

China Bandwagons with North Korea

Written by Andrew Scobell

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ANDREW SCOBELL, MAY 2 2013

It has become conventional wisdom in recent years to characterize China as an “assertive” power. While Beijing appears to have become more proactive on many issues especially with regards to the United States, where North Korea—or the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (“DPRK”) as it is formally known—is concerned China has tended to be surprisingly quite passive and reactive. Although China has been modestly proactive toward the Korean Peninsula at times during the past twenty years (i.e. early 1990s and early 2000s), this has not been evident of late. What explains the dramatic contrast between Chinese forthrightness toward the United States and recent reticence on North Korea?

China’s Foreign Policy Drivers

Why has China been meek as a mouse where North Korea is concerned but loud as a lion on U.S. policy in recent years? The answer lies in Beijing’s deep domestic insecurity, its “buffer strategy,” and Korea’s prime location. First of all, Beijing is inward focused and fearful of instability within the country. Anything that appears remotely to pose a challenge to Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rule is deemed dangerous and provokes a brutal response, including to individual dissidents such as Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo and the artist Ai Weiwei. Economic prosperity and national pride are the twin pillars of regime legitimacy, and CCP leaders believe they must deliver on them if they are to be seen as the rightful rulers of China and remain in power.

While China is more active globally in the early 21st Century, the focus is upon its Asia-Pacific neighborhood. The countries on its periphery are especially important because they are immediately adjacent and hence pose the greatest potential threat to stability within China. Since the end of the Cold War, Beijing has adopted a buffer strategy or what it calls a “good neighbor” policy. China has sought to build good relations with all its neighbors by resolving land territorial disputes, demilitarizing border regions, enhancing diplomatic ties, and expanding economic relations. Beijing’s goal has been to create a Chinese sphere of influence adjacent to its borders and deny or at least limit the actions and influence of outside powers.

In recent years building this buffer has been undertaken quite assertively and vocally for China’s maritime territories but in a more restrained and quiet manner in the case of North Korea. China’s strategy on the Korea Peninsula is part of a larger effort to counterbalance a significant perceived threat from the United States. The result is a Beijing bandwagoning with Pyongyang.

Overall, China has been quite successful at implementing its buffer strategy with better results in some locations than others. Beijing was most successful in Central Asia and most challenged in Northeast Asia. Taiwan and Korea have been the two perennial flashpoints in the latter region. Of the two, Korea has provided the most persistent headache of the 21st Century for China. Despite the fact that North Korea has been post-1949 China’s most enduring buffer, it has proved costly, high maintenance, and it has required repeated reinvestment. With the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 a worrisome double crisis emerged on the peninsula: a systemic economic one triggered by the end of Soviet aid and a security one whereby the United States reacted to the rise of a nuclearized North Korea.

Chinese efforts to build a belt of territory (landlocked and maritime) around its periphery of stable, pro-China states has proved particularly time consuming where the DPRK is concerned. Not only have attempts to keep North Korea stable economically proved to be a constant struggle, but denying or limiting the intervention of outside powers has also been an ongoing challenge. Beijing continues to provide Pyongyang with aid in the form of food and fuel. In

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addition, it has encouraged Chinese businesses to invest in and conduct trade with North Korea, notably in extractive industries but in other fields as well. What Beijing fears is turmoil inside the buffer.

Counterbalancing Washington, Bandwagoning with Pyongyang

The result of Beijing's acute insecurity, its buffer strategy, and extra sensitivity over the Korean Peninsula has two important impacts on China's Korea policy. First, it means that *China's North Korea policy is as much about Beijing's views of Washington as it is about Beijing's perceptions of Pyongyang*. The involvement of the United States raises the stakes for and threat to China. The United States poses an even bigger threat to China than North Korea—militarily and otherwise—going far beyond the geographical bounds of the Korean Peninsula or Northeast China. The stakes are also higher for Beijing—not just the danger of instability or war on China's doorstep but the specter of a wider conflict involving the United States and possibly other countries. Hence, a volatile situation in Korea is much more alarming to Beijing than a cursory analysis would suggest. While the United States is more problematic than North Korea in many ways, nevertheless, Beijing perceives Washington as more malleable than Pyongyang.

Second, it means that *severe inertia afflicts China's policy toward North Korea*. This is because Beijing deems the situation to be extremely delicate with policy alterations likely to be severely destabilizing. North Korea's geographic location on China's doorstep presents a serious proximate potential threat to China's political and economic heartland. Moreover, the United States is directly involved as the ally of South Korea with a military presence on the peninsula and a long-time staunch critic of Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs.

Beijing's strong preference is to keep the buffer zone between the Yalu River and the Demilitarized Zone free of interference by outside powers, especially the United States. Perhaps most alarming of all is that Pyongyang has proved to be a 'hegemon magnet'—attracting the attention of Washington to a sensitive location on China's periphery. The magnet both repels and attracts. The former force has tended to predominate where the United States is concerned. Through provocations, including the development of a nuclear program, missile launches, nuclear tests and other periodic provocations Pyongyang has predictably drawn the ire of Washington. What Beijing worries about is a tough U.S. response that will dangerously escalate tensions. In 1994, and then again in late 2002 and early 2003, China feared that the United States was preparing to launch a military strike against North Korea. Chinese leaders scrambled to avert this outcome.

Pyongyang's power of attraction is also of concern. While Beijing desires a North Korea on cordial terms with other states these relationships can become too cozy and challenge China's sphere of influence. Since the 1990s North Korea at various times has courted Russia, Japan, and of course the United States. Much of this activity is undesirable from Beijing's perspective.

One significant outcome of the second Korean nuclear crisis of 2002-2003 for China was the establishment of a multilateral forum for discussion of the North Korean nuclear program with Beijing in the driver's seat. The Six Party Talks offered Beijing a kind of management mechanism whereby it could rope in, however loosely, Pyongyang, Washington, Tokyo, Moscow, and Seoul together around a six-sided table for on-again off-again talks.

Conventionally, international relations theorists conceive of bandwagoning as a maneuver performed by a weaker state to move closer to a stronger power. But the peculiarities of the China-North Korea dynamic suggest that in this case the concept should be turned on its head: Beijing seems to be bandwagoning with Pyongyang. The North Korean shrimp appears to exert a disproportionate amount of influence on the Chinese whale; in other words it is not Beijing that alters Pyongyang's behavior but rather Pyongyang that constrains the behavior of Beijing. In terms of China's economic priorities and the outward orientation of its diplomacy, Beijing would seem to have more and more in common with Seoul. Moreover, South Korea's economic power, cultural vibrancy and political dynamism contrasted starkly with North Korea's poverty, anachronistic socialist realism, and Stalinist atrophy. The logical conclusion for Beijing is that Pyongyang represents Korea's failed past while Seoul symbolizes the exciting promise of the Peninsula's future. But abandonment of North Korea has to date proved unthinkable. Indeed, by the mid-2000s, China seemed to have decided that its truculent neighbor could not be permitted to fail. Since then, it has

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made concerted efforts to prop up the Pyongyang regime economically (with aid and investment), politically (tacitly supporting hereditary succession), and diplomatically (reluctantly condemning the North publicly for its intransigence or transgressions).

Great Debates, Little Impact, Big Worry

Since the mid-2000s, a lively debate has emerged in China over North Korea policy. A variety of perspectives are identifiable among foreign policy analysts. These opinion groups may be divided into three 'schools of thought.' The first opinion grouping is the "Dump the DPRK" school. This viewpoint is not so much a distinct school of thought as it is a gut reaction to the frustrations of dealing with North Korea. Indeed, this feeling appears to be widespread within China but tends to be voiced in public only by academics because it is officially highly controversial and far too risky to be a viable policy option.

This position springs from two perspectives. First, there is a sense—especially among those with liberal inclinations—of revulsion or distaste for a regime that is seen as morally reprehensible or at least untrustworthy and backward. Being so closely associated with a such a regime China is doing serious harm to its reputation as a responsible forward-looking great power. Second, there is a realist perspective that views a continued alliance or partnership with North Korea as being fundamentally at odds with China's national interests. While Pyongyang may have been an asset to Beijing in the past, North Korea has now become detrimental to Chinese national security.

A second grouping is the "Push Pyongyang" school. This opinion grouping is where many whose initial reaction is to 'dump the DPRK' gravitate upon reflection. Pushing North Korea to adopt Chinese-style economic reforms and moderate its security policy is less extreme and more closely parallels what Beijing has been articulating as official Chinese policy toward Pyongyang. After all, it reflects genuine Chinese desires for continued social order and economic prosperity within China and peace and stability beyond its borders. Beijing has tried for more than a decade to persuade North Korea's leaders that they should emulate China's example and adopt market-oriented reforms. But this is unlikely to happen, especially if Pyongyang discerns no significant improvement in its security situation. China's post-Mao reforms were made possible by Beijing's assessment that its strategic environment had improved as a result of dramatic rapprochement with the superpower (the United States) heretofore considered its most dangerous adversary. This experience leads Chinese analysts to argue that a North Korean "reform and opening" initiative must be preceded by a significant breakthrough in its relations with Pyongyang's most threatening adversary. These analysts tend to assume that the onus for this 'opening' lies with the more powerful adversary—the United States. Without significant reassurance from Washington that it harbors no aggressive intentions, Chinese analysts believe that Pyongyang will not embrace Chinese-style reforms.

A third grouping of Chinese analysts belongs to the "Bolster the Buffer" school. This opinion grouping believes that Pyongyang is located at the gateway to China's heartland and, as such, has tremendous geostrategic worth. North Korea is a valuable buffer client state because it keeps South Korea and its superpower patron, the United States, at arm's length. Although a serious headache, Pyongyang is nevertheless an ally of longstanding in a critical region. China has no other staunch friends in Northeast Asia. Indeed, of the four remaining actors, three have enduring alliances with the United States and the fourth, while loosely aligned with China, is deemed unreliable. Other than North Korea, China's best relationship is with Russia but it is far from an alliance. Of the three other actors, two seem firmly in the U.S. camp, and, as of 2013, appear deeply suspicious or skeptical of Beijing. Tokyo and Seoul both have formal bilateral defense treaties and U.S. forces stationed on their territory. A third, Taipei, while not considered the capital of a separate state by Beijing, has Washington as its superpower backer and arms supplier. Moreover, Taiwan remains unwilling to subordinate itself to China's authority.

In essence, adherents of this school of thought remain mired in Cold War-era thinking and continue to harbor a deep-seated distrust of the United States. Repeated Chinese protestations that the United States should discard its 'Cold War mentality,' 'zero sum' calculations and 'hegemony' say as much if not more about an entrenched way of thinking in Beijing as it does about the existence of such a mindset in Washington. Three Northeast Asian actors (Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan) are considered allies of a superpower that Chinese analysts tend to perceive in adversarial terms and a fourth (Russia), although sharing much of China's worldview, is a largely unreliable partner

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for Beijing. In this context, North Korea takes on greater significance because it is simultaneously considered a traditional Chinese ally and a sworn enemy of the United States.

These schools of thought tend to produce a hybrid Beijing narrative along the following lines: “We Chinese can barely tolerate those loathsome North Koreans (and would gladly dump them); nevertheless, we go through the motions of pushing for reform in North Korea (but don’t anticipate results, at least in the near future); in the meantime, fearful of destabilizing change, we maintain a buffer state (even though we disdain alliances).”

However, in the final analysis these different schools of Chinese thinking on North Korea may not really matter much. First of all, while the differences of opinion appear real, they are held by people one step removed from the decision makers themselves. Second, the decision makers are in fundamental agreement that the highest priority is maintaining the status quo with the result being policy inertia (as noted above). China is most fearful of the prospect of chaos in, or collapse of, the buffer. Near term fears about upheaval in North Korea trump Beijing’s concerns about a nuclear armed Pyongyang and the possibility of a unified Korea under Seoul’s auspices. China has more influence on North Korea than any other country. But this influence is “potential” in the sense that Beijing is extremely unlikely to activate it. This is because China fears that applying pressure to North Korea will either result in Pyongyang distancing itself from Beijing (and hence China will have no influence) or, worse Chinese pressure tactics will backfire and only make matters worse.

Although China’s leaders are not necessarily unreceptive to new thinking on Korea, they remain largely preoccupied with maintaining stability (internal and external) and focused on promoting their country’s great power status. North Korea threatens to besmirch China’s prestige, and many in China want their country to be viewed as a responsible power and a force for good in the world. But, North Korea is not akin to Sudan in Beijing’s eyes. After all, it is not a far off Third World state. Rather, it is a Darfur on the doorstep—a humanitarian disaster which is the subject of enormous international attention with a repressive, distasteful dictatorship made all the more complicated because North Korea is a hyper-militarized state armed with ballistic missiles and weapons of mass destruction. Instability immediately across the Yalu directly threatens domestic stability in China’s heartland if only because of the specter of many hundreds of thousands of refugees flooding into Manchuria. So Beijing is ultra-sensitive to any hint of turmoil on the Korean peninsula.

Since the late 1980s, Beijing has been engaged in a delicate tightrope, preserving good relations with Pyongyang while working to establish and maintain good ties with Seoul with considerable success at least up until the mid-2000s. China sent athletes to compete in the 1988 Seoul Olympics and normalized relations with South Korea in 1992. Moreover, Beijing supported both Pyongyang and Seoul for membership in the United Nations with both Koreas admitted to the world body in 1991. On the one hand, it tried to coax Kim Jong-il to adopt Chinese-style economic reforms, while on the other hand its trade with South Korea grew dramatically. The tightrope act survived the first Korean nuclear crisis in 1994 and the onset of the second crisis in 2002-2003. Although the DPRK weathered both crises intact, they took their toll on China. Tensions fluctuated between Pyongyang and Washington and relations between Beijing and Seoul cooled noticeably. Attempting to address these tensions, China stepped out of its comfort zone, leading Beijing to establish the Six Party Talks in 2003 and engage in rare public criticisms of Pyongyang at the United Nations.

Over the years North Korean provocations, including nuclear tests and missile launches, the torpedoing of the South Korean naval corvette Cheonan and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island (both in 2010), and bellicose blasts of rhetoric have ratcheted up tensions but China continues to bandwagon with North Korea.

Back to the Future?

Beijing is almost certain to stay the course on Korea barring a major crisis. Inevitably, there will be new provocations from North Korea, but China will refrain from harsh criticism or direct public condemnation. While North Korea threatens domestic and regional stability and China’s international reputation, in the near term the current unstable status quo security situation on the Peninsula is strongly preferred to the alternative: greater instability—the prospect of Chinese pressure that might push Pyongyang to even more extreme actions and rash provocations. For an

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extremely risk averse Beijing, the unstable status quo is preferable to the uncertainty of change.

Perhaps no foreign policy issue has posed a greater challenge for China in the 21st century than Korea. North Korea is also viewed in the context of a larger challenge—counterbalancing against the United States. This meant Beijing fears instability on the Korean Peninsula will be exploited—or perhaps even precipitated—by Washington as a way to threaten China. China feels very vulnerable to U.S. collaboration with its allies Japan and South Korea. Instinctively China has turned to bolstering the buffer—essentially bandwagoning with North Korea as it did in 1950. However, unlike in the former instance Beijing hopes that military force will not be required and economic power and diplomatic influence will be adequate.

North Korea has proved to be a near constant headache for China since the early 1990s. The Pyongyang problem appears to be chronic. While Beijing walked a tightrope between Seoul and Pyongyang for some two decades, ultimately, it decided to bandwagon with North Korea to counterbalance against South Korea and its superpower patron. The decision was not easy but was ultimately determined by Beijing's vital interests: domestic insecurity and a buffer state at the gateway to China's political and economic heartland. Future Pyongyang provocations are unlikely to alter fundamentally Beijing's buffer strategy. To bolster the North Korean buffer China seems prepared to use all of the instruments at its disposal—economic (aid, trade, and investment), political (tacitly supporting hereditary succession), diplomatic (refusing to directly criticize the North publicly for its intransigence or transgressions), and, if necessary, military (including limited or wholesale intervention to prop up the regime).

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