

CHAPPED LIPS, CHIPPED TEETH: SINO-NORTH KOREAN RELATIONS IN THE POST KIM JONG IL ERA

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When it became clear late in 2011 that Kim Jong Il's third son, Kim Jong Un, would succeed his father as leader of North Korea, speculation began in the capitals of Northeast Asia as well as the United States and elsewhere as to whether this princeling, who had spent some of his youth at boarding school in Switzerland, would continue to pursue the often provocative policies and inherit the same belligerent political style of his late father, or whether he would act more in accord with global standards of behavior.

In the space of little over a year after Kim Jong Un's accession, new leaders also assumed power in North Korea's closest neighbors—South Korea, China and Japan, although Shinzo Abe had briefly been Japan's Prime Minister in 2006-2007. Vladimir Putin continued playing musical chairs, moving back to the Russian presidency from the premiership. An election returned Barack Obama to the presidency of the United States, the major ally of South Korea and Japan, although Obama replaced all of his top foreign policy officials within the first six months of his second term. Most critical is the new leadership team in Beijing spearheaded by Xi Jinping, who holds the country's top three positions: General Secretary of the Communist Party, Chairman of the Central Military Affairs Commission, and President of the People's Republic of China (head of state). In the middle of 2013, there are thus a lot of moving pieces and uncertainty as regards the strategies, plans and motives of the unevenly experienced leaders of North Korea as well as the countries maneuvering to deal with it, directly or indirectly, willingly or unwillingly.

This essay focuses on relations between North Korea and China, more formally, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the People's Republic of China (PRC) respectively, in this period of leadership transitions. I argue that while the PRC might be the DPRK's main diplomatic ally, their bilateral tie needs to be seen in the larger context of China's "rise" and Beijing's increasingly complicated relations with other countries in Asia and with the United States. China holds a number of cards *vis-à-vis* all the other players as a result of its longstanding ties with the DPRK, but Pyongyang is still able to keep Beijing off balance enough to derive whatever benefits it can from continuing to play the unpredictable, nuclear-armed bad boy in the neighborhood who will not permit others, however big, to push him around or tell him what he "must" do.

As Close as Lips and Teeth

Kim Jong Il (Kim Chŏngil) died of a heart attack on December 17, 2011 and over the course of the next half-year, his third son, Kim Jong Un (Kim Chŏngŭn), assumed what *The Christian Science Monitor* snarkily referred to as “6 super-duper titles.”¹ These are: Marshall of the DPRK, First Chairman of the National Defense Commission, First Secretary of the Workers’ Party, Chairman of the party’s Central Military Commission, Member of the Presidium of the party’s Political Bureau, and Supreme commander of the Korean People’s Army. In North Korea, besides the Kim family itself, power resides in the party and military, so it does not really matter that Kim Jong Un has no state title. In fact, his grandfather Kim Il Sung (Kim Ilsŏng), whom he has been literally groomed to resemble physically, is president for eternity, never mind that he passed away in 1994.² Many observers speculate that the young dauphin has been backed by his powerful uncle, Jang Song Thaek (Chang Songt’aek),³ the husband of Kim Jong Il’s sister, Kim Kyong Hui (Kim Kyŏnghŭi), to help him consolidate power within all of the country’s key institutions. There have been personnel shifts along the way, and it remains to be seen what impact this will have on the country’s policy towards the rest of the world, to say nothing of its long-suffering masses.

China’s influence over Korea has waxed and waned over the centuries. China historically has seen Korea as a tributary state, its culture derived from China. By contrast, the Koreans, north and south, have a deep sense of their own peoplehood and independence as well as pride in their culture and history of resistance to outside forces.⁴ Over the course of the Cold War, in collaboration and competition with the USSR, China made enormous sacrifices for North Korea. An estimated 900,000 Chinese soldiers died during the 1950-1953 Korean War.⁵ This included Mao Zedong’s own son, Mao Anying. Cumings argues that “Mao determined early in the war that should the North Koreans falter, China had an obligation to come to their aid because of the sacrifice of so many Koreans in the Chinese revolution, the anti-Japanese resistance, and the

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- 1 Jenna Fisher, “Kim Jong-un’s 6 super-duper titles, CSMonitor.com, July 18, 2012.
 - 2 On April 15, 2012, North Korea celebrated his 100th birthday, which is also “Juche 101” in DPRK years. (Ben Piven, “North Korea celebrates ‘Juche 101’”, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2012/04/2012410111258757121.html>.) The DPRK was supposed to be a strong and prosperous nation as a way to commemorate that momentous anniversary.
 - 3 Also Romanized as Chang Song-t’aek. Uncle and Aunt received major promotions in the military and party upon Kim Jong-il’s death. (See Victor Cha, *The Impossible State: North Korea, Past and Future*. (New York: HarperCollins 2012, p. 100).
 - 4 This is quite clear from visits to museums in South and North Korea where there are exhibits celebrating the expulsion of would-be invaders and resistance to occupiers.
 - 5 Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War: A History*. (New York: Modern Library, 2010), p. 25. Victor Cha, *ibid.*, says 800,000 (p. 318), but the point is that this was an enormous sacrifice of blood and treasure when the PRC itself was in its infancy, facing internal and external threats to its very existence.

Chinese civil war.”⁶ The two countries inked a Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance in 1961, with China providing huge amounts of aid to the DPRK even in years when its own economy was facing shortages.

This sense of shared weal and woe is at the root of the characterization of PRC-DPRK relations as being as close as those of lips and teeth (唇齿相依), though Beijing believes it has made and continues to make the greater sacrifice, and that the Koreans are not properly grateful or reciprocal when China needs their support. Of course, while lips can kiss they can also suck things dry, and teeth can chew but also bite, so the simile is not without flaws, and relations between the two have indeed encountered serious problems over the years.⁷

The PRC and DPRK both conceive of themselves as the ideologically and ethically superior part of nations divided by the Cold War, and national reunification has remained a top agenda item for both Beijing and Pyongyang, even as such sentiment and commitment has waned appreciably in their other halves: Taiwan (Republic of China) and South Korea (Republic of Korea). In both cases, their American-allied doppelganger experienced rapid economic development and social change over the course of the 1960s and 1970s, culminating in democratization in the late 1980s. While China undertook a massive change of direction along the lines of Taiwan and South Korea’s development strategies, North Korea resisted such a move. It clung to its policy of *juche* (chuch’e), or self-reliance, an ideological touchstone elaborated by Kim Il Sung and then Kim Jong Il. The ensuing poverty increased its dependence not only on Chinese assistance, but also, during the horrific famine years of the 1990s, on international aid, even from sworn enemies such as South Korea, the United States and the United Nations.

This major Sino-North Korean divergence of development paths began with the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in December 1978. It launched China on the road of opening to the outside world and reforming and enlivening the domestic economy. This strategy combined elements of marketization in place of the plan, privatization and securitization⁸ in place of state and collective ownership, and globalization of trade and investment instead of self-reliance. China’s adoption of many of the developmental state policies that had brought about miraculous growth in South Korea and Taiwan, and Japan before them, was an explicit acknowledgement of the tragic consequences of the *juche* sort of strategy once dominant in both China and North Korea. In the 1990s, Vietnam likewise did an about face, adopting a reform and opening strategy it called *doi moi*.⁹ But Pyongyang

6 *Ibid.* (Cumings), p. 25.

7 See Cha (*op. cit.*), pp.318-323 for examples.

8 State enterprises were reorganized as share companies and part of their shares were publicly traded on stock markets, although the major shareholders are other state enterprises and agencies.

9 Cheong Kee Cheok, Lee Poh Ping, and Lee Kam Hing, “Learning from the China Model: What Is in It for Vietnam’s Economic Development?”, *Issues and Studies*, 47(4), December 2011, pp. 153-176.

clung to *juche*, which was too closely identified with the infallible Great Leader Kim Il Sung and Dear Leader Kim Jong Il to jettison. The CPC by contrast undertook a painful evaluation of Mao Zedong, criticizing many of the late charismatic leader's economic and political policies, a number of which bore close resemblance to those of the Kims. Without a similar reevaluation, however limited, the DPRK could not launch Chinese-style reforms. The DPRK in its entirety is much more closely identified with the personages of the Kim dynasty than China ever was with Mao, who did not attempt to establish a dynasty; this makes such an accounting so difficult.

The Chinese tried several times to persuade Kim Jong Il to follow their lead in opening the economy. They invited him to places such as Shenzhen and Shanghai, dynamic showcases of the results of opening and reform. If North Korea's economy boomed, it would reduce its dependence on Chinese aid and also provide numerous investment and trade opportunities for Chinese state and private enterprises. It could offer access to the North's minerals and other natural resources vital to the Chinese economy. It could shift the Korean leadership's obsessive and costly concentration on military affairs under the *sŏn'gun* (military first) policy to building the economy and improving the lives of its long-suffering masses. Kim paid an unprecedented three visits to China in the short span of 2010 and 2011, the last in May 2011. He met all of the top party and state leaders and the two sides toasted their time-tested lips and teeth relationship. Chinese leader Hu Jintao stressed the importance of regional peace and stability as well as economic prosperity.¹⁰

Beijing and Pyongyang did try to work out development zones along the lines of China's special economic zones. One was to be along the Tumen River, involving China, Russia and the United Nations Development Program.¹¹ China's plans to construct an industrial complex on North Korea's Hwanggŭmp'yŏng and Wihwa islands in the Yalu River beside China's Dandong city were suspended over the DPRK's request to deploy troops there.¹² Another one at Rajin and Sŏnbong (shortened to Rason) was even more closely patterned after China's SEZs.¹³ These zones would also offer China access to the Sea of Japan. But they have gone nowhere.

10 Top leaders of China, DPRK hold talks in Beijing," kp.china-embassy.org/eng/zcgx/sbgx/t692927.htm; Dong Ryul Lee, "Still Lips and Teeth? China-North Korea Relations after Kim Jong-il's Visit to China," *EAI Commentary* No. 20, July 1, 2011. Soon after Kim returned home, Pyongyang announced it was ceasing ties with the ROK's Lee Myung-bak (Lee Myŏngbak) administration, which had taken a harsher stance towards the North than its predecessors, posing another threat to China's desire for regional peace and stability.

11 SinoNK launched the on-line *The Tumen Triangle Documentation Project* in 2013.

12 Koichiro Ishida, "Troop deployment row halts China-N. Korean island project," http://ajw.asahi.com/article/asia/korean_peninsula/AJ201207310004 (July 31, 2012). "China's Embrace of North Korea: The Curious Case of the Hwanggumpyong Island Economic Zone," <http://38north.org/2012/02/hgp021712>.

13 Marcus Noland, "We'll Always have Rason," Peterson Institute for International Economics, "North Korea: Witness to Transformation," January 12, 2012 (<http://www.piie.com/blogs/nk/?p=4493>.)

Also going nowhere is the city of Sinūiju, another aborted development showcase just across the Yalu River from China's port city Dandong, the main conduit for trade between the two nations. Part of the fault for this failure lies with China, which disapproved of Pyongyang's selection of a Dutch-passport carrying Chinese entrepreneur as its manager. At night, the bright lights and lively scene in Dandong stand as a stark contrast to the darkness that is Sinūiju, down to its non-functioning ferris wheel, which stands as something of a metaphor both for a place frozen in time or, if not frozen, going around in circles. A new bridge that is being built across the Yalu at Dandong, slated to open in 2014, might facilitate legal trade.¹⁴

Since the 1990s, China has diverged further and further from the DPRK in economic, social, cultural, ideological and political fields, as well as integration with the outside world. In fact, Chinese tourists of a certain age visit their neighbor out of a sort of nostalgia for the alternate reality and personality cult kitsch still vibrant there. It is also an object lesson of what China might look like had it rejected reform. China now much more resembles its once implacable Cold War enemies, Taiwan and South Korea, than it does its lips and teeth neighbor. Neither China nor North Korea bears much resemblance to socialism as envisioned by Marx.

In sum, many of the elements that cemented the lips and teeth relationship are no longer in existence or even viable, as the two countries' development paths have diverged so fundamentally. While China has become increasingly a global player¹⁵ whose opinion (and cash) is welcomed and solicited worldwide, its neighbor has become increasingly isolated, largely due to its own behavior and refusal to be likeable or trustworthy.

The DPRK's Pariah Status

China's growing economic and military clout on the world stage contrasts greatly with the DPRK, which has become increasingly ostracized as a consequence of its anti-social and highly unpredictable behavior. There are several issues that have earned Pyongyang pariah status in the eyes of most other countries, particularly its neighbors in Northeast Asia.

First and foremost is its development of nuclear weapons and the possibility of North Korea proliferating nuclear technology to other states hostile to the democracies and to states involved in regional conflicts, such as Syria or Iran. In spite of a range of carrots and sticks from the United States and other members of the international community including the United Nations to stop its nuclear and missile programs, the DPRK has persisted by fits and starts, withdrawing from the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty in 2003. It conducted its first underground nuclear test in October 2006. This brought on UN Security Council Resolution 1718 demanding that Pyongyang refrain

14 "China Set to Deepen N. Korean Ties as Yalu River Bridge Rises," www.bloomberg.com/news/print/2013-04-16/china-set-to-deepen-north-korean-ties-as-yalu-bridge-rises.html.

15 For a recent comprehensive and cautionary overview, see David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

from further tests and imposing sanctions. Nonetheless, the North conducted a second, successful test in May 2009. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) unanimously adopted Resolution 1874 expanding sanctions. In February 2013 it conducted its third test, just before President Obama's State of the Union address and during Chinese New Years celebrations, predictably bringing on yet more UN sanctions. In case this did not attract enough attention, Pyongyang also threatened to launch nuclear weapons at the United States mainland. The DPRK has demanded to be considered a nuclear weapons state and to be treated as such.¹⁶

In December 2012 it had launched a small satellite, having failed to do so earlier in April of that year. Most observers argued that this was a thinly disguised test of its ability to launch a nuclear-tipped missile. The early days of 2013 were thus particularly fraught, and the third nuclear test came in a context of escalating threats and bellicose verbiage against America and South Korea.

In a more direct piece of offensive action, in March 2010 the South Korean patrol ship Cheonan (Ch'önan) had been sunk with the loss of 46 sailors near the maritime border of the two Koreas, with suspicion falling on a North Korean submarine. Then in October the North shelled the South Korean island of Yeonpyeong (Yönp'yöng). Foreign observers saw these acts as efforts by Kim Jong Un to prove his military credentials and cement ties with the military establishment while his father was still alive. The audience may have been primarily domestic, but the damage to South Korea was direct and lethal, and the concern was international. This was followed by the February 2013 declaration that North Korea was scrapping the armistice that ended the Korean War. The drumbeat continued with Pyongyang urging foreigners to leave South Korea as well as Pyongyang in April. That same month, Pyongyang shut down the Kaesöng Industrial Zone where South Korean firms had established factories employing tens of thousands of North Korean workers to produce goods for export.

North Korea's belligerence towards South Korea, Japan and the United States reached a crescendo at that time. In addition to attracting numerous UN sanctions and condemnations for its external behavior, the North is also ostracized widely because of the atrocious situation of human rights in the country.

There is evidence that displeasure with North Korea has also spread among the Chinese citizenry. In May 2013 North Koreans hijacked a Chinese fishing boat and held the crew for ransom. Coming on the heels of a North Korean missile launch sparked discussion on the Chinese web, much of it expressing criticism of Pyongyang.¹⁷

16 For a sober analysis of North Korea's nuclear policy, see Christopher R. Hill, "The Elusive Vision of a Non-nuclear North Korea," *The Washington Quarterly*, 32(2), Spring 2013, pp. 7-19.

17 Lotus Yuen, "After Kidnapping, Chinese Netizens Ask Why Beijing Humors 'Spoiled Child; Kim Jong-un,'" <http://www.tealeafnation.com/2013/05/after-kidnapping-chinese-netizens-ask-why-beijing-humors-spoiled-child-kim-jong-un/>; Jane Perlez, "Some Chinese Are Souring on Being North Korea's Best Friend," *The New York Times*, February 17, 2013, p. 12.; Simon Shen, "The Hidden Face of Comradeship: Popular Chinese Consensus on the DPRK and its Implications for Beijing's Policy," *Journal of Contemporary China*, 21(75), May 2012, pp. 427-443.

China's Policies¹⁸

Management of Sino-DPRK relations does not fall under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Rather, it is the International Liaison Department of the CPC, the Ministry of Public Security, and the People's Liberation Army that take charge, indicating the primacy of security in the relations.¹⁹

China's policies towards its irksome neighbor have not been consistent or transparent. This needs to be seen in the larger context of China's rise. While Beijing strenuously argues that its rise is "peaceful" and a threat to no one, many of its actions, including relations with Pyongyang, belie this protestation.²⁰ At times it sides with the international community, signing on to sanctions and publicly calling on Pyongyang to cool it. More commonly it urges restraint by all sides. It has tried to broker deals between the DPRK and other countries. And there is much evidence that China itself has violated or not rigorously implemented sanctions that it has agreed to. In the first year and a half after Kim Jong Il's death, the general trend of China's policy and attitude toward North Korea has been one of barely concealed frustration and criticism, but continued substantive and symbolic support. This exposes the mutual dependence, mutual advantage, and mutual distrust between the two.

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- 18 Some works consulted for this section include: Cha, *op. cit.*, pp 315-345; "Gaming North Korea," European Council on Foreign Relations, Asia Centre, September 2012; Bates Gill, "China's North Korea Policy," United States Institute of Peace Special Report 283, July 2011; You Ji, "Dealing with the 'North Korean Dilemma': China's Strategic Choices," RSIS Working Paper No. 229, 21 June 2011; Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt, "The Diminishing Returns of China's North Korea Policy," <http://38north.org/2012/08/skahlbrandt081612>; Andrei Lankov, "Chinese Interest on the Korean Peninsula and the Future of North Korea," EAU Issue Briefing No. MASI 2012-02, March 19, 2012; Sunny Lee, "China's North Korean Foreign Policy Decoded," *YaleGlobal Online*, 28 July 2011 (<http://yaleglobl.yale.edu>); Matthias Maass, "China's Peaceful Rise and North Korea's Military Provocations," *Issues and Studies* 47(4), December 2011, pp. 101-151; Hochul Lee, "China in the North Korean Nuclear Crises: 'interest' and 'identity' in foreign behavior," *Journal of Contemporary China*, 22(80), March 2013, pp. 312-331; Nick Miller, "Contact Between China and the DPRK: 2010-2012," China-North Korea Dossier No. 4, SinoNK.Com, April 2013; Dick K. Nanto and Mark E. Manyin, "China-North Korea Relations," Congressional Research Service, 7-5700, December 28, 2010; Drew Thompson and Natalie Matthews, "Six-Party Talks and China's Goldilocks Strategy: Getting North Korea Just Right," *Joint U.S.-Korea Academic Studies*, Volume 21, 2011, pp. 179-205.
- 19 Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt, "Who shapes China's North Korea policy?" *The Korea Times*, 19 May 2011, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/north-east-asia/china/kleine-ahlbrandt>; Nick Miller, *op.cit.*
- 20 Zheng Bijian, former Executive Vice-President of the Central Party School and close advisor to the Chinese leadership, is most closely identified with this trope: "China's 'Peaceful Rise' to Great Power Status," *Foreign Affairs*, 84(5), September-October 2005, pp. 18-24.

China is the major supplier of food and energy to North Korea, although it does not provide this *gratis*, and in fact makes a profit.²¹ China has also invested in building the country's infrastructure along with its own, to link the countries economically in case of a military emergency. This includes the Tumen and Rason projects mentioned above. Of course, these investments facilitate China's access to the DPRK's mineral and other natural resources, ports and cheap labor, so it is hardly selfless. These investments were also part of China's repeated efforts to try to convince Kim Jong Il to follow its reform and opening model. It has run training seminars for North Korean economic figures²² and also welcomed laborers from across the border.²³ China commonly turns a blind eye to the frenetic smuggling across the border, which provides a (black) market for many Chinese goods. This includes ignoring the export of many sanctioned luxury goods that the Kims use to reward their supporters and preempt possible discontent and which the North Korean elite purchases during trips to China.²⁴ It also helps to supply consumer goods for the evolving North Korean market, another means of distracting people from the overall miserable conditions in the country and keeping them involved in non-(overtly) political activity.

On the other hand, China sends back many refugees trying to get to South Korea through China and then third countries such as Mongolia, Myanmar or Thailand, knowing full well that many will face harsh punishment once back home. It has imprisoned China-based activists supporting these refugees.²⁵

Although siding with the UNSC in approving sanctions and condemnation after the nuclear tests, the PRC has also urged constructive engagement with the regime to give it the face and dignity Pyongyang thinks it deserves and which, it suggests, will lead to better behavior. To this end, China hosted six rounds of the Six-Party Talks from 2003 to 2007 involving itself, the DPRK, ROK, United States, Japan and Russia. Pyongyang hoped that it could use this forum for direct bilateral discussions with Washington,

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- 21 Stephan Haggard and Eujin Jung, "Is China Subsidizing the DPRK? The Pricing of North Korean Exports," Peterson Institute for International Economics, "North Korea; Witness to Transformation," June 19, 2013: If anything, China "secure[s] commodities at advantageous prices." "China seems to even be charging a premium for food and fuel."
- 22 "20 NK Officials Getting Schooled in Tianjin," <http://www.dailynk.com/english/read.php?catald=nk00100&num=9456>. "Rich village in China checked out by North," <http://koreajoonganqdaily.joinsmsn.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=2956548>, July 20, 2012.
- 23 "China Gives Work Visas for 20,000 N. Koreans," http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2012/05/28/2012052800858.html.
- 24 Megha Rajagopalan, "North Korea Sees Luxury Goods Flow Into Elite Hands Despite Sanctions," www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/20/north-korea-sanctions-luxury-goods_n_2910005.html, March 19, 2013.
- 25 See the documentary, "Seoul Train" for examples. Also, the New York Times Op-Doc video, "Escape from North Korea" by Ann Shin; and Choe Sang-hun, "One Man's Tale of Two Koreas, Changed Allegiances, Torture and Fear," (*New York Times*, August 8, 2012, p.6 profiling Kim Young-hwan who built a pro-democracy movement for North Koreans in China and was arrested and tortured by the Chinese.

but the Americans refused to let this happen. In 2009, after UN criticism of its failed satellite launch, the DPRK announced it was pulling out of the talks. It then resumed its nuclear program, culminating in the May 2009 test.²⁶ But Beijing did not join in the condemnation of North Korea after the sinking of the Cheonan in March 2010, claiming there was not enough evidence to lay the attack at the feet of Pyongyang.²⁷ It likewise did not criticize the North for its shelling of Yeonpyeong Island which resulted in the deaths of 4 civilians, instead urging both sides to work towards peace.

Beijing also publicly supported Kim Jong Il till the end, and indicated support for his designated successor. It hosted Jang Song Thack as a form of blessing of his nephew, Kim Jong Un, soon after the latter's ascension, and his special envoy Choe Ryong-hae, the political chief of North Korea's military, in May 2013 on the eve of the Xi-Obama informal summit in Palm Springs. Choe was the highest-ranking official to visit since the leadership turnover in December 2011.²⁸ Kim Jong Un himself has not received an invitation, in spite of requests.²⁹ Taken together, these can be seen as signals of displeasure from Beijing, although it continues to employ hortatory rhetoric when referring to the Kims as well as the lips and teeth relationship between the two nations and peoples.

But Beijing has also increasingly taken actions which explicitly and implicitly put Pyongyang on notice that there are limits to China's forbearance and willingness to endure international criticism for standing up for its neighbor and defending some of its most egregious acts. Perhaps most galling to Pyongyang was China's establishment of full diplomatic relations with the Republic of Korea back in 1992, a step once thought absolutely inconceivable given the Korean War-cemented lips and teeth relations between Beijing and Pyongyang and the decades of Cold War hostility between Beijing and Seoul. This was a tacit recognition of the ROK's extraordinary development through a policy of state-led reform and opening, and its undeniable importance on the world economic stage. Additionally, it indicated China's openness to South Korean direct investment, which, among other things, could transfer various forms of knowhow to China. This signaled that Beijing was willing to bypass Pyongyang and did not really care if its feelings were hurt.

China has also joined in UN sanctions and condemnations of North Korea's missile and nuclear tests, even if it has not fully implemented the sanctions in practice.³⁰

26 For a participant's personal take on the Six-Party Talks, see Cha, *op. cit.*, pp. 255-274. See also, Thompson and Matthews, *ibid.*

27 In fact, China opposed a UN resolution condemning the act, and Hu Jintao, who was General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, Chair of the Central Military Affairs Commission, and president of the PRC personally met Kim Jong Il in China in May and August.

28 Jane Perlez and Choe Sang-hun, "North Korean Envoy Visits Beijing Amid Concern About U.S.-Chinese Relations," *New York Times*, May 23, 2013, p. A15.

29 Benjamin Kang Lim, "Kim Jong Un China Visit Request Turned Down," www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/03/kim-jong-un-china-visit-turned-down_n_1934945.html.

30 mark, "China and DPRK Sanctions-Busting," armscontrolwonk.com/archive/847/china-and-dprk-sanctions-busting, 24 June 2012.

It has sanctioned North Korean banks that the United States has charged are involved in money laundering and purchasing sanctioned goods on the world market.³¹ China on occasion implements more rigorous customs investigations searching for internationally-sanctioned goods being smuggled across the border. China also periodically raises the issue of boundaries between the two countries, suggesting that swathes of North Korea actually belong to China.³² Given the extreme nationalism of the Korean people, this is intended to hurt their feelings and put them on notice. Ironically, the South has responded to these claims more vigorously than the North.

President Xi Jinping's June 2013 informal summit with President Obama included discussion of North Korea, with both sides indicating they should work together to ensure peace and stability on a non-nuclear Korean peninsula. Here again, China was going around North Korea and discussing its possible fate with its sworn enemy, an act that would have been condemned as superpower arrogance.

Observers of relations between the PRC and DPRK debate whether or not China is sincere in its criticisms of Pyongyang and support of sanctions promoted by the United States through the United Nations and whether it would ever abandon its ally. The Chinese claim that their overarching goal is peace and stability on the Korean peninsula and in the region more broadly, so that they can focus on developing their economy and improving the lives of the Chinese people. Denuclearization of the peninsula would certainly contribute to peace and stability, but unlike the United States, it is not China's primary goal in its relations with the North. From China's perspective, if the DPRK denuclearized, this would still not solve the problem, given the nuclear weapons capability of the United States and its ties with nearby South Korea and Japan.

China's Strengths

China brings many strengths to its relationship with North Korea, but at the same time also faces certain constraints in its ability to work its will over its neighbor. In most cases, what appear to be strengths are also liabilities.

Along with its phenomenal economic development, China has invested heavily in modernizing its armed forces. It could once again come to the North's defense should war break out with the South, but it would be extremely reluctant to do so, especially if the North provoked a confrontation unilaterally. China can supply modern weaponry to the North, legally as well as illegally, and also help it develop its own capabilities. China is a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty. China could use its military might to convince North Korea to restrain its own weapons development,

31 Keith Bradsher and Nick Cumming-Brice, "China Cuts Ties With Key North Korean Bank," www.nytimes.com/2013/05/08/world/asia/china-cuts-ties-with-north-korean-bank.html.

32 Taylor Washburn, "How an Ancient Kingdom Explains Today's China-Korea Relations," www.theatlantic.com/china/archive/2013/04/how-an-ancient-kingdom-explains-odays-china=koren-relations/274986; Miles Yu, "Great Wall Estimate Angers S. Koreans," <http://p.washingtontimes.com/news/2012/jun/13/inside-china-chinas-one-million-traitors>, June 14, 2012.

although this seems a non-starter given the role of the Korean People's Army in the political system and the stated military-first policy.

China's expanding and voracious economy provides many opportunities to exert leverage over the North. As the main transshipment point for goods coming from and going into the DPRK, China can open the spigot or close it off as one way to demonstrate support or unhappiness with the North's behavior. China can import the North's raw materials, and at prices favorable to Korea. China's construction companies can continue to develop the North's very backward infrastructure. Chinese companies can invest in the DPRK. China can provide needed food, energy and other vital goods to the North at below market prices. It can control the amount of smuggling across the border and can also turn a blind eye to the shipment of banned luxury goods that are used to reward loyalty among the elite. China can provide job opportunities to North Korean workers. China gives overriding priority to its own economic development, and North Korea is a key to revitalizing China's northeast, an area formerly dominated by state-owned enterprises which took a long time to recover from the reforms of that sector. China has made huge investments in the region, much of it banking on North Korea finally shifting gears to the economy, where China would be a central and even dominant player.³³

As the main land and air border, China can determine which North Koreans can pass through its territory, either to conduct business or travel within China or as a step to going elsewhere. It can also allow North Korean smugglers or refugees to cross unhindered. As the main conduit between the DPRK and the rest of the world, China can restrict the flow of possibly destabilizing information about the outside world into the North, or it can open the floodgates. In a society where information is one key element of power, facilitating information that offers alternative ways of thinking about their own country and the outside is a powerful tool. China has demonstrated a fair degree of success in controlling the internet, and can provide a similar service to the DPRK.

As the only powerful country with any regular relationship with the DPRK, China can protect Pyongyang from international condemnation and sanctions. Even if it supports these, as it did in 2012 and 2013, it can enforce them more or less strictly. China's role in initiating and hosting the Six-Party Talks showed the North that it has the ability to bring major powers to the table to talk to it directly. Beijing is the only country with a direct pipeline to Pyongyang as well as Washington, Seoul and Tokyo. Warming or cooling relations with Seoul also signal to the North that Beijing's support cannot be taken for granted. Beijing invited the newly-installed ROK president Park Geun-hye (Pak Künhye) for a state visit in June 2013, according her a highly public and prestigious welcome. In a joint statement, the two sides "agreed on the importance of faithfully carrying out United Nations Security Council resolutions that called for sanctions against North Korea, as well as a multilateral agreement in 2005 under which the North was obliged to give up its nuclear weapons programs in return for economic

33 This has already begun. "Rustbelt revival," *The Economist*, June 16, 2012, pp. 51-52. South Korean firms are major investors.

and diplomatic benefits.³⁴ Taken with the Xi-Obama meeting less than 3 weeks earlier, this clearly signaled to Pyongyang that China was more than willing and able to discuss how to manage North Korea with its two worst enemies. However, it does not resolve specific issues related to the Six-Party Talks, such as preconditions by all sides, how far China will go to actually sanction the North, and so on. Accompanied by a large business delegation, President Park also signaled the important economic relationship between China and South Korea, which far overshadows anything Pyongyang can show.

One of China's strongest suits *vis-à-vis* the North may be the demonstration effect: that the Communist Party can bring about exceptionally rapid economic development, and through this, improve its standing and prestige in the world at large and win support from its people whose lives have also improved dramatically, while maintaining power. Under Kim Jong Il the North balked every time it seemed on the verge of actually attempting to reform its economy along Chinese lines, with broad and multifaceted Chinese assistance. China's prestige among many countries of the developing world is extremely high, and its soft power has attracted many leaders eager to study the Chinese experience. Perhaps more remarkably, the Western countries, still lumbering through a major economic slowdown, have humbly turned to China for financing and investment. The Chinese market lures businessmen and government officials from around the world who see opportunities within China while also soliciting investment in their own countries. In 2012 and 2013 the Chinese party and state undertook what seemed on the surface to be a smooth transition of power to a new generation of leaders. This also signals to the North that economic development and opening to the outside have only strengthened the party's hand at home. All of this should give the Kim regime confidence that it can also undertake difficult reforms, focus on improving the lives of its people, loosen up a bit, and thereby reduce the burden on China of having to shelter and explain the erratic and dangerous behavior of its next door neighbor, and risk a loss of face and prestige for doing so.

China's strength has also given it the ability to bless the ascent of Kim Jung Un, granting him legitimacy at least in the eyes of some observers.

China's Weaknesses

We have just seen that China has many weapons, literal and figurative, in its arsenal that give it leverage over North Korea. But it also has a number of weaknesses that constrain its ability to bring the North to heel and reduce its own vulnerability as the champion of such an unpredictable and dangerous actor on the world stage.

China indeed wants to be seen as a major and responsible player in world affairs. When North Korea acts up, people turn to China to rein it in, yet Pyongyang repeatedly behaves in ways that make China look foolish, impotent or even acquiescent. China seems to condone some behavior, or not criticize it as forcefully as other powers want,

34 Choe Sang-hun, "China and South Korea Reaffirm Efforts Aimed at North," *New York Times*, June 28, 2013, p. A9.

with the Cheonan sinking and Yeonpyeong shelling as examples. Yet it did vote for UNSC sanctions after the recent nuclear tests. This is probably because the implications of them go beyond the Korean peninsula itself, particularly when Pyongyang explicitly threatens the United States. China thus risks appearing vacillating and noncommittal, which makes it an unreliable partner for everyone, even if everyone turns to it. Xi Jinping's June informal get-together with President Obama was an opening salvo in what the Chinese refer to as a new style great-power relationship, but if Xi can't bring the DPRK in line, it seriously compromises China's reputation and standing, certainly in the eyes of the United States.

The leaders in Pyongyang know full well that China fears instability on their border and that it does not want their regime to collapse, especially as this would likely result in an enhanced position for Seoul and its American allies. Much as Taiwan's leaders believe that, under the terms of the Taiwan Relations Act, America will come to its aid should conflict break out with the mainland, North Korea's leaders seem to believe that Beijing will do the same for them, even if they provoke a fight with the South and its American ally. Pyongyang continuously tests the limits of how far Beijing will go to shield and protect it, keeping China off-balance, satisfying no one, and even causing China much embarrassment, as with the February 2013 nuclear test against China's publicly stated wishes.

PRC-DPRK bilateral relations need to be seen in a larger regional context. Of great importance are recent ongoing and escalating conflicts between China and many of its neighbors, conflicts that the Chinese appear to have initiated. China claims to want peace and stability above everything else, yet has raised tensions throughout Northeast, Southeast and now West Asia. The first case is conflict with Japan over the Diaoyu Islands (Senkaku in Japanese). Then there are serious conflicts with Vietnam and the Philippines and to a lesser extent Taiwan, Malaysia and Brunei, over the Nansha and Xisha (Spratley and Parcel) Islands in the South China Sea. As perhaps the strangest case, in April China sent soldiers into India's Ladakh region where they stayed several weeks, right on the eve of Premier Li Keqiang's visit to India.

Observers are puzzled as to why China has been so vigorously asserting its longstanding claims to these far-flung territories at this particular time. Is it because it demonstrated such economic strength during the post 2008 global recession that it felt it could push against weaker neighbors? The main backer of the Philippines, Japan and South Korea is the United States, and it too was in economic distress, as well as trying to pull troops and commitments out of Iraq and Afghanistan. So did Beijing perceive this as the optimal time to make a move that the United States could not counter? In any event, it appears to be backfiring in the court of public opinion.

But these territorial disputes – and China has also asserted claims over Korean lands, stirring up resistance from South Korea – have had the consequence of pushing America's allies such as Japan and South Korea closer to the United States and to each other, despite their historical mistrust and animosity. The Philippines believes the United States will support it in a conflict, and even America's Cold War foe, Vietnam, has sought American assistance against what it sees as China's bullying. As America has pulled out of Afghanistan and Iraq, it has shifted its attention to Asia. This has been

referred to as a “pivot to Asia” as well as “rebalancing.” The former term seems to imply that China’s military modernization and assertiveness have drawn America’s attention and commitment to constrain such a move; America has spun around to refocus on Asia. “Rebalancing” sounds more neutral – America has always had a major presence in Asia, but in recent years has tipped to the Middle East and West Asia, so now needs to recalibrate, but it is hardly anything new or targeted at China. No matter which way it is interpreted, the Chinese see this as an American policy to constrain China, and stir up trouble in the region to derail China’s rise and influence.

These numerous potential flashpoints have put China in a game of whack-a-mole, and the last thing it needs is for North Korea to act up and add to its problems. China has protested that it is a still poor developing country engaging in a “peaceful rise”, but many of its neighbors are quite skeptical of these claims and Beijing’s own behavior belies them as well. While testing India, China has also strengthened ties with Sri Lanka and continues to build up the Shanghai Cooperation Organization with Central Asia. Meanwhile, it is aggressively investing in Iraq and Afghanistan to take advantage of the wealth of natural resources there, particularly oil and minerals. It is sending special envoys to global trouble spots, such as Syria, and increasing its participation in United Nations peacekeeping operations.

In addition to the ongoing East and South China Sea conflicts that China fanned, there is the matter of Myanmar. This country on China’s southwestern border was quite close to Beijing. China’s economic presence there is massive, and Chinese businesses have established claims over much of Myanmar’s riches. China took the deference of its military dictators for granted. But in 2011 the generals suddenly undertook fundamental political reforms, freeing political prisoners and opening all sorts of freedoms. This won major plaudits from the West and Japan who began to pour in the aid and investment they had denied when Myanmar was a military dictatorship. This has seriously weakened China’s clout there, and the regime has stood up to some instances of Chinese running their country as a virtual colony.

Taken together, these cases indicate that China may be overextended, opening several cans of worms that it cannot manage. While this may limit its ability to protect North Korea, at the same time it may signal weakness to Pyongyang who might then raise demands for various kinds of assistance from Beijing.

Conclusion

China’s new leader, Xi Jinping, speaks often of the “Chinese Dream.” Unlike the “American Dream,” which involves individual aspirations for success based on hard work, the Chinese version sounds more like Manifest Destiny: after enduring a century of humiliation by imperialists and civil war, the CPC has led a national rejuvenation and China can now reclaim its place at the center of world affairs. Xi has also spoken a “new Great Power Relationship” with the United States, and his informal meetings with President Obama in June 2013 appear to indicate that the United States is prepared to acknowledge China’s importance and meet with its leaders to discuss all manner of global issues. North Korea sits right at the top of the agenda and, correctly or incorrectly,

Washington believes that the key to bringing North Korea into line – abandoning its nuclear dreams, stopping missile development and ending threats to South Korea and Japan for starters – lies in Beijing.

This attention offers China a tremendous amount of face that the regime can show to its people at home. Given the very serious brewing issues it faces domestically – economic slowdown, financially strapped banks, unemployment, an aging population, corruption, pollution, street protests, ethnic unrest, and a disbelief in any political ideology besides nationalism – demonstrating its new global clout is one way to distract people from their day-to-day concerns. But it carries risks if the regime suffers a serious loss abroad. As the population becomes more aware of world affairs through many channels and demands that Beijing take a firm stance against its foes, China's inability to achieve its international goals cannot be kept secret. It is raising stakes and expectations at home as well as abroad about what it can do.

There is also a belief fostered by Beijing that China is a rising power and the United States a declining one, a situation that offers much opportunity for China. Beijing is gambling that the United States is so worn out and financially strapped after more than a decade of war in Afghanistan and Iraq, that the last thing it will do is challenge China's functional equivalent of America's "Monroe Doctrine" to assert its sovereignty and influence in its own backyard.

There is plenty of mistrust to go around. Beijing and Washington do not trust each other in terms of their motives or aspirations. Right after Obama hectored Xi about China's cyberhacking, former National Security Agency analyst Edward Snowden popped up in Hong Kong (a Special Administrative Region of China) to reveal the extraordinary extent of American hacking and spying on China. While America accuses China of shielding and even encouraging North Korea, Beijing launches the same accusations about America and the other claimants to small islands in the East and South China Seas.

China tries to play it both ways. It claims it is a victim of imperialism now tying up some leftover matters from history; it has no aspirations on the territory of any other country. At the same time, it relishes being at the center of global affairs and having a seat at the table with the other powers, particularly the United States. It will discuss the internal affairs of other countries, such as the DPRK, with other powers, fueling expectations that it can deliver on its promises as well as the demands of others, but then throws up its hands and says this is beyond its abilities. It also sends its own envoys to trouble spots such as Syria, and welcomes the leaders of Israel and the Palestinian Authority to try to mediate that situation.

Reviewing the evidence, such as it is, suggests that China is playing a risky game. It appears to be thrusting itself into external affairs that it cannot manage without having a grand strategy or thinking through all of the implications. If its promises are too self-contradictory, or if it cannot deliver on its pledges or fulfill the expectations it has led others to have for it, it is asking to be bypassed or not taken seriously. It may respond by stirring the pot even more, raising the stakes and risks.

For Pyongyang, keeping China guessing as to its motives and plans is part of its own game. Korean distaste for Chinese meddling and arrogance has a long pedigree, and Kim Jong Un has inherited, directly and through the people around him, a desire to suck everything they can out of China while yielding as little as they can in return. There is no endgame in sight. All in all, the metaphor of lips and teeth is now only a rueful memory, or as a top official confided in me in July 2012, in a meeting at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing, “Sometimes I wonder which is the worse job, dealing with the United States or North Korea.”

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