



## CHINA AND ITS PERIPHERIES **CONTENTIOUS RELATIONS WITH NORTH KOREA**

**Ranjit Kumar Dhawan**

*School of International Studies, JNU*

The relations between China and North Korea have been described as “Lips and Teeth” or “Sealed in the Fresh Blood”. China contributed more than a million People’s Volunteers in the Korean War (1950-53) and saved North Korea from being gobbled up by the United States (US) led United Nations (UN) forces. However, despite being the closest ally of China, North Korea has exercised its independent foreign policy and also became a member to the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1975.

Unlike South Korea, which maintains US troops on its soil, North Korea did not allow foreign troops in its territory after 1958. Since the end of the Cold War, the relations between China and North Korea have undergone significant changes as China adopted ‘two-Korea policy’. China normalised relations with South Korea in 1992 and has become its largest trade

partner. China-South Korea relations have increased many folds because of the convergence of economic interests between the two countries and have been elevated to “strategic cooperative partnership”.

Although, China still remains the most important ally of North Korea and its biggest trade partner, source of investment, fuel and food aid but differences between them have been increasing rapidly. North Korea remains obsessed with its Juche or self-reliance ideology and dynastic politics.

Apart from economic and political differences between China and North Korea, the lesser known territorial disputes between the two countries have the potential to seriously jeopardize the bilateral relations. The development and proliferation of nuclear and missile technologies by North Korea is another source of concern to China.

China has played a pivotal role in the denuclearisation dialogues of the Korean peninsula and hosted the ‘Six-Party Talks’.

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*Views expressed are author’s own.*

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The fiercely proud and nationalist North Korean regime has not bowed to the Chinese pressures on nuclear and missile development programmes. Illegal migrations from North Korea to China and issues related to history and culture are also contentious between the two countries.

Peace and stability in the Korean peninsula is of utmost concern to China in its pursuit of “peaceful rise” and regard it as its “national interest”. With the launch of a rocket in December 2012 and third nuclear test in February 2013 by North Korea, the relations between the two countries seem to have soured further. China fully supported the UN Security Council’s Resolutions 2087 and 2094, which have put fresh sanctions on North Korea.

## I

### MAJOR ISSUES BETWEEN CHINA AND NORTH KOREA

North Korea is increasingly becoming a burden for China. The issues could be categorized under the following sections.

#### A. POLITICAL

The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea was established on 9 September 1948, a year before the establishment of People’s Republic of China on 01 October 1949. The communist party of China had large numbers of Koreans who fought shoulder to shoulder with their Chinese comrades against Chinese Nationalists and Japanese imperialism in

Manchuria and other parts of China. After coming into power, Kim Il Sung made his best efforts to get rid of the ‘Yanan faction’, comprising of the Korean communists who returned from China and were considered to be a threat to his domination.

Over the years, the leadership in North Korea has also mitigated the role played by the Chinese Volunteers in the Korean War and has over-emphasised the role of the Korean revolutionaries and the leadership of the ‘eternal’ leader Kim Il Sung. Throughout the Cold War period, North Korea pursued a strategy of balancing between the Soviet Union and China, particularly after the Sino-Soviet schism. Another area of political conflict was the dynastic transfer of power in North Korea which negates the basic tenets of Communism and is often resented by the Chinese communists. The conflict between Kim Il Sung and Mao Zedong reached new dimensions when Mao categorically refused to accept the plan of appointing Kim Jong Il as the next leader of North Korea. “It was not until Deng Xiaoping held firm control over Chinese politics that the Chinese Communist Party finally gave Kim dynasty its explicit support” (You Ji 2001: 389).

#### B. ECONOMIC

China pursued the path of economic liberalisation under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping since 1978, which was interpreted in North Korea as betrayal. Since 1992, China has replaced the barter trade with North Korea with that in hard currency. In May 2000, the late ‘dear leader’ Kim Jong Il visited China and was impressed by the economic reforms in China. Subsequently, North Korea also tried to emulate some of the economic reforms and opened Special Economic Zones (SEZ) in various parts of the country. The economic reforms implemented in North Korea remained inadequate to jump-start the economy. After recurring famine and UN sanctions, North Korea has become highly dependent on China, particularly for food and energy. Some

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Chinese firms have invested in North Korea but they face several problems because of the lack of basic infrastructure, reliable banking and insurance institutions and non-conformity of the North Koreans with the agreements. There are reports which suggest that several Chinese firms have moved out or are in the process of moving out of North Korea (The Chosun Ilbo, 11 April 2013).

### C. TERRITORIAL

China shares 1416 kilometers of border with North Korea. The territorial dispute between China and North Korea are principally in three major regions. They are regarding area surrounding Mount Paektu (referred to as Changbai Mountain in China), islands and rights of navigation in Yalu and Tumen rivers, and on the issue of access to the East Sea or Sea of Japan. In 1962 (some say 1963) China and North Korea negotiated the demarcation of their borders, but within years the differences between the two countries sprang up. As has been mentioned by Daniel Goma Pinilla (2004: 5-6) in the following words,

The territorial issue is without doubt an element of tension between China and North Korea. However, neither Pyongyang nor Peking [Beijing] has ever had their relations depend on resolution of the border disputes, in spite of a few violent incidents in the late 1960s. The issue is annoying for the North Korean regime, but not to the extent of risking a breakdown in relations...Resolution of the territorial disputes appears to be no easy matter. China is unwilling to negotiate, given its position of force.

China in the recent years has reasserted its claims on the region surrounding Mount Paektu and applied to UNESCO for granting recognition to this region as the world heritage site. This created uproar in South Korea, as it also claims itself as the

*Ethnic Koreans in China known as Chaoxianzu are mainly concentrated in the Yanbian Autonomous prefecture of the Jilin province in north-east China. China remains wary that a reunified Korea may make territorial claims on the Yanbian region.*

party to the dispute. Mt. Paektu is revered by the Koreans as the site of the establishment of Go-Chosun, the first dynasty on the Korean peninsula, thus directly related to the Korean national identity. It is also claimed to be the site of the birth place of North Korean leader Kim Jong Il. Apart from territorial disputes, there are maritime disputes also, as was evident in May 2012 when North Korea captured 29 Chinese fisherman and three boats. North Koreans demanded a ransom of 1.2 million Yuan for the release of the fishermen but were released after 13 days of detention.

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### D. HISTORICAL

Korean rulers in the historical times had tributary relations with the Chinese kingdoms. "Korea was part of the Sino-centric regional order from 1300 to 1900, and benefited from close cultural, commercial and political ties with China within a system of formal hierarchy and informal equality" (Hundt 2010: 133). This hierarchical Confucian order made Korea a junior partner to China. However,

Chinese suzerainty over the Korean peninsula was lost because of the rise of Japan and eventual defeat of China in 1895 which was followed by the signing of the treaty of Shimonoseki. The Shilla dynasty (57 B.C-935 A.D) of Korea made an alliance with the Tang dynasty of China to defeat other Korean kingdoms, Goguryeo (37 B.C-668 A.D.) and Baekche (18 B.C-660 A.D) and unify Korean peninsula in 668 A.D.

The Shilla dynasty comprised the present day South Korea; where as the Goguryeo dynasty included the present day North Korea. The deepening ties between China and South Korea in the present times resemble this historical event. The North Koreans do harbor deep-seated suspicion regarding China on historical and civilizational claims on the Korean peninsula (Uttam 2013). In the recent years China has laid claims on the ancient Korean kingdoms of Goguryeo and Balhae (698 A.D. - 926 A.D). These claims were not only met with stiff resistance from South Korea but also by the North.

### E. CULTURAL

The North Korean regime made due efforts to abolish all vestiges of the Chinese cultural influences. This is evident from the fact that while South Koreans are still in the habit of using Chinese characters or Hanja in their writings, North Koreans have stopped this practice. Kim Il Sung tried to “minimize the Chinese influences in North Korean life by emphasizing “pure” Korean products and

cultural practices” (Snyder 2009: 26). The idea of Juche was an innovative contribution by Kim Il Sung to the North Korean brand of Marxism, which means self-reliance. North Koreans consider that because of the geographical location of the Korean peninsula, it had been the centre of contestations amongst the major powers in the region.

So the emphasis has been to be self-reliant in every aspect that is political, economy, foreign policy and defence. This idea is also applied to the communist states such as China. As Peter Hays Gries says, “While we typically think of North Korea as a last bastion of communism and thus an ideological ally of the People’s Republic of China, independence from China is also central to North Korean identity” (Gries 2005: 11).

### F. ILLEGAL MIGRATIONS

Illegal migrants from North Korea, who endanger their lives by crossing over to China has created irritation between the two neighbours. In China, these North Korean refugees often jump into the compounds of the foreign embassies to seek asylum, while being chased by Chinese police force. This has brought criticisms regarding the handling of North Korean refugees by China.

North Korea pressurises China to hand over the refugees back, but the refugees face severe punishments in labour camps or even executed once they return to North Korea. This issue has created uproar world over particularly by the human rights activists, who claim that deportation of the refugees back to North Korea by China is inhuman and violation of the UN Convention on Refugees to which China is a signatory. China fears that any major instability in the Korean peninsula would push large number of refugees from North Korea into China’s north-eastern provinces and would be detrimental to China’s own interests. In 1997, Beijing allowed Hwang Chang Yop, a (North) Korean Workers’ Party (KWP) secretary and a chief architect of the

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Juche ideology to defect to South Korea; it created serious tensions between China and North Korea (Chen Jian 2003: 9).

## G. SECURITY

The importance of the Korean peninsula for China stems from the fact that the security of China is directly related to the security of the Korean peninsula. In the historical context, Japan tried to control the Korean peninsula in its desire to annex continental Asia and was often remarked by the Japanese officials that the “Korean peninsula was like a dagger pointing at Japan’s heart.”

China fought against Japan in 1894 and later US in 1950 to protect the Korean peninsula. The Sino-North Korean alliance pact for mutual assistance, which was signed in 1961, still remains in force. North Korea provides a useful buffer to China against the US forces in South Korea, so despite the rhetoric of reunification of the peninsula as exemplified by the Chinese and other powers in the region, it is actually not in the interest of any of them. As Bae Myung-bok (2013) writes,

“China needs North Korea as a buffer against the United States. It is also concerned that the influence of a unified Korea would expand to its three Northeastern provinces. The United States needs Korea as a strategic base to check China. Japan does not want the emergence of a powerful nation with a combined population of 73 million in the region.”

Therefore, Chinese efforts are to maintain status-quo on the Korean peninsula. In short, “China’s foreign-policy wish list with respect to its northeast neighbor includes at least five “no’s”: no instability, no collapse, no nukes, no refugees or defectors, and no conflict escalation” (Kim 2003: 12).

## H. PROLIFERATION

Of late the proliferation of nuclear and missile technologies by North Korea has

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become a concern to China. However there are evidences which suggest that China had been a mute spectator in the case of North Korea-Pakistan nuclear-missile tradeoffs. China hosted ‘Six-Party Talks’, a forum created in 2003 comprising of China, US, Japan, Russia and both Koreas for the complete dismantlement of North Korean nuclear programme.

After the recent rocket launch and nuclear test by North Korea, China severely criticised them and gave full support to the UN Security Council resolutions 2087 and 2094, which has put severe sanctions on the North. North Korea came down heavily on the renewed sanctions and threatened to end any talks in the future regarding denuclearisation. The North Koreans were particularly highly critical of China and Russia, as they being the permanent members of the Security Council could have used their veto power against the resolution. Without naming them, the National Defence Commission (NDC) of North Korea said, the “big countries” that should be leading the way in establishing “fairness and order” in the world had been pressured by the U.S. and “relinquished basic principles that must be protected” (KCNA, 24 Jan 2013/The Chosun Ilbo, 25 Jan 2013).

Chinese efforts to pursue North Korea against conducting third nuclear test proved futile. When China summoned the North Korean envoy and warned of serious repercussions if the later went ahead with the test, to this the North

Korean Ambassador to China, Ji Jae-ryong, said that “the nuclear test is part of the North’s sovereign right to self-defense and not a matter for Beijing to interfere with” (The Chosun Ilbo, 7 Feb 2013).

### I. CHINA-ROK RELATIONS

The normalisation of China’s relations with South Korea in 1992 was vehemently resented in the North. With the establishment of diplomatic relations with South Korea, China accepted its existence. The relations between China and South Korea have increased many folds because of the convergence of economic interests between the two countries. China has emerged as the largest trade partner and destination of foreign investment by the South Korean Chaebols (Family owned companies). China receives largest number of South Korean students and tourists every year.

The Sino-South Korean relations were elevated to “strategic cooperative partnership” in 2008. After the launching of satellite followed by nuclear test by North Korea in the year 2013, both China and South Korea came closer in condemning North Korean belligerence and supported sanctions on it in the UN Security Council. In response to the increasing Sino-South Korea ties, North Korea has also been trying to improve economic and cultural relations with Taiwan (Chen Jian 2003: 9).

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## II

### THE NEW LEADERSHIP IN CHINA AND ITS POLICY TOWARD NORTH KOREA

The recent change in the leadership in China has not shown any paradigmatic shift in its policy toward North Korea, although there have been some tightening measures against North Korean belligerence. The newly constituted Politburo Standing Committee in China has some key members, who are known to have been close to the North Korean affairs such as Zhang Dejiang and Li Keqiang. “This new generation of leaders is ostensibly better informed on North Korea issues and may lead to some policy nuance from China, if not policy changes” (Cathcart, et.al 2012).

During the recent spike in the tensions on the Korean peninsula, the Chinese leader Xi Jinping in a telephone conversation with the South Korean leader Park Geun-hye, said, “That he understands Park’s thoughts [on bringing North Korea to a dialogue] well and he will continue trying to persuade the North, although it is difficult” (Korea Joongang Daily, 21 March 2013). The Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman Hong Lei was quoted as saying that “the Chinese government had made no change in its position on North Korea though it had signed up to new U.N. sanctions against the nuclear test” (The Korea Herald, 24 March 2013).

A remarkable incident was regarding the suspension of Deng Yuwen, deputy editor of an official Chinese publication, Financial Times. In the op-ed piece on Feb. 27, Deng Yuwen wrote, “North Korea’s third nuclear test is a good moment for China to re-evaluate its longstanding alliance with the Kim dynasty. For several reasons, Beijing should give up on Pyongyang and press for the reunification of the Korean peninsula” (The Chosun Ilbo, 01 April 2013).

In the milieu of threats of war against US and South Korea by the Kim Jong Un regime in North Korea, there were reports

about the movement of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of China along the Sino-North Korean border (Gertz 2013).

### III CONCLUSION

With the increasing tensions on the Korean peninsula, reigniting fears of nuclear warfare between North Korea and the US, all eyes are now on China. China is considered to be the closest ally of North Korea and its chief source of food, fuel and foreign investment. Thus, China is viewed to have considerable influence on North Korea, but the above facts provide contradictory evidences. The relations between the two allies are not as smooth as it is made out to be. In the recent years, China has shown considerable discomfort to the North Korean nuclear and missile programmes.

The nuclearisation of the Korean peninsula is not in the interest of China. The possession of nuclear weapons by North Korea can act as a catalyst for the pursuit of nuclear weapons by Japan and even South Korea. This would lead to an arms race in the East Asia region. So, China will continue its efforts for the denuclearisation of North Korea, but it would not be an easy task. Nevertheless, North Korea shall remain a "necessary evil" to China. As North Korea provides China a strategic buffer against the US troops, so for China disowning North shall be a costly affair. A reunified Korea is also not in the interest of China and other major powers in the region. It is likely that in the case of any major conflict on the Korean peninsula, China would lend support to North Korea and prevent the eventual collapse of the North Korean regime.

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