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## China and Denuclearization of North Korea

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### Abstract

China has advocated peaceful resolution of the nuclear proliferation issue in North Korea. It has regarded stability in North Korea as an important aspect in all of its policies and negotiations. Despite China siding with the US and its allies in the Security Council to impose tough economic sanctions on North Korea, the relationship between Beijing and Pyongyang is quite stable and close. China's policy of restraint towards North Korea's nuclear proliferation is, however, not free of costs, adversely affecting its relationship with other major power like the US, Japan, and South Korea. Scott D. Sagan's explanation for nuclear proliferation which focuses on domestic politics is quite beneficial to comprehend the manner in which the Kim regime has utilized its nuclear weapons program to not only secure itself from perceived threat from the US but also to justify continued sacrifices and harsh treatment of the people. China's quest for stability in the region aligns perfectly well with the Kim regime which is resolute to maintain its grip on power. For the Kim dynasty regime survival is the priority and it has learnt from past horrific cases of Iraq and Libya. It is highly unlikely that the regime will forego its nuclear weapons as they act as deterrent against aggression by external players.

### Keywords

Denuclearization, North Korea, China, United States

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The regime in North Korea envisaged nuclear weapons as tools for its survival that enhanced domestic support, serving as a bargaining chip for getting international concessions and a potential deterrent against external threats (Solingen 2007, 139). With China's expanding global influence and its global leadership aspirations, there is no doubt that its role in the resolution of the nuclear proliferation issue by the Kim regime will be consequential. The relationship between North Korea and China is often touted as "close as lips and teeth". The two countries signed a defense treaty in 1961, the Sino-North Korean Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty, whose Article 2 includes a mutual defense provision (Panda 2017). Notwithstanding the increasingly revisionist projection of Chinese power, the Cold War-era power structure in East Asia plays a crucial role in shaping and defining Chinese foreign policy. Three alliances still form the bedrock of international relations in East Asia: the US-ROK alliance, the US-Japan alliance, and the China-North Korea alliance (Wang 2018, 270).

With Premier Wen Jiabao's visit to Pyongyang in 2009, the two countries agreed to deepen economic engagement and develop new infrastructure along the border. A large number of small and medium private enterprises, as well as state-owned enterprises owned by provincial or municipal governments in the border provinces of China, began investing or doing business in North Korea, expanding their

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activities in sectors like mineral resources, fishery, light industry, tourism and others (Wertz 2019, 9). By the end of 2017, North Korea's trade became heavily dependent on China, constituting almost 95 percent of its total trade. With increasing engagement between the two countries since 2009, Beijing has encouraged North Korea to promote economic reforms and opening, taking a cue from its own successful experience of the early 1980s.

The relationship between China and North Korea witnessed some strains during the initial years of Xi Jinping and Kim Jong Un. In December 2012, North Korea launched a satellite to orbit despite Beijing's reservations (Kim 2013). In January 2013, China supported the US-drafted resolution 2087 passed by the Security Council, condemning the launch and imposing sanctions on Pyongyang's space agency and related individuals (Kim 2013). Despite repeated warnings from China and in blatant defiance of UN resolutions, North Korea carried out a nuclear test in February 2013. There was serious debate among Chinese scholars at this time on whether the Sino-North Korean alliance should be continued or

terminated (Chol Park 2016). At the same time, China's trade and economic relations with South Korea continued to expand. In 2014 China-South Korea trade was forty times greater than that with North Korea (Wertz 2019). The 2017 nuclear test caused further tensions between the two countries, and China once again supported economic sanctions, which also included North Korea's lucrative coal exports. The year 2018 witnessed a warming of relations between North Korea and other major powers. In his 2018 New Year address, Kim Jong Un announced that North Korea aspires for peace and friendly relations with its neighbours and that the country will be participating in the Winter Olympics being held in South Korea ("Kim Jong Un Makes New Year Address" n.d.). Tensions between North Korea and China further eased with preparation for the historic Trump-Kim summit (Wertz 2019). After six years in power, Kim Jong Un made his first visit to Beijing in March 2018. In 2019, Xi Jinping made his maiden visit to North Korea. Between 2018 and 2019, the two leaders had met each other five times.

The fact that there has been no fundamental shift in China's North Korea policy, indicates that the CCP continues to regard North Korea as a strategic buffer and a net security asset

With improving ties between the two countries, Beijing's commitment to sanctions enforcement became weak. The sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council in 2016 blocking North Korea's access to the international banking system did not significantly influence its trade with local governments in China, as due to livelihood exemptions, this trade does not violate Security Council resolutions (Su and Saalman 2017, 18). For the CCP, the economic development of the North-Eastern region remains a priority. The development of provinces in this region is linked to the openness of the North Korean economy, making the government less intent on enforcing Security Council resolutions effectively (Su and Saalman 2017, 19). With China's rapid economic engagement, North Korea has expanded its business networks embedded in China. These networks helped North Korea to use China's global trade and financial ties in extending its global economic reach, evading international sanctions, and procuring key components for the country's nuclear and ballistic missile programs (Wertz 2019, 10).

### **The Chinese view of North Korea**

North Korea plays an important role in Chinese policymakers' strategic and national security calculus. The fact that there has been no fundamental shift in China's North Korea policy, despite Pyongyang providing no tangible benefits to Beijing while costing it

immensely in the realms of security, an international reputation, and increasing cost of foreign assistance, indicates that the CCP continues to regard North Korea as a strategic buffer and a net security asset (Feng and Beauchamp-Mustafaga 2015, 39). History plays an important part in shaping this Chinese view. The Korean peninsula not only has been a traditional battleground for influence in North-East Asia, but it also invokes memories of Japanese domination of East Asia after the Sino-Japanese war of 1894 and Japanese annexation of Korea (Feng and Beauchamp-Mustafaga 2015, 44). The Korean War was also critical in shaping this perception. North Korea acts as a buffer between the US-allied South Korea and China, and the Kim regime is useful in preventing unification with the South, which could lead to US troops returning to the Chinese border (Feng and Beauchamp-Mustafaga 2015, 44). China can also use its close relations with North Korea to gain leverage over other countries, especially the US. China can agree to exert more pressure on North Korea in return for US cooperation on some other issue of importance to China.

Despite significant differences between the US, China, and North Korea, it is the Korean peninsula on which these countries share some common interest. They all aspire for a stable, nuclear-free Korean peninsula and support the peaceful unification of North and South Korea. However, there are substantial differences between them in the process and the sequence

Beijing has been advocating for maintaining stability in the region and solving the North Korean nuclear issue through a revival of the stalled Six-Party Talks

of steps to achieve the goal. North Korea has advocated for peace, reconciliation, sanctions relief, and normalization of relations before complete denuclearization. In contrast, the US has insisted on complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement (CVID) of nuclear programs before any security guarantee or sanctions relief can be provided (C. Lee and Chung 2020, 24). Similarly, China regards the North Korean nuclear issue as a complex, sensitive and interconnected matter of military and security, inherent to the US-North Korea bilateral relationship, and advocates for an incremental, phased approach which would be crucial in narrowing the trust deficit between the two sides (C. Lee and Chung 2020, 24).

China's position on the denuclearization of North Korea has been quite consistent. Beijing has been advocating for maintaining stability in the region and solving the North Korean nuclear issue through a revival of the stalled Six-Party Talks as a forum for peaceful and comprehensive resolution (Kong 2018). The Six-Party Talks, initiated by China, included the two Koreas and four other powers having a major stake in the security of the Korean peninsula: the US, Russia, Japan, and China.

The US finding of North Korea's Highly Enriched Uranium program and North Korea's withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty led to the end of the Agreed Framework, once again escalating tensions between the two countries. Alarmed by an increasingly volatile situation and fearing a military response from an aggressive Bush administration that has just invaded Iraq, China's attitude towards North Korea changed substantially, pressurizing it to join negotiations (Buszynski 2013). Seeking to stabilize the situation, Hu Jintao took the initiative and convened a trilateral meeting, also known as the Three-Party Talks, in Beijing among North Korean, Chinese, and US diplomats (Park 2005). To engage all the stakeholders and to find a comprehensive and lasting solution, China expanded the Three-Party format to a Six-Party Format. China has played a pivotal role in these talks, and its mediator role is often described as a "decisive moment" in Chinese diplomacy (Buszynski 2013, 70).

China emphasizes that economic engagement rather than sanctions enforcement is the best solution

China has supported economic sanctions imposed by the United Nations on North Korea since its first nuclear test in 2006. It has also kept open the economic and diplomatic channels between the two countries in sync

with its commitment to denuclearization by peaceful settlement. However, China's support for sanctions is conditional, emphasizing that the measures are not intended to produce negative humanitarian consequences to North Korea or harm economic and trade engagement (Kong 2018, 77). For instance, after the 2013 nuclear test by North Korea, China suspended a few of its ambitious infrastructure projects and imposed some financial restrictions; however, private trade was allowed to flourish (Kong 2019, 2). China also supported stringent sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council on North Korea after its 2016 nuclear test, which prohibited importing coal, iron ore, textiles, and a partial prohibition on oil import. There are two broad views on sanctions among analysts in China. Some believe that the intensity of sanctions should not be too extreme but measured and restrained to avoid any sharp reaction from North Korea. In contrast, others opine that sanctions are not useful, as countries have always found ways to evade them (Su and Saalman 2017, 12).

Further, China has said many times that sanctions are necessary, but they alone will not help achieve the end goal of denuclearization; dialogue and engagement are equally important. China emphasizes that economic engagement rather than sanctions enforcement is the best solution, arguing that economic interactions would reduce North Korea's hostile perceptions and expand its ability to constructively address its security concerns (Su

and Saalman 2017, 33). Unless North Korea realizes that nuclear weapons are unnecessary and decides to relinquish them, denuclearization cannot be achieved. Some Chinese experts also question the degree of influence their country has over North Korea and are skeptical about whether China has enough leverage to force North Korea to halt its nuclear program and return to the negotiating table (Su and Saalman 2017, 34).

The honeymoon phase of the relationship between the two countries coincided with an era of American unipolarity.

### **Cost of Restraint**

It is important to comprehend that Chinese foreign policy is driven by two sets of competing and conflicting interests; the national interest of China as a ‘normal’ Westphalian state and the political interest of the ideologically lonely and authoritarian CCP regime (Wang 2018, 270). China’s policy of engagement with North Korea and not using its economic leverage to pressure North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons is in the interest of the CCP and has a high cost. North Korea’s constant nuclear threats and proliferation have justified the US military’s presence in the region, something China has been consistently critical and anxious about. For the world’s

second most powerful country, the US-anchored East Asian security framework and its physical presence in the region are not only inconvenient but also represents a sharp contrast and a mortal threat to the CCP-PRC political system, thus increasing the likelihood of a direct conflict with the US (Wang 2018).

China’s inadequate and unconvincing response after North Korea’s 2016 nuclear test has impacted its relations with South Korea as well. Since the diplomatic breakthrough in 1992, the relations between South Korea and China have witnessed a dramatic turnaround not only in the economic and trade domains but also in the cultural and tourism sector. This honeymoon phase of the relationship between the two countries coincided with an era of American unipolarity. The Chinese response to North Korea’s 2016 nuclear tests illustrated clearly to South Korea that Beijing’s policy for the Korean peninsula was focused more on broader geopolitical considerations; in this case, the primary goal was to avoid any measures that can destabilize the regime in North Korea (J.-Y. Lee 2020, 10). China’s lax response led to South Korea deploying Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in 2016. Sensing a strategic threat, China retaliated with economic sanctions on South Korea (Kong 2019, 4). South Korea’s economy remains largely dependent on foreign trade, with exports to China constituting more than 25 percent of total exports in 2019, making Seoul vulnerable

in this asymmetric bilateral relationship (J.-Y. Lee 2020, 11).

China follows a one-party rule which makes it impossible for it to criticize or advocate for political reforms in North Korea which also follows socialism and is dominated by one political party

Threatened by continuous missile tests by North Korea in its neighbourhood, another US treaty ally, Japan, has sought a US-supported missile defense system for Asia, which has huge implications for China and can cause tensions between China and Japan (Feng and Beauchamp-Mustafaga 2015, 52). There are even possibilities that Tokyo can develop nuclear weapons if the perception of threat emanating from North Korea increases. Beijing would certainly not like this. Another issue of concern for China is the proliferation of nuclear technology from North Korea to rogue regimes worldwide.

It is also important to understand the limits of Chinese influence in North Korea. Despite close relations between North Korea and China, there are several areas in which the two countries differ. China has been critical of North Korea's frequent weapons testing as it puts Beijing in a difficult position where other countries demand China put more pressure on its treaty ally. As discussed, these expectations can strain China's relations with other major

powers. These increasingly high strategic and diplomatic costs of China's policy of restraint towards North Korea suggest that apart from geostrategic and security interests, there are strong ideational influences present behind this approach (Kong 2019, 6).

Ideational explanations focus on the tension between the two competing roles of China; 'responsible great power' role and 'socialist solidarity' role (Kong 2019, 7). With its increasing economic and military might, China wants to project itself as a 'responsible great power' which is willing to comply with the established rules of the game and become a norm-taker, making it difficult for it to align with a rogue-state (Noesselt 2014, 1312). Despite modern economic reforms that opened the country to the world and in turn led to the establishment of capitalist market structures, China continues to claim itself as a unique 'socialist' country. China still follows a one-party rule which makes it impossible for it to criticize or advocate for political reforms in North Korea which also follows socialism and is dominated by one political party (Noesselt 2014, 1313). Whenever North Korea creates military tensions, China's national role conception of 'socialist solidarity' comes in conflict with its 'responsible great power' role. It is this constant tension between two competing roles that explains China's approach to North Korea.

### **The Pursuit for Regime Survival**

Since the end of the Cold War, the relationships between major powers engaged with the Korean peninsula have become more complicated due to their intertwining interests on the nuclear issue, as illustrated by the stalled Six-Party talks (Jianyi and Yuanpeng 2015). The initiation of Six-Party Talks (SPT) in 2003 was regarded as a great diplomatic success in achieving the goal of peaceful denuclearization of North Korea. However, this multilateral security architecture intended for a peaceful regime in Northeast Asia collapsed in 2009 after North Korea withdrew abruptly and raised questions over the feasibility of this approach (Hur 2018, 1). As Waltz (2003, 38) argues, in the past half a century, no country has been able to prevent other countries from acquiring nuclear weapons if they were determined to do so. Empirical records suggest that neither security guarantees from a hegemonic power nor economic sanctions or coercion have been able to deter aspiring countries from going nuclear. (Solingen 2007, 25)

As given by Scott D. Sagan (1996), the domestic politics model of nuclear weapons proliferation is very useful in analyzing North Korea's case. This model shifts the focus from international and regional security issues to domestic actors who encourage or discourage the development of nuclear weapons, which at times may not serve the national interest of a state but serve the political interest of some individuals. Analyzing historical case studies, Sagan (1996) identified three key actors that

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have encouraged nuclear weapons development: the nuclear-energy establishment of the state; important units in the armed forces; and politicians in states where public opinion strongly favors nuclear weapons acquisition. From the domestic politics model, it is quite clear that denuclearization will not take place when external threats are minimized but rather when there are major internal political changes. In North Korea, the Kim dynasty's legitimacy is based on the cult of personality of its leaders. The dynasty has remained in power by using repressive tactics like tight control on information, limiting the population's contact from the outside world, and repeatedly stirring up nationalist sentiments among the people by warning them of constant external threat to the nation. In such a political milieu, the pursuit of nuclear weapons helps raise the power and prestige of the government, distracting the population from daily grievances and failures of the government, and justifying continued sacrifices and harsh treatment of people (Hecker 2010, 51).

Survival of the dynastic rule is the highest priority for the government in North Korea. All actions of the regime, howsoever irrational or



erratic they may appear from outside, have the ultimate goal of preserving the rule of the Kim dynasty. The regime has learned from the fate of Muammar Gaddafi and Saddam Hussein and has consequently developed significant nuclear capabilities to deter kinetic action by any major power. Despite noteworthy nuclear capabilities, the regime still needs a stable and healthy relationship with China, given Beijing's rising global stature, to counterbalance the US in its global strategy. By no means this implies that North Korea is a satellite of China or Pyongyang's foreign policies are dictated from Beijing. Further, the economic leverage that China has can be overestimated, and Beijing cannot use it to dictate terms to North Korea. Analyzing this aspect, Zhang (2018, 4) writes that "North Korea considers Chinese economic assistance as a service fee that North Korea deserves for protecting peace and security of China from the Western influence and potential US invasion." As discussed earlier, China faces a pressing dilemma. On the one hand, it wants North Korea to renounce its nuclear weapons and normalize its relations with other countries; on the other hand, it cannot support harsh economic sanctions on the country as it can potentially lead to the collapse of the Kim regime and a massive influx of refugees to China. More importantly, regime collapse can lead to South Korean or US troops moving towards China's border. This dilemma illustrates the surprisingly powerful influence that North Korea has gained over China and

shows that in certain bargaining situations, weakness and threat of collapse can be a source of power (Hur 2018, 116).

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### **Denuclearization and the new Cold War**

As competition between the US and China in various domains speed up, making their relationship more antagonistic, there is a high possibility that China's policies towards the Korean peninsula will become a function of its policies towards the US (J.-Y. Lee 2020, 13). Since the failure of the Hanoi summit in 2019, North Korea has repeatedly been demanding the US to abandon its 'hostile policy'. In his remarks on foreign policy at the Eighth Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), Kim spoke positively about the prospects for diplomatic cooperation "with socialist countries," which signals intention for closer cooperation, particularly with China (Frank 2021). These remarks were expected, considering the degree to which North Korea depends on China economically and the fact that China has the ability at the United Nations Security Council to veto the enactment of any further sanctions on North Korea (Frank 2021). At the same Congress, the US was

called the “primary obstacle” and “biggest enemy” to the “development of our revolution” (Frank 2021). The Biden administration is reviewing the US’s North Korean policy. It is expected that, unlike their predecessor, the new administration will cooperate more closely with Seoul and Tokyo to formulate a comprehensive strategy on the North Korean nuclear proliferation issue. With a raging pandemic and unprecedented internal political and social divisions coming to the fore in the US, it is unlikely that North Korea will be a priority for the Biden administration. However, managing an increasingly difficult relationship with China and dealing with fundamental differences on range of issues like Taiwan, Beijing’s unfair and opaque economic practices, human rights issues in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, territorial disputes in South China Sea, will be high on agenda. Biden has said that he will confront China where necessary while cooperate when it is in America’s national interest. It is highly unlikely that there will be a grand rapprochement between the two superpowers or a construct like G2 will emerge.

For a country like North Korea, which is largely cut-off from the international market, the impact of sanctions will be minimal.

As far as China is concerned, it will maintain its close relations with Pyongyang as a form of insurance to ensure stability on the peninsula

and influence the denuclearization and subsequent reunification process of Korea. This increasingly competitive relationship will make it difficult for the US and China to cooperate on the North Korean issue making the revival of Six-Party Talks and achieving a breakthrough in the status quo difficult. Historical cases have shown that unilateral or multilateral sanctions have failed to prevent the target state from changing its behavior. For a country like North Korea, which is largely cut-off from the international market, the impact of sanctions will be minimal. On the contrary, as sanctions get tougher and encompass more sectors of trade, the legitimacy of the Kim regime will be further strengthened as it will portray itself as the protector of the country. In the past few years, North Korea’s nuclear program has become increasingly sophisticated, and the possibility that the country will give up its nuclear weapons in the near future is extremely unlikely given the concerns of US threat and desire to be more independent from Chinese influence (Zhang 2018, 5). Going by Sagan’s (1996) thesis, one can argue that for the regime in North Korea, nuclear weapons are a means to achieve the goal of domestic stability by consolidating the grip of the Kim dynasty. For the Chinese also, the goal is stability. The means that North Korea uses to maintain stability at home are of little concern to the Chinese. This suggests that for China, denuclearization is not the priority; stability is. China will not mind the status quo,

and its economic engagement with North Korea is expected to continue and deepen.

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