

# The Korea Crisis and China's Policy

Written by Zhiqun Zhu

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ZHIQUN ZHU, JUN 2 2010

China's mild response to the March 2010 sinking of South Korean navy warship *Cheonan* has frustrated many people. Since the publication of a report by a team of international investigators on 20 May 2010 implicating North Korea as the perpetrator, killing 46 South Korean sailors, China has not joined the United States, Japan, and South Korea in openly condemning Pyongyang and threatening punitive measures. Meanwhile, Chinese leaders have expressed condolences to the South Korean government and South Korean families affected by the tragedy. What explains China's fence-sitting on this issue? What is China's interest on the Korean peninsula?

There are many misperceptions of China's policy towards the Korean peninsula. Some people believe that North Korea provides a friendly buffer zone between China and democratic South Korea where some 37,500 U.S. troops are based. Others assume that China needs to prop up the Kim Jong-il regime for fear of a massive influx of hungry and desperate North Korean refugees to China triggered by the sudden collapse of the Kim government. Western media routinely portray China as the major ally of the North Korean government and hint that China will always support Pyongyang in a conflict between the two Koreas.

These observations, though not completely wrong, do not reflect the full picture and complexity of China's Korea policy. The fact is since August 1992 when Beijing established diplomatic relations with the Republic of Korea (South Korea), China has adopted a "two Koreas" policy and has not stood by North Korea indiscriminately. For example, China condemned North Korea's missile tests in May 2009 and supported the UN resolution against North Korea.

On the other hand, very few bilateral relations have grown more rapidly than those between China and South Korea in less than 20 years. China's bilateral trade with South Korea reached \$156 billion in 2009 while its trade with the North was less than \$3 billion. China and South Korea are negotiating a free trade agreement to further boost trade to \$300 billion by 2015. They have also established the so-called strategic partnership in 2008, a close relationship that China has formed with less than a dozen countries. China has become the largest trade partner, the biggest export market and the largest source of imports of South Korea, while South Korea is the fourth largest trade partner of China. The two societies are also getting closer. The two countries have established more than 120 pairs of sister cities. Every week over 830 flights and 100,000 people travel between the two countries. South Korean movie and music stars boast millions of feverish fans in China, and vice versa.

China-North Korea relations are rooted in the past, while China-South Korea relations are oriented towards the future. China-North Korea relations used to be as close as "lips and teeth" during the Korean War. But China has grown increasingly unhappy with North Korea in recent years, and one can argue that North Korea has become a liability for China.

Economically, North Korea has become a burden for China. North Korea is like a black hole, endlessly absorbing China's supply of food and fuel. What China gets in return is a recalcitrant North Korea that frequently challenges the international system and embarrasses China. Diplomatically, North Korea, a small nation of less than 23 million people, has consumed way too many resources of China. A large part of China's diplomacy today revolves around North Korea, constraining China's ability to conduct diplomacy in other countries and regions. Politically and strategically, the perceived China-North Korea alliance deeply hurts China's international image. China has its own

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national interests such as maintaining good relations with its neighbors. However, offering continuous support for a repressive regime and sometimes tacitly condoning its reckless behavior are not commensurate with China's claim as a responsible great power.

Even within China, there have been calls for delinking with the Kim Jong-il regime. Then why hasn't China abandoned North Korea yet? The short answer is that China is in a dilemma on the Korean peninsula. China is ambivalent about and unprepared for the future of Korea. It is afraid that a united, pro-West Korea may pose a more serious challenge to China. The two Koreas already have historical and territorial disputes with China now. A unified Korea is likely to be emboldened to officially claim part of northeast China as its own. A unified Korea may also deny China potential access to rich minerals in the North.

It is in the best interest of China, and arguably of other countries in the region, to keep the *status quo* on the Korean peninsula. The United States is obviously not prepared to start another war now to help achieve Korean reunification. Japan, despite its anti-North Korea position, will be very concerned about having a unified, nuclear-capable neighbor of over 70 million people when Japan itself is not allowed to go nuclear.

China's priority remains stability at home and in the neighborhood so as to concentrate on economic development. Any harsh reaction towards North Korea risks triggering a conflict on the Korean peninsula. China will oppose actions and measures by any party that will escalate tensions in the region.

China's policy towards the Korean peninsula is based on its own national interest, not its endorsement of North Korean adventurism. The North Korea-China Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance was signed in July 1961 and remains valid unless one side agrees to a revision or abolishment. A clause guarantees automatic intervention if one of the signatories is attacked by a country or allied countries. However, China has downplayed this treaty and is trying hard to avoid the outbreak of conflict on the Korean peninsula.

North Korea is a country under siege. Its leadership succession is inconclusive. Kim Jong-il's youngest son, the 27-year-old Kim Jong-un, is mysterious and untested and does not seem to enjoy widespread support within the government and the military. Kim Jong-il may be a much hated person, but he is very calculated, and he often stirs up something like firing a missile or attacking a warship in order to attract international attention, rally the nation and the military around him and his family and extract more aid from the international community.

The Korea crisis poses serious challenges to East Asian security. China's peaceful policy toward the Korean peninsula is not likely to satisfy everyone, especially during a crisis, but under the current circumstances it serves the best interests of every party involved. The future of North Korea is far from clear, but one thing is certain: China will do its best to continue to promote peace and stability on the Korean peninsula.

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