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## What Explains the Enduring Alliance between China and North Korea?

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### **Abstract**

Is communism the only thread that weaves the relationship between China and North Korea? The comrades have been brothers-in-arms for a long time, but their relationship has been a reluctant one. China's foreign policy towards the Korean Peninsula is primarily based on the geopolitics puzzle. By keeping the friendship intact, China keeps the balance of power in its favor. For North Korea, the primary national interest today is 'regime stability', which China assures. Also, China has been North Korea's economic lifeline. Though the relationship may sound 'made in heaven', North Korea has also been more of a liability than an asset to China lately. Despite the fault lines, their friendship is likely to sustain in the foreseeable future.

### **Keywords**

China, North Korea, foreign policy

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## Significance of the Question

The intense friendship between North Korea and China was the highlight during the Korean War. The nuclear crisis looming over the Korean Peninsula made the world rethink what connects the two countries. Is it only the ideological similarity or geopolitical struggle, given the geographical proximity of both the countries? Both China and North Korea see their relationship with the lens of '*realpolitik*' in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Ideological connect and affinity has been replaced by the lens of 'realism' where both countries cater to their national interests. The crisis that has gripped the Korean Peninsula has altered the dynamics in the region. This paper would do an in-depth analysis of China-North Korea relations through the prism of China's foreign policy and its strategic thinking. It also analyses how the engagement between the two countries gained traction after Kim Jong Un came to power, focusing on the Six-Party Talks and Kim's summits with U.S. President Donald Trump and other aspects like tourism, etc.

## Brief History of China-North Korea Relations

The People's Republic of China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea formally exchanged diplomatic recognition in 1949. In 1950, after North Korea briefed China about its war plans, China entered the Korean War to support North Korea after setbacks from the United Nations Command. After the

Sino-North Korea relations been uncertain especially after North Korea carried out the 2013 nuclear test which China opposed.

Korean War Armistice was signed in 1953, China and the Soviet Union became North Korea's all-weather friends, where both the countries extended economic support to North Korea. Though 1960's witnessed a tipping point in Sino-North Korean ties after the Korean Workers Party criticized the Cultural Revolution, 2009 was celebrated as 'the year of China-DPRK friendship' as a milestone, marking sixty years of diplomatic relations and engagement between them. In 2011, after Kim Jong Un rose to power, relations between the two have been uncertain, especially after North Korea carried out the 2013 nuclear test, which China opposed. Being North Korea's only ally, China has been under tremendous pressure from world powers to contain North Korea's nuclear program, which threatens Korean Peninsula's stability.

## China's Foreign Policy and Strategic thinking about North Korea

The stakes for China have been high. Except for Taiwan, there is no other important area around China's proximity for China's domestic and foreign policy interests than the Korean Peninsula. The stakes grew with rising Chinese equities in improving relations with South

Korea and often intense U.S. and other regional and international involvement to contain North Korea's advancing nuclear weapons development. Contrary to the past practice, the Chinese administration allowed a public debate where relations with North Korea often were depicted as a liability for China, requiring readjustment in Chinese policy. The usual Chinese foreign policy practice showed caution in its approach: China has strived to preserve important Chinese interests in stabilizing the Korean Peninsula through calculated moves to balance Chinese relations with concerned parties at home and abroad. Over time, the Chinese leadership and the CCP have little success in limiting North Korea's nuclear weapons development. The core component of China's policy towards the Korean peninsula has been 'stability'. China also emphasizes one of its foreign policy objectives - maintaining Chinese influence and countering rising U.S. and Japan's footprint in the region.

A denuclearized North Korea was the aim of the multi-party negotiations that included North Korea, South Korea, China, Japan, the US and Russia.

### **Six-Party Talks and Its Failure**

The Six-Party talks' goal was to find a peaceful resolution to the security concerns arising from North Korea's ambitious nuclear weapons program. A denuclearized North Korea was the

aim of the multi-party negotiations that included North Korea, South Korea, China, Japan, the United States of America, and Russia. The main reason for the failure was North Korea's demand that U.S. financial restrictions be part of the negotiations on the North's nuclear weapons, which the U.S. was reluctant to adhere to. North Korea decided to no longer participate in the six-party process in 2009. In 2009, North Korea test-fired a three-stage rocket following which the U.N. Security Council imposed sanctions on it. As a result, North Korea declared that it would no longer participate in the six-party talks. Since the talks were terminated, each member of the Six-Party talks tried to resume the negotiations, with China trying to convince North Korea as recent as August 2017, but little progress has been made on this front.

### **Trump – Kim Summits**

2018 witnessed the historic summit between the U.S. and North Korea where President Trump and Kim Jong Un met in Singapore, which appeared to do away with decades of animosity and rekindling of ties and started a direct dialogue between the two countries. Trump and Kim signed a joint statement for progressing towards bilateral relations, complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, and return of remains of U.S. soldiers from the North. Both sides, though, made little or no tangible progress due to disagreements over the issues, especially on the

issue of denuclearization and lifting/relaxation of the sanctions. There were hopes about the Hanoi summit, but no progress was made. The summit proved to be a failure with an abrupt end, and no joint deal between the two countries took place. Though the summit was between the U.S. and North Korea, China played the role of a keen stakeholder. Before the Singapore summit, Kim Jong Un paid the first-ever official visit to Beijing and met Xi Jinping, briefing him about the developments leading to the summit. Given the United States' strategic advantage and hawkish views about North Korea, Kim made sure North Korea had its back covered, given China's clout in the region and its only military ally. China was a keen observer of both the summits as it has vested interests in the region. The failure of the summit, though, had little effect on China. Despite the disappointing end to the Hanoi summit, China remained optimistic about the diplomatic efforts between both countries, releasing a statement stressing that the Korean Peninsula issue has lagged on for many years and cannot be resolved overnight. It can be inferred from the scenario that a resolution of the Korean crisis would lessen China's strategic importance for the United States and Pyongyang's dependability on China. China does not favour war and wants both U.S. and North Korea to keep the diplomatic channels open. Still, neither does it desire an end to the Korean crisis as this is important for its geopolitical interests.

Outwardly the relations between both the countries sound harmonious, but differences are deep hidden in the crux of the friendship.

### **China-North Korea Relations under Xi Jinping**

Over the decades, it has been observed that the party structure is similar in both China and North Korea. The Chinese Communist Party and the Workers' Party of Korea both work on the ideological framework and have similar components in different aspects. With Xi Jinping rising to power in China, the very aspect of the personality cult of Xi and Kim Jong Un painted them in the same light. North Korean ideology of military-first seems to be normalizing in the Chinese sphere. The PLA's desire to develop unconditional friendship between the Chinese and North Korean militaries to protect their national interests in the region has written a new chapter in the relations between them. Outwardly the relations between both the countries sound harmonious, but differences are deep hidden in the crux of the friendship. 'National interests' and 'realpolitik' has been playing the most important role in shaping the future course of action between the two.

Despite the failure of all prior negotiations on the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, China is still optimistic about ‘peace and stability in the region.

### **Tourism – Easing the thaw between China and North Korea?**

For the last few years, Chinese tourists have been visiting North Korea, which is an incentive for both countries, given Pyongyang’s nuclear ambitions. According to various travel agencies, about 300 Chinese tourists enter North Korea via Dandong – the biggest Chinese city along the 1,400-km border. South Korean sources estimate the number to be 100,000 every year. The tourists visit Pyongyang, and even the cities of Nampo, Kaesongang, and Rason have seen many Chinese tourists. The relaxation of travel restrictions has helped the North Korean tourism industry regain the lost ground. North Korea’s shift of focus on reforming the economy is also one reason for attempting a revival of the tourism sector. This has eventually led to optimism in the neighboring countries too. Tourism is one of the few remaining reliable sources of foreign income for North Korea after the U.N. imposed sanctions targeting 90 percent of its \$3 billion annual exports, including commodities, textiles, and seafood. Kim Jong Un’s focus on

developing the economy has warmed up China and North Korea’s ties. Though the dual ambition of North Korea of developing nuclear weapons and reviving the economy still leaves everyone sceptical about North Korea’s future.

### **China’s North Korean policy**

North Korea’s nuclear ambitions provoked the debate in Beijing about China’s continued support to North Korea. Though, China has not changed its foreign policy towards North Korea. Despite the failure of all prior negotiations on the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, China is still optimistic about ‘peace and stability in the region. China has always stressed on the notion of maximum restraint by all stakeholders in the region and scaling down any escalation of the situation. The regime collapse in North Korea could spell disaster in the region and China’s interests in the long run. War might lead to a huge inflow of refugees to China and alter the demographics in China. Further, the resulting instability might be a blow to rising China’s ambitions as much of the energy and resources might be diverted towards North Korea, which would further dent Chinese aspirations.

Furthermore, the collapse of the North Korean regime might complicate China’s Taiwan equation. Many international relations scholars have spoken about how China should enhance its relationship with South Korea. Still, China does not trust South Korea as a trustful ally, given its proximity to the United States. China

believes that any political change in North Korea might lead to a South Korean-dominated peninsula. The two Koreas may become unified, which would lead to a change in the balance of power equation in the region. Therefore, China wants a troubled Korean peninsula that would serve its interests best.

The summits between Kim and Trump were unsuccessful as they failed to persuade Pyongyang to give up its nuclear weapons.

North Korea is seen as a pawn in the big power game between China and the United States. Whether it's the trade war or the geopolitical influences, both countries are striving for that top position on the world map. China would never allow the U.S. to play its cards in the Korean Peninsula and keep the U.S. out of bounds. China understands that after the failure of bilateral summits and slow progress in the negotiations, U.S. and North Korean energy would eventually drain out, leaving the U.S. weaker in the region and would keep Beijing at the center stage. China's role in the region as an important stakeholder would further its position on the geopolitical landscape.

### **Biden Presidency and North Korea**

er the Biden administration, it would be interesting to see the U.S. approach towards North Korea. Antony Blinken, Joe Biden's

nominee for secretary of state, called for the North Korean policy to be reviewed. Though, it is certain that the U.S. will increase pressure on Kim Jong-un to denuclearize. The U.S. would also discuss the options with all the stakeholders, particularly South Korea and Japan. The summits between Kim and Trump were unsuccessful as they failed to persuade Pyongyang to give up its nuclear weapons. While sanctions and embargos have crippled the North Korean economy, it is not yet willing to offer concessions, with China extensively offering help as its major ally. North Korea would be willing to discuss the crisis on the peninsula with the new U.S. administration. The Biden administration is expected to be more flexible about working-level negotiations with North Korea.

### **Conclusion**

China and North Korea may not be 'brothers in arms' anymore. Still, given the 'realist' approach, both countries have an unsaid understanding of the need to keep the friendship intact for the foreseeable future. North Korea's core national interest of 'regime stability' cannot be assured without China's support. Kim Jong Un understands that China is the only natural ally of North Korea, and any miscalculation might lead to a collapse of the regime. For China, a chaotic Korean Peninsula without a possible conflict caters to its geopolitical ambitions, which would label it as

the most important stakeholder for the foreseeable future.

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