

CHINA AND NORTH KOREA: THE UNEASY PARTNERSHIP

A new phase of strained relationship surfaced when Pyongyang tested a nuclear device in October 2006 forcing Beijing to back the U.N. Security Council Resolution 1718 that imposed sanctions on North Korea. Undeterred by its apparent concurrence with the international punitive measures aimed at North Korea, China for the large part remained opposed to imposition of harsh international sanctions on Pyongyang.

Hossein Ebrahim Khani

Research Fellow, Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS), Tehran, Iran

China and North Korea share a long period of relatively close and friendly relations centered around a common ideology in their contemporary history. Korean communists offered safe heaven and support for their Chinese comrades in their power struggle leading to the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Not long later, China reciprocated with large-scale military intervention in the Korean War of 1950–1953 and saved the Korea under Kim Il-Sung regime from total collapse in the face of American-led United Nations forces pushing back the North Korean assault in pursuit of unification of the Korean Peninsula. It marked the beginning of the new era of strategic Beijing-Pyongyang ties later referred to as “close as lips and teeth.”

In 1961 China and North Korea concluded the Sino-North Korean “Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance,” which obliged China to intervene against any “unprovoked aggression” directed at North Korea. The 20-year validity of the Sino-North Korean pact was renewed twice in 1981, 2001 but the formal and conventional arrangements for the third renewal in 2021 is long overdue, giving rise to speculations regarding China's cautious approach in its ties with Pyongyang in view of the fast-changing international politics. Worth mentioning is that a few days ahead of entering into alliance with China in 1961, Kim Il-Sung had signed a similar ideology-inspired treaty with his Soviet counterpart Nikita Khrushchev as he was wisely inclined to exploit the Sino-Soviet split to his benefit.

A year later another initiative that cemented further the bilateral relations, Beijing agreed to resolve a dispute over the demarcation of shared border with North Korea on terms said to be more favorable to Pyongyang. Notwithstanding all the apparent mutual warmth and goodwill displayed by the two neighbors, China and North Korea rarely got along fully, and through the Cold War, the Soviet Union, bypassing China, acted as the principal supporter of North Korea.

Despite being regarded initially as ideological allies, China and North Korea gradually parted ways and portrayed a fading image of what was known as “closer than lips and teeth” partners. In 1980, Beijing criticized the planned hereditary transfer of power in North Korea from Kim Il-Sung to Kim Jong-Il and branded it as “vestige of feudalism.” Beijing also lost much of its ideological influence over Pyongyang due to adjustments in its revolutionary state in favor of economic development while North Korea remained committed to the non-flexible zealous communist ideology. Moreover, Pyongyang viewed China's establishment of diplomatic relations with South Korea in 1992 as a dreadful betrayal. Having eroded the base of its ideological leverage, Beijing had no alternative but to rely heavily on its economic influence over Pyongyang.

In 1993, Beijing altered the terms of its bilateral trade with North Korea from concessional arrangements and bartering to a cash-based market approach, which - coupled with the aftermath of the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the suspension of aids coming from



Moscow - pushed the North Korean economy to the brink of collapse. At the same time, the birth of the Russian Federation took the ideology factor off the Moscow-Pyongyang alliance and the new Russian government subsequently downgraded its ties with North Korea and in 1995 decided not to renew the 1961 treaty.

In the mid-1990s Beijing agreed to more flexible terms for its food and fuel exports to North Korea even as bilateral trade plummeted and political relations remained tense. During the 1990s when North Korea began its nuclear breakout, Beijing tried, and succeeded in bringing Pyongyang to the negotiating table for what became known as the Six Party Talks, with Russia and Japan participating alongside the two Koreas, China, and the United States of America.

A new phase of strained relationship surfaced when Pyongyang tested a nuclear device in October 2006 forcing Beijing to back the U.N. Security Council Resolution 1718 that imposed sanctions on North Korea. Undeterred by its apparent concurrence with the international punitive measures aimed at North Korea, China for the large part remained opposed to imposition of harsh international sanctions on Pyongyang. Beijing for a decade took a minimal approach to interpretation and full enforcement of the 2006 Security Council resolution in anticipation of strong possibility of regime collapse and among others, refugee influx across its 1400-km long border with North Korea. Further on and against all the odds, China remained committed to deepening economic and political ties with North Korea

despite the collapse of the Six Party Talks, North Korea's second nuclear test in 2009, and Pyongyang's provocative military conduct against South Korea the following year.

The demise of Kim Jung-Il and Kim Jong-Un's succession in 2011 did not immediately contribute to more smooth Beijing-Pyongyang relations. Instead, early in his tenure Kim decided to assert his independence from Chinese wishes by launching a satellite in late 2012 in defiance of Chinese President Xi Jinping's request not to do so, followed by yet another nuclear test. The Chinese leader clearly rebuked Kim's actions by publicly stating no one should be allowed to throw a region and even the whole world into chaos for selfish gain. The relations took another negative turn in 2017 as Pyongyang's face-off with the United States appeared to be pushing the Korean Peninsula to the verge of armed conflict. Beijing reacted with sharp warnings and pledged support for tougher UN Security Council sanctions against North Korea. Following Pyongyang's test-firing a missile into the Sea of Japan in February 2017, China announced that it would suspend all coal imports from North Korea for the remainder of that year. In response, Pyongyang stirred anti-China sentiment within its own population and the state media issued unusually direct and harsh-worded attacks against China. A fresh North Korean missile launch in November 2017 drew Beijing's reaction by calling on North Korea to cease actions that increased tensions on the Korean Peninsula. The test also spurred the adoption of another UN sanc-

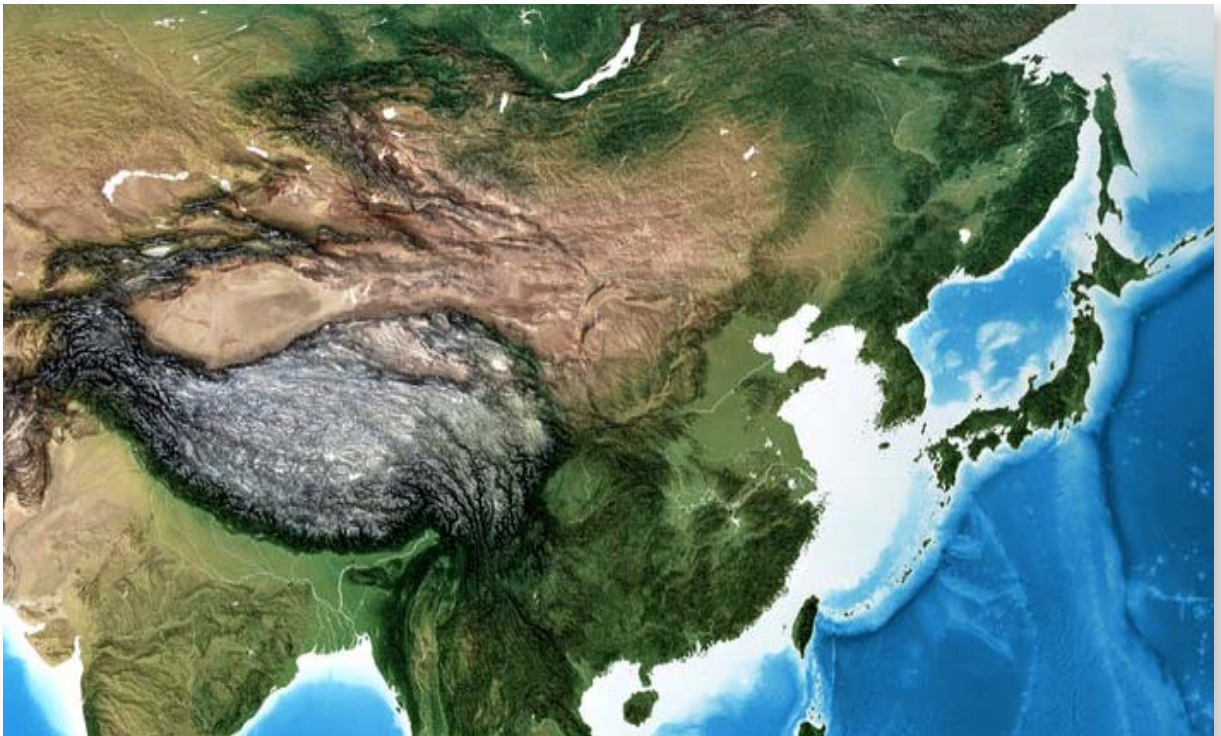
tions resolution, which for the first time targeted North Korea's lucrative coal exports in a bid to curtail that country's access to hard currency. China's approval of the resolution appeared as a signal of its willingness to take a tougher approach towards North Korea.

The year 2018 brought a remarkable turnabout on the Korean peninsula, including a fresh round of U.S. and South Korean dialogues with the North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un. However, as diplomacy accelerated, concerns mounted in Beijing that it was being sidelined and North Korea was fast drifting out of China's sphere of influence. The skillful Kim Jong-Un's initiatives of diplomatic outreach to Seoul and Washington did provide a new impetus for both Pyongyang and Beijing to quickly mend fences and to repair their relationship. China moved decisively to reassert itself and to manage relations with North Korea through an unprecedented series of summits between President Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-Un, as well as resumption of contacts between party and military officials.

In March 2018, Kim Jong-Un made his first official visit to Beijing. As North Korean talks with South Korea and the U.S. progressed over the next year, Kim made three additional visits to China and met President Xi before and after the Singapore Summit, and also a month prior to the second U.S.-North Korean summit in Hanoi. On June 20, 2019 President Xi Jinping arrived in Pyongyang marking the first visit by a Chinese leader to North Korea in 14 years. The course of these events

added credence to the assumptions that Kim Jong-Un after spending his first six years in power highlighted with less inclination towards Beijing, had managed to engage with China on terms much closer to his own.

Today China serves as North Korea's economic lifeline and the window to the world, monopolizing the vast majority of Pyongyang's trade and inflow of foreign investment. International sanctions imposed on Pyongyang have made the country more dependent than ever on Beijing for trade and support in the international arena. While Beijing appears willing to condemn its neighbor's nuclear headway, its policies remain focused on safeguarding stability in its surroundings. It is perceptible that Chinese leaders value stability as their foremost priority on the Korean Peninsula, fearing the consequences of a North Korean collapse or a conflict sparked by its emerging nuclear capabilities. China is also faced with a dilemma vis-à-vis its 1961 undertaking to defend North Korea in case of a major military conflict which by all means runs counter to its endeavor to avoid getting dragged into any large scale armed confrontation that poses inevitable risks at its economic growth. In this context, Beijing's apparent reluctance to officially renew the 1961 treaty gains prominence. Though the Chinese foreign ministry spokesman on July 2021 and ahead of the 60th anniversary of the conclusion of the mutual defense pact described it as strategic decision made with foresight by the older generation of leaders of the two countries and a major event in the history of bilateral relations" that "remains in force until





agreement is reached on its amendment or termination, there is less likelihood of enthusiasm on the part of China to commit itself to the defense of North Korea in the eventualities arising from possible North Korean adventurism.

With Beijing's reset of ties with Pyongyang, China's overall approach to North Korea is shifting, including signs that it is prepared to live with a nuclear North Korea. Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions have at various stages been both an asset and a burden for Beijing, threatening regional stability on one hand, but simultaneously providing China with an important leverage in its dealings with the U.S. on the other. It also indicates clearly that with China's revitalized relationship with North Korea, the U.S. can no longer expect Beijing to effectively support further sanctions and pressure on Pyongyang.

The endurance of the China-North Korea associa-

tion may also be explained by the persistent shared geopolitical interests against the U.S. presence in the region. Beijing's support for North Korea ensures maintaining a valuable buffer between China and the U.S. allied South Korea, home to a considerable American military might. As for North Korea, in the absence of any other forthcoming backer, it has to continue to rely on Chinese support and vital economic assistances, and assume Chinese protection while advancing its nuclear program.

In general, and in line with a pattern that has continued to the present day, any upheaval in Beijing-Pyongyang relations is unlikely to touch the breaking point, and would sooner or later be followed by joint initiatives to push the relations back to the track of normalcy. Though the two sides are far from being considered as friendly allies, they may settle for further engagement as partners of geopolitical necessity.