



CSDS-Asia Matters Podcast — 4/7/2022
The uneasy alliance between North Korea and China

Edited transcript

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Andrew Peable: Hello and welcome to CSDS Asia Matters, the podcast where we aim to go behind the headlines and discuss the background to the biggest stories in Asia. I'm Andrew Peable.

With Russia's war in Ukraine dominating the international media agenda so far this year, other global hotspots have faded into the background somewhat. Tensions around North Korea, however, are starting to make headlines again, with speculation mounting that the one-party state may be about to launch its first nuclear missile tests in five years. The North Korean army has already carried out more missile tests this year than ever before, according to the US government.

When it comes to North Korea, the focus is often on how the US and its allies South Korea respond to its provocations. But in this episode, we wanted to look at North Korea's ties with its closest ally, China. Despite their geographical and ideological proximity, the two countries have had an up and down relationship over the years. So how are they cooperating now? What do both Beijing and Pyongyang want from their relationship? And how far would China go to defend its ally?

Joining me to discuss such questions and more are two excellent analysts of North Korea and China's ties. Tongfi Kim is a research professor in Asian geopolitics at the Centre for Security, Diplomacy and Strategy at the Brussels School of Governance. Hello, Tongfi.

Tongfi Kim: Hi, Andrew.

Andrew Peable: And Jiyoung Ko. She's an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Korea University. Hello to you as well, Jiyoung

Jiyoung Ko: Hi, Andrew, thank you so much for having me.

Peable: Well, thank you both for joining us and sharing your time and expertise with us. Tongfi, can I start with you and some of the historical background here. How has China's relationship

with North Korea developed in the decades since the end of the Cold War period when obviously China's economic size and power has clearly grown enormously?

Kim: Sure. And actually, let me go back to the origin of North Korea's ties with its patron states because I think these pieces of information are actually quite relevant to understand more recent periods. North Korea has relationships with its patron states like China and earlier, the Soviet Union. These began even before the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was established in 1948. The founder of North Korea, Kim Il Song, fought against the Japanese Imperial Army in northeast China, alongside Chinese Communist guerrillas and later, during the Second World War, Kim Il Song fled to the Soviet Far East, and he also formed a tie with the Soviet Union. But there's an important caveat. I'm not saying that these personal experiences made Kim Il Song trust China or the Soviet Union. And Kim Il Song, in fact, worked really hard to purge Chinese and Soviet influence in North Korea later on during the Korean War, when both the Soviet Union and China militarily supported North Korea. And I think China more so because it sent a much larger number of troops and the so-called people's volunteer army, even though it wasn't really volunteer and hundreds of 1000s of Chinese soldiers were killed in the war. These ties were later formalised when North Korea signed a defense pact in July 1961, first with the Soviet Union and several days later with the People's Republic of China.

The China-North Korea alliance is quite special to both countries, not just because of the historical ties and shared communist ideology, but also because of their relatively isolated positions in international alliances and politics. China is clearly a major power, but has been critical of military alliances in general, and the Chinese government actually stopped using the language of military alliances altogether; they have advocated what they called an independent and self-reliant foreign policy of peace since 1982. The defence pact with North Korea is the only agreement that imposes a defence obligation on China, according to the alliance treaty obligations and provisions. China has several consultation pacts, but if you only focus on agreements that involve collective defence, North Korea is the only military ally China has. China is also an exceptional security partner from Pyongyang's perspective as North Korea's defence pact with Russia was terminated in 1996. And China and Cuba are the only military allies of North Korea, and because of geography Cuba is not really a realistic security cooperation partner for North Korea beyond some arms trade. Patron-client relations are not exactly the same as military alliances and North Korea's economic dependence on China is important too. But I wanted to mention the history of the security tie between China and North Korea because security considerations I believe are the most important driver of Sino-North Korean relations.

Peuple: So where you've had those tensions in more recent years, there have been some periods when Beijing has seemed to want to distance itself from North Korea in more recent decades. While those sorts of instances happened.

Kim: I think the most important event that affected Sino-North Korea relations is actually not about their bilateral relations. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, China no longer had to compete for North Korea's loyalty. Of course, North Korea's own behaviour also sometimes

upset Beijing. But these events, I think that their impact seems more limited. For example, North Korea infuriated China when North Korean operatives killed 21 South Koreans in Rangoon and Burma (currently Myanmar) when North Korea was trying to assassinate then South Korean president.

Peaple: This is back in the 1980s?

Kim: Yeah. And because that bombing happened shortly after North Korea used China as a mediator to diplomatically approach the United States. So Chinese leaders were obviously very angry. But then North Korea subsequently improved its ties with the Soviet Union, and it seems that China had to forgive North Korea. So the competition with the other communist giant, the Soviet Union that compelled China to always come back to North Korea and offer a hand but that's gone. And that structural change, I think, allowed Beijing to take some distance from North Korea when it chooses to do so.

Peaple: Very interesting. Jiyoung, can I bring you in? What influence can we say that public opinion has on China's relations with North Korea? I know it can be hard to gauge this with opinion polls, but what's the general feeling in China towards its neighbour?

Ko: The Chinese public's feelings towards North Korea have dramatically changed over the past three decades. Traditionally, China and North Korea were considered brothers, with the same communist ideals. So that means the Chinese probably tended to have a very favourable attitude toward North Korea. For instance, according to a poll conducted by the Chinese Academy of Social Science in 2005, nearly 40% of respondents had a favourable opinion of North Korea, and only 9% held a negative view, while about 59% of respondents believed that North Korea's nuclear weapons development was not threatening. So these results clearly show that the Chinese public had a very favourable view towards North Korea until the early 2000s.

However, I believe that after North Korea conducted its first nuclear test in 2006, the Chinese public's view toward North Korea started to change; their first nuclear tests went against China's national interest, for sure. And also that means that Pyongyang actually decided to go against Beijing's ruling not to develop nuclear weapons. So I believe that that's the point when Chinese public opinion toward North Korea started to deteriorate. And in particular, after Kim Jong Un took power in 2011, he conducted a series of missile and nuclear tests to speed up its development of nuclear weapons, against Chinese resistance. By this point many of the Chinese public actually felt betrayed. Around 2014, there were debates among academics and military officials about whether China should actually abandon North Korea or not. And then the general public started to make fun of Korean leader Kim Jong Un and calling him Fatty the third. And of course, North Korea protested about that. The Chinese government ended up deleting those posts on the web.

But despite this worsening public opinion, I don't think that actually this has had a big impact on China's relationship with North Korea. Generally speaking, the impact of public opinion on foreign policymaking is limited in authoritarian regimes. Of course, there are some exceptions

like issues related to nationalism, because nationalism is often a basis for political legitimacy in authoritarian regimes. However, in this case, the issues related to North Korea aren't related to Chinese nationalism. So the impact of public opinion is limited in this case.

Peaple: So there's a picture here of China having this close relationship in terms of the defence pact that it has with North Korea, but more of an ability these days to shift that relationship because it doesn't face any rivalry for North Korea's affection. So let's bring this to the present day a little bit and just look at how the relationship works in practice. Xi Jinping is known to have a pretty close personal relationship with Russia's Vladimir Putin. But what do we know about his relationship with North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un?

Kim: I think when we look at photos of Xi Jinping and Kim Jong Un and the media coverage, it might look like they are really on good terms. But for a long time, I was actually under the impression that Kim Jong Un had a very difficult relationship with Xi Jinping and more broadly, the Chinese leadership. Kim Jong Un's older half brother Kim Jong Nam, who was later assassinated, seemed to be living under China's protection; and Kim Jong Un's aunt's husband was considered to be very close to China and he was executed by Kim Jong Un — his execution also seemed to indicate that Kim Jong Un's attitude toward China may be quite critical.

So when Kim Jong Un visited Xi Jinping for the first time in March 2018, I was really surprised and like many analysts, I suspect that the first summit meeting between Kim Jong Un and Xi Jinping in late March 2018 was an effort on the part of both leaders to strengthen their international bargaining position before the June 2018 summit between US President Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un.

Peaple: I see. So there's not a particularly warm personal relationship between the leaders and obviously they waited quite a long time to meet. Xi Jinping had been in power for quite a long time by 2018. Jiyoung, what do we know about how it works in practice and how lines of communication between Pyongyang and Beijing for example. Does the leadership in Pyongyang inform China's leadership if it's going to carry out missile tests, for example?

Ko: So relatively little is known about missile tests, but what we know for sure is that Pyongyang informs Beijing about its nuclear tests in advance. But it's not clear how many days in advance Korea actually notifies China about its nuclear tests. So it seems like it partly depends on the climate of the bilateral relationship at the time. For instance, North Korea informed China about its first nuclear test in 2006. It was reportedly only 20 minutes before the test yet, when it came to the second and then the third nuclear tests, it is believed that it [Beijing] was notified at least one day before the test. The two countries have also actively maintained official lines of communication through high-ranking official visits. What is interesting here is that they have developed party to party communication as well. So for instance, in China, in addition to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the International [...] department of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party dispatched its head to North Korea. For instance, in 2018, [...] the head of the International liaison department was received by Kim Jong Un. These high ranking

official visits happen almost every year, but sometimes they are cancelled too. So if we track them out, we can certainly get a good sense of where the bilateral relationship is.

People: Tongfi, you wanted to come in there.

Kim: Yeah, I don't know how it is these days. And I certainly don't know any more than Dr. Ko knows, she knows far better than I do. But I agree with Jiyoung about this point about this communication being quite dependent on the bilateral relationship at the time and I think there are probably ups and downs in the communication. For example, after China and South Korea established their diplomatic ties in 1992, North Korea was outraged and cancelled the prior notification system between China and North Korea. So Pyongyang did not inform Beijing before North Korea announced its withdrawal from the nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty in 1993. And this prior notification system was reportedly restored in May 2000 when Kim Jong Il visited China. Now, whether or not the prior notification system has been working in recent years, North Korea has, on multiple occasions, conducted missile tests at a time that could insult China, for example, right before Trump-Xi summit in Florida in 2017. And Pyongyang's nuclear test in September 2017 even occurred just hours before Xi Jinping's speech at the summit of BRICS countries. So I don't know how they are communicating these tests. But in terms of the expressions of respect, I don't know how much North Korea is actually moderating this behaviour and how much they are communicating respect to China by giving advance notice or any kind of restrictions on their behaviour around the time of political events that are important to Chinese leadership.

People: It's very interesting, and you've referred to the fact that North Korea often carries out tests or military provocations around big other big global events, or other big meetings, or simply to attract attention. At least that's often the perception that we have in the west of North Korea's actions. But Jiyoung, you've written a joint piece of research with Junhye Kim about the way that China responds to these North Korean provocations. Can you explain a little bit more about your research and what it shows what you learned from it?

Ko: Sure. In this research project, we investigate how China publicly responds to North Korea's military provocations. So there are basically three ways that China can respond, condone, or criticise those provocations or remain silent, after analysing every Chinese official reaction to North Korea's provocations from 1981 to 2016. What we found is that China's default behaviour was actually not condoning North Korean provocations, but remaining silent throughout the 80s and 90s. China mostly remained silent on North Korea's provocations, that really goes against the alternative belief that China always takes sides with North Korea as an ally. In addition, we found that China started to publicly condemn North Korea's military provocations around only 2000, and, generally, such condoning was a reaction to US criticism toward North Korea. And we also found that the first public criticism came after North Korea's first nuclear test, and it repeatedly appeared after North Korea's subsequent tests, which shows that China is really unhappy with North Korea's nuclear weapons development. China has criticised on occasion North Korea's actions.

Peuple: I guess what you're arguing then in part is that China's reaction to whatever North Korea is doing has a strong link to the state of relations between North Korea and the US. Is that fair comment?

Ko: It's actually the case that China is more likely to condone North Korea's behaviour when the US has reacted. When the US reacts, China is more likely to condone North Korea's provocation, providing support for its ally. However, like when North Korea conducted its nuclear test, that's when China became very critical in public.

Peuple: That's really interesting. So Tongfi more broadly, we've seen China's relations with the US deteriorate in the last few years. So how has that impacted on China's approach to North Korea, do you think?

Kim: I think the strategic value of North Korea is higher when China has a more hostile relationship with the United States. Under a less hostile international environment to the Chinese Communist Party, Chinese leaders may also be more willing to pressure North Korea on issues that are important to the United States, such as international sanctions against North Korea. It might sound far-fetched from the western perspective, but Chinese leaders probably have a genuine fear of North Korea improving its relationship with the United States at the expense of Chinese national interest.

Peuple: So when we saw for example, the Trump administration's outreach to North Korea and that famous meeting in Singapore and so on, what was China's view of all of that?

Kim: I think this is the really direct trigger for the rapprochement we saw between the Kim Jong Un regime and the Chinese leadership. Before that the relationship between China and North Korea seemed to be quite cold. But then, because the United States was now engaged in North Korea, China also had to engage Kim Jong Un. I'm not saying that China was already worried about the United States becoming a rival patron, like the Soviet Union, that's very unlikely because of the regime-type difference. But still, the United States improving its relationship with North Korea gives strong leverage to North Korea. And Xi Jinping had to meet and talk with Kim Jong Un simply because Donald Trump was going to meet him. And if Xi didn't, it'll look like China doesn't really have influence over a supposedly very close ally and client of China.

Ko: I agree with Tongfi. That the summit actually gave momentum for the two countries, China and North Korea, to fix their relationship. So after Kim Jong Un took power, the relationship between the two countries cooled off for a while because North Korea conducted a series of missile tests to and comparable nuclear tests to speed up its nuclear weapons development. And then the two countries actually didn't maintain a good relationship during the time, but because of this summit, North Korea, basically approached China again, and then that gave a chance for the two countries to mend the relationship. And I think after that we have seen a more close relationship between the two countries so far.

People: And what do we know about how China and North Korea have responded to the pandemic and COVID? How much support, for example, has China been giving to North Korea economically, but also in terms of health? Because I think North Korea for a long time seemed to keep COVID out, but recently, there's been reports of cases spreading through the country. What do we know about how they've cooperated on COVID?

Ko: North Korea actually had long denied the outbreak of COVID in the country. However it officially acknowledged the spread of the pandemic last month, and then after that it sent some cargoes to Beijing. But it's not known what kind of assistance actually that North Korea received from China, but it's clear that after the situation got worse in North Korea, I mean, it basically always turns to China for help.

People: Tongfi, did you have a perspective on how the two countries have responded together to the pandemic?

Kim: So there's a lot of unknowns, but China is known to be by far the most important aid donor and economic partner for North Korea. So the bilateral economic ties must have been important during the pandemic as well, at least to a certain extent. But North Korea has had a very special approach for the pandemic. So I am not sure how much priority North Korea has placed on the economic ties with China.

People: What do you mean by a special approach?

Kim: It was very risk averse. And I think it prioritised domestic public health over the material welfare of the society. So for example, the trains that connect China and North Korea were stopped in January 2020 due to North Korea's border closure, and it was reopened in January 2022, but was then again suspended. And I actually read an article on Asahi Shimbun published on June 15 — North Korea is now requesting to restart the trains because of shortage of food and other goods. For one, they really need the material. But I think the more important reason is that they already have so many COVID infections, so they need to close the border. And this is why they don't have to worry so much about bringing in COVID by opening the border with China for economic exchanges.

Ko: So more broadly on North Korea's dependency on China: already from 2018, China accounts for almost more than 90% of North Korea's trade, and it wouldn't be a surprise if that number had actually increased during the pandemic. So I believe that China is the only route that North Korea can access to medication and then also vaccines too.

People: So if anything, the pandemic has increased the reliance of North Korea on China and probably made that relationship even closer. Jiyoung, before we move on, I just wanted to circle back to one piece of your research and the point you said about how China responded to North Korea's nuclear missile tests. How much fear is there in China or Beijing that actually this nuclear capability that North Korea has could be dangerous for China, that there's the danger of

some kind of error that takes place in North Korea's usage of nuclear weapons, even if it's just for tests? Are they actually worried about that sort of scenario?

Ko: So I think it's difficult to know exactly how the Chinese leadership assesses the risks related to North Korea's nuclear capability. But my guess is that China is probably less likely to worry about a catastrophic error in North Korea's nuclear estate, but it's more likely to have practical concerns about its nuclear tests. So after all, North Korea is a rational actor, as we have seen through past negotiations, and the state has a very strong control over the military. So I believe that there is relatively little possibility that North Korea uses nuclear weapons accidentally. I think a more practical issue for China is North Korea's nuclear tests. There have been growing fears among the Chinese public in the border area about radioactive fallout from North Korea's nuclear tests. So China has been monitoring for signs of radioactive fallout, because it is worried that contamination could provoke public unrest.

Kim: I think Jiyoung is probably right. And I'm just speculating here. But China can worry about the risk of a war between the United States and North Korea over North Korea's nuclear weapons development. And Chinese leaders could also worry about the possibility of North Korean nuclear weapons used against China. I mean, it's obvious these are all very small probability events. But because of their catastrophic consequences, I would think top leaders have to worry about these rather unlikely scenarios, so maybe there's some limited level of consultation between the United States and China about, for example, what to do if the Kim regime collapses because they need to then coordinate in dealing with remnants of North Korea's nuclear weapons programme.

North Korea's military threat to China is a very sensitive issue. And the Chinese government obviously has a very strong incentive to keep any discussion on this issue private. So we wouldn't really know much. And again, I talked about these very unlikely scenarios, but I somehow suspect that Chinese leaders also at some point have to worry about these possibilities, as well. And by the way, and China reportedly has not provided much assistance to North Korea's missile and nuclear weapons development, even though China offered significant support to Pakistan and Iran for these technologies.

Ko: So I think in that sense, Beijing may worry more about North Korea's intentional use of its nuclear weapons rather than [...]

Peaple: That leads me on to the broader big picture here from China's point of view. How do strategists in Beijing see the long term future of North Korea and the peninsula in general? This situation is often described as essentially one of the most dangerous situations in global geopolitics. How does China see that developing long term? Do they want to just keep the status quo? Or do they actually see a way for North Korea to somehow win over South Korea eventually? Or do they want to see some other kind of settlement? What's China's long term view here, Tongfi.

Kim: I have no special access to important information on sensitive issues like this one, but purely out of common sense calculation, I would think that Chinese leaders prefer to maintain the status quo. The current North Korean regime is unlikely to prevail over South Korea and South Korea absorbing North Korea means that China will have a border with a US military ally, that's really not a desirable outcome. And if China can install a pro-Chinese regime in Pyongyang, that would be the best, but that seems very difficult. The current competitive relationship between China and the United States also means that the United States will not be helping China to install a puppet regime in Pyongyang and the Kim regime has nuclear weapons that could also attack China, if China threatens the survival of the Kim regime.

Peaple: That's fascinating. So it faces some of the challenges that the US faces in that sense, and South Korea as well. Do you see, though, any way that China would want to see a lessening of tensions between the North and South permanently, and some kind of settlement, like the sorts of settlement that, under the Trump administration, whether rightly or wrongly, that they were trying to aim towards? Do you see China wanting to play a cooperative role, eventually, in bringing peace to the peninsula? Or is it just simply keep the regime in place, keep the status quo as it is?

Kim: I think a denuclearized North Korea is better for China, but I'm not sure how much priority China will place on the efforts to denuclearize North Korea. There are other important issues for China. So unlike the United States, South Korea or Japan, I don't think China will prioritise reducing the risks involved in having a nuclear North Korea.

Ko: I think maintaining the status quo actually suits China's national interest. The China-Korean relationship is often often illustrated as obtuse. China has long considered North Korea as part of its spinal interest, because it plays a role of preferred [...]. And if there is a reunification between the North and the South in any form, then I think there is a greater chance that it would be led by the South, and then that means that it will be more of a democratic regime on the Korean peninsula, and then China will lose its sphere of influence. So I think the status quo actually suits China's national interest.

And about denuclearization: So as a great power. China has definitely an interest in nuclear Non Proliferation and denuclearizing North Korea, but as Tongfi suggests, I agree that it's not China's top priority at the moment. I mean, look at their past efforts, during the 90s and then the 2000s, hosting the six party talks, all of those efforts didn't pay off.

Peaple: Do either of you see the possibility that an axis develops, potentially under Chinese leadership, between China, Russia and North Korea — we're almost bringing our discussion full circle here in the sense that the relationship started out with China and Russia competing for influence over North Korea. But do you see that axis reemerging? Because obviously, China has these reasonably close relations with Russia now, aswell. What's your thoughts on that?

Kim: I think there is indeed an axis of China, Russia and North Korea. And it sort of reminds us of the Cold War two-bloc system and inter-Korean relations. We also need to keep in mind that

this reemerging axis, I think this is basically a coalition of the excluded as far as security relations are concerned. And these countries don't trust each other either. And the United States and its allies should really keep that in mind and shouldn't treat them as a monolithic coalition.

People: That's a fascinating way to put it, a coalition of the excluded. Well, both of you, thank you so much for that highly informative discussion.