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China-North Korea Relations

DANIEL WERTZ

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Daniel Wertz is Program Manager at NCNK, where he has worked since 2011. Wertz manages NCNK's research and publications, and is the lead researcher and editor of [North Korea in the World](#), an interactive website exploring North Korea's external economic and diplomatic relations. Prior to working at NCNK, Wertz was a research assistant at the U.S.-Korea Institute at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. Wertz received master's degrees in International and World History in a joint program from Columbia University and the London School of Economics, and a bachelor's degree in History from Wesleyan University.

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CONTACT

The National Committee on North Korea
1111 19th St. NW, Suite 650
Washington, DC 20036
www.ncnk.org
info@ncnk.org
 @NCNKorea

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Cover Image: A display of Sino-DPRK friendship at the Mass Games in Pyongyang, September 4, 2010. Photo by Roman Harak via Wikimedia Commons. Note the incorrect star alignment on the PRC flag.

Introduction

The historical and contemporary relationship between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the People's Republic of China could be characterized as one of ostensible friendship and ideological affinity, but with tensions bubbling underneath and occasionally rising to the surface. The description of a relationship "as close as lips and teeth" has often masked a reality of mutual – though asymmetrical – dependency as well as mutual distrust. North Korea's leaders have been deeply wary of becoming subservient to China or other great powers, and although Beijing has held considerable economic and political leverage over Pyongyang, it has rarely translated into a commensurate level of influence.

The history of relations between China and the Korean Peninsula has deep roots, spanning the rise and fall of dynasties, empires, and modern states. For centuries, Korea's Choson Dynasty (1392-1897) served as a model tributary state in a Sinocentric order, internalizing neo-Confucian ideology imported from China.¹ This unequal historical relationship has arguably continued to influence PRC leaders' attitude toward the DPRK as a junior fraternal party-state which owes deference in return for Beijing's support.² The Kim dynasty, in turn, has resented this attitude and has defined its state *Juche* ideology in opposition to the tributary ideology of *sadaejjuui* or "serving the great," castigating what it calls "sycophancy" or "flunkeyism" in foreign relations.³ To be a pliant ally, or accept a role as a subordinate partner, would be anathema to the North Korean regime.

Nonetheless, China has had a longstanding strategic interest in keeping the North Korean state intact, while Pyongyang is dependent upon Beijing as a crucial source of economic and diplomatic support. China's intervention in the Korean War saved Kim Il Sung's regime from imminent defeat, and Beijing provided economic assistance to Pyongyang through much of the Cold War. China today serves as North Korea's economic lifeline and window to the world, accounting for the vast majority of its trade and foreign investment. China's relationship with North Korea has also been crucial to mitigating the impact of wide-ranging international sanctions imposed in response to North Korea's development of a nuclear arsenal.

North Korea, in turn, has served as a strategic buffer for China, keeping the United States and its allies at arm's length. Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions have, at various times, been both an asset and a burden for Beijing, threatening regional stability but also providing China with an important source of leverage in its dealing with the United States. Chinese experts and officials have regularly described their country's North Korea policy as "no war, no instability, and no nuclear weapons"; in practice, it is clear that those priorities are ranked in that order of precedence.⁴ The possibility of a unified and U.S.-aligned Korean Peninsula emerging from a collapsed or defeated North Korea would be antithetical to Beijing's interests, while the threat of a massive refugee crisis along its 1,400 kilometer-long border with North Korea has also been an ongoing concern. Denuclearization ranks as a tertiary priority, and from Beijing's perspective, would ideally entail a significant reduction in the U.S. military presence in the region in exchange for North Korea's abandonment of its nuclear program.

Revolution and War

As Korea attempted to assert its independence and cautiously modernize in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, it found itself at the center of struggles for power and influence among its neighbors – first between China and Japan, then Japan and Russia – before ultimately being annexed by Japan in 1910. In 1931, Japan invaded and occupied the neighboring Chinese region of Manchuria, expanding the war into the rest of China six years later and creating a common enemy for communist revolutionaries in China and Korea.

Ties between the individuals and institutions who would lead the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the People's Republic of China thus predate the founding of those two states in 1948 and 1949, respectively. Prior to the liberation of Korea in 1945, two distinct groups of Korean communists operated in China, each with their own links to the Chinese Communist Party. One group was comprised of various left-wing Korean independence activists in China who joined the CCP leadership at its "red capital" of Yanan for the duration of World War II, organizing a "Korean Volunteer Army" of a few thousand soldiers to fight with CCP-aligned forces against Japan in northern China. The second group was based in Manchuria, where a large number of ethnic Koreans from the region joined with Chinese communist-led efforts to fight against Japanese occupation.

Kim Il Sung, the future North Korean leader, joined the CCP in Manchuria in 1931 as one such anti-Japanese guerrilla fighter. In 1934, Kim's Chinese comrades arrested him on suspicion of being a pro-Japanese collaborator, amidst a bloody and paranoid purge of ethnic Koreans from the Manchurian branch of the CCP known as the Minsaengdan Incident.⁵ Kim survived the purge intact, however, and moved on to lead a small band of guerrillas in Manchuria before ultimately retreating to the Soviet Union in 1940 under pressure from Japanese forces. The ethnic Korean and Chinese guerrillas fleeing from Manchuria were incorporated into the Soviets' 88th International Brigade, headed by a Chinese commander, Zhou Baozhong. With Zhou's support in their Soviet exile, Kim would be promoted to command the brigade's first battalion, and garner the attention of the Soviet authorities who would eventually place him in power in northern Korea after Japan's defeat.⁶

Ties between the Chinese and Korean communist movements continued with the re-emergence of civil war in China after the Japanese surrender. At the end of World War II, the CCP dispatched the Korean Volunteer Army to Northeast China, where many of its officers remained to recruit ethnic Koreans in the region to fight against the Kuomintang-led Republic of China. Over 100,000 ethnic Koreans ultimately fought alongside Chinese Communist forces during this conflict, and northern Korea also served as an important rear base for the People's Liberation Army as it fought the Kuomintang for control of Manchuria. After the Communist victory in the Chinese Civil War, the CCP repatriated three divisions of ethnic Korean soldiers and officers who had served in the PLA to North Korea, significantly strengthening the Korean People's Army as it prepared for the invasion of South Korea.⁷

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Prior to the start of the Korean War, the Soviet Union had agreed to support Kim's plans for unification through force, conditional on China's endorsement. Mao Zedong reluctantly granted his approval, believing the imperative for China to be seen as the leader of the Communist revolution in Asia to outweigh the necessity of first consolidating his own victory.⁸ Yet Kim Il Sung kept Beijing out of the loop regarding Pyongyang's planning and early conduct of the war; only after the UN Command's counteroffensive routed the KPA and began advancing north of the 38th Parallel did Kim Il Sung request China's intervention in the conflict. The threat of U.S. troops approaching the Yalu also helped Mao to win the support of other CCP leaders in launching what they would call the "War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea."

Beijing's intervention saved Kim Il Sung's regime from extinction, but the Chinese and North Korean leadership clashed repeatedly over the conduct of the war. Peng Dehuai, the commander of what China called its "People's Volunteer Army," quickly assumed control over military operations and North Korea's railways, and privately dismissed the DPRK's "extremely childish" military command.⁹ Kim Il Sung would later blame Peng's hesitancy to rapidly move south of the 38th parallel as UN forces were retreating from the Chinese advance as a lost opportunity for military victory and unification.¹⁰

China, through its People's Volunteer Army, was a party to the prolonged Armistice negotiations that eventually ended fighting in the Korean War, along with the DPRK and the United Nations Command. After the Armistice Agreement was signed in 1953, China retained a large troop presence in North Korea, which would remain until 1958. Along with the Soviet Union and its Eastern Bloc satellites, China also provided massive amounts of aid for the postwar reconstruction of North Korea, with its "People's Volunteers" serving as a major source of free labor.¹¹

Yet in the years after the Armistice was signed, North Korea's internal propaganda would minimize the significance of China's contribution to the war, despite the central role of the People's Volunteer Army in turning the tide of the conflict and the massive casualties it suffered (including the death of Mao Zedong's eldest son). Soviet diplomats in Pyongyang noted as early as 1955 that "the Korean comrades underrate the role and importance of Chinese aid to Korea and, in particular, downplay the role of the Chinese volunteers in the fight against the American intervention."¹² As the North Korean state began constructing a mythologized narrative of its history centered on the exploits and iconography of Kim Il Sung, the foreign contributions to its origins could not remain at the center of the story.

Cold War Relations

In February 1956, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev gave his "secret speech" criticizing Joseph Stalin and the cult of personality surrounding him. Kim Il Sung's response to the ensuing pressure for "de-Stalization" ultimately reshaped the terms of the DPRK's relations with China and the Soviet Union, and put North Korea further on the course toward becoming an absolutist regime. At an August 1956 Party Plenum, Kim Il Sung denounced Workers' Party

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leaders who had (in accordance with Khrushchev's calls for collective leadership in the communist world) criticized his policy priorities. Kim branded his rivals as scheming "factionalists" due to their backgrounds in the Yanan base in China or in the Soviet Union, and because of their continued ties abroad. Kim's attempted purge prompted China and the Soviet Union to send a joint delegation led by Peng Dehuai and Soviet Deputy Premier Anastas Mikoyan to Pyongyang to intervene, forcing Kim to temporarily back down.¹³

Nonetheless, Moscow and Beijing proved ambivalent about how to deal with their insubordinate junior partner. Kim quickly began breaking his promises to Peng and Mikoyan, and further aggravated matters in November 1956 by suggesting (contrary to a previously agreed-upon formula) that the UN oversee a process to remove foreign troops from the Korean Peninsula and facilitate unification. In a conversation with the Soviet Ambassador to Beijing, Mao Zedong compared Kim's actions to those of the "traitor" Imre Nagy, the Hungarian Prime Minister who had recently been deposed by Soviet troops, and mused that Kim might even be conspiring with South Korean President Syngman Rhee.¹⁴ Yet rather than escalate the crisis, China and the Soviet Union ultimately chose to reconcile themselves to Kim's continued leadership. After a brief pause, Kim followed through on his program of purging domestic opponents – real or imagined – with foreign ties, and filled the upper ranks of the regime with comrades from his guerilla days. Not long afterwards, China withdrew its 440,000 troops stationed in North Korea, removing its most powerful source of leverage.

As the Sino-Soviet relationship grew increasingly contentious in subsequent years, both China and the Soviet Union took measures to keep the DPRK within their respective camps. In a 1960 meeting in Moscow, Nikita Khrushchev shared with Kim Il Sung a transcript of Mao's damning 1956 comments to the Soviet Ambassador suggesting that Kim be overthrown. The same year, China – in the midst of the famine caused by Mao's Great Leap Forward – provided North Korea with 230,000 tons of food aid, and in 1962 Beijing agreed to resolve a dispute over the demarcation of its border with North Korea on terms favorable to Pyongyang. Rather than lean too strongly to one side, though, North Korea pursued a policy of equidistance between its two patrons, signing separate mutual defense treaties with China and the Soviet Union within the span of five days in 1961.¹⁵ After the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, Pyongyang began to tilt toward Beijing; Khrushchev's willingness to back down during the crisis had, in Pyongyang's view, exposed the "revisionist" Soviet Union's lack of resolve in standing up for small allies. Nonetheless, North Korea and the Soviet Union moved to swiftly patch up their ties after Khrushchev's ouster in 1964. Soviet military and economic aid were not things that Pyongyang would give up lightly.¹⁶

China-North Korea relations similarly hit a low point with the onset of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, as China's Red Guards denounced Kim Il Sung as a pro-Soviet revisionist for his failure to recognize Mao's leadership of the global communist movement. Chinese and North Korean forces reportedly engaged in several minor clashes along the border; in one instance, Chinese troops crossed the border to briefly occupy a North Korean village. The two sides also waged a propaganda battle along the border, fought with dueling loudspeakers and billboards. Within

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China, Red Guards targeted members of the ethnic Korean community for public denunciations and attacks.¹⁷ North Korea's public response to these provocations demonstrated a considerable degree of restraint, but its internal propaganda denounced Mao Zedong as "an old fool who has gone out of his mind."¹⁸

Relations between the two countries rapidly improved as the most radical phase of the Cultural Revolution wound down in 1969, but China's sudden opening to the U.S. in the early 1970s provided another major jolt to North Korea. Pyongyang publicly supported China's engagement with the United States, portraying it as an ignoble surrender by Washington. Kim Il Sung also seemed to have unrealistic expectations about what he could gain from Sino-American rapprochement, seeing it as an opportunity to drive U.S. forces off the Korean Peninsula and achieve peaceful unification with the South on the DPRK's terms. However, Beijing was unwilling to link its normalization of relations with Washington to the withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Korea, and Pyongyang's efforts to engage Seoul in direct negotiations to improve relations proved short-lived.¹⁹ North Korea's subsequent attempt to engage directly with the U.S. over a peace treaty and troop withdrawals was similarly unsuccessful.²⁰ The U.S. withdrawal from Indochina, and the communist victories in the region, prompted Kim to contend in Beijing in 1975 that "this is a golden opportunity to carry out a military reunification in Korea," but Chinese leaders declined to throw their support behind renewed conflict on the Peninsula.²¹

China's *de facto* acceptance of the status quo of a divided Peninsula presaged another period of drift in relations with its ally across the Yalu River. In 1980, Beijing criticized the planned hereditary transfer of power in North Korea from Kim Il Sung to Kim Jong Il as a "vestige of feudalism."²² As Deng Xiaoping's government advanced a policy of reform and opening, Pyongyang mostly ignored its appeals to follow suit.²³ China's most egregious betrayal, in the North Korean regime's view, came when it established diplomatic relations with South Korea in 1992, following the example set over the previous few years by the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc countries.

Nonetheless, in spite of these periodic tensions throughout the Cold War era, China and North Korea remained bound by their shared history, ideology, and strategic interests, with Beijing offering Pyongyang military and economic assistance as well as diplomatic support *vis a vis* North Korea's various confrontations with the United States and South Korea. Even as bilateral relations were at a low point during the Cultural Revolution, China offered its public support to North Korea following its 1968 seizure of the U.S.S. Pueblo – an attack that threatened renewed conflict on the Korean Peninsula, and which had come as a surprise to Beijing.²⁴ Notwithstanding the Chinese leadership's aversion to hereditary succession, Kim Jong Il received a warm welcome in Beijing three years after his unveiling as heir apparent.²⁵ In a pattern that has continued to the present day, a downturn in relations between Beijing and Pyongyang would never quite reach the breaking point, and would sooner or later be followed by a reversion to the mean.

Recalibrating Relations in the Kim Jong Il Era

The end of the Cold War marked a major shift in the geopolitics of Northeast Asia, and with it the nature of relations between China and North Korea. In addition to establishing diplomatic ties with Seoul, Chinese trade with South Korea expanded rapidly during this period, soon dwarfing its economic ties with the North.²⁶ As Beijing's interest in promoting revolution abroad became a relic of the past, the historical and ideological ties binding it and North Korea together declined in relative importance, though they certainly did not disappear. China's leadership came to prize stability as their foremost priority on the Korean Peninsula, fearing the consequences of a North Korean collapse or a conflict sparked by its emerging nuclear ambitions. For its part, North Korea's hostility toward the changes taking place in China was counterbalanced by the fact that the Soviet Union's collapse had made Pyongyang's relationship with Beijing more structurally important than it had been since the end of the Korean War.

In 1993, Beijing shifted the terms of its trade with the North from concessional arrangements and bartering to a cash-based market approach – a policy reflecting China's economic reforms as well as the oft-expressed hope of its leaders that Pyongyang would follow in their footsteps. Combined with the loss of Soviet support and the accumulated impact of sclerotic economic policies, however, the shift to normalized bilateral economic relations contributed to a breakdown of the North Korean economy and the onset of famine. To prevent a total collapse, by the mid-1990s China agreed to more generous terms for its food and fuel exports to North Korea, even as bilateral trade plummeted and political relations remained tense.²⁷

The onset of famine also led many North Koreans to flee across the then-porous border into China to seek sustenance, earn a livelihood through informal trade, or escape punishment for perceived crimes. At the height of the famine, an estimated 50,000 to 150,000 North Koreans were living undocumented in China.²⁸ Most lived or conducted small-scale business activities among the ethnic Korean community in Northeast China, where linguistic and cultural familiarity as well as family connections facilitated cross-border ties. By the late 1990s, a small but growing number of North Koreans had also succeeded in transiting through China to eventually reach South Korea. As North Korean refugees and the organizations supporting them began to establish regular migration routes in the early 2000s, this number continued to climb.

To deter the flow of North Koreans into the country and to maintain relations with Pyongyang, China has consistently categorized undocumented North Koreans as “economic migrants” subject to deportation rather than refugees, despite their risk of arrest and imprisonment upon repatriation to their home country. Fear of arrest, in turn, has fueled trafficking of North Koreans in China, with North Korean women particularly vulnerable to sexual predation. A wave of high-profile mass defections at foreign embassies in China in 2002, as the worst period of famine was receding, prompted Chinese authorities to crack down on undocumented North Koreans, and led to a gradual decrease in the number of North Koreans seeking refuge in the

country.²⁹

The pursuit of “stability” has also shaped China’s approach to the long-running nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula. For Beijing, mitigating the destabilizing effects of North Korea’s development of nuclear arms and long-range missiles – as well as those of the potential U.S. and regional responses to such development – has been the priority. Achieving the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, while a long-stated Chinese policy goal, has been a lesser objective.³⁰

China was not a key player in the talks leading to the 1994 U.S.-DPRK Agreed Framework on North Korea’s nuclear program. However, Beijing worked to play a balancing role amidst the first nuclear crisis, facilitating initial U.S. dialogue with North Korea and opposing North Korea’s threatened withdrawal from the Nonproliferation Treaty while objecting to the imposition of sanctions to address the issue. China also participated in inconclusive Four Party Talks held from 1997 to 1999, which aimed to normalize relations between the U.S. and North Korea and replace the Armistice Agreement with a peace treaty.

After the 2002 collapse of the Agreed Framework, the U.S. pressed China to take a greater role in pressuring Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear ambitions. The renewed nuclear crisis came as Sino-DPRK ties were finally starting to rebound: Kim Jong Il visited China in 2000, marking the first leadership-level meeting between the two countries in eight years. Bilateral trade was also beginning to rise again after bottoming out in the 1990s. As North Korea began its nuclear breakout, Beijing succeeded in bringing Pyongyang to the table for what became the Six Party Talks, with Russia and Japan added alongside the two Koreas, China, and the United States.³¹

However, in its role as chair of the forum (and contrary to U.S. hopes that a multilateral approach to dialogue would leave North Korea isolated), Beijing’s priority in the Six Party Talks was to manage and maintain a diplomatic process, emphasizing *quid pro quo* bargaining and pragmatism over pressure. China proved unwilling to risk asserting its full leverage to try to bring that process to the conclusion of a denuclearized North Korea. To the contrary, as the Six Party Talks were underway, diplomatic and economic relations between China and North Korea continued to gradually mend.³² Beijing used unusually strong language to criticize North Korea’s first nuclear test in 2006 and signed on to the first UN Security Council sanctions resolution targeting North Korea’s WMD program, but reverted to a more friendly stance toward Pyongyang when Six Party Talks resumed several months later.

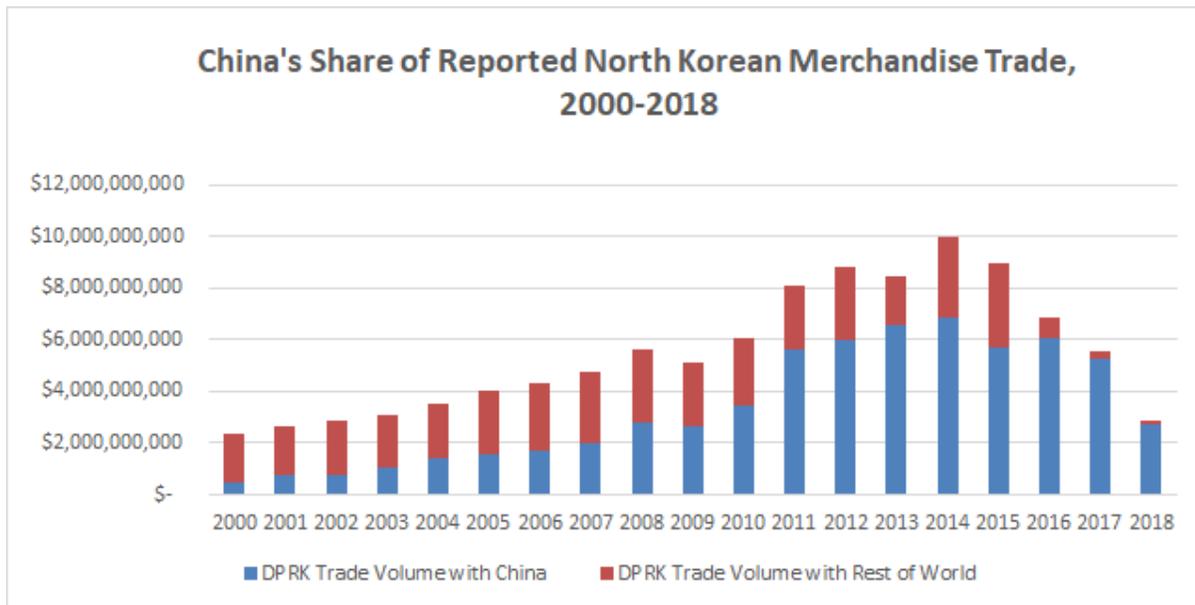
China’s Deep Engagement

Kim Jong Il’s August 2008 stroke, and the abridged succession plan it induced, appear to have motivated China and North Korea to move even closer to each other to ensure a stable transition of power.³³ Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao’s 2009 visit to Pyongyang signaled this shift in policy, as the two sides signed a host of documents promising to deepen economic ties and build new infrastructure along their border. Kim Jong Il traveled to China four times in 2010-2011, marking as many trips to China in his last two years as North Korean leader as in his first

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fifteen. China remained committed to deepening economic and political ties with North Korea despite the collapse of the Six Party Talks, North Korea's second nuclear test in 2009, and its provocative military actions against South Korea the following year.³⁴ Chinese trade and investment in North Korea also increased considerably during this period despite the adoption of UN sanctions resolutions targeting North Korea's nuclear program.

The deepening Chinese economic relationship with North Korea coincided with what one scholar has termed "reform without opening" in the country.³⁵ Though North Korea had long resisted appeals to follow China's development path, in the wake of a bungled 2009 currency revaluation scheme, Pyongyang increasingly allowed market forces to play a greater role in the economy, decentralizing economic decision-making while allowing the state-run and private sectors to effectively co-opt one another.³⁶ These changes took place as various unilateral and multilateral sanctions significantly constrained North Korean trade with South Korea, Japan, and other trading partners, leading China to dominate North Korea's foreign trade and the shaping of its evolving economy.



Source: NorthKoreaInTheWorld.org

These economic ties were largely commercial in nature, with Chinese leaders encouraging firms to do business in North Korea and indirectly supporting them through developing infrastructure in the border region.³⁷ Chinese firms that began investing in or doing business with North Korea around this time were mostly small-or medium-sized private enterprises located in the border provinces, as well as state-owned enterprises owned by provincial or municipal governments in the region.³⁸ North Korea's mining sector was a particularly large target for Chinese investment, and North Korean exports of coal, textiles, and seafood to China began to boom during this period. Growing North Korean imports (both clandestine and licit) of goods such as personal electronic devices, cell phones, and solar panels from China also facilitated enhanced access to foreign information and benefitted many ordinary North

Koreans.³⁹

For a decade after the UN Security Council first imposed sanctions on North Korea in 2006, China took a minimal approach to interpreting and enforcing the resolutions aimed at countering Pyongyang's WMD programs. China took no apparent action, for example, to enforce UN Security Council Resolution 1718's prohibition on the export of luxury goods to North Korea, or to prevent the export of six specialized heavy-duty trucks which North Korea quickly converted to transporter-erector-launcher vehicles for its long-range missiles.⁴⁰ As China's strategy of "deep engagement" moved forward, North Korea also expanded its business networks embedded in China. With the assistance of Chinese partners and intermediaries, these networks were able to use China's global trade and financial ties to extend North Korea's global economic reach, evading international sanctions and procuring key components for the country's nuclear and ballistic missile programs.⁴¹

Alongside these expanded networks and trade ties, the number of North Koreans permitted to reside in China also grew during this period. Beginning around 2012, China began allowing large numbers of North Koreans to enter the country as guest workers.⁴² According to some estimates, by 2017 there were an estimated 50,000 North Koreans working legally in China, accounting for about half of North Korea's total overseas labor force.⁴³ In addition to sending unskilled or semi-skilled workers abroad, North Korea sent hacking teams to be based in China (as well as other countries), using the better internet infrastructure to conduct espionage and cybertheft activities.⁴⁴ A growing number of North Korean students and scientists also began enrolling at Chinese universities or collaborating with Chinese counterparts, developing skills or expertise in WMD-related topics as well as studying more innocuous subjects.⁴⁵

A crackdown on undocumented North Korean migration to China accompanied the growing number of North Korean workers, students, and merchants going abroad at the behest of the state. Shortly after Kim Jong Un took power, the North Korean government began tightening control along its border with China, leading the number of North Korean refugees reaching South Korea to decline by over fifty percent.⁴⁶ China has similarly enhanced security along its side of the border, both to deter illegal crossings and to prepare for a potential crisis.⁴⁷ Chinese authorities have also continued to periodically crack down on North Korean refugees in the country as well as on those working to provide them with support and shelter.⁴⁸

The New Kim on the Block

In the years after Kim Jong Un and Xi Jinping assumed leadership of their respective countries, bilateral relations became increasingly strained. Expanded economic ties with China may have helped to encourage North Korea to begin cautiously reforming its economic policies, and to expose more North Koreans to new information and ideas about the world beyond their country's borders. However, they seemed to do little to moderate Pyongyang's behavior or its pursuit of weapons of mass destruction.

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Kim Jong Un asserted his independence from Chinese wishes early in his tenure by conducting a satellite launch (widely perceived as a proxy for a long-range missile test) in late 2012, in defiance of a letter from Xi Jinping asking him not to do so.⁴⁹ Kim followed the launch with a nuclear test, leading to the adoption of a new sanctions resolution at the UN (with China voting in support) and thence a string of provocative threats and actions from North Korea. Xi implicitly rebuked Kim's actions by publicly stating that "no one should be allowed to throw a region and even the whole world into chaos for selfish gain."⁵⁰

A further turning point in relations came with the December 2013 trial and execution of Jang Song Thaek, Kim Jong Un's uncle-by-marriage and a major interlocutor for the regime in its relations with China, as well as a purported advocate of Chinese-style economic reforms.⁵¹ Jang oversaw multiple business and economic cooperation projects with China, including two North Korean Special Economic Zones (SEZs) adjacent to the border. A 2012 visit by Jang to Beijing had many of the trappings of a leadership-level visit: accompanied by a large retinue of North Korean officials, Jang met with Chinese leaders including President Hu Jintao and signed several agreements on economic cooperation.⁵² The North Korean statement announcing Jang's execution, among many other charges, criticized his foreign business dealings (though without naming China explicitly), and accused him of accruing "huge debts" by selling "coal and other precious underground resources at random."⁵³

The purge cast a shadow over North Korea's relationship with China, with the planned new SEZ projects put on an apparently indefinite hiatus and the older Rason SEZ – which had become the closest thing to a bastion of capitalism in North Korea – seeming to lose autonomy.⁵⁴ Even before Jang's execution, however, there were signs that North Korea's unreliable business environment would continue to pose a challenge to Chinese investors. In August 2012, Xiyang Group – a private Chinese firm whose investment in a North Korean iron mine was among the largest instances of foreign direct investment into the country – publicly accused its North Korean partners of severe malfeasance and expropriation, and warned other Chinese firms not to invest in the DPRK.⁵⁵

Amidst these fraying ties, China's censors permitted a greater degree of public and elite criticism of the country's erstwhile ally. Even as official criticism of Pyongyang remained muted, Chinese social media users frequently mocked North Korea and its leader, and a number of former military officers called for Beijing to take a tougher line against its neighbor.⁵⁶ Prominent Chinese scholars engaged in a public debate: was North Korea a strategic liability for Beijing, a source of chronic instability in the region that was prompting military build-ups by the U.S. and its allies? Or did the relationship with Pyongyang remain an asset, a strategic buffer that provided China with leverage in its dealings with the United States?⁵⁷ Still, the CCP maintained limits on how far criticism of North Korea could extend: in 2013, a scholar was suspended from his post at China's elite Central Party School after arguing in the *Financial Times* that China should "abandon" North Korea, while in 2016 censors began blocking a derogatory nickname for Kim Jong Un from popular Chinese websites.⁵⁸

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China's leadership, too, seemed for a time willing to rebalance its policy toward the Korean Peninsula as Beijing took steps to cultivate a closer political relationship with Seoul. (Chinese economic ties with the South had long ago surpassed those with the North – even at the peak of China's bilateral trade with North Korea in 2014, total trade with South Korea was more than forty times greater.⁵⁹) Chinese leader Xi Jinping hosted ROK President Park Geun-hye for a state visit in 2013, and reciprocated by traveling to Seoul for a state visit a year later. President Park was also a guest of honor at a 2015 military parade in Beijing celebrating the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II. Her warm reception at the event contrasted starkly with that of North Korea's representative, Choe Ryong-hae, who was relegated to the far end of the parade's viewing stand.⁶⁰

Even as Beijing was developing warmer ties with Seoul, though, it was also attempting reconciliation with Pyongyang. In October 2015, Liu Yunshan, a top official and member of China's Politburo Standing Committee, traveled to Pyongyang to meet with Kim Jong Un, passing on a congratulatory message from Xi Jinping. But this rapprochement proved short-lived. That December, North Korea sent the Moranbong Band – an all-female, militarized electro-pop group favored by Kim Jong Un – to Beijing in a high-profile piece of cultural diplomacy. Not long after the band's arrival in China, though, its planned concert series was abruptly cancelled, and its members were recalled home.⁶¹ The reasons for this turn of events were not made public, but might have been tied to Kim Jong Un's announcement, made a day after the band arrived in Beijing, that North Korea had developed hydrogen bombs. The announcement reportedly dissuaded China from sending top officials to attend the concert, which in turn led North Korean authorities to cancel it altogether. A month after the incident, North Korea conducted another nuclear test.

The fourth test had negative repercussions for China's relations with both North and South Korea. It spurred the adoption of another UN sanctions resolution that for the first time targeted North Korea's lucrative coal exports in a bid to curtail the country's access to hard currency. China's approval of the resolution appeared to signal a willingness to take a tougher approach toward North Korea, though Beijing's generous interpretation of a "livelihoods" exemption to the coal ban significantly softened its impact.⁶² The nuclear test also led South Korea to announce that it would host a THAAD missile defense battery to defend against North Korea's growing missile capabilities. The decision quickly ended the diplomatic courtship between Seoul and Beijing. The Chinese government claimed that the THAAD radar could be used to undermine its own nuclear deterrent and subsequently imposed a set of *de facto* sanctions against South Korea, cutting off group tourism to the country and organizing boycotts of targeted South Korean businesses in China.

It would take another set of North Korean provocations before Beijing would similarly begin putting significant economic pressure on Pyongyang: a series of tests of new ballistic missiles, another nuclear test, and the assassination of Kim Jong Un's half-brother (and reported protectee of China) Kim Jong Nam.⁶³ In February 2017, China announced that it would suspend all coal imports from North Korea for the remainder of the year.⁶⁴ China took further action to

enforce sanctions as tensions between the U.S. and North Korea peaked later that year, with Kim Jong Un overseeing more nuclear and missile tests as well as trading threats and insults with Donald Trump. In conjunction with the UN Security Council's adoption of a series of increasingly punitive measures and a U.S.-led "maximum pressure" campaign of sanctions enforcement against North Korea's foreign business partners, China's government told its banks to cut ties with North Korean customers, ordered the closure of North Korean companies inside China, and cracked down on cross-border smuggling.⁶⁵ Reported Chinese imports from North Korea declined precipitously, and climbing fuel prices in North Korea suggested that China was taking action to reduce fuel exports to the DPRK, as well.⁶⁶

In response to this crackdown, North Korean state media issued unusually direct and antagonistic attacks against China. The broadsides condemned China's criticism of the North Korean nuclear program and its support for sanctions as interference in the DPRK's "internal affairs," and attacked China as an ungrateful and money-chasing "big neighbor" willing to "kowtow to the U.S." ever since Richard Nixon's 1972 visit to Beijing. The statements also implicitly rebuked the long-standing calls by China for North Korea to follow its path of reform and opening, saying that "the DPRK does not have to lie on its face just as China did when it visited the U.S. and there is no need for China to force the DPRK to learn it."⁶⁷

The Rapid Return of Sino-DPRK Friendship

Shortly after declaring that the DPRK had accomplished "the historic cause of completing the state nuclear force," Kim Jong Un announced that he now intended to ease tensions on the Peninsula and prioritize economic development.⁶⁸ Not long thereafter, North Korea reached an agreement with the South to participate in the upcoming Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, and began planning for a summit meeting between Kim and Donald Trump. Similarly, North Korean relations with China quickly changed course. Like his father, Kim Jong Un did not meet with his Chinese counterpart for his first six years in power; also like his father, when the younger Kim decided that the time was ripe for outreach to South Korea and the United States, ties with China quickly began to mend, as well.⁶⁹

In March 2018, Kim Jong Un made his first visit to Beijing as North Korea's leader. Meeting with Xi Jinping, Kim exhorted "the preciousness of the DPRK-PRC friendship, a priceless legacy left by the preceding leaders of the two countries and a treasure common to the two peoples."⁷⁰ North Korea's flurry of diplomatic outreach to Seoul and Washington had provided a new impetus for both Pyongyang and Beijing to quickly repair their relationship. For North Korea, healing the rift with China would provide leverage and ease pressure as it prepared for talks with the U.S.; for China, embracing Kim Jong Un would help to ensure that the negotiating process would advance Beijing's interests. (China's leadership may have also wanted to guard against the possibility, however remote, of a North Korean strategic realignment with Washington against Beijing.⁷¹)

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Beijing's willingness to put genuine pressure on North Korea in 2017 had been in support of achieving modest goals. Chinese officials had continually called for the U.S. and North Korea to return to dialogue and, in July 2017, had advanced a "freeze-for-freeze" proposal under which North Korea would halt missile and nuclear tests in exchange for the suspension of U.S. joint military exercises with South Korea.⁷² North Korea's unilateral announcement of a moratorium on nuclear and long-range missile tests and its apparent willingness to negotiate over "the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula" in exchange for security guarantees signaled that Pyongyang was willing to meet its half of Beijing's equation. Donald Trump's subsequent pledge during his summit meeting with Kim Jong Un in Singapore to end "war games" with South Korea advanced the other half.

As North Korean talks with South Korea and the U.S. progressed over the next year, Kim made three additional visits to China, meeting with Xi before and after the Singapore summit as well as a month prior to the second U.S.-DPRK summit in Hanoi. The rekindled China-North Korea friendship also went beyond leadership-level meetings. In May 2018, shortly after Kim Jong Un announced that economic development would now be the country's top priority, Pyongyang sent a large delegation of top officials to China to tour industrial sites. Chinese state media (though notably, not North Korean media) described the delegation's mission as "learning from China's experience in economic development and reform and opening up."⁷³ The following January, Xi Jinping attended a performance by a North Korean arts troupe in Beijing, a more successful follow-up to the botched cultural diplomacy that had accompanied the Moranbong Band's visit three years previously.⁷⁴

These strengthened ties were also accompanied by a weakening Chinese commitment to sanctions enforcement. Wide-ranging sanctions have remained on the books, and reported Chinese imports from North Korea since the start of 2018 have been less than a tenth of the value reported only a few years previously. Yet smuggling and informal trade along the border appear to have largely resumed, and many of the ship-to-ship transfers of refined fuel or other sanctioned goods to or from North Korea have involved Chinese intermediaries or passed through Chinese territorial waters. While Beijing is not necessarily green-lighting such activities, is not proactively stopping them either.⁷⁵ Since mid-2018, there has also been a surge of Chinese tourism to North Korea, providing the DPRK with a steady stream of revenue from a sector not directly prohibited by UN sanctions.⁷⁶

Accordingly, key indicators of the DPRK's macroeconomic health – the market exchange rate for the North Korean Won, and prices for food and fuel – have remained relatively stable, and consumer goods for Pyongyang's elite have remained readily available. China, in tandem with Russia, has also expressed its support for the early easing of UN sanctions against North Korea in conjunction with diplomacy over its nuclear program, and has denounced U.S. "unilateral" sanctions targeting North Korea's foreign trade partners.⁷⁷

Building New Bridges

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On June 20, 2019, Chinese leader Xi Jinping arrived in Pyongyang to great fanfare, marking his first trip to North Korea. In addition to meeting with Kim Jong Un, Xi visited the Kumsusan mausoleum to pay his respects to his host's embalmed father and grandfather; enjoyed a China-DPRK friendship-themed performance of North Korea's Mass Games; and penned a rare guest editorial for the *Rodong Sinmun*, the newspaper of record of the Korean Workers' Party. Even though North Korea's diplomatic engagement with the U.S. and South Korea had appeared to reach a stalemate after the Hanoi Summit several months earlier, relations with China were all about lips and teeth smiling together. After spending his first six years in power progressively alienating Beijing, Kim Jong Un had managed to engage with China on his own terms – a remarkable feat for the leader of a country so deeply dependent on the goodwill of its patron.

Perhaps the most fitting symbol of the two country's recent relationship has been the New Yalu River Bridge, a project promised by Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao during his 2009 visit to Pyongyang. Construction of the three-kilometer span was completed in 2014 at a cost of about \$350 million to China, but the project then spent five years as a "bridge to nowhere" because North Korea declined to build customs facilities or an access road in its territory to connect to it. The unconnected bridge was a sign, perhaps, of North Korea's ambivalence about deepening its economic dependence on China, as well as its disregard for reciprocity. However, during his trip to Pyongyang, Xi reportedly promised to fund the full cost of construction of these last portions of the project as well.⁷⁸

Whether by design or by default, the flurry of North Korean engagement with South Korea and the U.S. that began with its participation in the 2018 Pyeongchang Olympics has ultimately had the effect of doing far more to shore up Pyongyang's relations with Beijing than improving relations with Washington or Seoul. Given the many ups and downs in their relationship and their history of mutual mistrust, it would be unusual if this current state of goodwill between China and North Korea were to be sustained for a prolonged period. But given the mutual interests that have also shaped their bilateral relationship over the decades, it would be highly unlikely to see a lasting break in ties between China and North Korea absent a fundamental change in the political system of one country or the other.

¹ Despite this embrace of a Sinocentric order, relations between Korea and China during this period were often contentious. Many of the Choson Dynasty's Neo-Confucian elite considered the Manchu conquerors who founded the Qing dynasty to be illegitimate interlopers, and themselves to be the true keepers of ideological purity – a stance arguably echoed by North Korea's attitude toward China after (or perhaps even before) Beijing embraced a policy of "reform and opening."

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³ Chen Jian, "[Limits of the 'Lips and Teeth' Alliance: An Historical Review of Chinese-North Korean Relations](#)," in "Uneasy Allies: Fifty Years of China-North Korea Relations," Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Asia Program Special Report No. 115, September 2003.

⁴ Mathieu Duchâtel and Phillip Schell, "[China's Policy on North Korea: Economic Engagement and Nuclear Disarmament](#)," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Policy Paper 40 (December 2013), 44.

⁵ Hongkoo Han, "Colonial Origins of *Juche*: The Minsaengdan Incident of the 1930s and the Birth of the North Korea-China Relationship," in Jae-Jung Suh, ed., *Origins of North Korea's Juche: Colonialism, War, and Development* (Lexington

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⁶ Zhihua Shen, "On the Eighty-Eight Brigade and the Sino-Soviet-Korean Triangular Relationship – A Glimpse at the International Antifascist United Front During the War of Resistance against Japan," *Journal of Modern Chinese History*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 3-25.

⁷ Donggil Kim, "Prelude to War? The Repatriation of Koreans from the Chinese PLA, 1949-50," *Cold War History*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (2010), 227-244.

⁸ Chen Jian, *China's Road to the Korean War: The Making of the Sino-American Confrontation* (Columbia University Press, 1996). An alternative hypothesis about Mao's motivation during this period posits that he saw a quick victory in Korea as necessary for the stability of his own fledgling regime. See Donggil Kim, "New Insights into Mao's Initial Strategic Consideration towards the Korean War Intervention," *Cold War History*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (August 2016), 239-254.

⁹ Shen Zhihua, "[Sino-North Korean Conflict and its Resolution during the Korean War](#)," Woodrow Wilson Center, *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Issue 14/15 (Winter 2003 / Spring 2004), 9-24.

¹⁰ "[First Secretary of the Soviet Embassy in North Korea, 'Korean-Chinese Relations in 1969'](#)," December 9, 1969, Woodrow Wilson Center, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, RGANI, fond 5, opis 61, delo 466, listy 187-197. Obtained by Sergey Radchenko and translated by Gary Goldberg.

¹¹ Zhihua Shen and Yafeng Xia, "[China and the Post-War Reconstruction of North Korea, 1953-1961](#)," Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars, North Korea Documentation Project, Working Paper #4 (May 2012).

¹² "[Information on the Situation in the DPRK](#)," April 1955, Woodrow Wilson Center, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, RGANI, Fond 5, Opis 28, Delo 314, listi 34-59. Obtained for NKIDP by James Person and translated for NKIDP by Gary Goldberg.

¹³ James F. Person, "North Korea in 1956: Reconsidering the August Plenum and the Sino-Soviet Joint Intervention," *Cold War History*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2018), 253-274; Sergey Radchenko, "['We Do Not Want to Overthrow Him': Beijing, Moscow, and Kim Il Sung, 1956](#)," Woodrow Wilson Center, History and Public Policy Program, *Sources and Methods* blog, August 7, 2017.

¹⁴ Person, "North Korea in 1956," *op. cit.*; Radchenko (*op. cit.*) argues that the Soviet Union was inclined to depose Kim, but that Mao ultimately preferred to keep him in place.

¹⁵ The China-DPRK Treaty, Friendship, and Mutual Cooperation stipulates that if one country is subject to an armed attack, the other shall come to its aid. The treaty was renewed in 1981 and again in 2001, with the most recent renewal remaining in effect until 2021. However, Chinese officials and scholars have periodically indicated, both privately and publicly, that their country would not be obliged to come to North Korea's defense if Pyongyang were to initiate a conflict. See Ankit Panda, "[China and North Korea Have a Mutual Defense Treaty, But When Would It Apply?](#)" *The Diplomat*, August 14, 2017.

¹⁶ Balázs Szalontai, *Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era: Soviet-DPRK Relations and the Roots of North Korean Despotism, 1953-1964* (Stanford University Press, 2005), 174-209.

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²⁰ Eungseo Kim, "The Sino-DPRK Split and the Origins of US-DPRK Bilateralism," *European Journal of Korean Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2018), pp. 71-79.

²¹ Quoted in Jae Ho Chung and Myung-hae Choi, "Uncertain Allies or Uncomfortable Neighbors? Making Sense of China-North Korea Relations, 1949-2010," *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (2013), 243-264.

²² James Person, "[Chinese-North Korean Relations: Drawing the Right Historical Lessons](#)," *38 North*, September 26, 2017.

²³ Peter Ward, "[When North Korea Almost Backed China-Style Economic Reforms](#)," *NK News*, January 8, 2018.

²⁴ Schaefer, "North Korean 'Adventurism' and China's Long Shadow," *op. cit.*

²⁵ Adam Cathcart and Charles Kraus, "[China's 'Measure of Reserve' Toward Succession: Sino-North Korean Relations, 1983-1985](#)," SinoNK.com, China-North Korea Dossier #2, February 2012.

²⁶ On China's evolving relationships with South and North Korea since the 1990s, see Scott Snyder, *China's Rise and*

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the Two Koreas: Politics, Economics, Security (Lynne Reinner Publishers, 2009).

²⁷ Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, *Famine in North Korea: Markets, Aid, and Reform* (Columbia University Press, 2007), 31-32, 154-160.

²⁸ W. Courtland Robinson, "[Lost Generation: The Health and Human Rights of North Korean Children, 1990-2018](#)," The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (2019), 73-94.

²⁹ Melanie Kirkpatrick, *Escape from North Korea: The Untold Story of Asia's Underground Railroad* (Encounter Books, 2014); Andrei Lankov, "North Korean Refugees in Northeast China," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 44, No. 6 (November/December 2004), 856-873; Robinson, "Lost Generation," *op. cit.* Even though the number of North Korean refugees in China appeared to peak in the late 1990s to early 2000s, the number of North Korean refugees arriving annually in South Korea (and in almost all cases, transiting through China) continued to climb until 2009. This suggests that, after the famine had mostly subsided, fewer North Koreans tried to flee the country, and those who did leave North Korea increasingly decided to attempt to reach South Korea rather than stay underground in China.

³⁰ "[China's Role in North Korea Nuclear and Peace Negotiations](#)," U.S. Institute of Peace, Senior Study Group Report, May 2019.

³¹ On China's role in the Six Party Talks, see Yoichi Funabashi, *The Peninsula Question: A Chronicle of the Second Korean Nuclear Crisis* (Brookings Institution Press, 2007).

³² Haggard and Noland aptly term China's emerging strategy toward North Korea during this period as one of "deep engagement," a phrase this author believes is particularly appropriate for Sino-DPRK relations for the period from 2009-2016. See Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, *Hard Target: Sanctions, Inducements, and the Case of North Korea* (Stanford University Press, 2017).

³³ Duchâtel and Schell, "China's Policy on North Korea," *op. cit.*; "[Shades of Red: China's Debate over North Korea](#)," International Crisis Group, Report 179, November 2, 2009.

³⁴ In March 2010, the ROKS *Cheonan* sank after being impacted by what a South Korean-led investigation determined was a torpedo fired from a North Korean submarine, killing 46 sailors; China declined to assign blame for the sinking. Later that year, North Korea launched an artillery strike against South Korea's Yeonpyeong Island in response to military exercises taking place there; China similarly declined to condemn the attack.

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⁴¹ John Park and Jim Walsh, "[Stopping North Korea, Inc.: Sanctions Effectiveness and Unintended Consequences](#)," MIT Security Studies Program (August 2016); "[In China's Shadow: Exposing North Korean Overseas Networks](#)," C4ADS and the Asan Institute for Policy Studies (August 2016).

⁴² Barbara Demick, "[China Hires Tens of Thousands of North Korea Guest Workers](#)," *Los Angeles Times*, July 1, 2012.

⁴³ "[Fact Sheet: UN Security Council Resolution 2397 on North Korea](#)," United States Mission to the United Nations, December 22, 2017. North Korea's overseas laborers, managed and overseen by state-owned enterprises, are widely reported to work under hazardous conditions, face restrictions on their movement, and keep little of their pay.

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⁴⁷ Ryan McMorrow, "[China Adds Troops, Cameras, Radiation Detectors at North Korean Border](#)," *Agence France-*

Presse, January 19, 2018.

⁴⁸ [“China: Redoubling Crackdowns on Fleeing North Koreans,”](#) Human Rights Watch, September 3, 2017.

⁴⁹ Jane Perlez, [“North Korean Leader, Young and Defiant, Strains Ties With Chinese,”](#) *The New York Times*, April 13, 2013.

⁵⁰ Jane Perlez and Choe Sang-hun, [“China Hints at Limit to North Korea Actions,”](#) *The New York Times*, April 7, 2013.

⁵¹ Jeremy Page, [“North Korea Execution Confounds China,”](#) *The Wall Street Journal*, December 17, 2013. On Jang’s background, see Ra Jong-yil, *Inside North Korea’s Theocracy: The Rise and Sudden Fall of Jang Song-thaek*, trans. Jinna Park (SUNY Press, 2019).

⁵² Choe Sang-Hun, [“North Korean Official Cements Status in Beijing Visit,”](#) *The New York Times*, August 17, 2012.

⁵³ [“Traitor Jang Song Thaek Executed,”](#) *Korean Central News Agency*, December 13, 2013.

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⁵⁶ Andrew Scobell, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Astrid Cevallos, Arthur Chan, and Zev Winkelman, “Netizen Opinion and China’s Foreign Policy: Interpreting Narratives about North Korea on Chinese Social Media,” *Asia Policy*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (July 2019), pp. 97-122; Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, [“Deciphering PLA Media Commentaries on North Korea: Going Rogue or Staying on Script,”](#) Korea Economic Institute, Academic Paper Series, July 22, 2015.

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⁶⁵ Justin V. Hastings and Yaohui Wang, “Informal Trade along the China-North Korea Border,” *Journal of East Asian Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (2018), 181-203.

⁶⁶ Benjamin Katzeff Silberstein, [“China’s Sanctions Enforcement and Fuel Prices in North Korea: What the Data Tells Us,”](#) *38 North*, February 1, 2019.

⁶⁷ North Korean state media published these articles under the pen name Jong Phil; see particularly Jong Phil, [“Chinese Media’s Shameless and Impudent Act,”](#) *Rodong Sinmun*, September 23, 2017.

⁶⁸ [“Kim Jong Un Guides Test-fire of ICBM Hwasong-15,”](#) *Korean Central News Agency*, November 29, 2017; [“Kim Jong Un Makes New Year Address,”](#) *Korean Central News Agency*, January 1, 2018.

⁶⁹ Kim Jong Il’s first visit to China as North Korea’s leader took place in May 2000, a month before the first inter-Korean summit took place in Pyongyang and five months before Pyongyang sent Jo Myong Rok, a top military and political official, to Washington. Similarly, Kim Jong Un first traveled to China to meet with Xi Jinping in March 2018, shortly after U.S. President Donald Trump agreed to hold a summit with Kim, and a month before South Korean President Moon Jae-in met the North Korean leader at the DMZ.

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⁷³ [“Xi Meets DPRK’s WPK Friendship Visiting Group,”](#) *Xinhua*, May 16, 2018.

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