Alliance Fatigue amid Asymmetrical Interdependence:
Sino-North Korean Relations in Flux

Sukhee Han

Abstract

For more than four decades, China has been commonly recognized as North Korea's closest patron—it has served as a conduit for communication between the major regional powers and the “Hermit Kingdom,” a political and diplomatic protector of the neighboring socialist brethren, and an indispensable source of economic support. But the more important strategic glue binding the two countries has been the “Sino-North Korean Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance” of 1961.

However, since its reform and open-door policy in 1978, China has pursued a different set of strategies and directions for its national development, only to witness an ever-widening gap between its national interests and North Korea. The Sino-North Korean alliance has been redefined from a traditional alliance of “lips-to-teeth” to an alliance of asymmetrical interdependence.

Unambiguous signs of future changes in their relationship include: China’s active and immediate diplomatic involvement in dealing with North Korea’s renewed nuclear threat since 2003; its unusually public academic arguments for the redefinition of the Sino-North Korean alliance; and its intentional redeployment of the People’s Liberation Army for sealing the Sino-North Korean border.
deterrence by instability.” In brief, North Korea is a failed state whose future is increasingly tied to its military muscle—especially its nuclear and missile capability—and to economic assistance and aid from the international community.

Less clear, yet equally consequential, is the future evolution of China’s relationship with North Korea and its strategic implications for the region. This paper intends to shed some light on this important, yet little understood, relationship between Beijing and Pyongyang. After benefiting from the theoretical insights and historical analogies of their bilateral ties, it analyzes the major developments and emerging patterns that have largely defined their current ties. Finally, it addresses the future evolution of their relationship, which remains uncertain, uneasy and unpredictable.

The major arguments of this study are that the Sino-North Korean alliance is now experiencing its own “alliance fatigue,” mainly because of the decade-long asymmetrical interdependence between the two states. While it stands to reason that under the asymmetrical interdependence China does hold a certain level of economic and diplomatic leverage over North Korea, it does not necessarily mean that China is willing to use its leverage, or that it wants to see the Pyongyang regime suffer from outside pressure—as North Korea retains strategic value to China’s security. Therefore, North Korea knows this and utilizes it to its own advantage. Finally, unless a catalyst arises that could drive their relationship toward hostility, it is far more likely that China would attempt to prolong this asymmetrical interdependence for a while, as it is conducive to its primary goal regarding the Korean Peninsula: namely, stability.

Theoretical Insights into the Beijing-Pyongyang Alliance

In the Cold War international structure, a state, regardless of its prowess and ideology, had to rely very much on either “internal balancing”—independent arms build-up—or “external balancing”—forming a formal alliance with outside power(s)—or both, to ensure its national survival and national interests. Each option has relative costs and benefits. A state determines the best option based on a rational calculation
directed toward the most cost-effective alternative. Given the Cold War circumstances, a state’s foreign policy and external relations tended to be determined by the course of the development of its relationship(s) with its allied state(s). In a world characterized by divisions based on ideology, values, and political systems, states had to cluster into camps, for they perceived a need to fit their states’ fate and direction of development on the basis of the same criteria. It is for this perception and judgment that an alliance was supposed to be—at least in theory—mutually beneficial, reciprocal, and equally-based in its operation.\textsuperscript{4}

However, the reality was that it was a cluster by consequential choices. That is, smaller and weaker nations had to seek a source of protection against a variety of forms of nemesis, with bigger and stronger states inducing strategically valuable states to their own cause for the struggle in the bipolar global structure. Against this background, the alliance relationships fostered during the Cold War were naturally shaped to form “patron-client” relationships. While the greater powers would fully support the smaller ones in economic and security areas, it was usually at the cost of their autonomy in the foreign policy decision-making process and, to a certain extent, their sovereignty.

Alliances, however, are not permanent security mechanisms. Their fate is often subject to the changes occurring in both the domestic and international milieu of the patron and client states. In other words, an alliance is usually followed by adjustments when and if a significant change arises in their situation. This adjustment does not imply renunciation or nullification of the alliance relationship as long as the fundamental objectives and goals are perceived and shared by the states concerned. While the allied states may be bound by common goals and objectives, however, their relationship may not necessarily be so, because the client state’s strategic value in the patron’s strategic calculation may vary in accordance with changes in their situations. Under the circumstances, although the backbone of the alliance may remain

\textsuperscript{3} For an in-depth theoretical analysis of the alliance, see G. H. Snyder, “Alliance Theory: A Neo-realist First Cut,” Journal of International Affairs, No. 44 (1990), pp. 104–105.

\textsuperscript{4} As for the requirements for the formation of the alliance, see Jonathan D. Pollack and Young Koo Cha, A New Alliance: for the Next Century (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1995), p. 11.

unchanged, the relationships among allied states may sometimes seem to naturally drift apart or come together: an alliance is a symbol of a relationship, and a relationship entails realistic approaches toward its mechanism and operation.\textsuperscript{5}

Seen from the perspective of the alliance theory, the Sino-North Korean alliance has undergone a fundamental change in its nature and characteristics. Once described as “lips-to-teeth,” the alliance was much more balanced in terms of sustaining its purposes and objectives. To fend off the perceived military and security threat posed by South Korea and its ally, the two countries formed a military alliance.\textsuperscript{6} Depending on the view, however, there might be some confusion about which country is the “lips” to protect which country’s “teeth.” From the Chinese perspective, as the patron state and protector of the North, as demonstrated during the Korean War in the early 1950s, China is the lips protecting the teeth. From North Korea’s perspective, however, for its geostategic location, it is the lips guarding the teeth of the Chinese as long as it remains a buffer zone for Chinese strategic interests.\textsuperscript{7} Thus, the relationship between China and North Korea not only evolves around the military pact they signed in 1961, but also has developed on rather mutually beneficial and reciprocal terms as shown in economic cooperation and trade, as well as in political and diplomatic realms.

The economic and trade collaboration between the two nations was not conducted in the way it is today. As shown in Table 1, two-way trade in particular maintained a reciprocal trend.\textsuperscript{8} It was not until the

\textsuperscript{5} Regarding the qualitative changes in the alliance among the allies on the basis of costs and benefits, see Snyder, “Alliance Theory: A Neo-realist First Cut,” pp. 109–110.


\textsuperscript{7} Interviews with Chinese international relations experts and scholars, December 2002.

\textsuperscript{8} In the past, and especially in the 1960s and 1970s when the Chinese economy was devastated by successive bad economic policies during its experiences with the Great Leap Forward Movement and Cultural Revolution, North Korea “proved to be an important trade partner (to China).” Hong Yang Lee, “China’s Changing Relationship with North Korea,” in Doug Joon Kim, ed., Foreign Relations of North Korea: During Kim Il Sung’s Last Days (Seoul: The
early 1990s that North Korea became a unilateral recipient of Chinese aid and support in the form of the material needs for survival.9

In the political realm, the number of mutual visits by leaders and their support for each other’s regimes has been remarkably well-balanced. The pattern of their visits, at least, shows a great degree of consistency in terms of reciprocity.10 In the diplomatic area and international society, similar signs were easily detected in their mutual and reciprocal support for all the issues concerning each ally’s fate and national interests. Such support was clearly reflected in China’s voting behavior in particular11 and North Korea’s support for China’s anti-imperialism and anti-hegemonism campaign efforts. In return, up until the early 1990s, China was in full support of North Korea’s foreign policy, including its policy toward South Korea, as well as its unification policy.

On the other hand, the more or less balanced relationship between the two nations began to see an increasing tilt toward China, thereby transforming the structure into an asymmetrical one, particularly in their treatment of one another. Despite the fact that the backbone of the alliance is still maintained by the 1961 treaty, the alliance began to notice a transformation toward compliance with the end of the Cold War. With the rise of globalization, ever-deepening interdependence in the international economic realm, and increasing demand for cooperation in solving international conflicts, China adopted a policy to pursue the path of becoming a normal member of the international community, and became much more adaptive to such developments in world affairs. It was then in the early 1990s when China began to change its position with respect to handling its alliance relationship with North Korea.

China’s intention first manifested itself in the political and diplomatic sphere. Beginning with its approval of the joint admission of South and North Korea to membership of the United Nations in September 1991, it subsequently fully supported the joint statement by the two Koreas on the “Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-aggression and Exchanges and Cooperation between the South and the North” in December 1991 and the “Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula” in January 1992.12 A much more dramatic

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Table 1. China’s Trade with North Korea, 1950–1990

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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6.51</td>
<td>120.37</td>
<td>151.38</td>
<td>115.09</td>
<td>283.07</td>
<td>677.57</td>
<td>442.20</td>
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<td>% of China’s Total Trade</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>5.19</td>
<td>2.51</td>
<td>4.49</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>0.53</td>
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<tr>
<td>% of North Korea’s Total Trade</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>27.2</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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9 According to a Korean scholar’s finding, while North Korea received both grants (US$ 300.6 million) and credit assistance (US$ 172.5 million) from China in the 1950s, in the 1960s North Korea did not receive grants but credit assistance of US$ 105 million from China. See Cheon-ki Eun, North Korea’s Foreign Policy toward China and the Soviet Union (Seoul: Namji Press Company, 1994), p. 164, Table 5–1.

10 For a detailed list of reciprocal visits by the leaders, delegations, and military personnel of China and North Korea from 1949 to 1985, see the Appendix in Eun, North Korea’s Foreign Policy on China and the Soviet Union (Seoul: Namji Press Company, 1994), pp. 307–35.


12 Dong Sung Kim, “North Korea’s China Policy,” in Yang Seong Chul and Kang...
change in China’s position with regard to Korean Peninsula affairs was soon evident in its new assessment and evaluation of the American military presence on the Peninsula. It publicly stated that the U.S. military presence was beneficial and constructive to peace and stability on the Peninsula, for it prevents Japan from remilitarizing itself. Thus, in political and diplomatic perspectives, the structure of the Sino-North Korea alliance lost its inherent balance. In a retrospective sense, it is now asymmetrical.

An asymmetric trend began to surface in the economic realm due to a combination of factors, including the discontinuation of Soviet assistance, China’s reform policies, and a series of natural disasters in North Korea. The failed recovery from the natural disasters apparently deepened North Korea’s dependence on China, and to some extent, on South Korea for assistance and humanitarian aid until the breakout of the first North Korean nuclear crisis in 1993–94. In the midst of the crisis, South Korea withdrew itself from supporting the North, leaving China to assume the sole “life-supporter” role. Despite its sporadic demands for repayment of loans and goods to be traded with hard currency, it publicly stated that the U.S. military presence on the Peninsula was beneficial and constructive to peace and stability on the Peninsula.


One salient example was China’s demand for conditional payment of 25 percent for its total supply of grain, crude oil, and coal in hard currency, which was made in July 1996. China insisted on payment, and warned that it would cut off the supply of goods. Maeil Shinmun, July 18, 1996.


Historical Evolution of the Chinese-North Korean Military Alliance

In order to analyze the current status of the Sino-North Korean military alliance, it is necessary to carefully examine the vicissitude of the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance between China and North Korea, concluded in July 1961. For China, the major impetus for the conclusion of the treaty was its strategic interest in the Korean Peninsula in general and in North Korea’s strategic importance in particular, especially when the future of Sino-Soviet relations was so uncertain. Traditionally, China perceived the Korean Peninsula as a strategic pivot that exerted direct influence over the security of China proper. In order to protect this security linchpin, China was involved in three military confrontations, including the Sino-Japanese Wars in 1952 and in 1895, and its military involvement in the Korean War against the perceived U.S. expansion in 1950.

Given that its sphere of influence was limited to the northern half of the Peninsula after the end of the Korean War in 1953, China’s policy toward North Korea had been shaped along with a variety of power politics competition and alignments among the United States, Russia, and Japan in regional politics, which was the major rationale for the conclusion of the Sino-North Korean treaty.

The first motivation came from the U.S.-Japanese revision of their security treaty in 1960. Their major objective of the strategic binding was to further solidify their anticommunist military containment system in the Asian-Pacific region. China, which regarded it as a serious security threat, struggled to reinforce its frontline security. Second, a series of disruptive events in South Korea, in particular the anti-gov-

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ernment student uprising in April 1960 and Park Chung Hee’s military coup d’état in May 1961, increased Chinese concern of potential instability and uncertainty on the Korean Peninsula. Third, a more important impetus was the growing Sino-Soviet rift, which Kim Il Sung managed to manipulate in the interests of North Korea’s security. In order to secure their strategic influence over North Korea, China and the Soviet Union had competed to provide economic and military resources and political support for the Kim Il Sung regime. Hence the Chinese regarded this new treaty as an important instrument to counterbalance not only the assertive U.S. military presence in South Korea, but also the Soviet Union’s potential military ambitions in North Korea.

In particular, Article II of the treaty serves as an important legal basis to bind China and North Korea as strategic allies:

“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.”

The major source of the Sino-North Korean military alliance included an automatic military intervention clause to defend each other, just in case one of the contracting parties was subject to an armed attack by other state(s). Both China and North Korea committed themselves to immediate assistance by all means at their disposal, which was evaluated as “a more direct and categorical commitment” than that of the Soviet-North Korean treaty and that of the U.S.-South Korean treaty.

Over the years, however, the Chinese adjusted to new domestic and international conditions, and as a result the Sino-North Korean alliance lost its original strategic importance in the implementation of security commitment. The initial steps stemmed from China’s détente diplomacy. Given the definition of alliance as “a formal or informal relationship of security cooperation between two or more sovereign states,” it usually expects reciprocal support in disputes or wars with particular common adversaries. Following the general tendencies of the alliance, China and North Korea also established their exclusive alliance against specific adversaries. As signified in the joint statement issued by Liu Shaoqi (Chairman of the People’s Republic of China) and Choe Yong Kun (President of North Korea’s Supreme People’s Assembly) on June 23, 1963, their common adversaries included Soviet “revisionists,” U.S. “imperialists,” Japanese “militarists,” and South Korean “fascists.”

Moreover, in contrast to North Korea’s pursuit of its recluse “Hermit Kingdom,” China has embarked upon the so-called “normalization diplomacy” since the early 1970s—including the Sino-Japanese normalization in 1972, the Sino-U.S. normalization in 1979, the Sino-Soviet détente in the 1980s, and the Sino-South Korean normalization in 1992. Lacking common specific adversaries, China and North Korea faced growing difficulties and anomalies in maintaining the bilateral military alliance.

Second, and more pertinently, the Sino-South Korean normalization...
tion was a serious challenge to the Sino-North Korean alliance. Article III of the Sino-North Korean alliance reads, “Neither Contracting Party shall conclude any alliance directed against the other Contracting Party or take part in any bloc or in any action or measure directed against the other Contracting Party.” Although the Sino-South Korean normalization was technically viewed as neither terminating the alliance nor forming a bloc against North Korea, China’s formation of diplomatic relations with an adversary of its ally, South Korea, could be tantamount to Chinese negligence in respecting the Sino-North Korean alliance. Furthermore, China’s strategic shift from the traditional “one-Korea” policy to a “two-Korea” policy provided China with a higher bargaining position vis-à-vis North Korea—which enabled China to exercise stronger influence in dealing with North-South dialogue, North Korea’s nuclear brinkmanship, and the potential Korean unification process.

At the same time, however, the Sino-North Korean alliance still remains as a legal basis and a political symbol for the continuity of the bilateral relationship. Two explanations can be put forward for the longevity of the bilateral treaty. First, it is neither easy nor simple for China to revise or abolish the treaty. According to Article VII of the Sino-North Korean treaty, China cannot legally revise or terminate the treaty without prior mutual agreement. As a matter of fact, the Sino-North Korean treaty was signed five days after the conclusion of the Soviet-North Korean treaty of 1961. Given the growing intensity of the Sino-Soviet rift, China was under severe security pressure when it signed the treaty, and for this reason China apparently hastened to integrate North Korea to its side by securing a more compelling clause in the treaty. China’s successful insertion of the “amendment by mutual agreement” clause in the treaty enabled China to promote a greater sense of permanency and stability in its military relations with North Korea.

Four decades later, however, China and North Korea’s attitudes toward the treaty have been completely reversed. China no longer struggles to hold onto North Korea, referring to the amendment only by mutual agreement clause, while North Korea, taking advantage of the clause, strived to consolidate the traditional legal binding between China and itself.

Second, given North Korea’s current situation including its sagging economy, its international isolation, and its internal rigidity, China’s revision or abolition of the existing Sino-North Korean alliance would trigger or even precipitate North Korea’s implosion or explosion—which could in turn undermine China’s pursuit of the peaceful and stable regional environment necessary to its national goal of economic development. In particular, without any viable alternative to escape from its plight, North Korea cannot but cling to the nuclear development program. Similarly, considering China’s unique position to influence or persuade North Korea to continue the nuclear negotiation process, China’s severance or at least modification of the bilateral alliance would also undermine its diplomatic leverage vis-à-vis North Korea, which would make Northeast Asian security increasingly uncertain.

To summarize, the Sino-North Korean alliance is still legally valid, leaving its terms and regulations unchanged. But in terms of its actual implementation and operation, China’s attitude toward North Korea has changed remarkably compared with the past. China’s new emphasis on national development and its ensuing projection of modernization diplomacy has significantly reduced the shared range of bilateral

24 See the Appendix for treaty text.
26 Article VII says, “The present Treaty will remain in force until the Contracting Parties agree on its amendment or termination.” See Appendix in this paper.
28 From this perspective, the Korean Peninsula is categorized as the core problem (hexin wenti) in China’s foreign policy community. See Song Dexing, “Lengzhana anquan xingshe de bianhua [Changes in the Northeast Asian Security Situation after the Cold War],” Xiandai guoji guanxi [Contemporary International Relations], No. 9 (1998), p. 35.
common interests. As the gap in their national interests has widened, North Korea has turned out to be more of a strategic burden than a strategic buffer to protect China’s security. From this perspective, the Sino-North Korean relationship is no longer bound by a military alliance conducive to mutual security, but an alliance of asymmetrical interdependence.

Analyzing North Korea’s Growing Dependence and Its Leverage

The major reason why North Korea increasingly depends on China’s patronage is the instability of its regime. Three factors should be considered in explaining North Korea’s structural problems. The first factor is the end of the Cold War. Since the early 1990s, the worldwide collapse of the socialist states, including the Soviet Union and a number of Eastern European states, proved the invalidity of the socialist systems in the age of globalization, economic prowess, and interdependence. As a staunch socialist regime, North Korea has faced a formidable external threat to its regime survival.

Second, adhering to the anachronistic self-reliance on the basis of juche ideology, North Korea has pursued a reclusive and isolationist foreign policy. Fearing the possible destabilizing effect that external influences can have on regime stability, North Korea has remained a “Hermit Kingdom,” refusing to open up in a meaningful way to the international community. North Korea’s refusal to join the world trend of globalization has left it further isolated from the mainstream international community.30

Third, and the most determining, factor is North Korea’s chronic economic plight. Repeated failures in its economic development programs, coupled with a series of natural calamities since the mid-1990s have pushed the North Korean economy toward virtual collapse. Hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of North Korean civilians have died of starvation as a result. Foreign trade has declined precipitously and

30 For an insightful analysis of North Korea’s domestic predicaments, see Kongdan Oh and Ralph C. Hassig, North Korea through the Looking Glass (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2000).

the country’s gross domestic product has recorded negative growth each year throughout the 1990s.31 In addition, tens of thousands of North Korea’s hungry refugees crossed the Sino-North Korean border in search for food. Given the gravity of starvation and economic degradation, North Korea’s economic quandary has been so severe as to pose a major threat to the North’s regime stability.32 To overcome the economic impasse and to sustain the regime, North Korea, unlike most other transitional states, relied instead on atypical measures—nuclear programs and China’s economic aid—rather than on a self-serving economic development program. Since the end of the Cold War, China has provided over 20 percent of the food and over 70 percent of fuel that North Korea needs as a form of aid.33 Although international humanitarian aid was temporarily delivered to relieve the nationwide famine during the mid-1990s, when natural calamities wreaked havoc upon the North, China’s economic aid has consistently served as a major source of supply for the survival of North Korea’s citizens. In fact, Beijing’s grant for aid was designed to reduce the flow of North Korea’s refugees to China’s northeastern region, to delay a potential regime collapse in Pyongyang, and to enhance China’s voice for introducing a Chinese-style reform process and open-door policy to North Korea’s moribund regime.34 Therefore, North Korea’s growing dependence on China’s aid should be translated as China’s growing leverage vis-à-vis North Korea. Reviewing North Korea’s international behavior, on the other hand, North Korea’s geographical importance in China’s security consideration still left

More often than not, North Korea has practiced diplomatic brinkmanship in its negotiations with the regional powers, which is a dangerous tactic to begin with. Since North Korea’s nuclear brinkmanship is not a real suicidal measure, but a high-pitched rhetoric bordering on “deterrence by instability” for securing a stronger negotiating position, North Korea must depend on China for its own security from unwanted sanctions or military confrontations.

For example, when North Korea declared its intention to withdraw from the IAEA and the NPT in March 1993, the United States considered imposing sanctions on North Korea. But this strategy could not be implemented, because they believed that China would not be cooperative in imposing sanctions on North Korea in the UN Security Council.

As a result, China’s threat of a veto on any draft sanctions resolution in the Security Council enabled Pyongyang to arrange bilateral negotiations with the United States. A series of high-level talks between the two states in New York and Geneva culminated in the U.S.-DPRK Agreed Framework on Oct. 21, 1994.

As witnessed in the 1994 Agreed Framework, the security of North Korea and its success of nuclear diplomacy were all dependent upon the role of China. Although the North’s security is still heavily dependent on China, the North Korean regime’s continued pursuit of nuclear brinkmanship, instead of China’s preferred option of economic reform, is seriously undermining the alliance.

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36 Shambaugh classified the priority of China’s policy calculus toward North Korea and first two are North Korea’s regime survival and North Korea’s regime reform. It is very interesting that he puts the issue of North Korea’s comprehensive WMD programs at the bottom, see David Shambaugh, “China and the Korean Peninsula: Playing for the Long Term,” pp. 44-45.

37 For recent research on North Korea’s nuclear brinkmanship, see Michael O’Hanlon and Mike Mochizuki, “Toward a Grand Bargain with North Korea,” The Washington Quarterly, Vol. 26, No. 4 (Autumn 2003), pp. 7–18.


Future Evolution of the Asymmetrical Interdependence

Recently, Pyongyang’s growing dependence on Beijing for its economic and political survival has served as an emotional breeding ground for mutual distrust and resentment. Tired of North Korea’s incessant requests for economic aid, its diehard pursuit of nuclear weapons, and its continuing inflows of refugees, China has seriously considered redefining Sino-North Korean relations. The unexpected revival of Pyongyang’s nuclear blackmail in October 2002 was one of the most serious developments to annoy China. Although China demonstrated its continued diplomatic support for North Korea by arranging the Three-Party Talks in March 2003 and the Six-Party Dialogue in August 2003 and argued for the peaceful resolution of the North’s nuclear issue, Beijing was covertly expressing its annoyance over North Korea’s continued refusal to adhere to its advice by manipulating North Korea in an assertive manner.

China’s initial change of attitude toward North Korea was evident in its management of the renewed North Korean nuclear issue. In dealing with the 2003 North Korean nuclear crisis, Hu Jintao, the newly-inaugurated leader of China, reportedly sent three dignitaries to Pyongyang as messengers, conveying his three suggestions for future guidelines. First, North Korea should exert efforts to launch self-supporting economic development. Second, North Korea’s reform and open-door policy should be modeled after the Chinese experience. Third, North Korea should improve its relations with regional states by halting its development program for weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Beijing’s blunt and clear message to Pyongyang is said to have prompted North Korea’s participation in the Six-Party Dialogue in August 2003.

China’s active involvement in the 2003 nuclear issue was a far cry from its behavior in 1993–94, when it was reluctant to engage in nuclear negotiations. China’s changed North Korea policy was reflective of not only the growing emotional cleavages in the Sino-North Korean traditional alliance, but also China’s growing strategic leverage in the Sino-North Korean alliance of asymmetrical interdependence.

More unequivocal signs of China’s alienation from North Korea came to the frontline of public debates in Chinese academic circles. As You Ji analyzed in his article, the Chinese government strictly restrained the public debates on North Korea-related issues, including the North Korean refugee problem, Korean unification prospects, and Sino-North Korean relations.

From this perspective, two Chinese academics’ unusual comments on Sino-North Korean relations are worthy of note. Shi Inhong of Renmin University—while claiming that China’s involvement in the Korean War in 1950 exerted only political, military, and economic disadvantages to China—insisted that China should not get involved in potential military confrontations between the United States and North Korea. Echoing his position, Shen Jiru, a researcher at the Institute of World Economy and Politics, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), argued that Article 2 of the 1961 Sino-North Korean treaty, signing the mutual automatic intervention commitment, should be deleted from the treaty. He emphasized that China’s resolute message of no military assistance would preclude North Korea from

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41 Three messengers include Wang Yi and Dai Bingguo, deputy ministers of China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Xu Caihou, Secretary of PLA’s Commission for Discipline.
42 JoongAng Ilbo (in subscription of CNN), Aug. 26, 2003. One impetus for Hu’s attitudinal change toward North Korea is attributed to the generational changes in the Chinese leadership. With no personal bondage with North Korea’s Kim Jung-il, Hu is freer than his predecessors in dealing with North Korea. For China’s generational transition, see Joseph Fewsmith, “China’s
the potential miscalculation of waging a war on the Peninsula.\footnote{Shen argues that the North Korean nuclear crisis should be resolved by peaceful measures. In his article, Shen emphasizes that the amendment of the Sino-North Korean treaty contributes to the peaceful resolution of the crisis and also urges that South Korea and Japan should dissuade the United States from using military force against North Korea. See Shen Jiru, “youhu dongbeiya anquande danwuzhiwei: zhizhi chaohewentishangde weixianboyi [Urgent Mission to maintain Northeast Asia Security: Control the risk from North Korean nuclear brinkmanship], Xhijiejingji yu Zhengzhi [World Economy and Politics] No. 9 (2003), pp. 53–58.}

Considering China’s unique system of social operation, their arguments serve as valuable insights to assume that its attitude toward North Korea is moving in a direction, largely unfavorable to Kim Jong-II’s regime. Reflecting You Ji’s analysis, government officials and scholars have to control their comments to foreigners on sensitive issues, in particular North Korean issues. Most Chinese government officials and scholars tend to be reluctant to comment on North Korean issues, and if they do comment, their opinions should be in accordance with the official lines on the issue. Reviewing the background of Shi and Shen, a plausible assumption of the close relationship between their personal comments and tacit changes in the government’s position toward North Korea is even more vindicated. Although a professor of Renmin University, Professor Shi’s opinion is well-known in Chinese academia to be very conducive to China’s official position. As a researcher at the government sponsored research institute, Shen’s publication would have passed the government censorship before the publication.

Another sign of China’s uncomfortable relationship with North Korea was its “reported” deployment of a part of its Shenyang military troops to the border between China and North Korea.\footnote{The Economist, Sept. 18, 2003.} In response to China’s redeployment of its troops near North Korea, a variety of interpretations of the Chinese move proliferated in the media. Some argued that China’s action was an indication of its pressure on the North’s regime to give up its nuclear development; while others claim that the major objective of China’s action was limited to the management of the ever-growing flood of North Korean refugees; and yet others insist that this is not only for the purpose of stopping North Korean refugees from crossing the border, but also for preventing them from committing crimes in the northeast border area of China.\footnote{Washington Post, Sept. 16, 2003; JoongAng Ilbo, Sept. 16, 2003; and Daily Telegraph, Sept. 16, 2003.} Although Beijing officially denied the various reasons offered by the international media, it however at least confirmed that China’s military has replaced the armed police in the region. Regardless of the specific reasons, China’s unusual military redeployment, especially during a sensitive time and in a sensitive region, underscores the fact that the Sino-North Korean alliance has been undergoing dramatic changes.

Analyzing the Sino-North Korean relationship is always a challenging task. As socialist brethrens, both China and North Korea, at least in principle, still pursue the benefits of preventing outflows of information. Although China, aware of the sensitivity of the issue, has consistently struggled to conceal its policy toward North Korea, the decades-long divergence between China’s pragmatic pursuit of national development and North Korea’s erratic moves toward the “great leap backward” has created a political, economic, and cultural cleavage too wide to keep the Sino-North Korean alliance intact. The new bilateral adjustment, following the end of the Cold War, has resulted in an alliance of asymmetrical interdependence. Retaining its strategic value to China’s goal of peace and stability in the region, North Korea has steadily yet surely increased its political, economic, and security dependence on China. China, in fear of a potential collapse of the North Korean regime, has admitted to providing political, economic, and diplomatic aid to North Korea, even without enhancing its leverage over the moribund dynasty.

Even with limited leverage, China has consistently recommended to North Korea that it introduce a program for national development—amounting, to some extent, to a program for survival following the Chinese model of reform and open-door policy. However, China’s patient hospitality has frequently been reciprocated with blatant annoyance. Despite China’s declared opposition, North Korea has even tenaciously pursued its nuclear development programs. For North Korea, the nuclear development program is a means not only for securing...
ing regime survival but also for providing economic resources. Therefore, the North regime believes that there is no alternative to the pursuit of nuclear procurement, regardless of China’s wishes. Given the situation of a cul-de-sac, the only way for China to support the North’s regime survival and persuade Pyongyang to forfeit its nuclear development program, is to deliver a warning to the North that China is implementing a more hard-line policy.

From this perspective, it seems that China’s recent behavior reflects its internal perceptive changes of North Korea. China’s active and immediate diplomatic involvement in dealing with North Korea’s renewed nuclear threat of 2003, its unusually public academic arguments for redefining the Sino-North Korean alliance, and its deliberate redeployment of the People’s Liberation Army for the purpose of sealing the Sino-North Korean border, can be interpreted as unambiguous signs of future changes in their relationship. It is entirely possible that the current Sino-North Korean alliance relationship will continue to evolve and develop within the context of asymmetrical interdependence. But the context itself is also undergoing change. This, in short, constitutes China’s longer-term strategic dilemma regarding the North Korean question.

<Appendix>


The Chairman of the People’s Republic of China and the Presidium of the Supreme People’s Assembly of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, determined, in accordance with Marxism-Leninism and the principle of proletarian internationalism and on the basis of mutual respect for state sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other’s internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and mutual assistance and support, to make every effort to further strengthen and develop the fraternal relations of friendship, co-operation and mutual assistance between the People’s Republic of China and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, to jointly guard the security of the two peoples, and to safeguard and consolidate the peace of Asia and the world, and deeply convinced that the development and strengthening of the relations of friendship, co-operation and mutual assistance between the two countries accord not only with the fundamental interests of the two peoples but also with the interests of the peoples all over the world, have decided for this purpose to conclude the present Treaty and appointed as their respective plenipotentiaries:

The Chairman of the People’s Republic of China: Chou En-lai, Premier of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China.


Who, having examined each other’s full powers and found them in good and due form, have agreed upon the following:

Article I

The Contracting Parties will continue to make every effort to safeguard the peace of Asia and the world and the security of all peoples.

Article II

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.
Article III

Neither Contracting Party shall conclude any alliance directed against the other Contracting Party or take part in any bloc or in any action or measure directed against the other Contracting Party.

Article IV

The Contracting Parties will continue to consult with each other on all important international questions of common interest to the two countries.

Article V

The Contracting Parties, on the principles of mutual respect for sovereignty, non-interference in each other’s internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit and in the spirit of friendly co-operation, will continue to render each other every possible economic and technical aid in the cause of socialist construction of the two countries and will continue to consolidate and develop economic, cultural, and scientific and technical co-operation between the two countries.

Article VI

The Contracting Parties hold that the unification of Korea must be realized along peaceful and democratic lines and that such a solution accords exactly with the national interests of the Korean people and the aim of preserving peace in the Far East.

Article VII

The present Treaty is subject to ratification and shall come into force on the day of exchange of instruments of ratification, which will take place in Pyongyang.

The present Treaty will remain in force until the Contracting Parties agree on its amendment or termination.

Done in duplicate in Peking on the eleventh day of July, nineteen sixty-one, in the Chinese and Korean languages, both texts being equally authentic.

(Signed)

CHOU EN-LAI
Plenipotentiary of the People’s Republic of China
(Signed)

KIM IL SUNG
Plenipotentiary of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea