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Asia's China Debate

Dr. Alexandre Y. Mansourov is an Associate Professor at the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies. He is a specialist in Northeast Asian security, politics, and economics, focusing primarily on the Korean Peninsula. Dr. Mansourov received his Ph.D. in Political Science from Columbia University. He co-edited a book titled *The North Korean Nuclear Program: Security, Strategy, and New Perspectives from Russia* and has published numerous book chapters and academic articles on Korean and Northeast Asian affairs.

Giving Lip Service with an Attitude: North Korea's China Debate

ALEXANDRE Y. MANSOUROV

Executive Summary

- China's influence in North Korea is grossly misrepresented and exaggerated. In the past five years, Beijing's economic assistance to Pyongyang and the latter's economic dependence on China in terms of food, fuel, fertilizers, and monetary remittances declined in both absolute and relative terms.
- China's military-technical assistance is sporadic and of questionable value. The DPRK-PRC mutual defense alliance is hollow and on paper only. Controversial cross-border contacts aggravate tensions and increase uncertainty in the overall stressful bilateral relationship.
- North Korean elite perceptions and popular images of China grow increasingly ambiguous and negative. Strategic interaction on international security issues is self-interested, with very few common interests and shared approaches. Despite calendar exchanges of standard reverences, political relations are frosty.
- Revolutionary traditions have faded away, and personal loyalties and leadership bonds have already dissolved. The North Korean breed of resurgent neo-traditionalist and isolationist nationalism is hardly compatible with the hegemonic ideology of the revisionist Chinese pseudo-Marxist internationalism. Pragmatism and rational calculation of national interests prevail in both capitals.
- The United States should not count on China's perceived ability "to deliver the DPRK"—it hardly can. Although Beijing may be able to bring Pyongyang to "the party" occasionally, it definitely cannot make North Korea dance to its music, let alone to the tunes emanating from Washington. North Korea would rather spoil the multinational party than give the spoils to its Chinese "benefactor" or American "villain," if its concerns are not satisfied "in a just and appropriate manner."

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THE ECONOMIC DIMENSION: NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, "STEALTHY" ASSISTANCE, AND THE FUTURE OF REFORMS

Throughout history, Korean rulers looked at China as a source of political and ideological legitimacy for their regimes, as a reliable military shield, and as an applicable model of socio-economic development, cultural traditions, and moral values for Korean states. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) was no different.

DPRK founder Kim Il Sung turned to his former comrades-in-arms from the days of the joint anti-Japanese struggle in Manchuria—the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders led by Mao Zedong—for military assistance in his zealous drive to unify the Korean Peninsula in 1950–53. He also relied heavily on the economic aid of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the free labor of several hundred thousand Chinese People's Volunteers (CPVs) in the post-war reconstruction of Korea. During the socialist construction in the 1960s and 1970s, protected by the Chinese military umbrella, the DPRK's leadership tended to follow the CCP's ideological lead and copied Chinese methods of labor mobilization, e.g., the Ch'ollima ("Flying Horse") movement modeled after the Maoist Great Leap Forward and the Soktojon ("speed battle"). North Korea also adopted some Chinese-like forms of organization of industrial and agricultural production processes known as the Taean system. Even after Deng Xiaoping launched economic reforms in China in 1978, Kim Il Sung attempted to imitate the Chinese example by introducing the Joint Venture Law and a new self-accounting system in the mid-1980s. But, that is where emulation stopped.

In the beginning of the 1990s, the developmental paths of North Korea and China began to diverge rapidly. Following the cutoff of allied assistance, the collapse of the world communist economic system, and the death of its founder, North Korea fell deeply into economic depression and political coma, which disrupted the decades-old social-economic fabric and shook the political foundations of the North Korean regime, whereas China accelerated market-oriented economic reforms and experienced one of the most dynamic growth spurts in its modern history, increasing the political legitimacy of the CCP's rule at home and strengthening China's influence abroad.

The public in the impoverished and stagnant North Korea has rather ambiguous views and mixed feelings about prosperous and dynamic China. These days in Pyongyang, it is hard to find anyone who would view China as altruistic, fraternal, or friendly. There is little sense of close cultural ties, personal bonds, political affinities, or of China being a reliable ally ready to help out its smaller loyal neighbor in times of need.

Increasingly, people question whether China is a friend or a foe. Some fundamental questions hang in the air in the power halls of Pyongyang: Does the internal transformation and greater assertiveness in the external behavior of China pose a threat to the DPRK's national security or create opportunities and expand options for its diplomatic maneuvers and economic experimentation? Is China a part of the fundamental solution for some or all the North Korean problems, or is it a part and a source of these problems? Does the Chinese path of national development present a model to emulate or a hidden trap to avoid? Is the DPRK's geopolitical relationship with the PRC a strategic asset to be cherished—especially at the

time of escalated international tensions on the Korean Peninsula—or a long-term liability to be eventually discarded to prevent possible Chinese betrayal? Will the new fourth-generation leadership in China support and continue to assist Kim Jong Il's government or gradually withdraw its sponsorship and terminate its material assistance? In the Western language, people wonder whether China is a regime enabler or regime terminator for Kim Jong Il.

When many ordinary North Koreans are quietly pondering what went wrong during the lost decade of the 1990s, they hear the shallow official explanations pointing fingers at the tightening noose of the U.S.-led imperialist blockade and stressing the catastrophic impact of frequent natural calamities. But, the informed elites cannot help making unfavorable comparisons between their miserable and lethargic homeland and rich and vibrant China; they keep wondering why the communist leadership in China succeeded in its socialist modernization drive whereas their own leaders are unable to boost economic performance, improve public welfare, and maintain political stability.

Significant portions of the North Korean economic and military elites appear to admire and envy Chinese economic accomplishments. They quietly wonder why their own leaders seem to be reluctant to emulate the triumphant examples of Chinese reforms, despite the obvious lesson of the past twenty years that Beijing did succeed in moving a previously isolated, over-centralized, and heavily militarized command-and-control economy toward the state-regulated quasi-private markets, relatively open to the global economy, without undermining the political monopoly of the ruling communist party or disturbing social peace and internal stability. Even when the path of the Chinese-style economic reforms is clear—denationalize agriculture first, privatize light industry and liberalize foreign trade and investment next, restructure the state-owned enterprises in the heavy industries and banking system last—North Korean leaders appear to be adamant about ignoring the advice coming from all levels of the Chinese government and positive Chinese experiences.

Kim Jong Il must be well aware of the latent pro-Chinese sentiments among some members of the economic and military elites. He, too, likely appreciates Chinese economic accomplishments, which he witnessed during his two recent trips to the PRC. He likes the Chinese model of combining a “hard state” and a “soft economy” as a recipe for economic recovery and further progress. But, he resents Chinese “lecturing” about the direction of economic rehabilitation and restructuring in the North and resists Beijing's indirect attempts to “interfere” with Korean domestic affairs.

To reduce the influence of pro-Chinese sentiments around the country, Kim Jong Il's coterie is on the propaganda counter-offensive, accusing the reformist China of greed and lack of allied solidarity. Ordinary North Koreans are told that if China were still truly a fraternal socialist power, then why would the communist leaders of the second-largest economy in the world be so reluctant to share the benefits from its miraculous economic growth of the past two decades with its weak and impoverished neighbor, especially given the latter's tremendous misfortunes caused by natural disasters? North Korean officials are quick to point out that the prosperous Chinese are not as generous as the DPRK government used to be in the late 1960s when Pyongyang offered considerable food aid to starving Chinese peasants in the wake of the dreadful famine in the PRC caused by the excesses of the Cultural Revolution.

Overall, North Korean officials consider the sporadic trickle of economic aid from China to be pathetic. They say every time Beijing offers a grant-in-aid to Pyongyang, it is accompanied with numerous political conditions (which, to be fair, are rarely implemented). For comparison, they often refer to the Asian financial crisis and say that when an American ally, South Korea, found itself in deep trouble in 1998, Washington provided Seoul with US\$57 billion in international financial assistance without many reservations or pressure, thereby saving the ROK's economy from financial meltdown.

Moreover, Kim's regime seems to support the widely held popular belief that during the arduous 1990s, Chinese merchants actually took advantage of the North Korean economic difficulties by plundering the DPRK's natural resources, including its timber saw mills, coal mines, and ore deposits, as well as collecting its idle factory machinery and inoperable plant equipment such as iron and metal scrap, in exchange for the daily necessities and consumer goods of questionable quality and second-hand nature. Official grumbles and local public complaints both stress that "the Chinese can do more to help us, but they don't; and what they give us is of dubious value and low quality, especially the expired medicines, rotten food, worn-out clothes, poorly distilled hard liqueur, and very bad cigarettes."

Furthermore, some North Korean bureaucrats argue that "we tried to follow the Chinese example in the development of special economic zones (SEZ) by establishing the SEZ in Sinuiju, but the Chinese stabbed us in the back and almost derailed the process by arresting its first Governor-designate Yang Bin, even despite his Chinese origin." They go as far as to imply that the Chinese leadership may not be interested in any fundamental reforms in North Korea because the latter are allegedly against Chinese national interests.

In particular, if economic reforms succeed in the DPRK, they could spur economic recovery, further reduce Pyongyang's dependence on Beijing's economic largesse and political benevolence, and increase North Korea's sovereignty and independence in foreign affairs. Alternatively, if reforms fail, they could further undermine social stability and political status quo in Pyongyang, threaten the regime's future in the North, and bring about an early Korean reunification undesirable to the Chinese. Hence, Pyongyang seems to believe that Beijing prefers the preservation of the status quo in the North and, therefore, desires neither a success nor failure for the North Korean reforms.

SINO-KOREAN BORDER AND THE MANCHURIAN CONUNDRUM

Cross-border relations constitute another major driver in the DPRK's debate about China. Historically, the ever porous Sino-Korean border has always been "an area of exile, escape, and experimentation." The remnants of the Koguryo elites, defeated and bludgeoned by the victorious Silla rulers in the mid-seventh century, fled northward and founded a state of Parhae on the modern territory of Northeast China. In the wake of the farmland devastation caused by the Japanese invasions during the Imjin wars in 1592–98, thousands of Korean peasants fled across the Yalu River in search of shelter and livelihood. Social dislocation, general impoverishment, and famines in the mid-nineteenth century led not only to nationwide vagrancy and frequent rural rebellions, but also caused mass migration of displaced Korean peasants primarily from Hamgyong provinces in search

of food and income to Manchuria. The Japanese takeover of Korea in 1910 squeezed the anti-Japanese nationalists and communists into political exile in Northeast China. It should not be a surprise that among deprived peasants were thousands of bandits, wanted criminals, petty capitalists, vagabonds, exiles, self-made men and all sorts of opportunists. In brief, throughout Korea's two thousand-year-old history, Koreans—in particular many residents of the northern provinces—were drawn to Manchuria by the opportunity to improve their living standards and escape economic distress and criminal or political prosecution at home.

Since the mid-1990s, for many North Koreans, Northeast China has become associated with the land of opportunity and tragedy. A trip across the spottily guarded Sino-Korean border, a personal challenge and sacrifice in its own right, becomes their first encounter with the frontier capitalism, the Chinese-style Wild Wild West. Often-repeated fables about the Manchurian El Dorado generate high expectations and misguided hopes but also provoke many associated fears and high anxiety. These heroic endeavors are costly, physically and mentally challenging, and rarely produce lasting or repeated success. Instead, these opportunistic border crossings, after initial moments of joy and excitement, often tear families apart, put human lives in danger and outside the law, and tend to result in a drama of personal disappointment, abuse, and loss.

Most of the reported several hundred thousand North Korean migrants in Manchuria obviously try to escape from starvation and economic misery back in the DPRK. Some refugees are alleged to flee from criminal and administrative prosecution at home. Certain defectors clearly seek political asylum. Still, others opportunistically attempt to enrich themselves through repeated interactions with China by exploiting the growing inefficiencies of North Korea's collapsing economic system and ubiquitous corruption at all levels of the DPRK's administrative system and law enforcement organs.

Cross-border human trafficking, polygamy, underage sex slavery, illegal opium production in the mountains, drug smuggling from Manchuria to the North, commercialization of political asylum-seeking, contraband trade, black marketeering, local corruption, physical abuse, and violent crime all constitute part and parcel of the tragic North Korean refugee life in the Manchurian underground, organized by a seamless web of sly and ferocious intermediaries of Chinese-Korean descent in the Yanbian Korean autonomous region in China and their North Korean contacts of Chinese origin in the North.

The DPRK's authorities must be well aware of the tense criminal situation along the Sino-Korean border and miserable predicament of North Korean migrants. But, they do nothing to remedy the situation because it suits their parochial interests just fine. On a national level, underground human traffic to China offers a manageable safety valve relieving the socio-economic pressures from the discontented public on the malfunctioning regime institutions. Money remittances from migrant laborers and family members in Manchuria help liquefy the economy. Cross-border Korean shuttle traders help satisfy consumer demand outside the broken, state-run public distribution system. Locally, frightening stories from the returnees about the horrors accompanying the escape and dangers of life under the unbridled Chinese capitalism help deter and discipline new potential opportunists. Local law enforcement and their benefactors in higher

places on both sides of the border closely monitor and levy heavy duties on all aspects of cross-border interactions: everything has a price in these exchanges; it is all about money, not ideals or principles.

This notwithstanding, Kim Jong Il cannot ignore a plethora of potentially explosive downside risks stemming from the Manchurian entanglement. When almost 2 percent of the total national population—predominantly of younger ages and female gender—leave the country, he has a real problem: it diminishes the most productive cohort of the labor force; it disrupts families as the primary unit of social life; it affects the population reproduction rate amidst persistent demographic decline; it reduces the pool of potential military conscripts; and it creates a conducive environment for intellectual brain drain. Drug trafficking between Manchuria, Japan, and Russia via North Korea corrupts local law enforcement and national security apparatus, destroys local economies, and adversely affects public health and morals.

In addition, when desperate North Koreans storm foreign embassies and consulate offices in Beijing, Shenyang, and Shanghai, it creates unnecessary diplomatic complications with the Chinese central leadership and directs unwanted attention of the international community to the human rights situation in the DPRK. Moreover, people who cross the border back and forth, in whatever capacity or manner, spread discontent, create more expectations and dissent, disturb social peace, and undermine political stability in the periphery.

Furthermore, multi-layered and multi-faceted espionage activities and mutually subversive operations run by the North and South Korean intelligence services against each other in Manchuria, contentious interaction between the North Korean and Chinese security services in the area, xenophobic local policies and anti-DPRK propaganda campaigns among the general population in Yanbian, frequent Chinese police raids against the known refugee concentration areas, and periodic troop redeployments along the border only add to the sense of tension and uncertainty along the DPRK-PRC border and put more stress on the overall bilateral relationship.

But the ultimate risk for Kim Jong Il is that of China-sponsored forced dethronement. He can never be personally secure as long as there is a latent threat of the so-called “pro-Chinese fifth column” inside the DPRK that can move against his regime at Beijing’s beck and call, let alone spy on his government from the inside at will. As a reflection of his regime’s vulnerability, Kim’s unyielding paranoia at the perceived Chinese creeping internal subversion is partly responsible for periodic purges of the so-called “pro-Chinese elements” and “China sympathizers” within the senior ranks of the Korean People’s Army, WPK Central Committee, central economic bureaucracy, and among the Korean population of Chinese origin nationwide. Kim’s clan that rose to power in North Korea through the anti-Japanese guerrilla struggle in the hinterland of Manchuria in the 1930s and 1940s must ensure that Beijing not allow any kind of local autonomous groups with anti-North Korean political agendas, self-government, and anti-DPRK resistance to form among the North Korean refugees in Northeast China. No matter how much bilateral relations between the DPRK and PRC may deteriorate in the future, Kim Jong Il will continue to give “lip service” to the “traditional Korean-Chinese friendship” and to “serve the great”—albeit with an

attitude—to prevent Beijing from choosing and sponsoring another Manchurian candidate to replace Kim's dynasty in Pyongyang.

THE SECURITY DIMENSION: AMERICAN CHALLENGE AND NUCLEAR GAMBIT

Strategic security considerations play an important part in the DPRK's China debates. DPRK leaders perceive the Bush administration policy toward their country as extremely hostile, belligerent, and aimed at the eventual forceful overthrow of the existing political system and Kim Jong Il's government. Pyongyang's "peaceful offensive" of the 1990s, including the policy of "nuclear freeze" instituted under the terms of the 1994 Geneva Agreed Framework and its attempts to normalize diplomatic relations with the Western countries, was checkmated by the Bush strategy of "neo-conservative rollback." Against the background of renewed international hostility, the intensified U.S.-led blockade, and deteriorating domestic economic conditions, Kim Jong Il seems to have decided to play a nuclear card in his strategic maneuvering between China and the United States to deter what he perceives as the rising "threat of the U.S. pre-emptive nuclear strike."

The experience of the past decade must have taught Kim Jong Il that he could get very little mileage from "ideological (Marxist-Leninist) solidarity" and "traditional bonds" with the revisionist Chinese "comrades-in-arms." The fourth-generation communist leaders in Beijing, headed by Hu Jintao, seem to be very pragmatic, increasingly nationalistic, and harbor no personal feelings, sense of remorse, or attachment to their North Korean counterparts. Therefore, Kim toned down the lyrics and emotions and adopted a cool-headed, pragmatic approach in his pursuit of national self-interest in his dealings with China.

At present, mutual trust between the leaders of the two countries is badly shaken. The North Korean leaders harbor serious doubts about the PRC's security commitment to the military defense of the DPRK and the credibility of China's nuclear umbrella, despite the ironclad mutual obligations under the 1961 DPRK-PRC Mutual Defense Treaty, which officially remains in legal force. But, due to the enormous complexity and strategic significance of the overall DPRK-PRC relationship, the "special bonds" that exist between the Korean People's Army and the Chinese People's Liberation Army, as well as multi-faceted daily interactions between various government bureaucracies of the two countries, it would be imprudent, short-sighted, and virtually impossible for Kim Jong Il to single-handedly write China off in his strategic calculations in the national security area. He does not want to be abandoned by China. Hence, the North Korean manipulations of Chinese sensitivities, which are designed to make China recommit itself to the security and sovereignty of North Korea at the expense of Beijing's "strategic cooperation" with Washington. Pyongyang skillfully uses the American card and the nuclear card to leave Beijing with no options other than facing either the dreaded six-headed monster of American Scylla or the engulfing terror of nuclear Charybdis.

Kim's tough message to Hu is nothing short of nuclear blackmail: "Americans threaten us, so you either guarantee our security against the U.S. encroachments, or we will do it by ourselves by going nuclear." Beijing repeatedly stated its principled opposition to the nuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

But, Pyongyang is adamant about its “sovereign right to possess a nuclear deterrent force.” Kim’s gamble is that China does not want to see its strategic backyard in Northern Korea be transformed into an open-ended frontline and a bleeding wound in its looming global confrontation with the U.S. hegemon in the long run. Consequently, Kim may expect that Chinese leaders will neither call his nuclear bluff nor sell him out to the “ugly Americans,” but instead will push Washington to a normalization settlement, delivering him an olive branch of détente with the United States without war. Perhaps, ardent Chinese intermediation may deliver the Second Opening of Korea to the West, similar to events in the late nineteenth century when the Shufeldt Treaty of Peace, Amity, and Navigation was concluded between the United States and China-dependent, isolated Korea.

In the meantime, Kim seems determined to maintain a degree of strategic ambiguity regarding his nuclear intentions and capabilities to keep China in the game and on his side. Kim also seems keenly interested in pushing for a negotiated solution at the on-again, off-again six-party talks in Beijing.

THE NATIONALISM DRIVER: COPING WITH THE GROWING ROK-PRC STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP AND PROSPECTS FOR KOREAN UNIFICATION

Korean nationalism is another significant driver in the DPRK’s China debates. Kim Jong Il’s ultimate nightmare is that Beijing may strike a separatist strategic deal with Seoul behind the scenes at the expense of Pyongyang. Korean history is merciless: China can make or break any Korean state. As a rule, China’s approach to the Korean Peninsula has been relatively benign and passive. However, whenever the peninsula is divided, China’s role as the final arbiter of Korean unification becomes indispensable. North Korean leaders are well aware that to be victorious in any unification drive, an ascending Korean power must align itself with China, because of China’s enormous political, economic, and military potential, huge stakes, and a high degree of sensitivity to geopolitical developments on the Korean Peninsula.

As a realist, Kim Jong Il understands that he cannot stall or slow down the mammoth growth of Chinese-South Korean annual trade and meteoric rise in mutual cumulative investment (nearly US\$35 billion and more than US\$10 billion, respectively). Nor can he probably frustrate an all-out intensification of their political and military exchanges, which undermines the credibility of the DPRK-PRC mutual alliance treaty.

Kim’s game seems to be to promote “national cooperation” between the North and South, play up historical anti-Chinese nationalist sentiments across the DMZ, and gradually, albeit reluctantly, increase his reliance on the ROK for economic assistance, diplomatic support, and military guarantees, thereby reducing the DPRK’s lop-sided dependence on and strategic vulnerability to China, giving a stake to Seoul in the survival of his regime, and, in the long run, using the South as a leverage in his own bargaining with the Chinese, or even forging a common North-South front in dealings with the PRC. In other words, if worse comes to worst, a Chinese blessing for the gradually expanding South Korean protectorate over the Kim clan-run North Korea is better than a Beijing-sponsored military coup in Pyongyang or the PRC-sanctioned, avalanche-style, outright absorption of the DPRK by the ROK.

CONCLUSION

China's dramatic rise to economic superpower status has sent shockwaves throughout East Asia and the world. Paradoxically, its closest neighbor and most traditional ally, North Korea, benefited the least from China's booming economy, new power capabilities, and greater influence in international affairs. Having missed the Chinese juggernaut in the past two decades, Pyongyang feels betrayed, abused, and abandoned by China. North Koreans still "serve the great" (*sadaejui*), as they have been practicing for centuries, but they do it with an attitude. Admiration is mixed with envy—at times even enmity. Attempts to emulate the Chinese economic model are thwarted by anti-Chinese nationalism. Cooperation is obstructed by fear and lack of trust. "Lip service" for "the teeth" resembles conditional accommodation. Although most North Koreans naively view China in a benign light and believe that Beijing harbors no sinister motives vis-à-vis their government and the Korean Peninsula, Kim Jong Il personally seems to be quite suspicious of Beijing's ulterior motivation and will continue to second-guess and hedge any dealings with China as long as he stays in power.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of APCSS, U.S. Pacific Command, the U.S. Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies

2058 Maluhia Road, Honolulu, Hawaii, 96815-1949

tel 808.971.8900 • fax 808.971.8989 • www.apcss.org

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