



# CHINA AND NORTH KOREA: A RELATIONSHIP IN TRANSITION?

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*Military tensions on the Korean Peninsula have been escalating for several months now. The latest events with the missile launches and newly released reports on the abduction of Chinese fishermen by North Korea have further exacerbated the situation and also cast doubt on the once close relationship between China and North Korea. Beijing has come under increasing pressure from the international community to take a tougher stance on Pyongyang. By observing China's behavior, it would seem likely that such a development is possible. However, it would be unrealistic to expect that China will abandon North Korea, as this is not in its strategic interests.*

When reading the recent news and debate on Beijing's policy toward North Korea, it is easy to be confused about the real intentions of the Chinese government. On the one hand, it is apparent that China has taken a more critical position through its acceptance of the UN sanctions. This is also seen in its tougher actions and wording against North Korea in general. Moreover, recent internal debate in China has been rather critical of North Korea. Is this then an indication of a different North Korea policy from China? The simple answer is "No." More accurate is the fact that a transition has been initiated and the relationship is no longer the "lips and teeth" relationship Mao once claimed it was. The Chinese government's main policy is still to maintain stability on the Korean Peninsula and to keep the U.S. at an arm's length. However, its long-term commitment to defend North Korea at any cost can no longer be taken for granted. Notwithstanding, it would be premature, and naive, to assume that China will abandon North Korea, for this does not lie in Beijing's strategic interest.

## Costs and Benefits for Beijing

The most important priorities for China are regional stability and national security, the two being closely interwoven. From a geopolitical perspective, North Korea will always be an area of concern, or rather a constant "toothache" for Beijing. China and North Korea are bound by a 1334 km-long border characterized by criminal activity, human trafficking, and tense relations. It is obvious that any catastrophe in North Korea—whether military, ecological,

or social—would have a direct effect on China. In the case of an outbreak of war, for example, a considerable inflow of refugees would test the abilities of the leadership in Beijing as well as its commitment to stand up for North Korea.

By taking on an active role in the efforts to resolve the nuclear crisis, China can enhance not only its prestige as a regional leader in Northeast Asia but also strengthen its own national security. However, there are limits to how far China, and other states, would seek to decrease tension and work for unity on the Korean Peninsula. For instance, if in the future a more politically liberal North Korea were to lean more toward the U.S. and South Korea, the gains for China would be limited—a scenario which, to China's consternation, would also see a stronger U.S. presence in the region. Thus, in Beijing there is a perception of a "Catch 22" situation: the choice between a nuclear North Korea and the prospect of a unified Korean Peninsula potentially under U.S. tutelage. The reality that China would still remain the most important trading partner for a unified Korea, exerting its influence through economic means, does little to alter Beijing's perception.

During U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry's tour in the region last month, the indication from Washington seemed to be that if North Korea denuclearizes, the U.S. would reduce its newly enhanced missile defense system. For China, such an outcome would be a win-win situation—that is, a nuclear-free North Korea and a reduced U.S. missile defense. The outlook for such a development is unfortunately (for China as well as the rest of the world) gloomy: the North Korean government views its nuclear program as a strategic asset and the guarantee of its sur-



vival. Thus, it clearly mistrusts China's resolve to defend it. That puts China in a position whereby it has to reevaluate its policy toward North Korea.

Evidently, there has been a downside of China's hitherto soft approach toward North Korea, as Beijing has lost a measure of influence over Pyongyang as well as has seen the U.S. step up its cooperation with South Korea and Japan with an increased military presence. Whereas the international community has long urged China to take a stronger stance on North Korea, China has continued its engagement policy, albeit one that is increasingly criticized within China itself. Indeed, vocal public criticism in China has become more pronounced, not least Chinese public opinion as expressed on Internet platforms such as Sina Weibo. Whereas public disquiet over Beijing's North Korea policy (and other issues) has been acknowledged, it has so far been ignored by the government.

## What Will the Future Hold?

During the last decade, Chinese foreign policy at large has undergone significant changes, not least due to China's changed national and strategic interests. What we have seen in recent times is the beginning of a transition also of the Chinese approach to North Korea. In a short- to medium-term perspective, China will most likely not engage in any actions that would threaten stability in North Korea. As for the "abandonment" of North Korea, this is most unlikely: the long-term policy of China is to distance the U.S. from the Korean Peninsula and keep North Korea on the right side—China's side.

At the moment, it would seem that China is aiming to resume its role as a mediator. Beijing's preference, based on recent announcements from General Fang Fenghui, is to return to the long-stalled disarmament talks involving the two Koreas, China, Russia, Japan, and the U.S. He also indicated that a fourth North Korean nuclear weapons test would underscore the need for "fresh talks" between Pyongyang and

other regional parties. Whether North Korea will conduct a fourth test and/or if the threads of the Six Party Talks will be picked up remains to be seen. The chances are that such a test might happen, however, with renewed tensions as a result.

Many people in China—including within the Party's own rank-and-file—have begun to question the government's policy toward North Korea. It would seem obvious that the close relationship that once characterized bilateral relations between the two countries is now over and that, with time, China will take a tougher stance on North Korea. This position will not be in line with that of the West, however, but rather one that takes its own interests into account.

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