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Does China Still Back North Korea?

Brendan Taylor

China's relationship with North Korea has long been likened to the closeness between lips and teeth. Since the 1960s, North Korea has been China's most important ally. But relations between Beijing and Pyongyang seem to be souring. China supported new sanctions imposed against North Korea in January and March 2013 following the latter's latest ballistic-missile and nuclear tests. According to South Korean officials, Beijing has instructed local governments to implement these measures.¹ China's three largest banks announced in May 2013 that they were ceasing to deal with North Korea. Chinese President Xi Jinping also asserted that 'no one should be allowed to throw a region and even the whole world into chaos for selfish gains', in a statement widely interpreted as being directed at Pyongyang.² Deng Yuwen, deputy editor of a prominent Communist Party journal, was less oblique, writing in the *Financial Times* that China should 'abandon' Pyongyang and press for Korean reunification.³ Further reflecting the strained state of China–North Korea ties, in May 2013 it was reported that North Korea had detained the crew of a Chinese fishing vessel and demanded that Beijing pay a \$100,000 ransom to secure its release.

These developments have led to much conjecture that China has turned a corner in its approach to dealing with its recalcitrant North Korean ally. Three well-placed Stanford University scholars recently wrote that 'numerous [Obama administration] officials appear to have concluded that Chinese leaders are rethinking their approach'.⁴ Senior *Washington Times* journalist

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Bill Gertz concurs, pointing to Pyongyang's standing down of two intermediate-range ballistic missiles as evidence that 'clear signs are emerging for the first time indicating that China is responding to US pressure to help modify belligerent behavior by Beijing's fraternal communist ally in North Korea.'⁵ Jonathan Pollack, a respected Asia hand at the Brookings Institution, goes further, contending that 'for the first time, [China's] leaders are beginning to acknowledge that the notion of North Korea as a strategic asset is laughable'.⁶

Hopes that China has turned a corner on North Korea have been raised previously, only to be disappointed. Beijing signed on to previous UN sanctions following North Korean nuclear and missile tests, but its implementation of the measures has been notoriously patchy. During the early 2000s, there were high hopes that Beijing's willingness to host the Six-Party Talks would form the centrepiece of a new Chinese strategy intended to demonstrate its credentials as what Robert Zoellick would later call a 'responsible stakeholder' in the international system and a great power that was rising peacefully. To be sure, China on occasion used a combination of economic carrots and sticks to coax Pyongyang to the Six-Party negotiating table. Yet the talks failed to deliver meaningful outcomes and, notwithstanding ongoing efforts to resuscitate them, have been moribund for several years now.

The signs that Beijing is turning its back on North Korea may be misleading. Its support for UN sanctions notwithstanding, Beijing continues to invest billions of dollars in new infrastructure projects designed to bring it closer to its defiant communist relative. Work is reportedly well underway on three high-speed railways, on new highways and bridges, and on a cross-border power cable.⁷ Although it is intriguing that the Chinese government has noticeably lifted the lid by allowing greater domestic criticism than usual of North Korea, just as revealing is the fact that Yuwen was suspended from his senior editorial position for going too far in his public criticism of Pyongyang.

Korea watchers have generally provided three explanations for China's unwillingness to abandon the North. The first relates to the historical bonds forged between Beijing and Pyongyang in the Korean War of 1950–53, a conflict in which China suffered more than a million casualties. Due to the

effects of generational change, it is conceivable that the impact of this particular factor could weaken with time. A second explanation for Beijing's patience vis-à-vis Pyongyang is that China fears the flood of refugees that could come spilling across its shared land border with North Korea following serious economic or political dislocation there.

A third explanation posits that Beijing remains wedded to Pyongyang because it regards North Korea as an important strategic buffer between China and American forces stationed in Japan and South Korea. Although some analysts contend that this consideration has become increasingly irrelevant in a world of long-range strike capabilities, if anything the logic of this particular explanation has become all the more compelling for Beijing in the context of the US 'pivot' or 'rebalance' to Asia.

Despite Washington's reassurances to the contrary, Chinese strategic analysts remain convinced that the US rebalance has been designed and implemented with a view to containing China's re-emergence. The solidification of America's Asian alliances that arguably began during the Clinton presidency but which has intensified under the Obama administration is interpreted in zero-sum terms, as part of an American project to assemble a coalition to counterbalance China's growing military power.⁸ Beijing has responded with what the prominent Chinese intellectual Wu Xinbo describes as a 'tit-for-tat' strategy, wherein it is quietly using its considerable economic leverage to recruit partners – including Cambodia, Laos and Thailand – with a view to wrong-footing the US rebalance.⁹

The view that the Obama administration is out to contain China's rise is especially prevalent among the People's Liberation Army, whose influence on China's North Korea policy is particularly strong. This group sees little value in taking a tougher line against North Korea, particularly if any ensuing collapse of the Kim regime were to lead to a reunification of the two Koreas. As Victor Cha recently observed:

Such an outcome would only reinforce in Chinese minds an important lesson of history – instability on the Korean peninsula has never redounded to Chinese interests. The last two times this occurred, the result was war with Japan (1895) and the United States (1950), which cost China dearly.¹⁰

Against that backdrop, what accounts for recent changes in the tenor and tone of China's approach towards North Korea?

First and foremost, Beijing is signalling to US policymakers. As epitomised by Zoellick's responsible stakeholder concept, a term which he first used in the mid-2000s, Washington has been calling upon China for some time now to adopt a more responsible international posture commensurate with its increasingly apparent great-power status. China's approach towards North Korea has become one important yardstick with which to measure its willingness to assume such a posture. It has also become a central issue in, and indeed a barometer for, the state of US–China relations more generally – as reflected by the emphasis it received at the Obama–Xi 'Sunnylands summit' of June 2013. Seeming shifts in China's approach towards North Korea can thus be read as in part a tactical gesture designed to assuage American criticism that Beijing needs to do more to bring its considerable leverage to bear against Pyongyang.

Secondly, China could also be sending a signal to moderate elements in Washington and throughout the Asia-Pacific region, potentially with a view to undermining the US rebalancing strategy. Obviously enough, China policy in Washington, and in most Asian capitals for that matter, has long been contested. Moderate elements in these various debates can point to recent shifts in Beijing's approach towards Pyongyang as evidence that the period of Chinese assertiveness is coming to an end. The conclusion of China's once-in-a-decade leadership transition, which culminated in Xi's appointment as president, can be presented as the turning point. Some commentators have even extrapolated from China's changing treatment of its neighbour the beginnings of a new charm offensive akin to that undertaken by Beijing during the late 1990s and into the 2000s.¹¹ Hence, by taking a harder line against North Korea, a case can be made that Beijing is intentionally arming those advocating that the United States and its allies adopt a much softer approach in their dealings with a rising China.

Thirdly, Beijing's shifting rhetoric towards North Korea is also designed to send twin messages of disdain and deterrence to Pyongyang itself. During the latter part of 2012, China separately dispatched two senior policymakers to the North – Vice-Foreign Minister Fu Ying and politburo member Li

Jianguo – urging Pyongyang not to proceed with further missile or nuclear tests. These pleas were ignored, however, when North Korea conducted such tests in December 2012 and February 2013 respectively. At one level, therefore, China's changing approach is intended to signal displeasure at being rebuffed. At the same time, it has also been carefully calibrated to deter Pyongyang from undertaking further such provocations by making clear that there are limits to Chinese patience. Beijing is concerned that such provocations undermine the stability in Northeast Asia required to maintain China's economic growth. Just as importantly, it also worries Beijing that North Korean recalcitrance provides the United States and Japan with a rationale for ramping up their own military capabilities in the region, particularly in the area of missile defence.

Beyond the multiple diplomatic signals China seems to be sending, it is important to keep in mind that the relationship between Beijing and Pyongyang has traditionally been subject to stresses and strains. It endured some tense times during the 1990s following China's August 1992 decision to normalise its relationship with South Korea. These were further compounded during the subsequent North Korean leadership transition – from Kim Il-sung to Kim Jong-il – when the Chinese leadership called into question the merits of North Korea's hereditary succession model. Beijing was again highly critical of the North following its missile and nuclear tests of 2006 and 2009, labelling them 'flagrant' after Chinese insistence that they be stopped was again ignored. Debate reportedly even raged at that time over whether China should abandon its 1961 alliance agreement with North Korea.

Nevertheless, on each occasion acrimony in the China–North Korea relationship ultimately gave way to strategic realignment. When Kim Jong-il made his first visit to China in May 2000, both sides committed to consolidating their relationship. Following Pyongyang's 2009 nuclear test, Chinese officials reviewed their North Korea policy and concluded that strategic stability on the Korean Peninsula superseded all other concerns and objectives.

This history of rapprochement between Beijing and Pyongyang suggests that high-level visits provide a particularly useful indicator for how China–North Korea relations are developing. The July 2013 visit to Pyongyang of Chinese Vice-President Li Yuanchao thus probably signalled that any frozen

ties were already well and truly thawing.

As with lips and teeth, the geographic proximity of North Korea to China suggests that this pattern is unlikely to change. As the respected Korea watcher Scott Snyder recently observed:

Shared geography has contributed to the endurance of the relationship, given that instability has historically had spillover effects across the Sino-DPRK border. Even when Sino-DPRK relations were strained, Chinese and North Korean officials could always fall back on geography as a factor underlying close ties, using the fact that the two countries share mountains and rivers as a justification for their continued relationship.¹²

North Korea's added geo-strategic significance to China as a buffer against the US rebalance suggests a continuation of this trend. For China, North Korea remains more of a strategic asset than a strategic liability.

Notes

- ¹ Shaun Waterman, 'China Doing "Quite Well" Enforcing U.N. Sanctions on North Korea, South Says', *Washington Times*, 15 April 2013, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/apr/15/china-doing-quite-well-enforcing-un-sanctions-nort/>.
- ² Celia Hatton, 'Is China Ready to Abandon North Korea?', BBC, 12 April 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-22062589>.
- ³ Deng Yuwen, 'China Should Abandon North Korea', *Financial Times*, 27 February 2013, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/9e2f68b2-7c5c-11e2-99fo-00144feabdco.html#axzzzcW2PwjqY>.
- ⁴ Gi-Wook Shin, Thomas Fingar and David Straub, 'A Chance to Defuse North Korea', *New York Times*, 5 June 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/06/opinion/global/a-chance-to-defuse-north-korea.html?_r=0.
- ⁵ Bill Gertz, 'Inside the Ring: China Reins in North Korea', *Washington Times*, 8 May 2013, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/may/8/inside-the-ring-china-reins-in-north-korea/>.
- ⁶ Steven Mufson, 'Online, Chinese Express Scorn for Longtime Ally North Korea', Associated Press, 13 April 2013.
- ⁷ Jeremy Page, 'China Builds Up Its Links to North Korea', *Wall Street Journal*, 6 June 2013, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887324069104578527080945326710.html>.
- ⁸ Michael D. Swaine, 'Chinese Leadership and Elite Responses to the U.S. Pacific Pivot', *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 38, Summer 2012, <http://www.hoover.org/pub->

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- ⁹ Wu Xinbo, 'Not Backing Down: China Responds to the US Rebalance to Asia', *Global Asia*, vol. 7, no. 4, Winter 2012, p. 19, http://www.globalasia.org/V7N4_Winter_2012/Wu_Xinbo.html.
- ¹⁰ Victor Cha, 'Why China Can't Cut Off North Korea', *Huffington Post*, 4 June 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/victor-cha/china-north-korea-relations_b_1404178.html.
- ¹¹ Barbara Demick, 'China on a Charm Offensive', *Los Angeles Times*, 5 June 2013, <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/jun/05/world/la-fg-china-charm-offensive-20130606>.
- ¹² Scott Snyder, 'Diplomatic and Security Relations Between China and North Korea Under Kim Jong-il', in Bonnie S. Glaser et al., 'Reordering Chinese Priorities on the Korean Peninsula', *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, November 2012, pp. 25–26, http://csis.org/files/publication/121217_Glaser_ReOrderingChinese_web.pdf.