

## SECTION 2: RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN CHINA'S RELATIONSHIP WITH NORTH KOREA

### Introduction

This section examines China's relationship with North Korea and assesses how China's approach to relations with North Korea is shifting in light of Pyongyang's continued destabilizing behavior. It concludes with a discussion of how the evolving China-North Korea relationship impacts the United States.\* The statements and assessments presented here are based on the Commission's June 2014 hearing on China-North Korea relations, briefings by government and nongovernmental experts on China-North Korea relations, the Commission's fact-finding trip to South Korea, and open-source research and analysis.

### Overview of China-North Korea Relations

China and North Korea fought alongside each other in the Korean War and have shared a Treaty of Friendship, Co-operation and Mutual Assistance since 1961.† Each is the other's only treaty ally, and their relationship is founded on wartime camaraderie, decades of communist party ties, proximity, and a shared resentment of the West, among other factors. Mao Zedong famously said that China and North Korea are "closer than lips and teeth," and both countries for decades have perpetuated that image.

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\*For a more comprehensive examination of China-North Korea relations, see U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2013 Annual Report to Congress*, November 2013, pp. 228–229; and U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2011 Annual Report to Congress*, November 2011, pp. 241–252.

†Among other assurances, the treaty provides that "the Contracting Parties undertake jointly to adopt all measures to prevent aggression against either of the Contracting Parties by any state. In the event of one of the Contracting Parties being subjected to the armed attack by any state or several states jointly and thus being involved in a state of war, the other Contracting Party shall immediately render military and other assistance by all means at its disposal." Treaty of Friendship, Co-operation and Mutual Assistance between the People's Republic of China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, July 11, 1961.

**Figure 1: Korean Peninsula Map**

Source: Ian McGibbon, 'Asian Conflicts-Korean War,' Te Ara—The Encyclopedia of New Zealand, updated 16-Nov-12. <http://TeAra.govt.nz/en/map/34516/korean-peninsula-showing-the-38th-parallel>.

China's support for North Korea is multifaceted. On the economic front, China provides vital food and energy aid to North Korea, promotes investment, and funds and develops joint special economic zones. China generally seeks to use this economic engagement as a way to enhance stability in North Korea.<sup>1</sup> On the diplomatic front, China uses its position on the United Nations (UN) Security Council to shield North Korea from international condemnation and to blunt the impact of sanctions.<sup>2</sup> In addition, China has sold military and dual-use materials associated with ballistic missiles to North Korea, though it is unclear whether this support continues today.\* China has provided jet fuel and small arms to North Korea as well.<sup>3</sup> China's failure to fully enforce UN sanctions on North

\*Most recently, in 2012, North Korea displayed transport-erector-launchers for its new KN-08 ballistic missile affixed to vehicles imported from China. The Chinese government claimed the vehicles were lumber transporters exported to North Korea in 2011 for agricultural use and stated the sale did not violate sanctions or Chinese law. The U.S. Department of State also understands the sale to be of a civilian, not military, nature. However, the UN Panel of Experts tasked with investigating sanctions enforcement against North Korea noted in a 2013 report that "the particulars of the transaction remain unclear and the Panel will continue its investigations." United Nations Security Council, *Report of the Panel of Experts Established Pursuant to Resolution 1874 (2009)*, June 11, 2013, p. 27. [http://www.un.org/iga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/2013/337](http://www.un.org/iga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2013/337); Associated Press, "China Denies Exporting North Korean Missile Launch Vehicles," June 13, 2012. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jun/13/china-north-korea-missile-vehicles>. Some analysts remain skeptical of China's claim that the vehicles were truly intended for civilian use. For example, see Mark Hibbs, "China and the POE DPRK Report," *Arms Control Wonk* (Blog), July 2, 2012. <http://hibbs.armscontrolwonk.com/archive/879/china-and-the-poe-dprk-report>; and Jeffrey Lewis, "That Ain't My Truck: Where North Korea Assembled Its Chinese Transporter-Erector-Launchers," 38 North, February 3, 2014. <http://38north.org/2014/02/jlewis020314/>.

Korea has also enabled the North's military modernization, including its ballistic missile programs.<sup>4</sup>

China's support for North Korea belies the true nature of Sino-North Korean relations, which can be described as a "mutual hostage" situation in which North Korea depends on Chinese economic, political, and security assistance for regime survival and China depends on North Korea to provide a strategic buffer between itself and U.S.-allied South Korea.<sup>5</sup> This mutual dependence causes resentment on both sides. North Korea resents its near-total dependence on China, and perceives Beijing as high-handed and condescending.<sup>6</sup> It also distrusts China, which it feels has abandoned its Marxist-Leninist principles and has become politically and morally corrupted by capitalism and its relations with South Korea and the United States.<sup>7</sup> For its part, Beijing resents Pyongyang's continued provocations, which it fears will destabilize and raise the risk of conflict in the region; drive South Korea and the United States to strengthen their alliance and military capabilities, which also could be used to threaten China; and prompt the international community to criticize China for its role as Pyongyang's primary supporter.<sup>8</sup>

The following pages chronicle the deterioration of Sino-North Korean ties in recent years, but conclude that in spite of the growing risks North Korea poses to China's interests, China still supports—and likely will continue to support—its neighbor. China's anxiety over the United States is the primary driver of this seemingly counterintuitive policy. Beijing sees U.S. military power on the Korean Peninsula as a threat to its security environment and, as such, relies on and seeks to bolster the North Korean buffer to ensure U.S. troops remain below the 38th parallel.

### **China-North Korea Relations Deteriorate**

According to several subject matter experts consulted by the Commission during its hearing and trip to Seoul, South Korea, Sino-North Korean relations have become increasingly tense since late 2012. High levels of distrust and frustration now characterize the relationship, particularly on the Chinese side.<sup>9</sup>

### ***North Korea Tests Long-Range Missile Capability and Conducts its Third Nuclear Test***

Sino-North Korean ties began to deteriorate after North Korea's December 2012 rocket launch, which put the country's first satellite into orbit. Although Pyongyang insisted the launch was part of a peaceful civilian space program, the international community viewed it as a thinly-veiled attempt to test the North's long-range ballistic missile capability, and the UN Security Council condemned the launch as a violation of resolutions prohibiting North Korea from using ballistic missile technology in space launches.<sup>10</sup> A few months later, in February 2013, North Korea conducted its third nuclear test, also in violation of UN resolutions.<sup>11</sup> Much to China's frustration, both the rocket launch and the nuclear test took place during China's sensitive leadership transition and de-

spite Beijing's repeated warnings to Pyongyang against such provocations.\*<sup>12</sup>

Beijing's diplomatic response to North Korea's 2013 nuclear test was swift but limited, as it stopped short of taking serious economic and political actions against Pyongyang. China issued several strongly worded statements opposing the nuclear test, summoned North Korea's ambassador to China, and cooperated with the United States and other UN Security Council members to craft and pass Security Council Resolution 2094, which "strengthen[s] and expand[s] the scope of United Nations sanctions against [North Korea] by targeting the illicit activities of diplomatic personnel, transfers of bulk cash, and the country's banking relationships, in response to that country's third nuclear test."<sup>13</sup> Although China took some steps to enforce the new sanctions (see below), China's efforts in crafting and passing Resolution 2094 likely were meant more to send a signal of disapproval to Pyongyang than be a punitive measure.<sup>14</sup>

### ***Kim Jong-un Purges and Executes Jang Song-taek***

In December 2013, relations soured further when North Korean leader Kim Jong-un purged and executed Jang Song-taek, his uncle and then second-most powerful official in North Korea. According to North Korean official media, Mr. Jang's crimes included selling "precious underground resources at random" and "committing such an act of treachery . . . as selling off the land of the Rason economic and trade zone to a foreign country."<sup>15</sup> These allegations were barely-veiled references to Mr. Jang's dealings with China, which imports North Korean resources and shares the Rason special economic zone with North Korea.

Beijing was stunned and upset by Mr. Jang's execution, according to several subject matter experts and U.S. and South Korean government officials consulted by the Commission.<sup>16</sup> Mr. Jang had been Beijing's main interlocutor in Pyongyang and was known for his role in promoting bilateral economic projects. Sue Mi Terry, senior research scholar at the Weatherhead East Asian Institute at Columbia University, testified to the Commission that Mr. Jang "was a man that Chinese leaders had gotten used to dealing with."<sup>17</sup> Chinese officials sought to quickly reestablish normalcy in the relationship following Mr. Jang's execution, according to Daniel Pinkston, deputy project director for Northeast Asia at the International Crisis Group, who met with the Commission in Seoul.†

\*Among North Korea's other destabilizing actions in 2013 were its decision to temporarily shut down the Kaesong Industrial Complex, an industrial zone in the North shared and jointly managed by North Korea and South Korea, and its frequent and belligerent official statements threatening the United States and South Korea. *Fire on the City Gate: Why China Keeps North Korea Close* (International Crisis Group, December 9, 2013), pp. 3-4. <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/north-east-asia/254-fire-on-the-city-gate-why-china-keeps-north-korea-close.pdf>.

† In recent years, Beijing increasingly has sought to conduct its relationship with North Korea through official diplomatic channels, a departure from a long history of relations conducted primarily via party-to-party ties. China's loss of its connection to the North via Mr. Jang probably reinforced to China's top policymakers the need for more institutionalized and formal state-to-state ties. U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *Hearing on Recent Developments in China's Relations with Taiwan and North Korea*, written testimony of Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt, June 5, 2014; Yonhap News Agency, "(LEAD) China's Relations with North Korea Have Normalized: U.S. Expert," May 22, 2014. <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/northkorea/2014/05/22/93/0401000000AEN20140522006100315F.html>.

### ***North Korea Conducts Missile Tests***

A review of open-source reporting suggests North Korea fired more than 100 projectiles over the course of at least 18 missile tests in 2014.<sup>18</sup> According to the South Korean Ministry of National Defense, at least ten of these tests used ballistic missile technology,<sup>19</sup> violating UN resolutions against the use of ballistic missile technology in North Korean launches. The UN Security Council—which includes China—condemned two of the launches.<sup>20</sup> The Chinese government responded to each of the missile tests with the same basic formulation, along the lines of: “We hope all parties make efforts to reduce tension and safeguard peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula.”<sup>21</sup>

North Korea carried out some of these tests without prior warning, contravening international norms for safety of navigation. In one instance, the South Korean government reported that four tactical ballistic missiles test-fired by North Korea in March passed above airspace traversed by a China Southern Airlines passenger aircraft seven minutes later.<sup>22</sup> Regarding this incident, a Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson stated, “Countries, while conducting military trainings or exercises, should adopt necessary measures in accordance with international conventions to ensure the safety of civil aircrafts and vessels in relevant airspaces and waters.”\*<sup>23</sup>

### ***China Strengthens Ties with South Korea***

The warming of ties between China and South Korea since mid-2013 is both an indication of and a response to deteriorating Sino-North Korean relations.† Beijing’s public and high-profile efforts to advance relations with Seoul suggest Chinese leaders are becoming increasingly unhappy with China’s relationship with North Korea and wish to communicate as much to Pyongyang, Seoul, and the world.

Relations between Beijing and Seoul have significantly improved since South Korean President Park Geun-hye traveled to China for a state visit in June 2013. Her visit culminated in an ambitious joint statement announcing several initiatives to strengthen bilateral security and economic cooperation, including a high-level hot-

\*The United States and several other countries in July 2014 issued a letter to the International Civil Aviation Organization, a UN body that develops standards and recommended practices for international civil aviation, expressing concern that North Korea’s failure to issue prior notification of its missile launches poses a “serious threat” to international aviation safety. North Korea in the past notified the International Civil Aviation Organization of some launches. Agence France-Presse, “U.S. Warns of Aviation Risk from N. Korea Rockets,” July 16, 2014. <http://news.yahoo.com/us-warns-aviation-risk-n-korea-rockets-210129436.html>.

† Warming Sino-South Korean relations are not merely a reflection of the Sino-North Korean relationship. China’s more friendly approach to relations with South Korea also is motivated by China’s desire to alienate Japan, with which it is embroiled in a contentious territorial dispute. Policy experts who met with the Commission at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies in Seoul assessed that Beijing seeks to take advantage of an ongoing rift in the Japan-South Korea relationship to drive a wedge between Seoul and Tokyo. For example, Beijing implored Seoul to join it in criticizing Tokyo in 2013 when several high-level Japanese officials visited the Yasukuni Shrine, a site controversial for its commemoration of several war criminals implicated in wartime atrocities against Chinese and South Koreans. For an in-depth discussion of the China-South Korea-Japan triangular relationship, see Chapter 3, Section 1, “China and Asia’s Evolving Security Architecture.” See also Andrew Browne, “South Korea-Japan Rift on Exhibit in China,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 5, 2014. <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304815004579418653837738902>; and Robert E. Kelly, “The Complex China-South Korea Relationship,” *Diplomat*, June 18, 2014. <http://thediplomat.com/2014/06/the-complex-china-south-korea-relationship/>.

line between South Korea's chief of national security and China's state councilor for foreign affairs, and a semiannual bilateral strategic dialogue between the two countries' vice foreign ministers.<sup>24</sup> The visit also laid the groundwork for several follow-up meetings between officials from both countries.<sup>25</sup>

From July 3–4, 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping reciprocated President Park's 2013 visit with a trip to Seoul, marking the first time a sitting Chinese president had ever visited South Korea before North Korea. The joint statement from the visit declared, "The two countries reaffirm their firm opposition to the development of nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula." President Park stated she and President Xi agreed that "denuclearization of North Korea must be achieved at all costs."<sup>26</sup> Pyongyang expressed its displeasure with President Xi's trip to Seoul by conducting several missile tests in the weeks leading up to the visit,<sup>27</sup> and North Korea's National Defense Commission asserted, "Some backbone-lacking countries are blindly following the stinky bottom of the U.S., also struggling to embrace Park Geun-hye."<sup>28</sup> The "backbone-lacking country" referenced almost certainly is China.

North Korea has been and remains a central focus of the China-South Korea relationship. North Korea likely was a prominent issue on the agenda for the July 2014 summit meeting between Presidents Xi and Park,<sup>29</sup> and U.S. officials told the Commission that a telephone call between Presidents Xi and Park in the run-up to the summit featured coordination on denuclearizing North Korea. Official communication about North Korea is supplemented by informal engagements and dialogues. For example, U.S. government officials in Seoul told the Commission that former Chinese People's Liberation Army leaders and retired Chinese government officials are increasingly willing and able to meet with their South Korean counterparts to discuss North Korea.

Assuming China-South Korea relations continue to warm, China's influence and leverage over South Korea will grow. According to South Korean government officials with whom the Commission met in Seoul, Beijing seeks to use this leverage to pressure Seoul to abandon its alliance with the United States. Andrei Lankov, associate professor of social science at Kookmin University in Seoul and an expert on Sino-North Korean relations, told the Commission that Beijing thinks time is on its side and expects its influence over Seoul (and Pyongyang) will grow in the future, which will better position China to affect outcomes on the Peninsula. He noted it is highly likely that China intends to use its growing influence over Seoul to apply pressure on the U.S.-South Korea alliance in order to negotiate a diminished U.S. presence on the Peninsula.

### ***High-Level Contacts between China and North Korea Decrease***

In stark contrast to the China-South Korea bilateral relationship, high-level contacts between China and North Korea in 2014 have been conspicuously limited.<sup>30</sup> According to open-source reporting, only seven high-level exchanges have occurred between the two countries since 2013, compared to 30 such meetings during the pre-

vious two years.\*<sup>31</sup> Moreover, President Xi has not met with Kim Jong-un. By comparison, he has met with President Park five times since 2013.<sup>32</sup>

### ***North Korea Reaches Out to Russia and Others***

Just as China has strengthened ties with South Korea, North Korea has been reaching out to other countries, suggesting it too is dissatisfied with its relationship with China.

In 2013 and 2014, North Korea bolstered economic ties with Russia in particular:

- In September 2013, state-owned Russian Railways and the North Korean Ministry of Railways completed repairs on North Korea's Rajin Port and on a railroad from Siberia to the port. In early 2014, Russia began using the reopened port as a transshipment hub for coal exports destined for China.<sup>33</sup>
- In April 2014, the Russian parliament agreed to forgive 90 percent (close to \$10 billion) of North Korea's debt to Russia.<sup>34</sup>
- During a high-level Russian delegation to Pyongyang in April 2014, the two countries signed an agreement on bilateral trade and economic cooperation and Russia donated an unspecified number of fire engines to North Korea.<sup>35</sup>
- In June 2014, North Korea reportedly announced plans to simplify visa requirements and provide Internet access and mobile services for Russian investors and businesspeople working in North Korea.<sup>36</sup>
- In June 2014, Russian officials appeared to revive a long-standing and ambitious plan to extend the Trans-Siberian Railroad through both North and South Korea.<sup>†</sup>
- North Korea in 2014 imported greater amounts of Russian crude oil than in previous years, and according to open-source research conducted by NK News, North Korean oil tankers in 2014 visited Russian ports more often than Chinese ports.<sup>37</sup>

This current upswing in Russia-North Korea relations reflects Pyongyang's decades-long practice of playing its two patrons, China and Russia, against one another to extract political and economic gains and to mitigate the effects of international isolation.<sup>38</sup> The success of this strategy is succinctly illustrated in remarks made by Russian President Vladimir Putin in 2003 about the prospective Trans-Siberian Railroad extension through the Korean Peninsula:

\*For the purposes of this Report, meetings held at the vice-ministerial level or higher are considered high-level meetings.

†With the exception of brief cross-border rail service between 2007 and 2009, North and South Korean efforts to establish a trans-Korean rail link have been stymied for several decades, mostly due to political sensitivities and security issues. Discussions of linking a trans-Korean railway with the Trans-Siberian Railroad have been ongoing since the late 1990s. *Russia Times*, "Russia to Extend Trans-Eurasian Rail Project to Korea," June 6, 2014. <http://rt.com/business/164116-russia-railway-north-korea/>; Andrei Lankov, "A Trans-Korean/Trans-Siberian Railway? Not Any Time Soon," NK News, November 18, 2013. <http://www.nknews.org/2013/11/a-trans-korean-trans-siberian-railway-not-any-time-soon/>; and *North Korea-Russia Relations: A Strained Friendship* (International Crisis Group, December 4, 2007), p. 12. [http://www.crisisgroup.org/-/media/Files/asia/north-east-asia/north-korea/b71\\_north\\_korea\\_russia\\_relations\\_a\\_strained\\_friendship.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/-/media/Files/asia/north-east-asia/north-korea/b71_north_korea_russia_relations_a_strained_friendship.pdf).

“Russia must build the [railroad] for the simple reason that if it does not, then our dear friend China will do it.”<sup>39</sup>

In what appears to be another attempt to lessen its economic isolation, North Korea in early 2014 took steps to improve ties with Japan as well. In May, Pyongyang agreed to re-open stalled investigations into North Korea’s kidnapping of several Japanese citizens in the 1970s and 1980s in exchange for Japan lifting some of its unilateral economic sanctions on North Korea.\*<sup>40</sup> Japan began to lift sanctions in July, but by mid-September North Korea appeared to be delaying progress on the investigation. Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga announced that Pyongyang’s initial report on the investigation, expected in the fall of 2014, could be delayed up to one year, predicting that negotiations with North Korea “will not go smoothly.”<sup>41</sup> Even if Pyongyang makes progress on the abduction investigations, Japan is unlikely to pursue a more friendly relationship with North Korea. Japan, which does not have official diplomatic relations with North Korea, views the North as a major security threat, which it works in concert with its ally the United States and South Korea to address.† Indeed, North Korea is a central focus of the U.S.-Japan alliance and a driver of Japan’s ongoing security reforms.<sup>42</sup>

North Korea’s Foreign Minister Ri Su-yong traveled to Southeast Asia in August, where he attended the high-profile Association of Southeast Asian Nations Regional Forum. A South Korean official referred to the trip as “a move to come out of international isolation and gather ground in the global diplomatic arena.”<sup>43</sup>

These efforts reflect North Korea’s desire to reduce its overwhelming dependence on China and suggest the Kim regime has determined it should hedge against the potential that China will abandon its long-standing North Korea policy. Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt, director of Asia-Pacific Programs at the United States Institute of Peace, testified to the Commission, “There’s nothing more the North Koreans would like [than] to do a great deal with Japan, a sunshine deal‡ with South Korea, get in touch with Myanmar, Indonesia, and any other country that will deal with them.”<sup>44</sup>

### **China’s Perceptions and Policies Evolve, Strategy Remains the Same**

Although North Korea’s recent provocations are leading to a shift in China’s perception of North Korea and an adjustment of policy

\* Sanctions lifted by Japan include (1) some restrictions on the flow of people between Japan and North Korea; (2) reporting requirements for some currency transfers from Japan to North Korea; and (3) an embargo on some North Korean ships docking in Japanese ports. *Asahi Shimbun*, “Japan to Lift 3 Sanctions Against North Korea; Abduction Reinvestigation to Start,” July 3, 2014. [http://ajw.asahi.com/article/behind\\_news/politics/AJ201407030071](http://ajw.asahi.com/article/behind_news/politics/AJ201407030071); Linda Sieg and Kiyoshi Takenaka, “Japan Lifts Some North Korean Sanctions amid Report of Surviving Abductees,” Reuters, July 3, 2014. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/07/03/us-japan-northkorea-idUSKBN0F70NK20140703>.

† Japan and South Korea cooperate on security issues related to the North, especially in the context of the U.S.-Japan-South Korea relationship. However, bilateral cooperation between the two countries has recently suffered from political tensions between Tokyo and Seoul, according to U.S. officials in Seoul and policy experts who met with the Commission at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. For a more comprehensive discussion of tensions between Japan and South Korea, see Chapter 3, Section 1, “China and Asia’s Evolving Security Architecture.”

‡ This is a reference to South Korea’s “sunshine policy” toward North Korea, which lasted from the late 1990s to the mid-2000s and was intended to build positive ties with the North.

toward North Korea, China's overarching strategy and objectives have not changed. China continues to prioritize reinforcing stability in North Korea with the aim of maintaining a credible buffer between itself and the U.S.-allied South.

### ***A Vibrant Debate on North Korea Emerges***

Beijing has allowed a vibrant public debate on the utility and wisdom of China's policies toward North Korea to emerge since North Korea's third nuclear test in 2013.\*<sup>45</sup> The spectrum of views ranges from proponents of China's current policy of supporting the Kim regime, to those calling for Beijing to pressure Pyongyang to moderate its destabilizing behavior,<sup>†</sup> to the "abandonment school" of strategists and commentators who argue North Korea is a liability for China and that Beijing should "cut its losses and cut North Korea loose."<sup>46</sup> Dr. Lankov characterizes the debate:

*We should keep in mind that North Korean studies remain a rather divided area in China. There are some specialists in China who are genuine supporters of North Korea's cause. Some of these people belong to an older generation of specialists who once studied the North as students, while some others merely see North Korea as a useful strategic buffer against the bullying United States. There are also experts who see North Korea as a troublesome anachronism, a fossil from a Maoist-Leninist past that most Chinese wish to forget about. However, even such people, often with close connection to South Korea, still tend to appreciate the strategic advantages presented by North Korea to China.<sup>47</sup>*

So far, the "abandonment school" of thought appears to be a minority view and has not gained traction among China's senior leaders. However, the ongoing debate reveals a demographic trend that may have implications for China's policy toward the North in the future. Ms. Kleine-Ahlbrandt's testimony to the Commission echoes Dr. Lankov's observation that Chinese public opinion on North Korea is subject to a generational divide, and asserts that younger Chinese "overwhelmingly view [North Korea] with pity and contempt."<sup>48</sup> It may be the case that future generations of Chinese leaders—those who have no memory of the Sino-North Korean camaraderie of the 1950s and who prefer China shed its reputation as North Korea's only patron—will calculate it is no longer in China's interests to support the North unconditionally.

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\* Similar debates emerged in China following North Korea's first and second nuclear tests in 2006 and 2009. U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *Hearing on Recent Developments in China's Relations with Taiwan and North Korea*, written testimony of Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt, June 5, 2014.

<sup>†</sup> Chinese state-affiliated newspaper *Global Times* published an editorial by a prominent Chinese expert on North Korea which stated that North Korean missile launches "have already posed a grave threat to the security of neighboring countries," and opined that China should "impose a certain amount of pressure" on North Korea. Although commentaries such as this do not necessarily represent the views of the Chinese government, they suggest frustration over North Korea's behavior is on the rise in China. Zhang Liangui, "Pyongyang Missile Launch Risks Isolation," *Global Times*, May 18, 2014. <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/849325.shtml>.

### ***China Begins to Take Denuclearization Seriously***

Although China historically has not viewed North Korean denuclearization as an urgent task, U.S. government officials in Seoul told the Commission that Beijing appears to be genuinely concerned about North Korea's accelerating nuclear program. Four distinct but related perceptions appear to be driving China's evolving threat perception. First, Kim Jong-un's decision to proceed with a third nuclear test despite China's strong opposition likely convinced Beijing that Kim Jong-un is both reckless and unconcerned about whether North Korea's provocations will anger China. Second, China perceives the United States could use a North Korean provocation as a pretext to deepen its military engagement in the region, an outcome China desperately seeks to avoid.<sup>49</sup> Third, China is concerned that the North's progress on its nuclear program could precipitate a nuclear arms race in Northeast Asia. In particular, China fears U.S. allies South Korea and Japan may develop nuclear weapons, which it believes would seriously degrade China's security environment.<sup>50</sup> Fourth, China recognizes that North Korea's leverage—vis-à-vis China and the rest of the international community—grows as its nuclear program becomes more credible. Notably, none of these perceptions reflects concern about North Korean nuclear weapons posing a direct threat to China. Rather, China's concerns relate to how North Korean nuclear weapons could precipitate second-order effects that could result in a more vulnerable security environment for China.

China's heightened sense of anxiety over North Korea's nuclear program has not led to a wholesale shift in China's North Korea strategy, but it appears to have informed one recent policy adjustment: Beijing's reinvigorated efforts to resume the Six-Party Talks.\* China's efforts to restart the Six-Party Talks have included holding a "Track 1.5" talk between officials from some of the countries involved in the Six-Party Talks;<sup>51</sup> sending Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin to conduct "shuttle diplomacy" visits to Seoul and Pyongyang;<sup>52</sup> holding meetings with senior U.S. officials;<sup>53</sup> and generally emphasizing the importance of the Six-Party Talks in official statements.<sup>54</sup>

China's motivations for restarting the Six-Party Talks are manifold. According to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the aim of the negotiations has always been to "keep them talking and not fighting."<sup>55</sup> Ms. Kleine-Ahlbrandt testified to the Commission that China's motives are more complex:

*China prioritized the talks because as Chair, it was guaranteed a central role in setting international policy toward [North Korea]. Beijing never expected that the talks would resolve the issue, rather, the process kept negotiations open and lessened the possibility of crises escalating, while allowing Beijing to exert control over the international re-*

\*The Six-Party Talks involving China, Japan, North Korea, Russia, South Korea, and the United States were established in 2003 to negotiate the termination of North Korea's nuclear program. After six rounds of negotiations, North Korea left the Six-Party Talks in 2009, and the negotiations have not resumed since. Jayshree Bajoria and Beina Xu, *The Six Party Talks on North Korea's Nuclear Program* (Council on Foreign Relations, September 30, 2013). <http://www.cfr.org/proliferation/six-party-talks-north-koreas-nuclear-program/p13593>.

*sponse by ensuring interaction with and influence over all parties.*<sup>56</sup>

An additional driver of China's desire to revive the Six-Party Talks, according to Ms. Kleine-Ahlbrandt, is Beijing's fear that Pyongyang will "cut a deal" with Washington to denuclearize or otherwise thaw relations, which would leave China with diminished leverage and little control over the situation on the Peninsula.<sup>57</sup>

Another potential indicator that denuclearization is a rising priority for Beijing is a growing emphasis on denuclearization in official Chinese statements. China's long-standing official line on North Korea has been "no war, no instability, no nukes."<sup>58</sup> This characterization conveys not only China's interests vis-à-vis North Korea, but also the prioritization of those interests, with denuclearization as the lowest priority.<sup>59</sup> Recently, however, some official Chinese statements, including those made at the July 2014 U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue, have begun to list "denuclearization" before "stability" in discussions of China's interests and priorities on the Korean Peninsula.<sup>60</sup>

### ***China Strengthens Sanctions Enforcement, but Problems Remain***

China's enforcement of UN sanctions against North Korea has improved somewhat since North Korea's third nuclear test. In March 2013, China appeared to enhance border inspections of cargo traveling from China to North Korea.<sup>61</sup> In April 2013, the Chinese government issued directives for "relevant agencies to take measures to strictly enforce" Security Council Resolution 2094.<sup>62</sup> In August 2013, Chinese diplomats told researchers from International Crisis Group that China was for the first time strictly enforcing sanctions on North Korea.<sup>63</sup>

These developments notwithstanding, gaps in China's sanctions enforcement remain. In testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in June 2014, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel R. Russel acknowledged China's efforts but insisted it "could do more to prevent North Korea from engaging in proliferation activities."<sup>64</sup> According to a UN Panel of Experts established to monitor enforcement of sanctions against North Korea, China's recent failures to fully enforce sanctions include:

- The Chinese port of Dalian in March 2013 appears to have served as a transshipment hub for five aluminum alloy rods (considered nuclear-related dual-use equipment by the International Atomic Energy Agency) from North Korea destined for Burma.<sup>65</sup>

\* In addition to lax enforcement, China continues to use its position on the UN Security Council to weaken sanctions resolutions. According to Bruce Klingner, senior research fellow for Northeast Asia at the Heritage Foundation, "After the April 2012 missile launch, the U.S., South Korea, Japan, and the EU proposed adding 40 additional North Korean entities to the U.N. sanctions list. China vetoed all but three, severely limiting the scope of U.N. efforts against North Korea's prohibited nuclear and missile programs." Bruce Klingner, *North Korea: Sanctions, Nuclear and Missile Threat* (Heritage Foundation, April 2, 2014). <http://www.heritage.org/research/testimony/2014/04/north-korea-sanctions-nuclear-and-missile-threat>.

- China has made implementing UN prohibitions on transferring “luxury items” to North Korea difficult because its definition of “luxury goods” is much more limited than that of most other countries. For example, when Switzerland prohibited the sale of ski lifts to North Korea, a Chinese company acquired the contract and delivered the ski lifts to North Korea in January 2014.<sup>66</sup>

Indeed, China’s partial efforts to enforce sanctions after the nuclear test were probably intended to signal displeasure to North Korea rather than truly seek to isolate the regime and cut off inputs to the North’s missile and nuclear programs. This is unsurprising given China’s rhetorical aversion to formal sanctions in general. China does not view sanctions as an effective tool to pressure North Korea; instead, China believes the best way to deal with the North is to engage it through dialogue and economic exchange.<sup>67</sup>

### ***China Continues to Prioritize Stability***

The deterioration in Sino-North Korean relations has not led to a change in China’s long-standing strategic objective regarding North Korea: stability.\* Beijing emphasized this in February 2014 when Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi articulated China’s “red line” on the Korean Peninsula, saying, “We will not allow war or instability on the Korean Peninsula.”<sup>68</sup> According to subject matter experts who met with the Commission in Washington and Seoul, China fears a North Korean collapse could provide a pretext for U.S. military intervention in North Korea and allow Washington greater influence over the future of the Peninsula.<sup>69</sup> In Beijing’s view, a sustained U.S.-South Korea allied military presence on the Peninsula is inimical to China’s security interests, and China would perceive the crossing of U.S. troops into the North as an urgent deterioration of its already-degraded security environment. This view is informed by China’s perception that the United States seeks to encircle and contain China with regional alliances and partnerships in Northeast Asia. China’s overriding imperative to avoid such a scenario is what drives its economic and political support for Pyongyang.

#### **Does China Have Leverage over North Korea?**

The United States and South Korea frequently call on China to use its close relationship with North Korea to pressure Pyongyang to halt its nuclear program and cease its destabilizing behavior.<sup>70</sup> China’s ambassador to the United States Cui Tiankai called Washington’s and Seoul’s requests for China to pressure North Korea a “mission impossible,” and claimed China does not have the kind of leverage over North Korea that the United States and others think it has.<sup>71</sup>

\*Stability, in China’s perception, is characterized by the absence of unrest, upheaval, or other sudden shifts in a country’s internal situation and often is synonymous with regime stability.

**Does China Have Leverage over North Korea?—Continued**

Because China's economic and diplomatic support for North Korea is so great, Beijing's leverage over Pyongyang is indeed significant. Dr. Terry testified to the Commission that "by some estimates, Beijing provides some 80 percent of North Korea's consumer goods, 45 percent of its food, and 90 percent of its energy imports. Sino-North Korean trade accounts for nearly 90 percent of North Korea's global trade, while official Chinese investment accounts for almost 95 percent of foreign direct investment in the North."<sup>72</sup> Several experts in China and the West have suggested Beijing could pressure Pyongyang to cease its provocative behavior by cutting off (or threatening to cut off) its exports, particularly oil exports, to North Korea. According to Ms. Kleine-Ahlbrandt, China has used this leverage—albeit in a limited way—by charging above market prices for food or delivering oil at slower rates to "annoy and send messages to North Korea."<sup>73</sup> Dr. Lankov also told the Commission that China sometimes uses its leverage over North Korea to deter Pyongyang from undertaking provocative actions such as missile and bomb tests.

In reality, although China does have leverage over North Korea, Beijing's uncompromising commitment to stability prevents it from using that leverage. Beijing fears applying too much pressure on the Kim regime could be destabilizing. Ms. Kleine-Ahlbrandt testified that some Chinese strategists believe the amount of pressure required to force North Korea to denuclearize would be so great that it almost certainly would result in regime change, which to China could be a worse outcome than a nuclear North Korea.<sup>74</sup>

Witnesses who testified at the Commission's June 2014 hearing differed in their assessments of whether China will ever reach a "tipping point" at which it would deem the threat of a nuclear North Korea is greater than the threat of instability in North Korea and abandon its unconditional support for Pyongyang in favor of an approach more in line with that of South Korea and the United States. Dr. Terry opined China will only reconsider its support for North Korea if China "feel[s] like there is an imminent threat such as a conflict on the Peninsula."<sup>75</sup> Ms. Kleine-Ahlbrandt suggested China might reach a tipping point if North Korea instigated a major provocation along the China-North Korea border in a way that threatened China's own domestic stability.<sup>76</sup> Ambassador Joseph R. DeTrani, president of the Intelligence and National Security Alliance, suggested China may have already reached a tipping point. Referring to speculation that Beijing had gone to great lengths to convince Pyongyang not to carry out a planned fourth nuclear test in the spring of 2014,<sup>77</sup> Ambassador DeTrani said, "I don't think it's an accident we're not seeing a fourth nuclear test."<sup>78</sup>

### The Potential for North Korean Collapse: China's Interests and Potential Responses

Kim Jong-un has rapidly consolidated power since succeeding his father as North Korea's supreme leader in late 2011, defying expectations that his youth and inexperience would prevent him from exerting control over Pyongyang's elite leadership. Indeed, several subject matter experts consulted by the Commission in 2014 asserted that Kim Jong-un appears to have complete and unchallenged control over decision making in Pyongyang.<sup>79</sup> Kim Jong-un's successful purges of top Korean officials like his uncle, Jang Song-taek, demonstrate his ability to eliminate threats to his rule and command fear and respect from his inner circle.

Nevertheless, North Korea, like many authoritarian regimes, may be "stable until it's not,"<sup>80</sup> and the potential for regime instability or collapse exists.<sup>81</sup> Indeed, Kim Jong-un's mysterious disappearance from public view for 40 days in September and October 2014 prompted some outside observers to speculate that a coup had taken place in Pyongyang.<sup>82</sup> As this Report went to print, however, North Korean media reports suggest Kim Jong-un's absence was due to health problems and that he remains firmly in control of the country.<sup>83</sup>

In response to a North Korean regime collapse, Beijing would make its long-term strategic objectives for the Peninsula—most importantly restoring stability and ensuring continued Chinese influence—its top priority. China almost certainly would intervene in the event of North Korean regime collapse.<sup>84</sup> Its response would be scenario-dependent and based on what course of action it judges most closely aligns with its national interests at that moment. These responses could include:

- *Reinforcing Border Security:* China fears regime collapse or large-scale unrest in North Korea could precipitate a refugee crisis with potentially millions of North Koreans crossing the border into China. According to Bruce W. Bennett, senior defense analyst at the RAND Corporation and author of *Preparing for the Possibility of a North Korean Collapse*, China likely would avoid such a situation by deploying troops to seal China's side of the border with North Korea and potentially creating a buffer zone within North Korea in which to set up refugee camps.<sup>85</sup>
- *Securing Nuclear Weapons:* According to Dr. Bennett, interlocutors who met with the Commission in Seoul, and others, China likely would cross into North Korea to secure weapons of mass destruction, particularly nuclear weapons, in the event of regime collapse.\*
- *Maintaining a Strategic Buffer:* According to subject matter experts who met with the Commission in Seoul, China prefers a divided Korean Peninsula over a unified one because it values

\*North Korea's Yongbyon nuclear facility is about 80 miles from the Chinese border. Bruce W. Bennett, *Preparing for the Possibility of a North Korean Collapse* (RAND Corporation, 2013), pp. 89–90. [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR300/RR331/RAND\\_RR331.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR300/RR331/RAND_RR331.pdf). See also Andrew Scobell and Mark Cozad, "China's North Korea Policy: Rethink or Recharge?" *Parameters* 44:1 (Spring 2014): 58–60. [http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/parameters/issues/Spring\\_2014/5\\_ScobellCozad.pdf](http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/parameters/issues/Spring_2014/5_ScobellCozad.pdf).

North Korea as a buffer between itself and the U.S.-allied South. Should regime instability or collapse occur, China would take steps to ensure North Korea continues to serve as a strategic buffer.\* However, if China judged unification under the South to be the inevitable outcome of instability or collapse in the North, it likely would go to great lengths to ensure that U.S. troops on the Peninsula remain as far south as possible.

China is not the only country planning for contingency scenarios in North Korea. U.S. government officials in Seoul told the Commission that the United States in concert with South Korea plans for all contingencies on the Korean Peninsula. According to policy experts who met with the Commission at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies in Seoul, Chinese officials are reluctant—although less reluctant than in the past—to discuss North Korean collapse scenarios with their South Korean counterparts. At the unofficial level, however, Chinese and South Korean think tank and academic experts discuss North Korean regime collapse and participate in regime collapse war games.

China's mistrust of the U.S.-South Korea alliance, its alliance with the North, and its unique security priorities vis-à-vis the North prevent it from meaningfully engaging with South Korea and the United States in discussions about collapse scenarios and contingency planning.<sup>86</sup> As a result the three countries most likely to intervene in North Korea in the event of regime collapse—the United States, China, and South Korea—are not fully informed of each other's intentions, which could lead to accidents, miscalculation, and conflict should regime collapse occur.

### **U.S.-China Relations in the North Korea Context**

According to the Obama Administration, North Korea is the United States' biggest security concern in East Asia.<sup>87</sup> The *2014 Quadrennial Defense Review*, a legislatively-mandated review of the U.S. Department of Defense's strategy and priorities, describes North Korea's long-range missile and weapons of mass destruction programs as a "significant threat to peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia" and a "growing, direct threat to the United States."<sup>88</sup>

Unfortunately, as the need for cooperation between China and the United States on North Korea grows more urgent, China increasingly views U.S. interests on the Peninsula as inimical to its own. As discussed earlier, the United States is central to China's calculus when it comes to devising and implementing its North Korea policies. Ms. Kleine-Ahlbrandt testified:

*When China looks at North Korea, it does so through an East Asian strategic lens with growing rivalry with the United States as the focal point. Despite its interests being seriously harmed by North Korean behavior, Beijing be-*

\*According to Dr. Bennett, such steps could include seeking to sustain the incumbent North Korean government, supporting a new, pro-China North Korean government, or occupying parts of North Korean territory along the Chinese border in order to maintain a buffer zone. Bruce W. Bennett, *Preparing for the Possibility of a North Korean Collapse* (RAND Corporation, 2013), pp. 89–90. [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR300/RR331/RAND\\_RR331.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR300/RR331/RAND_RR331.pdf).

*believes that Washington and its allies pose a larger threat to China's strategic interests than Pyongyang does. Consensus amongst analysts in Beijing is that the U.S.-led bloc is using North Korea and tensions in the South and East China Seas as excuses to deepen the Asia rebalance, strengthen regional alliances, expand military exercises and move missile defense and military assets to the region. China is increasingly uncomfortable with long-standing U.S. defense relationships with countries around China's periphery (including South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Kyrgyzstan). From the Chinese perspective, China-North Korea relations are intrinsically part of Sino-U.S. geopolitical competition in East Asia. As long as China continues to view the U.S. with such strategic mistrust and suspicion, a fundamental shift in its policy toward North Korea remains unlikely.<sup>89</sup>*

Moreover, China believes Washington (as well as Seoul) is as much to blame for instability on the Korean Peninsula as Pyongyang. For example, China resolutely opposes U.S. military exercises with South Korea, saying they provoke Pyongyang and contribute to a hostile environment on the Peninsula.<sup>90</sup> In some official statements, China appears equally disapproving of U.S.-South Korea military drills and North Korean nuclear test threats.\*

China's distrust of the United States likely will continue to inform China's approach to relations with North Korea, especially if U.S.-China security relations continue to deteriorate in other areas, such as over territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas. However, Dr. Terry assessed in her testimony to the Commission that the recent deterioration in relations between China and North Korea might present an opportunity for the United States to "take advantage of [China's] concerns" and pursue a more robust dialogue with China on the future of the Korean Peninsula.<sup>91</sup>

## Conclusions

- North Korea has the potential to be one of the most dangerous flashpoints in U.S.-China relations. Although regime collapse or a major humanitarian disaster in North Korea do not appear likely in the near term, such an event could lead to war on the Korean Peninsula, which likely would draw simultaneous military intervention jointly by the United States and South Korea and by China. At the current time, trilateral communication between these countries about their intentions and possible actions in the event of a major contingency in North Korea appears dangerously insufficient to avoid accidents, miscalculation, and conflict.

\*A Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson replied to a question about tensions on the Korean Peninsula by answering that China is "opposed to any action that may lead to the escalation of tension. We disapprove of joint military drills and the threat of nuclear tests." China Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on April 15, 2014," April 15, 2014. [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2511\\_665403/t1147430.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1147430.shtml).

- Sino-North Korean relations are at their lowest point in decades. This is driven largely by China's frustration over North Korea's destabilizing behaviors since late 2012, including a nuclear test and a high volume of missile tests. Beijing's frustration with Pyongyang notwithstanding, China continues to support North Korea in the interest of stability. China assesses that as long as the North Korean regime remains stable, North Korea will continue to exist as a buffer between itself and U.S.-allied South Korea. Preserving this buffer is the fundamental objective of China's relationship with North Korea.
- China appears to be genuinely concerned about North Korea's nuclear program. This concern is mostly over second-order effects of the North's nuclear advances. For example, China believes North Korea's continued progress on its nuclear program incentivizes the United States to strengthen its military presence and capabilities on the Korean Peninsula. Further, China believes the North's nuclear progress could prompt U.S. allies Japan and South Korea to develop their own nuclear programs. Either of these outcomes would constitute a major deterioration of China's security environment.
- Since 2013, China has redoubled its efforts to restart the Six-Party Talks. Although Beijing is skeptical North Korea will halt its nuclear program as a result of the Six-Party Talks, it values the forum because it ensures China will have a central role in the international community's interaction with North Korea and allows China to exert influence over the parties involved.
- China increasingly views U.S. interests on the Korean Peninsula as inimical to its own. Beijing assumes Washington uses North Korean provocations as a pretext to bolster the U.S. military presence and capabilities on the Korean Peninsula and justify a "rebalance" policy that is actually aimed at containing China.
- China's relationship with South Korea is significantly improving in both the economic and security realms. Beijing's efforts to strengthen ties with Seoul reflect China's frustration with North Korea and are meant in part to signal its disapproval to Pyongyang. China's pursuit of stronger ties with South Korea also is aimed in part at drawing South Korea away from its alliance with the United States. As its influence over South Korea grows, China judges it eventually will be in a stronger position to pressure South Korea to reduce its security ties with the United States.

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