

## *Why is China Accommodating a Nuclear North Korea? The Five Fundamental Reasons Underpinning a Political Masterpiece*

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### **Introduction**

There is more than meets the eye in the China-North Korea relationship, where China supports its nuclear-armed, potentially fragile, old-style communist neighbour, as a means to exercise strategic local pressure on the Korean Peninsula, and as an useful bargain chip towards its ultimate goal of replacing the United States (US) as East Asia dominant power.<sup>1</sup> China (People's Republic of China (PRC)) is a capitalist cum communist country,<sup>2</sup> promoting free enterprise and a quasi-free market system,<sup>3</sup> and relying on a nationalist/Confucian approach to preserving the one-party rule.<sup>4</sup> North Korea (Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)) is a communist state with a

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<sup>1</sup> Hwang Chun-mei, "Chinese leader Xi Jinping signs new rules governing 'non-war' military operations", *RFA Mandarin*, 13 June 2022, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/military-rules-06132022153121.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Aryeh Tepper, "Is China a Communist, Confucian or capitalist country?" *Signal*, 18 October 2018, <https://www.jns.org/opinion/is-china-a-communist-capitalist-or-confucian-country/>.

<sup>3</sup> Guiying Laura Wu, "Tackling capital misallocation in China," Nanyang Technological University, 19 August 2019, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/08/19/tackling-capital-misallocation-in-china/>.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher A. Ford, "The Party and the Sage: Communist China's use of quasi-Confucian rationalizations for one-party dictatorship and imperial ambition," *Journal of Contemporary China* 24, 96 (2015): pp. 1032-1033, DOI: 10.1080/10670564.2015.1030954..

controlled economy and an approach to power that is characteristic of a Kingdom, where the same family has been ruling the country since its inception, following the end of the Japanese occupation after the Second World War.<sup>5</sup> The credo of North Korea over almost 80 years of existence is self-reliance (*Juche*),<sup>6</sup> promoted by its first leader, Kim Il-Sung, so it can withstand adversity and build a society on its own. In addition, North Korea also maintains a military-first approach to all facets of societal life, embodied in the principle of Songun,<sup>7</sup> established by the second dynastic ruler of the Hermit Kingdom, Kim Jong-Il. Relationships with its neighbours have been either adversarial (South Korea, Japan, and, *ad extenso*, the US) or cautiously friendly (China, USSR / Russia).

Over the centuries, China has been the dominant power in the Korean Peninsula. Korean kings would pay tribute to the Chinese Emperor and enjoy the benefits of the Chinese tributary system.<sup>8</sup> The tributary system was a consequence of the Pax Sinica, itself a result of the emergence of a centralized, culturally uniform Chinese state, at the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC.<sup>9</sup> It allowed for an hierarchical order to be established, where participating statal entities acknowledged the “moral authority of the Chinese empire,”<sup>10</sup> enjoying the protection and imperially sanctioned commercial exchanges in the process. The end of the Second World War saw the demise of the Japanese Empire-controlled Asian Sphere of Co-Prosperity, which included the Korean Peninsula and parts of China. During more than 35 years of Japanese occupation (1910 – 1945) the Korean Peninsula experienced brutal Japanese administration, which was military and politically challenged by communist and nationalist forces.<sup>11</sup> In 1949, after several years of power-sharing, the Chinese communists defeated the nationalist forces and

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<sup>5</sup> Andrzej Purat and Pawel Bielicki, “The Songun Doctrine as the Most Important Factor of Internal and International Policy of North Korea,” *Athenaeum* 60 (2018): p. 41, DOI: 10.15804/athena.2018.60.03.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 43-44.

<sup>7</sup> Purat, “The Songun Doctrine,” p. 45.

<sup>8</sup> Global Security, “Chinese Tributary States,” accessed 24 September 2020, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/china/history-tributary-states.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> Yongjin Zhang, “System, empire and state in Chinese international relations,” *Review of International Studies* 27 (2001): p. 46.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>11</sup> Jin Jingyi, “China’s Anti-Japanese War and the Independence Movement on the Korean Peninsula,” in *China and North Korea Strategic and Policy Perspectives from a Changing China*, ed. C. Freeman (Springer, 2015).

established China as a communist republic. After Japan surrendered to the allies on 15 August 1945, the Korean Peninsula was divided along parallel 38 between Soviet Union-controlled communist North and United States-controlled nationalist South, which eventually saw the emergence of two ideologically different states on the Korean Peninsula in 1948.<sup>12</sup> The Korean War (1950-1953), which eventually amounted to direct confrontation not only between the two ideologically different Korean states but also between their patrons, China and the US, ended with an armistice that left the Korean question open.<sup>13</sup> Subsequently, China sought to preserve its sphere of influence in North Korea and extend its reach to South Korea (Republic of Korea (ROK)) as well.<sup>14</sup> These two complementary goals have been achieved, where China has maintained resilient political, economic, ideological, and emotional links with North Korea,<sup>15</sup> and has enhanced its relations with South Korea by building a strong economic partnership, becoming South Korea's most important commercial partner.<sup>16</sup>

Even under the threat of UN-mandated sanctions due mainly to its nuclear stance,<sup>17</sup> as well as US-led military and economic pressures,<sup>18</sup> the communist regime in North Korea has always had the support of China in general, and of Kim's family dynastic rule, in particular.<sup>19</sup> The reasons are linked to political, economic, strategic, societal, and philosophical considerations, where the current geopolitical realities and

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<sup>12</sup> "Korea Divided," accessed 24 June 2022, <http://www.fsmitha.com/h2/ch24kor.html> .

<sup>13</sup> "Military Contests and Settlement," accessed 24 June 2022, <http://www.fsmitha.com/h2/ch24kor8.htm>.

<sup>14</sup> Gilbert Rozman, "China's Role on the Korean Peninsula," *National Interest*, 30 June 2021, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/korea-watch/chinas-role-korean-peninsula-188904> .

<sup>15</sup> Andy Lim and Victor Cha, "Dataset: China-North Korea High Level Visits Since 1953," *Beyond Parallel*, 17 March 2017, <https://beyondparallel.csis.org/china-dprk-high-level-visits-since-1953/> .

<sup>16</sup> South Korea Exports, accessed 15 September 2020, <https://tradingeconomics.com/south-korea/exports-by-country>. See also: South Korea Imports, accessed 15 September 2020, <https://tradingeconomics.com/south-korea/imports-by-country>.

<sup>17</sup> Eleanor Albert, "What to Know About Sanctions on North Korea," *Backgrounder*, 16 July 2019, pp. 2-3, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-know-about-sanctions-north-korea>.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>19</sup> Shi Yinong, "Painful Lessons, Reversing Practices, and Ongoing Limitations: China Facing North Korea since 2003," in *China and North Korea Strategic and Policy Perspectives from a Changing China*, ed., C. Freeman. (Springer, 2015), p. 20.

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the assertive policies of the present Chinese and North Korean leadership give credence to the strong bond apparent between the two East Asian nuclear-armed countries.<sup>20</sup>

### **Chinese–North Korean Relationship: Political Considerations**

It is widely accepted that “The PRC is North Korea’s closest ally, the largest provider of food, fuel, and industrial machinery, and arguably the country most able to wield influence in Pyongyang.”<sup>21</sup> The links between the two countries evolved on the backdrop of the Korean War (1950-1953). China intervened in the conflict in October 1950 to safeguard its mainland, reinforce the communist rule in East Asia and repel US-led UN troops that had defeated the invading DPRK army under Kim Il Sung and were approaching the Chinese border. Three years of bitter war ensued, following which an armistice was declared, and the two Korean states continued under the protection of the US for South Korea and the patronage of China/USSR for North Korea. Even if over the years “the relationship between China and North Korea had previously rested on unique Party-to-Party foundations,” this is not the case anymore, where the “‘new normal’ with North Korea under the leadership of Xi Jinping” amounts to “a normal state-to-state relationship with a deep tradition of friendship.”<sup>22</sup>

The stated goals that underlie the political environment in which China operates relate to its aim to maintain the traditional friendship with North Korea as well as peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, support international non-proliferation regimes, oppose North Korea’s nuclear and missile developments, and promote dialogue and consultation for peaceful resolution of issues, and promoting its national strategic interests.<sup>23</sup>

Even if China’s stated goals preclude a sudden breakdown in relations with North Korea, where “China will not break ties with North Korea just because of the

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<sup>20</sup> Peter J. Li and Lucille Y. Li, “The China-DPRK Relations: from Perceived Marginalization to a Spirited Comeback,” *East Asia* 37 (2020): pp. 217-218, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12140-020-09339-6>.

<sup>21</sup> Dick Nanto and Mark Manyin, “China–North Korea Relations,” *North Korean Review* 7, 2 (Fall 2011): p. 94, DOI: 10.3172/NKR.7.2.94.

<sup>22</sup> Adam Cathcart and Christopher Green, “Xi’s Belt: Chinese-North Korean Relations,” in *Chinese Foreign Policy Under Xi*, ed. T.B. Hoo, (Routledge, 2017), p. 132.

<sup>23</sup> Gu Guoliang, “China’s Policy toward the DPRK’s Nuclear and Missile Programs,” in *China and North Korea Strategic and Policy Perspectives from a Changing China*, ed., C. Freeman (Springer, 2015), p. 159.

nuclear issue,"<sup>24</sup> episodes of China asserting its power over its troublesome neighbour did occur, especially after the 2011/2012 change in leadership in both countries. Chinese President Xi adopted extremely harsh policies following Kim Jong-Un's long-range rocket test in December 2012 and third nuclear test in February 2013, imposing unilateral sanctions on the DPRK, in addition to the UN agreed ones.<sup>25</sup> A public admonition issued by China's Foreign Affairs Minister also followed in April 2013,<sup>26</sup> after which "Kim has bowed his head in response to China's harsh warning and hard sanctions."<sup>27</sup> More UN-mandated sanctions were put in place, though, as a response to North Korea's multiple rocket launches and nuclear tests,<sup>28</sup> where China has always urged "for calm and restraint in international responses, so as to avoid further escalation of the situation."<sup>29</sup> However, considering subsequent evolutions, it seems that the Chinese additional sanctions and tough diplomatic issuances were just a means to establish the primacy of the newly appointed Chinese leader Xi Jinping with respect to his North Korean counterpart Kim Jong-Un.

The delicate political situation is epitomised by China's balancing act. As a signatory along with the US and North Korea of the 1953 Armistice,<sup>30</sup> China has special responsibilities as a guarantor of the status quo on the Korean Peninsula and as a promoter of future agreements meant to achieve durable peace. Toward this end, in 2003, China organized the Six-Party talks as a result of North Korea breaching the 1994 Agreed Framework signed with the US, its withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in January 2003,<sup>31</sup> and US resolve to resolutely address the unfolding situation, where President Bush declared that "all military options [are] open."<sup>32</sup> Even if the Six-Party talks were concluded with a Joint Statement (2005)

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<sup>24</sup> Yinhong, "Painful Lessons," p. 29.

<sup>25</sup> Yinhong, "Painful Lessons," p. 26.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>28</sup> Albert, "What to Know About Sanctions," p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> Guoliang, "China's Policy," p. 169.

<sup>30</sup> Zhu Feng and Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, "North Korea's Security Implications for China," in *China and North Korea Strategic and Policy Perspectives from a Changing China*, ed., C. Freeman (Springer, 2015), p. 42.

<sup>31</sup> Guoliang, "China's Policy," p. 158.

<sup>32</sup> Yang Xiyu, "China's Role and Its Dilemmas in the Six-Party Talks," in *China and North Korea Strategic and Policy Perspectives from a Changing China*, ed. C. Freeman (Springer, 2015), p. 179.

amounting to an agreed denuclearization framework, North Korea pursued its goal of becoming a nuclear power. Consequently, “China voted for U.N. Security Council Resolutions 1718 (2006) and 1874 (2009) imposing sanctions on the DPRK following its missile and nuclear tests”<sup>33</sup> however, after several years, in April 2012, DPRK formally declared itself a “nuclear state” through a Constitutional amendment.<sup>34</sup> It nevertheless appears that China, even while supporting UN-mandated sanctions against North Korea, tacitly endorses DPRK policies. “Chinese financial and trade support effectively facilitated North Korea’s nuclear program by keeping its economy afloat and thus fractured the chances of a reunified peninsula.”<sup>35</sup> The fact that President Xi and North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un met five times since the beginning of 2018<sup>36</sup> shows both the importance China bestows on bilateral relations in the context of the US-China competition and the coordination that exists between the two East Asian allies. Furthermore, it is worth remembering that the 1961 Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Assistance between China and North Korea, recently renewed in 2021,<sup>37</sup> allows China to exert a certain amount of pressure on its ally in exchange for perpetually extending the Treaty, the pressure that may amount to the DPRK enacting broad, market-oriented, economic reforms,<sup>38</sup> in addition to the special economic zones already in place since May 2013.<sup>39</sup>

### **Chinese–North Korean Relationship: Economic Considerations**

Irrespective of their political relationship which experienced both lows and highs, the economic relationship between China and North Korea remained stable. China supplied food aid to North Korea and encouraged it to open its economy

<sup>33</sup> Nanto, “China–North Korea Relations, p. 97.

<sup>34</sup> Yinhong, “Painful Lessons,” p. 24.

<sup>35</sup> Wang Chenjun and Richard McGregor, “Four reasons why China supports North Korea,” 4 March 2019, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpretor/four-reasons-why-china-supports-north-korea> .

<sup>36</sup> BBC, “Xi Jinping visits N Korea to boost China’s ties with Kim,” 20 June 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48672306> .

<sup>37</sup> “China-North Korea friendship treaty ‘remains in effect’ all the time,” *Global Times*, 7 July 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202107/1228071.shtml> .

<sup>38</sup> James Reilly, “China–DPRK economic engagement: don’t blame the sunshine,” 13 November 2013, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2013/11/13/china-dprk-economic-engagement-dont-blame-the-sunshine/> .

<sup>39</sup> Xiyu, “China’s Role,” p. 186.

following the Chinese model of open market and private enterprise implemented in 1978.<sup>40</sup> Even as North Korea is reluctant to embrace the open market reforms and change its state-controlled, military-focused economy, the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century saw an improvement in its economic outlook and enhanced economic relations with China. For example, in 2004 China built a glass factory to address the lack of float glass in North Korea.<sup>41</sup> However, following multiple nuclear and missile tests over the years, performed especially after 2012, China's economic partnership with North Korea was reduced to food aid and import/export operations that complied with the requirements of the UN-mandated sanctions on North Korea. Hence, because of geopolitical imperatives and renewed sanctions, China became the most important trading / economic partner for North Korea. In 2018, the trade between the two countries amounted to \$182M in North Korean exports to China and \$2.22B imports from China (81 percent, respectively 96.7 percent of total North Korean trading activity).<sup>42</sup> It is worth noting that by keeping the lines of communication and economic links open, China fulfills several goals: ensures stability and power continuity in North Korea, promotes its model of successful socio-economic development to North Korea, supports its economic development, by triggering its Northeast region economic revival, as well as by using North Korean raw materials and port access, once the sanctions are lifted, reiterates its standing as a "responsible rising power" by supporting other countries to achieve their economic targets and enhance social stability.<sup>43</sup>

There is a flow of goods and hard currency by-passing official channels that assures the North Korean regime survival even if China formally abides by the UN-imposed sanctions. A 2020 study found that "North Korea's economy appears to be staying above water despite sanctions, even though the scope of its foreign trade is constrained and prospects for sustained growth are slim."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Li Nan, "A Strategic and Emotional Partner: China and Its Food Aid to North Korea in the Twenty-First Century," in *China and North Korea Strategic and Policy Perspectives from a Changing China*, ed. C. Freeman ((Springer, 2015), p. 192.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198.

<sup>42</sup> North Korea Trade, accessed 10 September 2020, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/asprk> .

<sup>43</sup> Nan, "A Strategic and Emotional Partner," pp. 193-194.

<sup>44</sup> Daniel Wertz, "China-North Korea Trade: Parsing the Data," *38 North*, 25 February 2020, p. 8, <https://www.38north.org/2020/02/dwertz022520/>





**Figure 1: China-North Korea Trade Regime<sup>45</sup>**

Furthermore, a report published by the London-based Royal United Services Institute think-tank, and discussed by *The Telegraph*, alleges that commercial ventures in the border city of Dandong, China, may have “helped North Korean entities construct complex sanctions evasion networks across various jurisdictions.”<sup>46</sup> China has an unenviable position of continuing its economic support for, and interaction with DPRK, abiding by the UN-mandated sanctions, and bearing the scrutiny of the international community for alleged breaches in the enforcement of these sanctions, where “China ... has incurred international criticism for its lax enforcement of restrictions along the mountainous shared border that divides the two states.”<sup>47</sup> Even if smuggling seems to be the main way the Hermit Kingdom ensures its necessities and primal survival,<sup>48</sup> its politico-economic relationships with, and strategic importance to, China are crucial factors in enabling the regime to withstand adversity for the time being.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>46</sup> Nicola Smith, “China complicit in bypassing UN sanctions to launder North Korean money, report suggests,” *The Telegraph*, 4 September 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/09/04/china-complicit-bypassing-un-sanctions-launder-north-korean/>.

<sup>47</sup> Cathcart and Green, “Xi’s Belt: Chinese-North Korean Relations,” p. 132.

<sup>48</sup> Nan, “A Strategic and Emotional Partner,” p. 200.



### Chinese–North Korean Relationship: Strategic Considerations

Due to their geographical position and historical ties, China and North Korea fundamentally embrace the same strategic outlook, not to say the same strategic environment. Their main goals are to promote and ensure internal societal stability and to preserve and protect national independence as a fundamental principle. Whereas communist China, over the years, ultimately decided on a confrontational approach with the Soviet Union and subsequently with the US to enhance its international clout as a middle to great to superpower status, North Korea craftily triangulated between the Soviet Union, China, and the US in its quest for survival, resolutely embracing the nuclear arms option<sup>49</sup> after the August 1992 China's recognition of South Korea<sup>50</sup>.

China's policies evolved from Deng Xiaoping's traditional approach reflected in the dictum Keep Low Profile (KLP) to the more assertive posture of current President Xi's Striving For Achievement (SFA).<sup>51</sup> The shift started with increased military expenses over the years since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a more aggressive stance in East and South China Sea disputes (including submitting notes showing the South China Sea Nine-Dash Line map to the UN),<sup>52</sup> and unreserved support for North Korea, even following atrocious acts of war (like the 2010 sinking of South Korean navy ship Cheonan and the shelling of South Korean Yeonpyong Island, with tragic loss of life.)<sup>53</sup> Hence, "the perception of China's growing assertiveness destroyed more than a decade of improved relations under Deng Xiaoping's 'Good Neighbor Policy.'"<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Guoliang, "China's Policy," pp. 157-158.

<sup>50</sup> China vs. South Korea 1953 – 1992, accessed 25 June 2022, <https://www.prcprague.cz/fcdataset/china-southkorea>.

<sup>51</sup> Xuetong Yan, "From Keeping a Low Profile to Striving for Achievement," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 7, 2 (2014): p. 153.

<sup>52</sup> Institute for Security and Development Policy, "Understanding China's Position on the South China Sea Disputes," June 2016, p. 2, <https://isdip.eu/publication/understanding-chinas-position-southchina-sea-disputes/>

<sup>53</sup> Feng and Beauchamp-Mustafaga, "North Korea's Security Implications for China," p. 54.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

The main goals of China's DPRK strategy stem from several interlinked security necessities:<sup>55</sup>

- keeping North Korea as a strategic *buffer zone* between China and the US military in South Korea
- avoiding the collapse of the North Korean state with severe repercussions on the stability in both the Korean Peninsula and mainland China (where the influx of refugees from North Korea to China would be compounded by nuclear proliferation and terrorist threats)
- promoting denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula
- ensuring a certain degree of influence on the North Korean regime
- enabling peaceful relations on the Korean Peninsula

Four schools of thought emerged underlying the two major trends of Chinese traditionalist and strategist discourses regarding the North Korean problem - nationalist, realist, internationalist, and liberalist.<sup>56</sup> Whereas the nationalists and the realists embrace the same strategic approach, amounting to close ties to North Korea, even if for different reasons, the internationalists and liberalists advocate for a harsher approach to North Korea's Kim dynasty and focus on increasing both China's leverage on DPRK to promote its own goals and enacting economic revival to benefit the North Korean people at large.<sup>57</sup> It is apparent that the first approach, supported by both the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) most-powerful International Liaison Department (ILD) and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) prevailed,<sup>58</sup> even if China resolutely stated it "will not come to North Korea's aid if [Kim Jong-Il] gets [himself] in hot water."<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, China actively tried to disentangle itself from a possible military adventure in support of North Korea's ambitions, carefully parsing the Treaty of Friendship between the two countries "to find ways of eliminating the automaticity of

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<sup>55</sup> Yinong, "Painful Lessons," p. 18. See also: Feng and Beauchamp-Mustafaga, "North Korea's Security Implications for China," p. 43.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>58</sup> Feng and Beauchamp-Mustafaga, "North Korea's Security Implications for China," p. 41.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

the security and military commitments in a way that would not severely anger the DPRK.”<sup>60</sup>

The geopolitical situation also helped solidify the nationalist/realist approach. The US “pivot to Asia” in support of its global interests and a response to the more assertive Chinese policy, including its position regarding DPRK actions, led to China’s acceptance of the necessity to support the North Korean regime as a means to ensure its strategic interests and ultimately “keep the peninsula out of US hands.”<sup>61</sup>

### **Chinese–North Korean Relationship: Societal Stability Considerations**

The most valued concept in Chinese decision-making circles and public perception at large is stability, which embraces the quest for internal/societal stability at home, and “maintenance of stability along [its] borders” by “improving friendly relations with other countries on a non-ideological basis” as well as by applying “bilateral strategic and cooperative partnership” in the case of North Korea.<sup>62</sup>

The reason for valuing and enforcing societal stability stems from the “century of humiliation” to which China was subjected,<sup>63</sup> which amounted to the encroachment of Chinese sovereignty by foreign powers, culminating in Japanese occupations of significant swathes of its territory before and during the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War. A *sine qua non* condition to restore the “national greatness,” “erase the stain of humiliation” and “enrich the state and strengthen its military power”<sup>64</sup> is only possible in the context of a stable societal layout. Stability was only brought about by the communist regime of Mao Zedong, who in 1949 emerged victorious at the end of a brutal civil war, harshly enforced popular submission, and swiftly quelled dissent.<sup>65</sup> The price China paid for societal stability under Mao was large-scale sufferance, deprivation, and millions of

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>61</sup> Chenjun and McGregor, “Four reasons why China supports North Korea.”

<sup>62</sup> Nan, “A Strategic and Emotional Partner,” p. 193.

<sup>63</sup> Orville Schell and John Delury, *Wealth and Power* (New York: Random House, 2014), p. 7.

<sup>64</sup> Schell and Delury, *Wealth and Power*, p. 5.

<sup>65</sup> “Chinese Civil War 1945–1949,” accessed 25 June 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Chinese-Civil-War/Nationalist-collapse-and-the-establishment-of-the-Peoples-Republic-of-China-1949> .

deaths brought about by ideological nightmares like the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution.<sup>66</sup>

Starting in 1978, under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, China implemented economic reforms that were deemed crucial for “China’s future power and prosperity.” The need to find the “right balance between economic reform and the integration of China into the global economy, on the one hand, while suppressing ideological and cultural influences from abroad, on the other” was the only available option for the survival of the communist regime.<sup>67</sup> To achieve societal stability and avoid “social revolution and regime collapse” the “CCP continued to develop and refine the tools of coercion”<sup>68</sup> that amount to the “use of old-fashioned government controls.”<sup>69</sup>

For China, therefore, it is extremely important to avoid any disturbances that may endanger societal peace, especially in the form of unfavourable political/social evolutions occurring in North Korea. These extreme events may trigger social unrest and a large-scale refugee influx from North Korea to China, where a “massive refugee influx would challenge the Northeast provinces’ capabilities to ensure adequate food, shelter, and services and maintain social stability.”<sup>70</sup> A domino effect could easily see these troubles spreading to other areas, affecting the overall societal stability of the Middle Kingdom. Another threat to societal stability that may emerge from North Korea, even if somewhat unlikely, has North Korea using its nuclear arsenal to attack or blackmail China in response to perceived slights.<sup>71</sup> North Korean nuclear proliferation and state-sponsored criminal activities within Chinese territory<sup>72</sup> are two other destabilizing factors that China has to deal with, that arguably affect its societal stability and security. Hence, accepting that there are general risks associated with the present “turbulent international situation,” President Xi stressed the importance of “ensure[ing]

<sup>66</sup> Victor S. Kaufman, “A Response to Chaos: The United States, the Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution, 1961–1968,” *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* Special Issue 7, No. 1/2 (Spring – Summer 1998): pp. 76-86.

<sup>67</sup> Aaron Friedberg, “Globalisation and Chinese Grand Strategy,” *Survival* 60, 1 (2018): p. 8, DOI: 10.1080/00396338.2018.1427362.

<sup>68</sup> Friedberg, “Globalisation and Chinese Grand Strategy,” p. 8.

<sup>69</sup> Lena Ren, Yale University, “Restructuring China to promote social stability,” *East Asia Forum*, 6 August 2011, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2011/08/06/restructuring-china-to-promote-social-stability/>.

<sup>70</sup> Feng and Beauchamp-Mustafaga, “North Korea’s Security Implications for China,” p. 50.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50.

social stability” and posited that “We [China] must be on high alert over ‘black swan’ events and ‘gray rhino’ risks,” Xi said. “We must be able to not only prevent risks but also solve all challenges.”<sup>73</sup> The risks encompass seven areas, where black swan events amount to an occurrence that is unlikely and unexpected but has dire consequences, whereas gray rhino associates risk with a threat that everyone sees coming but fails to address.

Consequently, to ensure its societal stability, China has to help North Korea maintain, protect and strengthen its social fabric, even if the DPRK approach to building a stable society focuses on military (including nuclear weapons), rather than economic, capabilities.

### **Chinese–North Korean Relationship: Philosophical Considerations**

The relationship between the two countries is epitomized by the “lips-to-teeth” symbolism,<sup>74</sup> where “If there is one country that truly understands China strategically, politically and emotionally, it is North Korea, which has maintained a close relationship with China since World War II.”<sup>75</sup> Conversely, China offered its support to North Korea both from a *Confucian, historical perspective* and from an *ideological, internationalist position*.

The *historical perspective* is apparent because “Korea had long been China’s tributary state, in a sense, a protectorate of the Chinese empire,” where the “tributary relationship between ‘celestial dynasty’ and ‘vassal state’ has remained in the minds of the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) leaders and has become an important factor in Sino-North Korean relations.”<sup>76</sup> Additionally, *Confucian principles* are at play as well.

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<sup>73</sup> Charlotte Gao, “Stability and ‘Struggle’: China’s High-Level Meeting on National Risk Control,” *The Diplomat*, 24 January 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/01/stability-and-struggle-chinas-high-level-meeting-on-national-risk-control/>.

<sup>74</sup> Cheng Xiaohe, “The Evolution of the Lips and Teeth Relationship: China-North Korea Relations in the 1960s”, in *China and North Korea Strategic and Policy Perspectives from a Changing China*, ed. C. Freeman (Springer, 2015), p. 119.

<sup>75</sup> Nan, “A Strategic and Emotional Partner,” p. 193.

<sup>76</sup> Shen Zhihua and Yafeng Xia, “Refuting Two Historical Myths: A New Interpretation of China-North Korean Relations,” in *China and North Korea Strategic and Policy Perspectives from a Changing China*, ed. C. Freeman (Springer, 2015), p. 96.

The “Five Social Norms for individual behavior,”<sup>77</sup> also known as “the five basic human relationships and implied responsibilities,”<sup>78</sup> comprise older and younger brother interactions that depict China’s actions towards North Korea. “As the ‘younger brother,’ North Korea could be capricious and act shamelessly while its ‘big brother’ (China) had to endure humiliation in order to maintain the semblance of the Sino-North Korean alliance.”<sup>79</sup> It is apparent that, in addition to political, economic, and strategic considerations, philosophical/*Confucian principles* permeate these two Asian countries’ interaction, where North Korea embraced a “brotherly” stance and was the only supportive polity following China’s Tiananmen crackdown and subsequent international isolation.<sup>80</sup>

*Ideological links* are present as well, even if China left the path of pure communism and embraced a private enterprise, free market-based, capitalist approach to economic affairs following Deng Xiaoping's ascension to power and subsequent economic reforms engineered after 1978.<sup>81</sup> Triggered by the societal changes brought about by the economic reforms, CCP morphed from a “workers’ party” to a “Party [that] no longer claims to represent the interests of workers and peasants against their class enemies—since admitting capitalists to the Party and advancing the concept of ‘Three Represents’ under Jiang Zemin, they have aimed to represent the ‘fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the people of China.’”<sup>82</sup> The “fundamental interests” seem to be related, as Ford quoting Yu notes, to “[t]he construction of a harmonious socialist society’ [which] had become ‘the most important strategic objective in China today.’”<sup>83</sup> Nevertheless, the *ideological support* China benefits from when dealing with the North Korean regime is still present, where fraternal party bonds between China and North Korea are still part of the official discourse. More to the point, the legitimacy of the CCP relies on its continuous support and acceptance of the North

<sup>77</sup> Ioan Tuleasca, “China and its role in the global order from a historical perspective,” Research Paper, INTP 354 *International Relations of East Asia, Graduate Diploma in International Relations*, 2019, p. 1.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>79</sup> Zhihua and Xia, “Refuting Two Historical Myths,” p. 103.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>81</sup> Gregory C. Chow, “China’s economic transformation”, in *China’s 40 Years of Reform and Development: 1978–2018*, ANU Press 2018, Canberra, Australia, doi.org/10.22459/CYRD.07.2018.06.

<sup>82</sup> Eli Friedman, “Why China is Capitalist,” *Spectre Journal*, 15 July 2020, p. 5, <https://spectrejournal.com/why-china-is-capitalist/>.

<sup>83</sup> Ford, “The Party and the Sage,” p. 1036.

Korean regime, since “no [communist] party could deny proletarian internationalism and the importance of unity in the international Communist movement—as to do so would amount to forsaking Marxist-Leninist principles, thus negating the legitimacy of Communist political power.”<sup>84</sup>

Additionally, the *ideological links* also reflect the formal mutual acceptance of the unlimited power of Chinese and DPRK leaders, where both Kim and Xi are *primus inter pares* in all three branches of their respective governments, accessing supreme authority in the political, military, and state realms. To burnish their legacy, they devised unique ideologies in the form of “Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism” in North Korea, which merges Juche and Songun, that is, self-reliance and military-first concepts,<sup>85</sup> and Confucian/communist precepts in the form of “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” in China.<sup>86</sup> Hence, acceptance of ideological innovations that allegedly embrace “a people-centered philosophy”<sup>87</sup> is reflected in strong bonds that transcend adversity and the occasional flare-up in relations between the two countries.

## Conclusions

Irrespective of the international environment and geopolitical imperatives of the moment, China has been a steadfast ally of North Korea, where the occasional low in bilateral relations always gave way to renewed friendship and mutual support. Since the end of the Second World War, China has been keen not only on protecting its national/strategic interests in the Korean Peninsula, particularly concerning North Korea but also on continuously interacting with the Hermit Kingdom irrespective of international circumstances. As substantiated, the reasons are linked to political, economic, strategic, societal stability, and philosophic considerations, where the discrepancy between economic and military policies of the two countries has been

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<sup>84</sup> Zhihua and Xia, “Refuting Two Historical Myths,” p. 104.

<sup>85</sup> Li Yongchun, “North Korea’s Guiding Ideology and Its Impact,” in *China and North Korea Strategic and Policy Perspectives from a Changing China*, ed. C. Freeman (Springer, 2015), p. 237.

<sup>86</sup> Delia Lin, “Morality politics under Xi Jinping,” *East Asia Forum*, 1 August 2019, <https://www.easiaforum.org/2019/08/01/morality-politics-under-xi-jinping/>.

<sup>87</sup> Yongchun, “North Korea’s Guiding Ideology and Its Impact,” p. 237.



compensated by strategic and philosophical determinants, and by a common understanding of, and adherence to, the concept of social stability.

It is important to note that other factors that influence China's approach to various global issues are at play, including its Korean stance, factors that underlie the cultural divide between Western and Chinese/East Asian civilizations, where the Western cultural values of individual freedom, democracy, and equality translate into the Far East concepts of harmony, meritocracy, and hierarchy respectively.<sup>88</sup> Since, over the years, "Chinese political theory was marginalized mainly due to the superior economic and military power of Western countries,"<sup>89</sup> it may be beneficial to address the issue and "systematically compare political values prioritized in China and the West and explore areas of overlap and areas of difference."<sup>90</sup>

Also, on a practical level, it may be productive to rely on China for solving seemingly intractable problems, such as the Korean Peninsula question, that belong to its cultural and geographic space. The advantage of this approach was not lost on the Council on Foreign Relations commissioned Task Force, chaired by Admiral Mike Mullen (former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2007 – 2011) and Senator Sam Nunn (former Chairman of the US Senate Committee on Armed Services).<sup>91</sup> The task force issued a report (*A Sharper Choice on North Korea - Engaging China for a Stable Northeast Asia*) that included ten findings and six recommendations, urging "that the United States and its allies engage China as soon as possible to plan for the future of the Korean Peninsula"<sup>92</sup> by "encouraging a transformation of China's policy toward North Korea should be the next administration's top priority in its relations with China."<sup>93</sup> Unfortunately, the Trump administration seemed to have embraced a confrontational approach with China, though, which precludes any headway relating to the Korean problem, irrespective of high-level meetings carried out between the US and DPRK

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<sup>88</sup> Daniel Bell, "Comparing Political Values in China and the West: What Can Be Learned and Why It Matters," *Annual Review of Political Science* 20 (2017): p. 96.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>90</sup> Bell, "Comparing Political Values," p. 95.

<sup>91</sup> Mike Mullen, Sam Nunn, Adam Mount, a.o., "A Sharper Choice on North Korea - Engaging China for a Stable Northeast Asia," Independent Task Force Report No. 74, Council on Foreign Relations, USA, 2016, xiii.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

Heads of State. In the same line of thought, the Biden administration continues the strategic competition with China, where repeated comments/actions aimed at upholding American interests in East Asia (with emphasis on the Taiwan flashpoint) reflect “profound U.S. strategic thinking.”<sup>94</sup>

When analysing China's policies towards North Korea in the context of the unfolding international pressures North Korea is submitted to, either via UN-mandated sanctions or through individual states' sanctions, to find an adequate way forward of answering the Korean question. It is necessary to put things into perspective and realistically assess the situation on the ground. Since China fulfilled its goals of enmeshing both Korean states into its economic and commercial system, seamlessly organizing the Korean Belt and Road Initiative, only serious incentives will persuade it to actively collaborate in achieving denuclearization and peaceful reunification of the two Korean states. Also, as for direct negotiations, North Korea is not interested in relinquishing its nuclear arsenal, so it digs its heels in, bides its time, endures sanctions, and waits for the international community to shift its focus from compelling it to disarm, to accepting the status quo and desist pressures. As for forcibly enacting change in DPRK, this is rather a forgone conclusion, given North Korea's mind-set of accepting war as an inevitable price to be paid, either for reunification or for defending national sovereignty.<sup>95</sup> Hence, China's policies of accommodating a nuclear North Korea for all the reasons substantiated herein will arguably pay dividends in the end.

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<sup>94</sup> Qi Weiqun, “Biden’s Taiwan Policy Is the Most Dangerous Issue in China-US Relations,” *The Diplomat*, 10 June 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/06/bidens-taiwan-policy-is-the-most-dangerous-issue-in-china-us-relations/>.

<sup>95</sup> Van Jackson, *On the Brink: Trump, Kim, and the Threat of Nuclear War*, book excerpt, 13 December 2018, <https://go-gale-com.helicon.vuw.ac.nz/ps/i.do?p=ITOF&u=vuw&id=GALE|A565600067&v=2.1&it=r&sid=ITOF&asid=d5301b56>.

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