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Uncertain allies or uncomfortable neighbors? Making sense of China–North Korea Relations, 1949–2010

Jae Ho Chung and Myung-hae Choi

Abstract This study is based upon two premises: (1) the available literature, though voluminous, fails to provide systematic understandings of the complex and evolving relations between China and North Korea; and (2) China and North Korea had been short of being trusted allies bound in blood and belief even before the launch of post-Mao reforms and the normalization of Beijing–Seoul relations. This article dissects this curious relationship into four questions: (1) What does history inform us about China’s relations with (North) Korea? (2) Has China communicated effectively with North Korea? (3) Have China and North Korea been ‘trusted allies’? (4) How effective has China been in inducing North Korea to comply with its demands over the years? The authors argue that, geo-strategically, China can hardly afford to put North Korea in an adversarial position. Furthermore, residues of the Factional Incident of 1956 and North Korea’s deep-rooted suspicion of China still linger on. These have been the sources of Beijing’s dilemma in consistently opting for ‘soft’ measures despite that North Korea’s provocative acts and nuclear weapons programs have negatively affected China’s interests. From the outset, China and North Korea had been more uncertain allies who had to cooperate with each other under the ideological and geopolitical imperatives of the difficult times. The authors also suggest that it would be misleading to put Sino–North Korean dynamics in a usual category of big power–small nation relations where power asymmetry generally works against the latter. North Korea has undoubtedly been an atypical ‘small nation’. It is due to these limitations that China’s pressurizing has not been always

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effective and that Beijing's reactions have been continuously cyclical. This cyclical trend is not likely to be broken since the upcoming drama of Sino-American rivalry is bound to close the window of such opportunities for China, which will nevertheless regard North Korea increasingly as a liability, if not uncomfortable neighbor.

Keywords China–North Korea Relations; alliance; geopolitics; nuclear programs; Factional Incident; Six-Party Talks.

International sections of major newspapers hardly miss out on coverage of China and North Korea, the two most intriguing 'socialist' systems on the globe. Not only have China and North Korea been crucial variables in East Asia's geo-strategic dynamics, but the relationship between the two has also constituted a riddle to policy and scholarly communities the world over (Brzezinski 1998: 30, 63–4, 197–8; Morgenthau 1973: 177). With the ascent of China and North Korea's nuclear aspirations, Sino–North Korean relations are becoming more important than ever in shaping the future strategic landscape of the region and beyond.

Despite the amplifying importance of the subject, available literature, though voluminous, largely fails to provide a systematic understanding of this complex bilateral relationship. A majority of the studies typically offer one-shot descriptions of short-term events or transient policy prescriptions. This study seeks to put China–North Korean relations in a long-term analytical framework in an effort to produce generalizable inferences that go beyond accounting for a particular incident.

This study substantiates that China and North Korea have been short of being trusted allies bound in blood and belief. We argue that from the outset, even before the launch of post-Mao reforms in 1979 and the normalization of Beijing–Seoul relations in 1992, China and North Korea were uncertain allies who offered only limited cooperation to each other under the ideological and geopolitical imperatives of difficult times. The key implication of this argument is that, with mutual strategic needs being the only ingredient of the ties, Sino–North Korean relations of the twenty-first century may stand on a shakier foundation than is widely taken for granted.

After more than 60 years since the founding of the Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea (DPRK; hereafter North Korea) in 1948 and the People's Republic of China (PRC; hereafter China) in 1949, we still lack a comprehensive picture of how China–North Korea relations have evolved and where they are heading. This article seeks to fill the void by framing this curious relationship in the following four questions: (1) What does history offer us about China's perceptions of and relations with (North) Korea? (2) How well has China communicated with North Korea? (3) Have China and North Korea been 'trusted allies'? (4) How effective has China been in inducing North Korea to comply with its demands?

A brief note is due on the source materials used in this study. In addition to government documents, scholarly publications, media reports and policy briefs in English, Korean, Chinese and Japanese, a wide range

of newly available sources were also utilized. Four types of sources are particularly noteworthy. First, materials from the Cold War International History Project (CWIHP) of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars were extensively consulted. Second, official North Korean materials were carefully scrutinized and checked against Western sources. Third, unstructured interviews carried out by the authors in China during 2001–2010 were utilized. Fourth, findings from the structured questionnaires that one of the authors conducted in Beijing and Shanghai in 2004 and 2007 were also taken into consideration.¹

What does history tell us about China–North Korea relations?

Prior to the rise of the Mongol Yuan in China, the Koryo Dynasty on the Korean Peninsula showed little genuine commitment to observing the norms of the Sino-centric tributary system. The Sino–Korean hierarchical order was more or less anchored during the fourteenth century under the reign of the Ming Dynasty (Huang 1992: chapter 2; Yun 2002: 67–70). China had long regarded Korea as a model tributary, which fervently internalized China's ruling ideology and statecraft. While another major Confucian tributary, Vietnam, had often declared itself as an empire internally – and externally on a few occasions – Korea had almost always held on to kingship, out of deference to China (Chun 1970: 24; Woodside 1970: 237). From Korea's perspective, China was deemed a reliable protector and crucial source of high culture (i.e., 'soft power').

Korea and China have shared the 'curse' of geopolitics. Situated at the crossroads of maritime and continental powers, Korea is often compared to the 'dagger' pointed at the neck of China. Abundant historical accounts testify to Korea's strategic importance to China. As early as 1592, Xue Fan, a Ming General, wrote: 'Liaodong [the southern part of Manchuria] is an arm to Beijing while Chosun is a fence to Liaodong'. Another Ming official, Zhao Congshan, remarked that 'the protection of Chosun is central to the security of China while securing Kyongsang and Cholla Provinces [of Korea] is the key to protecting Chosun' (Choi 1997: 26, 28).

It was on the basis of such geo-strategic considerations, along with normative/cultural affinity, that the Ming Court dispatched huge armies to rescue Chosun from the marauding Japanese in the late sixteenth century. The subsequent downfall of the Ming due to the extreme financial difficulties accumulated from the military expeditions highlights the crucial importance of Korea in China's security calculations. During the late nineteenth century, despite its waning fortune, the Qing decided to fight against Japan over Chosun and subsequently lost the war as well as its face as the 'Middle Kingdom' (Schmid 2002: chapter 2).

The Korean War (1950–53) unequivocally demonstrated the geo-strategic importance Korea has for China. Given the dire economic difficulties and political challenges that the newly-established People's

Republic faced at the time of sending troops to Korea, the opportunity cost for saving Pyongyang at the expense of giving up on liberating Taiwan for the time being must have been evident to Beijing. With the civil war continuing in Sichuan, Guizhou and Tibet and unbearable levels of inflation, everything seemed against Beijing's participation in the Korean War. Mao Zedong must have been keenly aware of the fatal effect that sending armies to save Chosun had had on the Ming Dynasty more than three centuries earlier (*Banyuetan* 2000: 33–34; Shen 1999: 13–47). Yet, against all odds, China chose to fight against the US and the United Nations.

The geo-strategic rationale that best captures China–North Korean relations is the analogy of the ‘teeth-to-lips’ relationship (*chunchi xiangyi* or *chunwang chihan*). That is to say, without lips (i.e., North Korea or the Korean Peninsula), the teeth (China) may be adversely affected. On a banquet for a North Korean delegation in November 1953, Mao commented that ‘without Korean people’s heroic struggles, there is no guarantee for the security of Chinese people ... Whereas North Korea is the frontline, China constitutes the second line’ (Pei 1993: 81). This analogy means that, strategically speaking, China needs North Korea as much as, if not more, North Korea does China (Lee 2004: 199–237; Shen 2006: 26–9). Therefore, history tells us that China–North Korean relations are not usual asymmetric dynamics between a great power and a smaller nation. It should be noted that a flipside of the ‘teeth-to-lips’ analogy is that the teeth may often bite the lips. North Korea’s inherent concern and sense of insecurity in the face of a strong China is the theme we now turn to.

How well has China communicated with North Korea?

Chinese and North Korean Communists were allies against Japan in World War Two and against America during the Korean War. We may therefore presume that Beijing and Pyongyang had formed a sort of ‘latent war community’ equipped with communication channels for policy coordination and intelligence sharing. The most crucial channel through which China and North Korea obtained key information on each other was a group of high-level North Korean officials who had strong connections with the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) from the days of the Yan’an base area – i.e., the ‘Yan’an Faction’ (Lankov 2002; Scalapino and Lee 1972).

The rise of the Yan’an Faction in North Korean politics became evident after July 1949 for two reasons. First, a large number of Korean communist veterans who had participated in the Chinese Civil War returned to North Korea around that time, strengthening the Yan’an Faction (Jin 2006: 103–14). Second, it was also around that time that Stalin put China in charge of ‘supervising’ the communist parties in Asia (Goncharov et al. 1993: 232). The ascent of the Yan’an Faction made Kim Il Sung concerned

about his own Manchurian Faction. Kim's concern was best demonstrated by his meticulous effort to exclude the Yan'an Faction from the task of mapping out attack plans for the Korean War. Prior to Kim's meeting with Mao in Beijing in May 1950, no consultation was ever made with China regarding the war plans. It was only after 28 September 1950 when North Korea requested China's assistance for war efforts that Pyongyang began to share military intelligence with Beijing (J. Shen 2003/2004: 9–24; Suh 2004: 274–5, 399).

Once the combined forces command was created under Marshall Peng Dehuai, China demanded that a North Korean deputy commander be recruited for better liaison between the two militaries. When a prominent member of the Yan'an Faction, Pak Il-U, was appointed to the post, Kim viewed it as a mounting threat to his power. When Kim transferred Pak to a minor position of the Minister of Post in 1952, Pak allegedly complained, 'how could he demote me to a third-grade minister without Mao Zedong's approval?' (*Bukhan daesajon* 1974: 501; Lee 2000: 193–5).

China, of course, was keen to support the Yan'an Faction to sustain a key channel of communication with North Korea. The Yan'an Faction also sought for political prominence by utilizing the support from China and from Mao in particular. Kim later recollected that 'the perils of toadyism (*sadae juyi*) became severe during the Korean War years and reached an unbearable point after the war' (Suh 2004, Vol. 1: 582). In December 1955, Kim kicked Pak Il-U out of the Korean Workers Party for an anti-party act of factionalism and, in August 1956, the 'Factional Incident' took place by which most members of the Yan'an Faction were purged.

Mao, in coordination with Mikoyan, a Soviet Politburo member, sought to reverse the political tide in Pyongyang. Mao's bid proved unsuccessful, however, as Kim Il Sung gained an upper hand by purging the Yan'an Faction thoroughly (Person 2006, 2008). On 23 April 1956, Kim asserted that Pyongyang would not accept any outside interference with domestic affairs and that all foreign militaries (including the Chinese forces) were to be withdrawn (Mao 1999, Vol. 7: 340–1; Suh 2004: 149). The Factional Incident of 1956 virtually eradicated China's key communication channels with North Korea.

The most daunting challenge for China was then to reestablish channels of communication and information-gathering since China was more eager to sustain good relations with North Korea in the newly emerging context of Sino-Soviet schism. Kim Il Sung, however, remained highly sensitive and cautious in dealing with China. For instance, among seven North Korean ambassadors appointed to China during 1949–1977, none was even remotely connected to the Yan'an Faction. Instead, the Domestic and Manchurian Factions were the key pool for ambassadorial recruitment. Of North Korea's four Ministers of Foreign Affairs for the same period (Pak Houn-Yong, Nam Il, Pak Sung-Chul and Heo Dam), none came from the Yan'an Faction.

Given that China's North Korean connections were largely rooted out after the 1956 Incident and few prominent positions were given to pro-China figures thereafter, China had to make special efforts to keep abreast of North Korean affairs. The watershed was drawn by Zhou Enlai's maiden trip to North Korea in February 1958, just prior to the withdrawal of Chinese military forces. Zhou's visit produced the 'Agreement Concerning Mutual Visits of Leaders between China and North Korea'. The Agreement stipulated that leaders of the two countries (i.e., Mao, Zhou and Kim in particular) would consult and coordinate with each other closely and directly regarding key issues of concern through frequent visits (Liu and Yang 1994, Vol. 2: 942-8; Oh 2004: 26-8; *Zhou Enlai nianpu* 1997, Vol. 2: 127).

Summit diplomacy became a fad in post-Cold War years but it was by no means popular during this early period. Noteworthy is the fact that it took the form of formal agreement between the two states. From Beijing's perspective, the Agreement generated a new channel of communication, consultation and information-gathering with regard to North Korean affairs. On the other hand, Kim Il Sung (and later Kim Jong Il) attained guaranteed accesses to Mao and Zhou (Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao in later years) regarding any issue deemed important enough to require top leaders' attention. Consequently, whenever Kim Il Sung or Kim Jong Il visited China, they often attained the audience of almost all Politburo Standing Committee members during their brief stay. It was not simply an extension of diplomatic courtesy by China but a manifestation of the political tradition built on the official agreement signed in 1958.

While the 1958 Agreement accounts for the frequent visits by top leaders of the two countries and the highest protocol accorded to them, the system nevertheless had embedded problems. First, the absolute prominence of top leaders in managing Sino-North Korean relations meant that formal organizations (most notably the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) was relegated to a mere protocol implementer. It is alleged that the Chinese Embassy in Pyongyang has not been able to perform ordinary intelligence-gathering duties that its counterparts in other countries have routinely carried out. High level officials of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs were rarely granted an audience with Kim Jong Il.

While the International Liaison Department (ILD) under the Central Committee of CCP is known to have been deeply involved in managing North Korean affairs, it does not necessarily mean that ILD is the arena where key decisions were meted out. Given that Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il superseded the Party at will, the Korean Workers Party's International Department could not function properly either. Whenever possible and necessary, therefore, China has insisted on 'sustaining top-level visits and close communication' (*jixu miqie gaoceng wanglai jiaqiang xianghu goutong*) with North Korea (*Renmin ribao*, 6 September 2001 ; *Chosun jungang tongsin*, 28 October 2005). It is alleged that ILD assessed, wrongly,

that Pyongyang would not carry out a nuclear detonation test in 2006 (*Dong-A Ilbo*, 23 June 2007). The situation seems little different for the twenty-first century. At his meeting with Kim Jong Il in May 2010, Hu Jintao stressed the necessity of strengthening ‘strategic communication’ (*zhanlue goutong*) between the two states (*Chosun Ilbo*, 3 May 2010).

The large number of ‘escapees’ from North Korea possess little of the crucial information that the Chinese government really needs. Chinese human intelligence in North Korea does not seem to match the quality of the key intelligence Beijing seeks on Pyongyang’s mindset and policy stances. And China’s exclusive reliance on top-level visits makes one wonder if its status as the monopolizer of intelligence on North Korea is warranted. Consequently, China not only misinterpreted the core motivation of North Korea’s nuclear weapons program; it was also less successful than the Western sources in tracing the illicit activities of North Korea (Chestnut 2007: 80–111; Funabashi 2006: 201–11, 429–32, 650–1).

Have China and North Korea been ‘trusted allies’?

Since 1949 Kim Il Sung had wished to sign alliance treaties with both the Soviet Union and China. The actual timing of the signing, however, was delayed until the summer of 1961 for two reasons. First, Kim was seriously concerned that the signing of an alliance treaty with China would only enhance the power of the Yan’an Faction relative to his own (Nobuo 2004: chapter 4; J. Shen 2003: 48; Wu 1999, Vol. 1: 269–72). Second, while the delay was initially due to Mao’s concern that it might unnecessarily provoke the United States, China’s perception of increased Soviet threat led him to conclude that Beijing should not allow Pyongyang to sign an alliance treaty only with Moscow (Liu and Yang 1994, Vol. 3: 1279–80; Shen 2009: 147–94).

Balancing threat is the most crucial ingredient of any genuine alliance (Snyder 1997; Walt 1987). We argue here that North Korea and China have not been trusted allies because, since the eruption of the Sino–Soviet schism, Beijing and Pyongyang had hardly concurred on their comprehensive threat assessments. By the time the Sino–North Korean alliance treaty was signed in 1961, the seed for a ‘same bed, different dreams’ was already planted. While China’s main adversary in seeking security cooperation with North Korea was the Soviet Union, North Korea’s principal target was unequivocally the United States (J. Shen 2003: 48; Wu 1999, Vol. 1: 510–33; Yang 2002: 1–43). During Liu Shaoqi’s state visit to Pyongyang in September 1963, for instance, China and North Korea failed to produce a joint communiqué despite that it was the first visit by the Chinese President (Liu and Yang 1994, Vol. 4: 1551–74). Unlike China, North Korea was in desperate need of the Soviet Union’s assistance and Pyongyang had to rely on Moscow’s provision of anti-aircraft weapons to deter America’s aerial intrusion (Radchenko 2005: 25–7, 29–30).

The level of complexities involved in North Korea's relations with China and the Soviet Union in the context of Sino-Soviet schism points directly to the fatal weakness – deficit of trust – in Pyongyang's alliance with Beijing. This intricate situation made North Korea pursue two goals simultaneously. One refers to the development of nuclear weapons and delivery technologies on its own, thereby making up for the shortfalls in Pyongyang's alliance relationships (Szalontai and Radchenko 2006: 3–4, 27–8). The other denotes a sort of hedging strategy North Korea adopted toward the Soviet Union and China, which in itself was a testimony that Pyongyang's alliance relationship with China was on a shaky foundation. China often interpreted North Korea's such stance as anti-China in nature.

North Korea's approach to rebuilding alliance ties with China in the midst of the Cultural Revolution was an unconventional one. Instead of conducting summit diplomacy or dispatching high-level envoys, Pyongyang carved out a specialized method – namely, 'adventuristic' provocations. In January 1968, North Korea hijacked an American naval vessel, the *Pueblo*, forcing China to clarify its position on the united front against 'American Imperialists'. Beijing had to make a statement in support of Pyongyang against Washington (Li 2006: 159–60). Again, in April 1969, North Korea shot down an American EC-121 reconnaissance plane. China, again, stood on the side of North Korea (*New York Times*, 16 April 1969; Wang 1999: 36–7). Yet, Mao did not fully endorse Pyongyang's brinkmanship. Since China was then negotiating secretly with the United States on a possible rapprochement, Beijing's action was not based on sincere sympathy toward Pyongyang but a mere gesture to give it a face (Chen 2000: 244; Garver 1993: 113–77).

More importantly, the strategic postures of China and North Korea became increasingly diverged during the 1970s. Whereas, from 1970 on, Mao de-emphasized revolutionary diplomacy as a key component of China's external relations, Kim Il Sung continued to stress the role of China in forcing American forces out and accomplishing a communist revolution on the Korean Peninsula (Yang 2002: 39–40; Zhai 2000: 168–74). In 1971, in an interview with *Asahi Shimbun*, Kim Il Sung commented that 'Regardless of the kind of relationship American imperialists get to establish with China, it is evident that we [North Koreans] cannot have friendly relations with Washington' (Kim 1974, Vol. 6: 109).

Diverging strategic postures of China and North Korea were displayed again in April 1975 when Kim visited Beijing right after the China-supported Khmer Rouge took control of Phnom Penh. Encouraged by what happened in Cambodia, Kim said to Mao that 'This is a golden opportunity to carry out a military reunification in Korea ... and we have to make this great event come true earlier than later' (Kim 1985, Vol. 30: 46–7). While Mao's reply has to date been unknown, Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping allegedly vetoed Kim's request. In four meetings with Kim, Deng

allegedly remarked, 'Unlike Indochina where liberation wars were going on for two decades, armistice is in effect on the Korean Peninsula'. That is to say, the Chinese leadership's preference was to avoid another war and maintain peace and stability on the Peninsula until a suitable political solution could be found (Oh 2004: 56–8). These meetings reconfirmed Kim's earlier perception that China was not a totally reliable ally.

Since the launch of system reforms and nationwide opening in the late 1970s, China has regarded maintaining peace and stability in the region as the utmost priority. Naturally, Kim Il Sung's confrontational strategy became increasingly incompatible with China's preferences. In January 1980, Huang Hua, Foreign Minister of China, commented in his internal speech that:

It is unlikely that the two Koreas will be unified in an immediate future ... We share with the United States and Japan the perspective on the American forces stationed in South Korea. The stability on the Korean Peninsula contributes to the stability of the region as a whole. (Chu 1986: 70–1)

Clearly, this was not in line with North Korea's revolutionary strategy.²

In order to make up for the weakening alliance relationships, North Korea worked on four fronts. First, under the principle of 'self-reliance', Pyongyang made its clandestine yet persistent efforts for the development of nuclear weapons and long-range missiles (Kim 1987, Vol. 4: 122–44; Denisov 2000: 23). Second, North Korea strengthened its diplomacy toward the Third World, which in Pyongyang's view could provide a pool of potential allies against the United States. Third, Pyongyang adopted limited measures of opening (including the enactment of the Joint Venture Law) toward Western Europe and Japan (Harrison 1987: 37–8). Fourth, while securing military and economic assistance from Moscow, North Korea made strenuous efforts to ensure that Pyongyang and Beijing also kept good relations going.

Pyongyang's plans did not work well when it came to sustaining good ties with China. In 1986, North Korea requested that China's Northern Sea Fleet make a port call to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Sino–North Korean Friendship Treaty. But China turned it down, not only because Beijing then had a rapprochement with South Korea in mind but because it also wished to tone down the military nature of the relationship with North Korea. In his meeting with Kim Il Sung in May 1987, Deng Xiaoping commented that:

Every state has to cope with problems on the basis of their own situations. It is impossible to find a uniform position on all issues ... We, of course, support your plans for reunification but it is a *long-term* goal. (*Deng Xiaoping nianpu*, Vol. 2: 1190–1; emphasis added)

An atmosphere of ‘trusted allies’ was nowhere to be found.

Then came the ultimate test for the China–North Korean alliance. While China oftentimes made gestures of accommodating North Korea’s complaints about the Sino–South Korean rapprochement, Pyongyang’s discontent was gradually buried in the midst of fast-growing trade and investment across the Yellow Sea. Furthermore, China’s new ‘friendly neighbor’ (*mulin youhao*) policy adopted after the 1989 Tiananmen tragedy made North Korea’s importance pale relative to China’s new friends in Asia. In August 1992, South Korea and China normalized relations, thereby reaffirming to North Korea that Beijing was acting more for its own interests than for the alliance framework (Chung 2007: chapter 4–6).

A crucial rupture took place in April 1994 when North Korea withdrew from the Armistice Committee at Panmunjom and called for a new peace mechanism between Pyongyang and Washington. This happened without Pyongyang’s prior ‘consultation’ with Beijing. In August 1994 (after Kim Il Sung’s death), North Korea dispatched an envoy to Beijing and demanded that China should also withdraw from the Armistice Committee. At around the same time, North Korea came out of the first nuclear crisis by producing the Agreed Framework with the United States bilaterally and Pyongyang lost no time in discounting the role of China in the process (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea 1998: 141; *Rodong sinmun*, 1 December 1994; Carter and Perry 1999: 127–33).

Interesting is the fact that China has neither abolished nor revised the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance with North Korea, the very legal foundation of the ‘alliance’. Despite some intermittent calls in recent years for its revision in the academic circles of China, Beijing has not yet done so (J. Shen 2003: 57; Wang 2004: 92–4). Three reasons account for the lack of change. First, the Treaty stipulates that it cannot be abrogated unless both parties agree to do so and, for the reasons listed below, China does not want to be the first to propose it. Second, given the high uncertainties surrounding the strategic landscape of Northeast Asia and the future of North Korea, China wishes to retain the treaty as an option poised against the Korea–America alliance (Niu 2009: 116–23). Third, Article 4 of the Treaty stipulates that both parties are obliged to notify and coordinate with each other on key issues. This means that the treaty can also be used as a useful, though not always effective, mechanism of constraining North Korea from carrying out an adventurist act (interviews; Liu and Yang 1994, Vol. 3: 1279–80; Schroeder 1976).

How effective has China been in inducing North Korea?

The international academic community is divided over how effective China has been in pressing North Korea over the years, say, on the nuclear question. One school of thought contends that China’s leverage is inherently limited and has in fact varied over different issues (Cai 2006: 55–61; Chung

2004: 1–18; International Crisis Group 2006; Snyder 2009: 130–2, 157–8). For historical, geopolitical and economic reasons, China is well positioned to wield influence over North Korea and Pyongyang's fast-growing economic dependence on China further highlights the leverage Beijing may possess (Cha and Kang 2003: 23; Noland 2007). Yet, this school is of the opinion that economic dependence is not readily or automatically translated into China's actual influence or leverage over North Korea in other issue areas.

Another school of thought argues that China's goals have been drastically transformed in the post-Mao era, so that both Beijing and Pyongyang are keenly aware of the different levels of support that one can provide for the other. This in itself illustrates the limited scope of leverage China currently has over North Korea. It is also suggested that, given Pyongyang's unusual sensitivity to outside interference, once China wields influence over North Korea explicitly, Sino–North Korean relations will be transformed so much as to reduce Beijing's long-term leverage over Pyongyang once and for all. China's preoccupation with a stable regional environment may also work as a key constraint on employing drastic measures against North Korea (International Crisis Group 2006: 8, 10–11; Scobell 2004; Wang 2005: 265–75; You 2001: 387–98).

Yet another school contends that asking how much influence China actually possesses over North Korea is a non-starter, since North Korea was precisely following the footsteps of China in developing nuclear weapons and long-range missiles in a self-reliant manner (Chang 2006; Chung 2010; General Armament Department of the People's Liberation Army 2001). That is, Beijing does not stand on higher moral grounds over Pyongyang as far as the issue of nuclearization is concerned. Hence, there is little leverage over North Korea.

Much of this debate is perhaps missing the point. It appears that gauging the level of influence China actually has over North Korea should be based on a test that goes beyond the nuclear question, which is a small, though important, portion of the larger game of how big a role North Korea has been willing to assign to China. Viewed in this vein, a better analytical alternative is to trace North Korea's responses to China's proposals on the mode of managing Korean affairs.

The case of multi-party consultative frameworks

While China has long regarded the Korean Peninsula as its sphere of strategic interest, it had not expressed manifest intentions of involvement in Korean affairs due to the lingering residues of the 1956 Factional Incident. Yet, by the early 1970s, it became evident that China wished to bring in the United States to prepare a platform for co-managing the Korean Peninsula (Oberdorfer 1997: 144–7). Whereas Beijing encouraged Pyongyang to improve relations with Seoul, North Korea more often than not preferred

the path of seeking rapprochement directly with the United States. In contrast, Washington insisted on including Seoul as a formal party in any multilateral framework on one hand and proposed cross-recognition on the other, whereby Seoul was to normalize relations with Beijing and Moscow and Pyongyang with Washington and Tokyo. Expectedly, North Korea rejected the cross-recognition option and criticized it as a conspiracy to perpetuate two Koreas permanently (National Agency for Security Planning of the ROK 1985: 38–45).

The Carter Administration (1977–1980) proposed a three-party formula among the United States, South Korea and North Korea. Pyongyang rejected the scheme as it was not willing to accept Seoul as an eligible party to the negotiation. However, via Xiao Xiangqian, a minister at the Chinese Embassy in Tokyo, China expressed in April 1978 that it did not object to the three-party framework (National Agency for Security Planning of the ROK 1985: 58). It was the first time that China had ever insinuated that South Korea could be a party to the negotiations on Korean affairs, despite the fact that Seoul was not a formal signatory to the armistice agreement. In his meeting with Kim Il Sung in 1978, Hua Guofeng, President of China, commented that ‘consultative meetings on Korean affairs need to take into consideration wishes of the South Korean people’ (Oh 2004: 65–7). Yet, Pyongyang made it clear that it objected to the idea of three-party talks that included South Korea. North Korea even used ‘dominationism’ (*jibae juyi*) to criticize China’s policy toward the Peninsula (The Central Committee of the Korean Workers Party 1979: 501).

By the early 1980s, China assigned to itself the role of a ‘mediator’ on Korean affairs. According to Ambassador Charles W. Freeman, the post-Mao leadership under Deng regarded peace and stability as the common interest shared between China and the United States (Tucker 2001: 429–30). In September 1983, in a meeting with Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, Deng commented that ‘China must cooperate with the United States to mitigate tension on the Peninsula’ (*Deng Xiaoping nianpu*, Vol. 2: 937). Deng is also alleged to have remarked at the same meeting that:

If North Korea should prove to be the attacker in a future conflict on the Peninsula, China will not get involved to support it. If South Korea should be responsible and China must support the North, Beijing would seek consultation with Washington. (Oh 2004: 96)

Deng went further to propose hosting a three-party talk in Beijing and China passed to Pyongyang a United States proposal that included three-party talks as a condition for improving ties with North Korea (Tucker 2001: 429–432).

Neither was Pyongyang willing to accept Seoul as a formal player; nor did it want to see Beijing’s leverage expand over the Korean Peninsula.

What North Korea did, therefore, was to execute a contradictory plot to spoil China's plan. On the one hand, North Korea relayed its acceptance of the three-party formula through China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 8 October 1983. On the other hand, the very next day, it carried out a bombing campaign against President Chun Doo Hwan and his entourage in Rangoon, Burma. Cold water was thus thrown on inter-Korean rapprochement and little room was left for China as the mediator. According to Ambassador Freeman, Chinese officials were infuriated with the bombing, so meticulously planned by North Korea (Downs 1999: 162–4; National Agency for Security Planning of the ROK 1985: 63; Tucker 2001: 431, 533). Beijing, once again, failed to induce Pyongyang to follow its initiative.

During the 1990s, North Korea was in serious trouble on various fronts. Washington and Seoul were in agreement to engage and help Pyongyang to soft-land. With the working assumption that China's leverage over the now impoverished North Korea was immense, the United States and South Korea concurred that Beijing must be included in any workable solution to the Peninsula problem (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the ROK 1998: 145; Yi 1995: 119–40). It was against this backdrop that Washington and Seoul proposed a new formula of four-party talks in April 1996.

Knowing too well that Pyongyang had been unwilling to recognize South Korea as a formal partner for dialogue, China initially did not accept the proposal. Nor did China buy the so-called 'two plus zero' option (i.e., Pyongyang–Washington deals), which it regarded as unreasonable and unrealistic (McVadon 1999: 289). China was concerned that it might lose its clout over the Peninsula affairs if it were to refuse the proposal by Washington and Seoul. Subsequently, China provided a wide range of support and aid to induce North Korea to accept the four-party formula. China's provision of incentives included the signing of a five-year aid-in-goods agreement, the supply of military goods worth \$3.5 million (247% up from the previous year), the dispatch of China's Northern Sea Fleet to Nampo in commemoration of the 35th anniversary of the Sino–DPRK Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance, and the provision of 100,000 tons of grain (The Policy Research Bureau of the Foreign Ministry 1997: 907; *Yonhap News*, 18 July and 2 October 1996; *Xinhua*, 11 July 1996).

Despite three preliminary gatherings and six main meetings, the four-party talks failed to mete out binding agreements on the Korean question. The core reason lay in the fact that Pyongyang did not wish to assign a key role to China in managing Peninsula affairs. North Korea insisted that 'under no circumstances, the four-party formula is to become a platform for the resolution of problems among the Korean people' (Korean Central News Agency, 11 August 1997). Due to North Korea's reservation, all meetings of the four-party formula ended up taking place in Geneva, in spite of China's expressed preference for hosting special small-group meetings in Beijing (Korean Central News Agency, 4 November 1997). The launch of Daepodong missiles in 1998 resulted in a sudden inactivation

of the four-party formula, and Beijing's failure to induce Pyongyang was evident even before that.

What about the six-party formula of the 2000s? Unlike Southeast and Central Asia where such prominent multilateral frameworks as ASEAN plus China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) are in place, Northeast Asia lacked an equivalent until 2003 when Beijing hosted the Six-Party Talks on the North Korean nuclear problem. Some dubbed it as the 'Beijing Six', indicating wishful thinking on the part of China in establishing a China-centered regional security architecture like SCO in Northeast Asia.³ Despite the dire difficulties of multilateral coordination, China took the six-party formula and its role as the chair very seriously.

Since Pyongyang has wished to utilize its nuclear weapons program as a bargaining chip (at the least) in improving ties with Washington, Beijing's multilateral design of the Six-Party Talks was not well received by North Korea (Funabashi 2006: 455–60). From North Korea's viewpoint, China's role shifted from an honest broker to that of 'collaborator' with the US on pressing Pyongyang during the second term of George W. Bush. For instance, China's role was crucial in meting out the September 19 Joint Communiqué of 2005 (Christensen 2005: 2–6; Glaser and Wang 2008: 165–80; Lin 2006: 32–8; Wu 2005: 35–48). In October 2006, North Korea turned the table by undertaking a nuclear test, to the extreme displeasure of China. Having conducted the second nuclear test in May 2009, North Korea once again expressed that more remained to be done directly between Washington and Pyongyang. It was clear that North Korea was resisting China's active role in managing Peninsula affairs, Pyongyang's participation in the Six-Party Talks notwithstanding. Zhang Liangui, a Chinese scholar from the Central Party School, summarizes North Korea's purpose in the Six-Party Talks as 'putting China aside' (*paichi zhongguo*) (Zhang 2010: 43).

On some numbers

The overall assessment of the Six-Party formula cannot be all that positive since it has thus far failed to accomplish the principal objective: preventing North Korea from developing nuclear weapons and related technologies. An important question remains: why did North Korea take part in the framework after all? The most common answer is: Pyongyang needed economic assistance and food provision from China in exchange for participating in the Six-Party formula, which it did not prefer. Do the records substantiate this claim? If so, what can we infer from that concerning North Korea's relations with China?

For the eight-year period of March 2003 through August 2011, China's top leaders or high-level envoys are known to have had audience with Kim Jong Il on at least 23 occasions. Of these 23, only eight meetings with Kim Jong Il produced an immediate effect on the convening of Three- or Six-Party meetings within two months (see Table 1 below). This 'influence rate' of 36% is by no means strong or conclusive evidence as to China's

Table 1 China's inducement and the convening of the Six-Party talks, 2003–2009

Date	Visitor	Receiver	Outcome
8–9 March 2003 ^a	Qian Qichen	Kim Jong Il	Three-Party talks
19–20 August 2003 ^b	Xu Caihou	Kim Jong Il	1st Six-Party talks
30 October 2003 ^c	Wu Banguo	Kim Jong Il	None
19 January 2004 ^d	Wang Jiarui	Kim Jong Il	2nd Six-Party talks
23–25 March 2004 ^e	Li Zhaoxing	Kim Jong Il	None
19–21 April 2004 ^f	Kim Jong Il	Hu Jintao	3rd Six-Party talks
19 February 2005 ^g	Wang Jiarui	Kim Jong Il	None
12–14 July 2005 ^h	Tang Jiaxuan	Kim Jong Il	4th Six-Party talks (#1)
8 October 2005 ⁱ	Wu Yi	Kim Jong Il	None
28–30 October 2005 ^j	Hu Jintao	Kim Jong Il	4th Six-Party talks (#2)
10–18 January 2006 ^k	Kim Jong Il	Hu Jintao	None
18–19 October 2006 ^l	Tang Jiaxuan	Kim Jong Il	5th Six-Party talks
2–4 July 2007 ^m	Yang Jiechi	Kim Jong Il	6th Six-Party talks
29 January 2008 ⁿ	Wang Jiarui	Kim Jong Il	None
17–19 June 2008 ^o	Xi Jinping	Kim Jong Il	None
22–24 January 2009 ^p	Wang Jiarui	Kim Jong Il	None
17–19 September 2009 ^q	Dai Bingguo	Kim Jong Il	None
4–6 October 2009 ^r	Wen Jiabao	Kim Jong Il	None
7–9 February 2010 ^s	Wang Jiarui	Kim Jong Il	None
3–7 May 2010 ^t	Kim Jong Il	Hu Jintao	None
26–30 August 2010	Kim Jong Il	Hu Jintao	None
23–26 May 2011	Kim Jong Il	Hu Jintao	None
25–27 August 2011	Kim Jong Il	Dai Bingguo	None

Sources: (a) *Chosun Ilbo* (Chosun Daily), 13 November 2003; (b) *Joong-ang Ilbo* (Joong-ang Daily), 23 August 2003; (c) 'Regular press conference', Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), accessed at <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw/s2510/2511>, 30 October 2003; (d) 'Regular press conference', Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), accessed at <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw/s2510/2511>, 9 January 2004; (e) 'Regular press conference', Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), accessed at <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw/s2510/2511>, 23 March 2004; (f) Department of International Liaison of the Central Committee of the CCP, accessed at <http://www.idcpc.org.cn/duiwai/niandugaikuang/2004/040421-1.htm>; (g) 'Regular press conference', Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), accessed at <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw/s2510/2511>, 19 February 2005; (h) 'Regular press conference', Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), accessed at <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw/s2510/2511>, 14 July 2005; (i) *Chosun Ilbo*, 9 October 2005; (j) Department of International Liaison of the Central Committee of the CCP, accessed at <http://www.idcpc.org.cn/duiwai/niandugaikuang/2005/051028-2.htm>; (k) Xinhua News Agency, 18 January 2006; (l) 'Regular press conference', Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), accessed at <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw/s2510/2511>, 18 October 2006; (m) 'Regular press conference', Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), accessed at <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw/s2510/2511>, 3 July 2007; (n) Department of International Liaison of the Central Committee of the CCP, accessed at <http://www.idcpc.org.cn/duiwai/niandugaikuang/2008/080129-1.htm>; (o) Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), accessed at <http://fmprc.gov.cn/chn/gxh/tyb/zyxw/t466341.htm> and *Chosun Ilbo*, 5 February 2009; (p) <http://www.idcpc.org.cn/dongtai/090123.htm>; (q) <http://fmprc.gov.cn/chn/gxh/tyb/zyxw/t585254.htm>; (r) <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/chn/gxh/tyb/zyxw/t618473.htm>; (s) <http://www.idcpc.org.cn/dongtai/100209.htm>; (t) <http://www.idcpc.org.cn/dongtai/100507.htm>.

leverage over North Korea, with or without economic assistance. It may be the case that Pyongyang has steered its own course of nuclearization in spite of occasional gestures of cooperating with China and the United States. Whether the lowered 'influence rate' of 10% since 2007 (as opposed

to 58% for 2003–2006) is an indicator of North Korea's growing confidence in its nuclear capabilities remains to be further substantiated.⁴ At least one thing is clear: the frequency of Six-Party meetings declined sharply from six during 2003–2006 to only one during 2007–2011, pointing in part to a corresponding decline in China's leverage over North Korea (Ye 2010: 41–2).⁵

What do we make out of all these?

Geostrategically speaking, China can hardly afford to put North Korea (or the Korean Peninsula) in an adversarial position. History is a powerful testimony to this view, as demonstrated by China's entanglements in the wars against Japan during the sixteenth and, again, in the nineteenth century, as well as in the war against the US during the 1950s. The complex equation regarding the future of Sino–American relations further underscores China's imperative of not antagonizing North Korea. This geostrategic consideration has been the very source of Beijing's dilemma in consistently opting for 'soft' measures against Pyongyang despite that North Korea's nuclear weapons programs and other military provocations have negatively affected China's interests (*Global Times*, 13 May 2010).

The mainstream Chinese view is that North Korea's nuclear efforts have damaged China's interests in the following six areas: (1) introducing a new source of instability to Northeast Asia; (2) setting off military confrontation between the US and North Korea, thereby putting China in a potential dilemma situation; (3) giving Japan a justifiable cause for military build-up; (4) generating regional domino effects of nuclear proliferation; (5) causing environmental hazards (i.e., radioactive) to the Northeast region; and (6) posing direct security threat to China (interviews in Beijing in 2007 and 2008).

Added to the equation is North Korea's strategic suspicion of China. North Korea has persistently guarded against China's efforts to gain influence over its domestic politics and Peninsula affairs. The 1956 Factional Incident reaffirmed North Korea's suspicion and residues of it still linger on, making it difficult for Pyongyang and Beijing to recover full trust of each other.⁶ During his state visit to North Korea in October 2005, Hu Jintao presented an 18-character tenet on Sino–North Korean relations: 'consolidating traditional friendly ties' (*gonggu chuantong youyi*), 'strengthening mutual trust' (*jiaqiang xianghu xinren*) and 'expanding cooperation on the basis of reciprocity' (*kuoda huli hezuo*). North Korea's official announcement at the time failed to echo the second and third clauses (*Renmin ribao*, 31 October 2005; Korean Central News Agency, 28 October 2005).

It would be misleading to put Sino–North Korean dynamics in the category of conventional big power–small nation relations where asymmetry generally works against the latter. North Korea has been an atypical 'small nation' as she knows exactly how to take advantage of her geostrategic importance, as well as how to walk the tightrope between two competing great

powers. That is why Pyongyang would not hesitate to get on great powers' nerves and carry out adventuristic plots without getting punished (Handel 1981: 41–7; Lindell and Persson 1986: 81–3; Keohane 1971: 162–3).⁷

Beijing's repeated failures to induce Pyongyang to comply with the three-, four- and, to a considerable extent, six-party frameworks are illustrative of this interesting yet underexplored balance of power between these two uncomfortable neighbors. While China intermittently let off steam by calling North Korea 'brazen' or shutting off the oil supply for a few days, Pyongyang knows too well that Beijing's real options are limited, unless the latter is determined to turn Sino–North Korean relations into completely different dynamics. After all, North Korea is taking the same path of self-reliant nuclearization as that of China's from the 1950s through the 1970s. In a nutshell, China and North Korea have maximized their respective interests while making the best out of such rhetoric as communism, friendship and camaraderie.

In the 2007 edition of *China's Foreign Affairs* compiled annually by the Policy Research Bureau of China's Foreign Ministry, Beijing's official relations with Pyongyang were branded as a 'friendly neighbor relationship' (*mulin youhao guanxi*). Compared to the previous editions where the bilateral relationship had been consistently labeled as 'traditionally amicable relations' (*chuantong youhao guanxi*), China's grudges against North Korea's nuclear test in 2006 were clearly discernible (*Zhongguo waijiao 2007*: 100; *Zhongguo waijiao 2008*: 83). Yet, the later editions of *China's Foreign Affairs* re-employs the term 'traditionally amicable relations' as if nothing happened. Anecdotal as it may be, this cycle highlights the inherent limitations China has in pressuring North Korea. The upcoming drama of Sino–American rivalry is most likely to close the window of opportunity for China to break that cycle. Hence, the cycle will continue, to the frustration of many. One thing is clear, though: down the road, North Korea will be more of a strategic liability and uncomfortable neighbor than trusted ally.

Notes

- 1 These are hereafter cited as *China Survey 2004* (on 30 Chinese international relations experts) and *China Survey 2007* (on 38 experts).
- 2 At the Sixth Party Congress in 1980, Kim Il Sung criticized China for 'selling out revolutionary ideals', despite that Li Xiannian, Chinese President, was present at the event (Suh 2004, Vol. 1: 523, 538; Liu and Yang 1994, Vol. 5: 2484).
- 3 Interviews in Beijing in 2004 and 2005. Thirty-seven (97%) of the 38 experts surveyed by the author wanted to see the Six-Party Talks evolve into Northeast Asia's security architecture. *China Survey 2007* (Q-B-15).
- 4 In the expert surveys conducted in 2007, 47% (18 out of 38) were pessimistic about preventing North Korea's nuclear ambitions. *China Survey 2007* (Q-D-2).
- 5 The decrease of the influence rate from 58 to 10% cannot be attributed wholly to the decline of China's influence over North Korea since the Six-Party Talks have other actors as well. Nevertheless, the decrease is significant enough to suggest an interesting change in dynamics between Beijing and Pyongyang since 2006.

- 6 Even in 2011, Hong Seok-hyong, secretary in charge of economic affairs, was purged allegedly for ‘colluding with China’. See *Chosun Ilbo*, 6 October 2011.
- 7 In this vein, a remark by Hwang Chang-Yop, formerly North Korea’s party secretary in charge of international affairs and later defector to South Korea, shed important light: ‘People tend to view North Korea’s relations with China in a simple big country–small nation relationship. Yet, North Korea is not a mere small nation and Beijing understands too well the spirit and audacity that North Koreans have in managing international affairs’ (author’s interview, 2006).

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