao, director of the CCP's International Department. Song, whose responsibilities include relations with North Korea's ruling Worker's Party of Korea (WPK), was warmly received by Kim Jong Un, who expressed appreciation for the "cordial hospitality...warm comradeship and friendship" he had received during his "unforgettable visit to China."<sup>24</sup> The reception accorded Song in April was in sharp contrast to his previous experience in Pyongyang. When Song travelled to North Korea as Xi's special envoy in November 2017, Kim Jong Un

declined to meet with him, opting instead to visit an automobile factory to deliver on-the-spot guidance.<sup>25</sup> The snub spoke volumes about the degree to which relations had deteriorated.

The now-improved atmospherics between China and North Korea were clearly on display when Kim met with Xi again in Dalian, a city on China's Liaodong Peninsula between Beijing and the two countries' border, on May 7-8, 2018. Occurring in the run-up to the June 12 U.S.-DPRK summit in Singapore, the meeting allowed the two to exchange views in advance of the historic first encounter between the North Korean leader and the U.S. president. The Chinese media's coverage of the smiles, warm handshakes, and seaside strolls involving the two leaders in Dalian confirmed that, from Beijing's perspective, the meeting was a success.<sup>26</sup> Xi reportedly complimented Kim for returning to China so soon and noted with pleasure that since the two had first met, "both China-DPRK relations and the Korean Peninsula situation have made positive progress."<sup>27</sup>

Xi and Kim met for the third time in 100 days in Beijing on June 19, one week after the Trump-Kim summit in Singapore. A beaming Xi heaped praise on Kim for the outcome in Singapore and for the ongoing improvement in China-North Korea relations, noting that bilateral ties were now "radiating new vitality." Xi also lauded Pyongyang's emphasis on economic development, saying that the WPK's "new strategic route has pushed the DPRK's socialist cause into a new journey."<sup>28</sup> Xi did not need to add that this "new route" was infinitely preferable to Pyongyang's confrontational path that had prompted China's concerns about possible conflict in Korea only months earlier.

There had been speculation that Xi might visit North Korea in connection with the 70th anniversary of the founding of the DPRK in September 2018. But despite the rapid improvement in bilateral relations, Xi was not yet ready to take this step. Instead, Xi sent Li Zhanshu, the third-ranking member of the CCP Politburo, to represent him. In their meeting, Li reportedly urged Kim Jong Un to "reach the common goal of denuclearization," a pointed reminder of Beijing's hope that the DPRK would adhere to the denuclearization commitment it had made in Singapore.<sup>29</sup>

Xi and Kim met again in Beijing in early January 2019, prior to the U.S.-DPRK summit in Hanoi held on February 27. The subsequent failure of the Hanoi summit disappointed Beijing but did not deter it from continuing to pursue better ties with Pyongyang.

China continued to make clear its hope that North Korea would work with the United States to develop a roadmap leading to denuclearization. Speaking on the margins of China's National People's Congress on March 8, 2019, Foreign Minister Wang Yi emphasized that China's relations with Pyongyang would not be affected by "temporary incidents," an apparent reference to the failure in Hanoi.<sup>30</sup> The implication was that, despite the disappointing outcome in Hanoi, the door remained open for further improvement in relations, presumably to include the long-anticipated visit by Xi to Pyongyang.



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Xi's visit to North Korea, the first by a Chinese leader in 14 years, took place on June 20-21, 2019. The previous leadership visit, by then-President Hu Jintao, had occurred only after Pyongyang had agreed to the September 19, 2005 denuclearization agreement in the Six-Party Talks. North Korea's violation of that agreement and its first nuclear test in 2006 began the downward slide in relations that China was now seeking to repair.

While Xi's visit to Pyongyang was brief, it was warm and contained all of the pomp and upbeat rhetoric to be expected when longtime friends and allies meet. Kim greeted Xi at the airport with an elaborate ceremony and hundreds of thousands of North Koreans lined the streets to welcome Xi's motorcade in downtown Pyongyang. China's media gave considerable coverage of the visit, calling Xi's reception "unprecedented" and reporting that Xi assured Kim during their meeting that "shared ideals, beliefs and goals are the driving force" of the China-North Korea relationship.

The two leaders reportedly discussed a wide range of issues, including denuclearization, but no details were provided on the discussions. Nor were any major agreements announced, other than Xi's commitment to work with North Korea "to implement the plan for commemorating the 70th anniversary of diplomatic ties [which were established on October 6, 1949] so as to carry forward the traditional China-DPRK friendship and improve the well-being of both peoples."<sup>31</sup>

Xi's visit was the highest-level reaffirmation of China-North Korea relations in years, and signalled a remarkable turnabout in bilateral relations since the dark days of 2017. And since it occurred only days before Xi was to meet with Trump at the G-20 in Osaka, the visit also signalled to Washington that, despite Trump's failure in Hanoi, China was determined to improve relations with North Korea regardless of the troubled state of U.S.-DPRK diplomacy.

As previewed by Xi's commitment in Pyongyang, his visit set in motion a flurry of exchanges designed to reinvigorate China-North Korea ties. Since Xi's visit, Beijing has hosted visits by the first vice director of the WPK's International Department, the director of the General Political Bureau of the Korean People's Army, a delegation from the North Korean Ministry of People's Security, and the president of the North Korean Central Court.<sup>32</sup>

Meanwhile, Foreign Minister Wang visited Pyongyang September 2-4, possibly to prepare for the commemoration of the anniversary of the establishment of relations on October 6. Building on the upbeat tone of Xi's visit, Wang said, "China and the DPRK should communicate more, exchange more, understand each other, trust each other, support each other, and safeguard common interests and legitimate rights and interests." Wang reportedly assured the North Koreans that "...China will always stand on the road as comrades and friends of the DPRK."<sup>33</sup>

Wang was well received in Pyongyang by his counterpart Ri Yong Ho, and his visit was positively reported, but he did not meet with Kim Jong Un. Considering the effort Beijing and Pyongyang had been making to keep things positive, Wang's failure to gain an audience with Kim during the course of a three-day visit is puzzling. This is especially so in light of reports that Kim was

contemplating a visit to China in connection with the PRC's October 1 commemoration of its founding, as well as the anniversary of the establishment of relations.<sup>34</sup> Neither of those visits took place.

It is possible that the U.S.-North Korea working-level talks in Stockholm and the collapse of those talks on October 5 prompted the Chinese side to defer further summitry for now. Meanwhile, Kim Jong Un's focus on leadership-level meetings with his Chinese, American, Russian, and South Korean counterparts may have convinced him a meeting with Wang was unnecessary. Nevertheless, the apparent snub of Wang probably raised eyebrows in Beijing.

## CHINA-NORTH KOREA RELATIONS: AS CLOSE AS...?

Beijing's concerted effort to repair relations with its ally has laid the foundation for a more stable and predictable relationship with Pyongyang. As they commemorated the 70th anniversary of their establishment of diplomatic relations in October 2019, Beijing and Pyongyang have reopened communication channels, restarted exchanges and visits, and reestablished an atmosphere of diplomatic decorum that had largely evaporated in 2017.



**For China, maintaining even a fictional goal of denuclearization meets its needs.**

But it would be too much to say that the relationship is now fully normalized or that all concerns have been resolved. For now, China's greatest concern – the potential for instability or conflict on its border and the vulnerability caused by this – has eased. But the root cause of that concern – North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons and the missiles on which to deliver them – remains. For all the talk of denuclearization, Pyongyang done nothing to give up its nuclear weapons and shown no sign it intends to abandon the nuclear weapons program that constitute the main source of instability and uncertainty on China's border.

For China, the reality is that North Korea is probably now a permanently nuclear-armed state on its border. Nuclear weapons give Pyongyang useful leverage in its relations with all its neighbors, including China. But Beijing's ability to influence North Korea is constrained by its reluctance to use its considerable economic leverage for fear of causing the collapse of the regime. For China, stability and the avoidance of conflict, not denuclearization, has long been the top policy priority, and that is likely to remain the case.

In resetting ties with North Korea, Beijing may now be reconciling itself to the reality of a permanently nuclear-armed North Korea, although it has not completely given up hope for denuclearization. In a recent conversation, a prominent Chinese specialist and former senior official declared that Beijing would never “accept” North Korea as a nuclear weapon state. However, he acknowledged, China is prepared to tolerate a nuclear-armed North Korea as long as Beijing can point to a negotiating process that offers some hope, however vague, of eventual denuclearization.<sup>35</sup> For China, maintaining even a fictional goal of denuclearization meets its needs.

Meanwhile, the outline of China's overall approach to the Korean Peninsula remains largely unchanged, despite the turbulence of the past two years. The core goals of that approach include:

- Ensuring that China plays a central role in any future peace mechanism on the Korean Peninsula.
- Pursuing a Korean War peace treaty that undermines the rationale for the U.S.-South Korea alliance.
- Maintaining good relations with both Koreas.
- Avoiding the collapse of North Korea and the reunification of the peninsula under a U.S.-allied South Korea.
- Reducing the threat posed by the U.S.-South Korea alliance and, if possible, ending that alliance and the U.S. presence on China's doorstep.
- Reducing the vulnerability caused by North Korea's continued possession of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles.

- Ensuring the United States understands that China's support, cooperation, and assent are essential if peace and stability are to be preserved on the peninsula.

Beijing has probably calculated that U.S. influence in Northeast Asia is waning and that friction in the U.S.-South Korea alliance, the erosion of U.S.-South Korea-Japan security cooperation, and a passive U.S. approach to its regional alliances give China a major opportunity to advance its interests. In this context, Beijing may also seek to use its improved relationship with North Korea to accelerate these trends and advance at least some of its goals.

Today, all may not be perfectly harmonious in China-North Korea relations, but ties are much better than they have been. Most importantly for Beijing, China and North Korea share similar goals when it comes to weakening the U.S.-South Korea alliance, removing U.S. forces from the Korean Peninsula, and reducing U.S. influence in Northeast Asia. For China, even a problematic partnership with Pyongyang has strategic value. But it remains to be seen whether Beijing's patience with Pyongyang and grudging tolerance for its WMD programs will continue if North Korea's ongoing effort to expand its nuclear and missile programs begins to affect China's regional and strategic interests.

## IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES

China's restoration of normal relations with Pyongyang is an important reminder of the priority Beijing places on maintaining stability on the Korean Peninsula. It also tells us there are limits to how far Beijing will go in pressuring North Korea.

It is possible, even likely, that a resumption of nuclear or long-range missile testing by Pyongyang that threatens to restart a crisis on China's border would prompt Beijing to react strongly against the DPRK. But absent renewed provocative behavior by North Korea, Beijing now seems highly unlikely to support increased pressure on the Pyongyang regime.

U.S. efforts to persuade Beijing to support sanctions and isolate North Korea probably achieved peak success in 2017. Since then, China has made clear, unilaterally and in concert with Russia, its preference for reducing or reversing sanctions on Pyongyang, and this has become a regular theme in its public statements on North Korea.<sup>36</sup>

Russia has generally followed China's lead in dealing with North Korea. Nevertheless, Russian President Vladimir Putin's April 2019 summit with Kim Jong Un in Vladivostok reminded the United States and China that Moscow has a stake in the Korean Peninsula and that Russia expects to play a role, particularly with respect to any future easing of international sanctions on Pyongyang. In this connection, North Korean recognition of the need to solicit Russian support for sanctions easing was probably the main reason behind Kim Jong Un's desire to hold his brief encounter with Putin in Vladivostok.

Meanwhile, China eased its own measures against North Korea during 2018 – a trend that could continue if Beijing decides to provide incentives to keep relations with North Korea on a positive plane.<sup>37</sup> Such a move would seriously undermine the pressure campaign on North Korea and would also decrease U.S. leverage.

China will resist any effort by the United States to exclude it from the process of bringing a permanent peace to the Korean Peninsula, including talks to establish a peace regime or the conclusion of a treaty bringing the Korean war to a formal end. As a major combatant in the war, Beijing will demand a seat at the table. U.S. policymakers will therefore need to be mindful of the PRC goals listed above, particularly Beijing's hope to use the process of ending the Korean War to weaken and ultimately end the U.S. military presence in Korea – a goal that is also central to Pyongyang's game plan.

The downturn in U.S.-China relations, distrust between Beijing and Washington, and the emerging strategic rivalry between the two increases the possibility that Beijing might be tempted to link its future cooperation on North Korea to other issues in the U.S.-China relationship, for example in the trade arena. At a minimum, China seems likely to turn away U.S. requests for expanded cooperation on North Korea as long as U.S.-China relations are deteriorating or in conflict.

The “normalization” of Beijing-Pyongyang ties provides a new challenge and additional complication as U.S. policymakers deal with North Korea’s nuclear threat. To contend with this new reality, policymakers should refine and refocus the current U.S. policy approach to include the following:

- Future attempts to solicit Chinese support for additional U.N. Security Council sanctions or other measures against North Korea must convince Beijing that its own security is at stake or that applying pressure on the Pyongyang regime is the only way to avoid a return to the dangerous days of 2017. It is not clear that such an effort will succeed, especially since Beijing may believe the U.S. threats of 2017 were a bluff. In addition, a U.S. attempt to rekindle the heated rhetoric and actions of 2017 would risk making it seem that the United States, not North Korea, is the problem. Accordingly, if a breakdown in U.S.-North Korea talks or a resumption of North Korean missile and/or nuclear testing prompts the United States to return to a more aggressive approach, such an approach should be carefully considered and designed to show Beijing that, once again, Pyongyang’s behavior is threatening China’s interests.
- Securing additional Chinese cooperation against North Korea in the context of a deteriorating U.S.-China relationship seems highly unlikely. The downturn in Washington-Beijing ties and harsh U.S. rhetoric directed at Beijing by senior U.S. officials have soured China’s leadership on accommodating American concerns regarding North Korea. As a former senior Chinese official put it recently, Beijing will not do the United States a “favor” while Washington treats China with hostility.<sup>38</sup>
- In the future, if the goal is to secure Chinese cooperation on North Korea, U.S. policymakers will have to improve currently antagonistic relations with Beijing. However, in an increasingly complex and competitive U.S.-China relationship, it’s not clear that Washington policymakers will be prepared to prioritize cooperation with Beijing on North Korea over other, no less important issues. Nevertheless, the growing North Korean threat to U.S. regional allies and U.S. bases in the western Pacific, and the emerging threat to the continental United States from Pyongyang’s nuclear arsenal, argue strongly in favor of making North Korea an urgent priority.
- Meanwhile, U.S. diplomacy with China should attempt to dissuade Beijing from offering uncoordinated or unilateral economic incentives to North Korea as a way of improving bilateral ties. Should such efforts fail, the U.S. should be prepared to emphasize the negative consequences to U.S.-China relations if it does so.
- The U.S. should acknowledge that China has a legitimate role in the Korean Peninsula peace process, but Washington should nonetheless be wary of Chinese efforts to use that process to undermine the rationale for the U.S. military presence in Korea.
- The improvement in China-North Korea relations and the problematic nature of current U.S.-China ties makes it more important than ever that the United States strengthen and lead an international coalition to maintain tough-minded sanctions and other pressures on North Korea. U.S. leadership in this area has been lacking, and the ongoing erosion of the international sanctions regime poses a major challenge for U.S. efforts to use “maximum pressure” to convince North Korea to denuclearize.<sup>39</sup>
- Indeed, the case can be made that “maximum pressure” may no longer be the U.S. approach. Instead, the Trump administration has been fixated on presidential summitry with Kim Jong Un. But three meetings with Kim have not only not led to denuclearization, Pyongyang is actually expanding and enhancing its nuclear and ballistic missile arsenal. Simultaneously, U.S. willingness to tolerate ongoing North Korean ballistic missile testing in order to preserve the atmosphere for negotiations has effectively encouraged Pyongyang to continue such launches, which are in violation of U.N. Security Council resolutions and which enable Pyongyang to enhance its ability to strike U.S. allies and U.S. forces in the region. North Korea has long sought to gain acceptance

of its nuclear and missile arsenal from the United States and the international community. Ironically, current U.S. policy may encourage Pyongyang to believe it could succeed in doing so.

- Meanwhile, the foundation of any international coalition designed to deal with North Korea must be an effective U.S.-Japan-South Korea partnership. Washington has allowed this trilateral partnership to deteriorate in the face of ongoing Japan-South Korea rancor. U.S. policymakers must take steps to revitalize and repair this important trilateral relationship.

Finally, policymakers should not underestimate the challenge posed by Beijing's reset of its ties with Pyongyang and the degree to which China's policy on North Korea has fundamentally shifted. Over the years, the conventional wisdom had been that, for all their differences, Washington and Beijing shared an interest in bringing about North Korea's denuclearization. But China is showing signs of accommodating itself to a nuclear-armed North Korea, and the United States may be prepared to accept a freeze or cap on the North's program instead of the North's full, final, and verified denuclearization.<sup>40</sup> The common goal that once inspired U.S.-China cooperation on North Korea is disappearing. Uncertain times lie ahead.

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