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The China-North Korea Strategic Rift: Background and Implications for the United States

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Key Findings

- In 2020 and 2021, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary Xi Jinping sent messages to North Korean leader Kim Jong-un applauding Kim's leadership and emphasizing China's willingness to strengthen bilateral ties. In turn, the North Korean leader declared that China and North Korea were "advancing towards a bright future by smashing the high-handedness and desperate maneuvers of hostile forces," referring to tensions between both countries and the United States. Behind these public displays of mutual support, however, were surprising signs of distance and distrust.
- The strategic divide between China and North Korea became increasingly apparent in 2018 and 2019 when U.S.-North Korea summits rekindled Beijing's longstanding fear that North Korea would jeopardize China's interests in negotiations with the United States and South Korea. Chinese leaders are keenly aware of the bilateral tensions that prompted reports of Pyongyang describing China in 2018 as North Korea's "thousand-year enemy" and expressing willingness to accept a long-term U.S. presence on the Korean Peninsula, potentially to counterbalance China's influence. Despite their nominal alliance, tension and even antagonism have existed between China and North Korea for over 70 years.
- Since 2018, Beijing has taken steps to maintain its influence over North Korea and forestall any attempt by Pyongyang to stray from its orbit. General Secretary Xi held his own summits with Kim Jong-un and Beijing began undermining the international pressure campaign against Pyongyang by violating its UN sanctions commitments and boosting licit and illicit bilateral trade. China remains invested in ensuring North Korea's economic dependence, accounting for more than 90 percent of North Korea's total reported imports and exports and facilitating Pyongyang's efforts to obtain foreign currency in violation of sanctions.
- Any Sino-U.S. cooperation on North Korea's denuclearization will remain constrained by Beijing's unwillingness to rupture its relationship with Pyongyang completely and lose leverage over North Korea's foreign policy decisions. Chinese government-affiliated scholars continue to publicly express concern that North Korea could realign with the United States at China's expense. Meanwhile, despite public affirmations of the relationship, Pyongyang has continued to maintain some distance from Beijing, maintaining tight control over its border with China and rejecting Chinese offers of novel coronavirus (COVID-19) vaccines.

Introduction

The history of China-North Korea relations shows that despite their treaty alliance and close economic ties, mutual distrust, resentment, and even antipathy have long plagued the bilateral relationship. Since its founding in 1949, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has attempted to continue the imperial Chinese tradition of interfering in the foreign and domestic affairs of its smaller Korean neighbor. For its part, Pyongyang has maintained close ties with Beijing while rejecting a subordinate role and taking notable steps to counterbalance China's influence. Chinese leaders have long been frustrated by North Korea's defiance of China's policy preferences and expressed concern since the 1950s that Pyongyang might align with other countries, including the United States, at China's expense.

Since 2018, China and North Korea have attempted to use their relationship to generate leverage and diplomatic advantage in their individual negotiations with the United States.¹ Nevertheless, the deep distrust between the two countries remains evident. Despite its need for assistance in combating the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, in August 2021 North Korea rejected a shipment of nearly three million doses of COVID-19 vaccines produced by Chinese biopharmaceutical company Sinovac Biotech.² According to South Korea's intelligence service-affiliated Institute for National Security Strategy, North Korea is particularly reluctant to accept Chinese-made vaccines, which it views as ineffective.³ North Korea kept its border with China closed until early 2022 after becoming one of the first countries to seal its border with China in early 2020 following the COVID-19 outbreak.⁴ Meanwhile, Chinese government-affiliated scholars continued to express concern that North Korea could jeopardize Chinese interests in potential negotiations with the United States.⁵

This report examines the deeply rooted tension between China and North Korea and assesses its implications for U.S. policy. First, it surveys the history behind the China-North Korea relationship, examining the importance of the relationship to both countries as well as Pyongyang's determined efforts to remain independent from Beijing. It then analyzes changes in political and economic ties between China and North Korea since the 2017–2018 nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula and subsequent leadership summits involving the United States, North Korea, South Korea, and China. The report concludes by exploring the implications for U.S. policy of the continuing tension and distrust between Beijing and Pyongyang.

Divided from the Start: Historical Tensions between China and North Korea

The PRC's attempts to assert dominance over North Korea (also known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or DPRK) and the North Korean regime's efforts to guard against undue Chinese influence have long generated tension between the two countries. This dynamic was apparent from their first interactions, when then North Korean leader Kim Il-sung refused Chinese military assistance for his June 1950 invasion of South Korea.*⁶ China's massive intervention in the war later that year did little to alleviate the strain in bilateral ties.⁷ In a particular affront, Mao Zedong overruled Kim's desire—expressed as early as February 1952—to conclude an armistice agreement with the UN coalition, opting instead to prolong the war to achieve China's broader geopolitical goals.⁸ According to historian Chen Jian, among these goals was gaining North Korea and other countries' acceptance of what the CCP viewed as its "morally superior position in directing the 'revolutions of the East.'"⁹ For years after the fighting concluded, North Korea refused to publicly recognize the significance of China's contributions to the war.¹⁰

Tensions continued after the war when China retained a massive army in North Korea and contemplated military intervention in the country after Kim purged the North Korean leadership of Chinese influence. Following political intervention by China and the Soviet Union in 1956 to reinstate pro-CCP and pro-Soviet officials whom Kim had removed from their positions earlier that year, Mao warned Soviet leaders that North Korea might betray the socialist camp and "defect to the Western bloc."¹¹ In response, Mao proposed that China use its armed forces in North Korea to "help Kim Il-sung correct his mistakes" in a manner similar to the Soviet Union's armed intervention earlier that year in Hungary.¹² Upon learning of Mao's comments several years later, Kim denounced China's policy as aiming to "turn Korea into a Chinese colony."¹³ Chinese troops remained in North Korea until 1958.[†]

North Korea Rejects Playing "Flunkey" to China

North Korea adeptly exploited Sino-Soviet rivalry during the Cold War to avoid becoming overly reliant on either of its great power benefactors. While effectively purging Soviet influence within his regime, Kim Il-sung also went to great lengths to end the practice of "flunkeyism" to the PRC—a reference to Korea's historical role as a tributary

* Kim informed Chinese leaders of the invasion only three days after the outbreak of war. He also routed military supplies directly from the Soviet Union to avoid transiting Chinese territory and further lessen Chinese influence over his mobilization and war planning. Kim's distrust of the CCP likely predated the war. While operating as a guerilla in northern China in the 1930s, Kim was nearly executed by the CCP on suspicions of espionage. Shen Zhihua and Yafeng Xia, *A Misunderstood Friendship: Mao Zedong, Kim Il-sung, and Sino-North Korean Relations, 1949-1976*, Columbia University Press, 2018, 34, 256; James Person, "Chinese-North Korean Relations: Drawing the Right Historical Lessons," *38North*, September 26, 2017. <https://www.38north.org/2017/09/jperson092617/>.

† Chinese military forces in North Korea contributed to post-war reconstruction in the country along with significant Chinese economic aid. China also engendered resentment from the North Korean government and people who came to view it as an oppressive occupying force that violated North Korea's sovereignty. According to contemporary reports from China's state-run Xinhua news agency, there were many cases of occupying Chinese forces detaining, interrogating, and abusing North Korean citizens, including numerous instances of rape. Xinhua reported that the Chinese military even detained and interrogated some of North Korea's highest-ranking officials. See Shen Zhihua and Yafeng Xia, *A Misunderstood Friendship: Mao Zedong, Kim Il-sung, and Sino-North Korean Relations, 1949-1976*, Columbia University Press, 2018, 79–80, 116–117.

to the imperial Chinese state.*¹⁴ North Korea's official ideology of *Juche* (roughly translated as “self-reliance”) was promulgated in the 1950s during a period of intense conflict within the ruling Korean Workers' Party (KWP) between Kim and KWP officials whom he viewed as beholden to Chinese and Soviet influence.¹⁵ By emphasizing Korean national identity, culture, and history, the Kim regime used *Juche* to assert North Korea's political and diplomatic independence in international affairs.¹⁶ According to Dae-Sook Suh, former director of the Center for Korean Studies at the University of Hawaii and historian of the Kim regime, Kim Il-sung's development of *Juche* “signified the end of [North Korea's] political dependence and subservience to the Soviet Union and China.”¹⁷

Following tensions over Kim's purge of CCP-affiliated and Soviet-affiliated factions within the KWP, the Soviet Union recommitted to extensive aid to North Korea in 1960 and canceled some of Pyongyang's prior debts, prompting a similar overture of aid from China.¹⁸ China and North Korea signed the China-North Korean Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance in 1961, less than a week after North Korea signed a treaty of the same name with the Soviet Union.[†]¹⁹ Signing the treaty of alliance, however, did not prevent bilateral ties from reaching another low during China's Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) when radical CCP factions accused the Kim regime of ideological heresy and persecuted thousands of ethnic Koreans in China on suspicion of spying for North Korea.²⁰ In 1966, Kim Il-sung elevated *Juche* to become North Korea's official ideology and spoke in the following years about North Korea's “unflinching struggle against flunkeyism.”²¹

China's rapprochement with the United States beginning in 1971 deepened North Korea's distrust of China and may have prompted it to begin its own outreach to Washington several years later.²² China's pivot in its foreign relations and economic model prompted concern in Pyongyang, with Kim Il-sung fearing that China would draw closer to the United States, Japan, South Korea, and other capitalist countries in ways that could damage North Korea's interests.²³ China's invasion of its former ally Vietnam in 1979 to “teach [it] a lesson” after Hanoi made moves to act independently from Beijing likely further reinforced for North Korean leaders the potential threat posed by China.²⁴ In 1985, amid China's improving ties with South Korea, top Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping warned that Beijing should prepare for North Korea to “fall out with [China]” in a manner similar to Vietnam, with whom China remained engaged in a low-level border war.²⁵

China's Greatest Betrayal and North Korea's Outreach to the United States: 1992–2012

Sino-North Korean tensions continued for the remainder of the Cold War and culminated in what North Korea considered perhaps China's greatest betrayal—its establishment of diplomatic ties with South Korea in 1992. According to Shen Zhihua, noted Cold War historian and researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and Yafeng Xia, professor of East Asian history at Long Island University, China's normalization of diplomatic relations with North Korea's primary rival “cut the last cord in the ‘brotherly’ political foundation of Sino-North

* North Korea's rejection of “flunkeyism” to China draws on nationalist rhetoric in Korea dating to the late 19th century. The concept of *sadae*, meaning to accommodate or revere stronger countries (literally “serving the great”), had originally referred to Korean policy during the Choson Dynasty (1392–1910) to pay “tribute and respect to the Chinese emperor in exchange for protection and autonomy.” This policy came under attack by Korean reformers who desired to modernize the country and secure independence from China. Reformers criticized ruling conservative officials for their dependence on Chinese support and “subservient, obsequious and backward attitudes and thought.” Opposition to *sadae* became a defining force in North Korea's *Juche* ideology, which opposes what the Kim regime castigates as “sycophancy” or “flunkeyism” in foreign relations. After the mid-1950s, the Kim regime went so far as to ban publication of classical Chinese poetry in North Korea's official media because it was seen as “flunkeyist.” Seo-Hyun Park, “Dueling Nationalisms in North and South Korea,” *Palgrave Communications* 5:40 (2019). <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-019-0248-3>; Daniel Wertz, “China-North Korea Relations,” *National Committee on North Korea*, November 2019. <https://www.ncnk.org/resources/briefing-papers/all-briefing-papers/china-north-korea-relations>.

† The China-North Korea Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance stipulates the two countries' defense obligations to each other. The treaty is up for renewal every 20 years, with both sides formally renewing the treaty in 2001. In July 2021, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin stated the treaty “remains in force unless agreement is reached on its amendment or termination.” The North Korean government has not yet publicly reaffirmed the treaty. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference on July 7, 2021*, July 7, 2021; *Global Times*, “China-North Korea Friendship Treaty ‘Remains in Effect’ All the Time: FM Spokesperson,” *Global Times*, July 7, 2021; Jagannath Panda, “How ‘Eternal’ Is the Sino-DPRK Alliance?” *38North*, June 30, 2021.

Korean ties.”²⁶ With this move, they argue, the “strategic, economic, and political foundations of the Sino-North Korean ‘special relationship’ collapsed completely.”²⁷

It was in this strategic context, which also included the Soviet Union’s dissolution, that tensions between Beijing and Pyongyang entered a new stage. During the 1990s, China drew closer to South Korea while North Korea embarked on new efforts to retain its strategic autonomy by conducting diplomatic outreach to the United States and accelerating its nuclear weapons program.²⁸ According to testimony before the Commission from Valerie Lincy, executive director of the Wisconsin Project on Nuclear Arms Control, the Chinese government never provided North Korea’s nuclear or missile programs the high level of assistance it did to either Pakistan or Iran—both countries with whom Beijing had no treaty alliance.²⁹

Meanwhile, according to longtime *Washington Post* journalist Don Oberdorfer and Robert Carlin, former chief of the Northeast Asia Division of the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research, by the early 1990s the North Korean regime had “already decided that normalizing relations with the United States was a strategic imperative to counter potential threats ... from China and Russia.”³⁰ The two continue that this goal became the “engine of North Korean foreign policy for years to come.”³¹ In the latter half of the 1990s, they go so far as to posit, Pyongyang was “focused on improving relations with the United States, at China’s expense if possible.”³² During this period Pyongyang also made attempts to develop economic and cultural ties with Taiwan—moves guaranteed to deeply anger the PRC.*³³ After assuming power in 1994, Kim Jong-il did not travel to China for six years until finally paying a visit to Beijing in 2000.[†]³⁴

Negotiating with the United States at China’s Expense

In one sign of North Korea’s efforts to balance against Chinese influence, Pyongyang attempted in the 1990s to exclude China from multilateral discussions about North Korea’s nuclear program and a potential peace agreement on the Korean Peninsula. During these discussions, North Korean leaders insisted on bilateral talks with the United States or three-way talks involving the United States and South Korea, bristling when Washington insisted on including China in the negotiations.³⁵ When U.S. negotiators proposed four-party talks including Beijing in 1996 to achieve a peace agreement, North Korean participants opposed China’s involvement in a matter “they considered to be none of Beijing’s business.”³⁶ In later four-party discussions, North Korean officials demanded to know “why the Chinese were there.”³⁷ According to Oberdorfer and Carlin, in 2003 China was only able to convince North Korea to engage in the multilateral discussions—which later evolved into the Six-Party Talks—after assuring Pyongyang that the talks would transition quickly into bilateral negotiations with the United States.³⁸

North Korea’s ending of its longstanding objection to the presence of U.S. troops on the Korean Peninsula may have been another sign of its efforts to counterbalance China. While it still perceived the United States as a potential existential political and military threat, beginning in the early 1990s the North Korean regime openly discussed the possibility of accepting the continued presence of U.S. troops on the Korean Peninsula.³⁹ During an October 2000 visit to the United States, First Vice Chairman of North Korea’s National Defense Commission Jo Myong-rok suggested that new North Korean leader Kim Jong-il was willing to contemplate potentially stationing U.S. military forces on the Korean Peninsula on a long-term basis.⁴⁰ Kim had made a nearly identical point to a senior advisor to South Korean President Kim Dae-jung earlier that year, agreeing with the South Korean position that U.S. troops should remain on the peninsula even after reunification.⁴¹ During that discussion, Kim was reported to have said it was “desirable that U.S. troops stay as a peacekeeping force in Korea,” albeit with a revised role, for the purposes of maintaining “stability in Northeast Asia.”⁴²

China Deepens Economic Influence

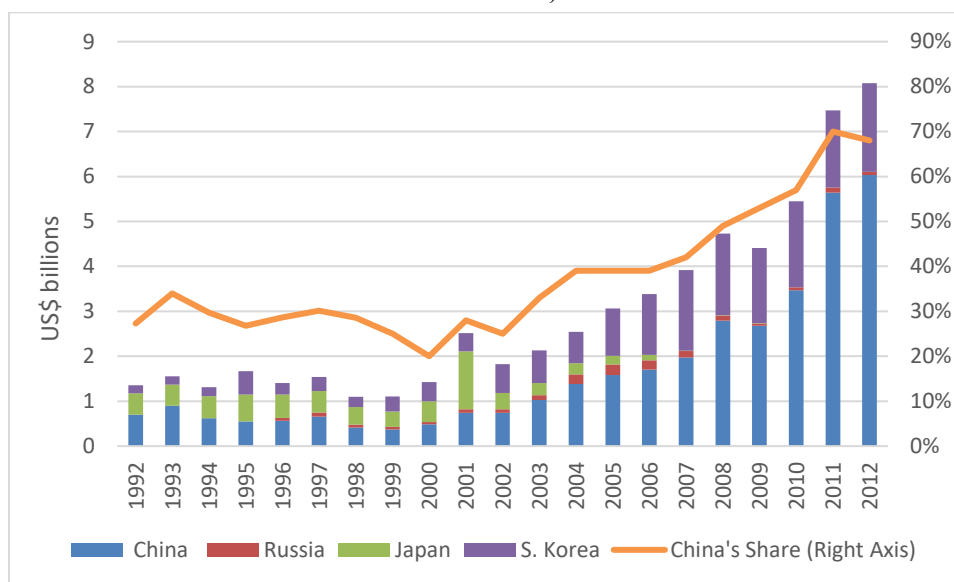
* In one telling example, in 1997 North Korea reached a deal with Taiwan to store Taiwan’s nuclear waste in exchange for over \$100 million. Both China and the United States pressured Taiwan to scuttle the deal, which fell apart after Taiwan eventually “discovered” a problem with the necessary permits. Don Oberdorfer and Robert Carlin, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History*, Basic Books, 2014, 447.

† Even then, Kim’s visit was likely planned to gain negotiating leverage prior to important summits with South Korean President Kim Dae-jung and then U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright later that year. Don Oberdorfer and Robert Carlin, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History*, Basic Books, 2013, 332–333, 340–346.

Despite the strategic tension in their bilateral relationship, China continued its diplomatic support and economic aid to North Korea during the 1990s. China became the main supplier of imported food for North Korea but sought to trade with Pyongyang on a market basis rather than extend its previous patterns of bartering, concessions, and loans, ultimately resulting in far lower trade levels.⁴³ Chinese food exports to North Korea fell precipitously in the mid-1990s, prompting the North Korean media to label the Chinese as “traitors to the socialist cause.”⁴⁴ Nevertheless, the North Korean famine that broke out during this period became increasingly dire, eventually forcing a more positive diplomatic reception of China as Beijing resumed aid.⁴⁵

In the first decade of the 2000s, China steadily gained more economic influence over North Korea as a weakened economy and international sanctions forced Pyongyang into deepened dependence on Chinese trade and economic assistance. North Korea’s worsening diplomatic relations with its neighbors further contributed to China’s growing share of the country’s goods trade.* After North Korea’s first nuclear test in 2006, China voted in favor of UN sanctions prohibiting the flow of luxury goods and weaponry to North Korea along with limiting provision of financial resources.⁴⁶ Still, Chinese-North Korean bilateral goods trade more than tripled from \$1.7 billion in 2006 to \$6 billion in 2012.⁴⁷ China’s share of North Korean trade accounted for nearly 40 percent of North Korea’s trade in 2006 and almost 70 percent of its trade in 2012 (see Figure 1).⁴⁸ This growth in China’s share occurred as South Korea declared that it would restrict economic ties with the North after attributing the 2010 sinking of its naval corvette *Cheonan* to a North Korean torpedo attack.⁴⁹ Japan’s trade with North Korea had already sharply declined in the early 2000s as bilateral tensions resurfaced† and Japan grew concerned about its neighbor’s nuclear capabilities.⁵⁰

Figure 1: North Korea’s Estimated Goods Trade Volume with Neighbors and China’s Share of North Korean Goods Trade, 1992–2012



Source: Various.⁵¹

Note: Unless otherwise specified, trade includes the sum of goods exports and imports.

* North Korea does not report official statistics for its economy, meaning that trade and other economic data come from mirror statistics of its trade partners as well as official South Korean estimates. Reported data from these various sources include aid data and goods trade but not services trade. Uses of the term “trade” throughout this paper primarily refers to goods trade. All North Korean economic data in this paper should be regarded as estimates.

† North Korea’s past abduction of Japanese citizens remains a key issue in the Japan-North Korea relationship. North Korea abducted at least 17 Japanese citizens between 1977 and 1983, returning five of the abductees in 2002 after admitting to the abductions. Relations broke down as Japanese public opinion soured on North Korea and the two governments could not reach a resolution on investigating the remaining abductees. Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Abductions of Japanese Citizens by North Korea*, August 6, 2021. https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/n_korea/abduction/index.html; Takahiro Yamamoto, “Abduction: Japan’s Blunders in Negotiations with North Korea,” *North Korean Review* 5:2 (Fall 2009), 34–42. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43908715>.

China's Disrespectful Ally and the "Thousand-Year Enemy": 2012–2018

The China-North Korea relationship reached another low ebb following the rise to power of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and General Secretary of the CCP Xi Jinping in 2011 and 2012, respectively. After several years of increased contact and exchange in the final years of Kim Jong-il's life, bilateral ties soon reverted to their earlier pattern of "coldhearted smiles in public and expressions of thinly disguised contempt behind the scenes" following the change in both countries' leadership.⁵² According to Patricia Kim, then Stanton Nuclear Security Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, since General Secretary Xi's rise to power, "Beijing has taken less pains to hide its disdain for Pyongyang."⁵³ Further contributing to the diplomatic strain, neither General Secretary Xi nor Kim Jong-un visited the other for years after assuming their leadership posts.*

Tensions between the two countries also grew over Kim's actions against potential political challengers closely tied to China. In 2013, Kim executed his uncle, Jang Song-thaek, an influential figure in the regime widely viewed as extremely close to the Chinese leadership.[†] ⁵⁴ In 2017, Kim ordered the assassination of his half-brother Kim Jong-nam, a purported admirer of China and its economic system who had been living under Chinese protection in Macau.⁵⁵ According to Zhu Feng, director of the Institute of International Studies at Nanjing University, the "heavily publicized nature" of the killing of Kim Jong-nam "signaled Pyongyang's utter disrespect for Beijing."⁵⁶

Growing Investments and Diminishing Returns

Despite diplomatic tensions, China-North Korea economic ties deepened along with growth of underlying networks of illicit activities and finance.⁵⁷ On top of the official trade relationship, China's import of migrant labor and support for North Korea's malicious cyber activities[‡] over the last decade have been key to Pyongyang's ability to weather increasingly dim economic conditions.⁵⁸ Lax Chinese government enforcement has allowed the growth of multiple North Korean businesses that are fronts to obtain foreign currency.⁵⁹ Sanctions on financial transfers to the country have severely curtailed North Korean access to foreign currency, which is highly desired for major purchases because of both the low value of North Korea's won and public mistrust within North Korea of the country's weak financial system.⁶⁰

With Kim Jong-un's ascendance, China increased efforts to influence the new leader, though with mixed success. Chinese leaders saw Kim's emphasis on economic growth as a potential break from his father's policy.⁶¹ Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) reached a notable high of \$109.5 million in 2012, reflecting Kim Jong-un's focus

* In contrast, General Secretary Xi visited South Korea in 2014. At a military parade in Beijing in 2015 commemorating the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II, then South Korean President Park Geun-hye attended the festivities, while Kim Jong-un remained notably absent. Kim Jong-un followed in his father's footsteps by not visiting China for years after his assumption of North Korea's top leadership post, waiting until just before his summit with then U.S. President Donald Trump in 2018 to make the trip. Yun Sun, "Kim Jong Un Goes to China: Mending a Weathered Alliance," *38 North*, April 3, 2018; Balbina Y. Hwang, written testimony for U.S. China Economic and Security Review Commission, *Hearing on China's Relations with Northeast Asia and Continental Southeast Asia*, June 8, 2017, 11; Jane Perlez, "Chinese President's Visit to South Korea Is Seen as Way to Weaken U.S. Alliances," *New York Times*, July 2, 2014.

† Jang had led a high-level delegation to China the year before, met with then CCP General Secretary Hu Jintao, and oversaw multiple high-profile economic cooperation projects with China. For more information on Jang Song Thaek, see Bill Bishop, "Excerpt from 'The Great Successor: The Divinely Perfect Destiny of Brilliant Comrade Kim Jong Un' by Anna Fifield," *Sinocism*, August 2, 2019. <https://sinocism.com/p/excerpt-from-the-great-successor>; Jeremy Page, "North Korea Execution Confounds China," *Wall Street Journal*, December 17, 2013. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304403804579263801761078622>; Scott Neuman, "Ouster of North Korea's Jang Noted with Unease in China," *NPR*, December 10, 2013. <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2013/12/10/249991867/ouster-of-north-koreas-jang-noted-with-unease-in-china>. Daniel Wertz, "China-North Korea Relations," *NCNK*, November 2019. <https://www.ncnk.org/resources/briefing-papers/all-briefing-papers/china-north-korea-relations>.

‡ A substantial amount of North Korean internet traffic is routed through China, while Chinese facilities and training support aggressive ransomware hacking incidents and immense thefts of cryptocurrency and fiat currencies. Jason Bartlett, "Exposing the Financial Footprints of North Korea's Hackers," *Center for New American Security*, November 18, 2020. <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/exposing-the-financial-footprints-of-north-koreas-hackers>; Insikt Group, "How North Korea Revolutionized the Internet as a Tool for Rogue Regimes," *Recorded Future*, February 9, 2020. <https://go.recordedfuture.com/hubfs/reports/cta-2020-0209.pdf>.

on increased development of special economic zones and development zones.*⁶² Although China's investments steadily declined from their peak in 2012, Beijing remains the top source of North Korea's FDI.⁶³ With increasing frustration around the country's economic straits, Kim Jong-un used the occasion of the regime's Seventh Party Congress in 2016 to promote diversification away from China and criticize the Chinese model of "reform and opening up."⁶⁴ Nonetheless, China went from making up 64 percent of North Korea's total trade in 2015 to accounting for 88 percent of its trade in 2016 (see Figure 2).⁶⁵

Figure 2: Estimated China-North Korea Bilateral Goods Trade Volume and China's Share of North Korea's Goods Trade, 2012–2020



Source: Various.⁶⁶

Tensions Escalate over Nuclear and Missile Tests

The rift between China and North Korea worsened in 2016 and 2017 as North Korea embarked on a series of increasingly provocative nuclear weapons and missile tests. The timing of some of these tests appeared designed to purposefully embarrass or anger Beijing. Of Pyongyang's 20 missile tests in 2017, one took place just before the Trump-Xi summit in Florida in April 2017 and another was carried out immediately prior to the Belt and Road Forum in Beijing that May.[†]⁶⁷ The latter test, which occurred hours before General Secretary Xi addressed representatives from participating countries, signaled Pyongyang's lack of concern over potentially insulting its chief ally, according to Zhao Tong, a fellow at the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy.⁶⁸ Similarly,

* North Korea established 24 special economic or economic development zones between 2013 and 2017, compared to the five already established between 1991 and 2005. Many of these zones benefit Chinese localities and provinces along the border as they facilitate additional trade and tourism. North Korea's economic zones have failed, however, to produce growth commensurate with that of similar zones in China in the 1980s due to UN sanctions on FDI into North Korea, the country's restrictive economic policies, and its weak legal and financial infrastructure, among other reasons. Théo Clément, "From Failed Economic Interfaces to Political Levers: Assessing China-South Korea Competition and Cooperation Scenarios on North Korean Special Economic Zones," *Korean Economic Institute of America*, June 11, 2019, 3. https://keia.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/kei_aps_clement_190604_final.pdf; Christina Kim, "Bridges of Ambition to North Korea: Economy of Anticipation and Materiality of Aspiration in Dandong, China," *Critical Sociology* 44 (2017): 1–17; Andray Abrahamian, "The ABCs of North Korea's SEZs," *U.S.-Korea Institute at SAIS*, 2014, 14–21. <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep11155.3>.

† North Korea had previously conducted missile tests at times that could embarrass Beijing, such as its missile test in 2016 during the G20 meeting held in Hangzhou, China. North Korea has also timed its missile tests to coincide with important events in the United States, such as its July 4, 2017, test launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile that Kim Jong-un reportedly described as a "gift package" for the United States on its Independence Day. See Justin McCurry, "North Korea Fires Three Missiles into Sea as G20 Leaders Meet in China," *Guardian*, September 5, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/05/north-korea-fires-three-ballistic-missiles-into-sea-reports>; Choe Sang-Hun, "U.S. Confirms North Korea Fired Intercontinental Ballistic Missile," *New York Times*, July 4, 2017.

Pyongyang's nuclear test in September 2017 occurred hours before General Secretary Xi gave an address at the summit of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) countries in Xiamen, China.⁶⁹

In response to North Korea's nuclear weapons tests and missile launches in 2017, Beijing agreed to enforce a series of escalating UN sanctions as Chinese scholars openly questioned the value of the bilateral relationship. China, along with Russia, ultimately voted for UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions that prohibited imports of North Korean coal and textiles, extended asset freezes for some North Korean individuals and institutions, restricted oil and natural gas exports to North Korea, and required repatriation of North Korean migrant laborers.* The sanctions struck a huge blow to the North Korean economy, as coal and textile products constituted 69 percent of its exports at the time.⁷⁰ Understanding China's sanctions compliance has been continually challenged by a lack of reliable data for both formal and informal trade, but China demonstrated compliance in the early years of sanctions imposition.[†] China's rejection of North Korean coal and other products prohibited by UN sanctions imposed in 2016 translated into an 87.6 percent drop in Chinese imports from North Korea the following year.⁷¹ China's total trade with North Korea declined by 13.2 percent to a value of \$5.3 billion in 2017 and shrank more dramatically by 48.2 percent to a value of \$2.7 billion in 2018.⁷² Even still, China remained North Korea's primary trade partner, accounting for 95 percent of North Korea's total trade in 2017 and 2018.⁷³

Meanwhile, Chinese scholars harshly criticized North Korea, likely with the tacit approval of the Chinese government. In 2017, Mr. Zhu characterized the China-North Korea relationship as "a heavy burden for China" while Mr. Shen argued that recent events suggested North Korea was not an ally but rather "China's latent enemy."⁷⁴ In early 2018, Radio Free Asia reported that North Korean officials had begun stirring up deeply rooted anti-Chinese sentiment throughout the country at the behest of the KWP Central Committee, with one senior official publicly referring to China as North Korea's "thousand-year enemy."[‡]⁷⁵

Preparing for a Military Crisis

Some voices within China also began considering the potential for regime change in North Korea as perceptions of the threat from North Korea increased in 2017. According to testimony before the Commission from Yun Sun, codirector of the East Asia Program at the Stimson Center, one prominent line of thinking identified the "capricious and belligerent North Korean regime" as a significant threat to Chinese interests that had "defied China's strategic preference of a diplomatic approach ... disregarded China's vital interest in border security given the proximity of the nuclear test sites to the Chinese border ... and disrespected the Chinese top leader's repeated calling for restraint."⁷⁶ The most direct solution to this threat, the argument concluded, was to "prompt a leadership change in North Korea," with new leaders in Pyongyang agreeing to rapid denuclearization and emulating Chinese-style economic reforms in the long term.⁷⁷

Throughout 2017, China fortified its defenses and enhanced military readiness along the Sino-North Korean border in preparation for a potential military crisis.⁷⁸ Chinese leaders also agreed to discuss military planning for a potential North Korea conflict scenario with the United States, a highly sensitive conversation they had previously refused to have.⁷⁹ Meanwhile, influential Chinese scholars expressed open concern over the potential for North Korea to

* For more on the UNSC sanctions that were passed to pressure North Korea, see U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, "China and Northeast Asia," in *2017 Annual Report to Congress*, November 2017, 334; and Evans J. R. Revere, "Lips and Teeth: Repairing China-North Korea Relations," *Brookings Institution*, November 2019, 4.

† Informal trade is trade in legitimately produced goods and services that escapes the regulatory framework set by the government, such as regulatory and tax burdens. Justin Hastings and Yaohui Wang, "Informal Trade along the China-North Korea Border," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 18 (2018): 181. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-east-asian-studies/article/informal-trade-along-the-chinanorth-korea-border/6F5C907EC76EF9E85E659C2311F3D8F1>.

‡ China is not the only country to which North Korea has applied this term. For instance, after Japan announced export controls on materials used in semiconductor manufacturing to South Korea amid a diplomatic dispute between Japan and South Korea in 2019, North Korea referred to Japan as a "thousand-year enemy." In its 2018 article, however, Radio Free Asia reported that North Korean officials identified China as a more significant adversary than Japan, describing Japan as only a "century-old enemy" while China was a "thousand-year-old enemy." The article cited a source within North Korea as claiming that "anti-Chinese sentiment among North Koreans [had] recently become more acute than anti-Japanese sentiment." *Global Times*, "Sticking Up for South Korea! North Korea Severely Criticizes Its 'Thousand-Year Enemy' (为韩国出头! 朝鲜痛批 '千年宿敌')", July 20, 2019. Translation; *Radio Free Asia*, "North Korea Stokes Anti-China Sentiment in Response to Tougher Sanctions," January 4, 2018. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/north-korea-stokes-anti-china-sentiment-in-response-to-tougher-sanctions-01042018161757.html>.

adopt a more aggressive posture toward China and threaten Chinese territory with its nuclear weapons and missiles capabilities.⁸⁰

Chinese Concerns Grow over North Korean Engagement with the United States: Relations from 2018 to the Present

The sudden developments in U.S.-North Korean diplomacy in 2018 prompted a dramatic shift in Chinese policy toward North Korea as China scrambled to neutralize any prospect of negotiations that could threaten its regional security interests. Beijing's invitation to Kim Jong-un to visit China occurred shortly after Washington accepted Pyongyang's offer for a summit between the U.S. and North Korean leaders. According to Ms. Sun, while Chinese media "portrayed Kim's visit as a victory for China ... there was no disguising the reality that Beijing was forced to extend the invitation if it did not want to watch the unfolding Trump-Kim summit from the sidelines."⁸¹ Former *Washington Post* Beijing Bureau Chief Anna Fifield makes a similar argument, writing, "The events of early 2018 changed the calculus: suddenly Xi had an urgent interest in talking with Kim. Or, rather, he didn't want to be the only one not talking to him."⁸² As a result, the Chinese and North Korean leaders engaged in a total of five summits—four in China, one in North Korea—as both sides sought to advance their own interests amid the rapid geopolitical changes unfolding on the peninsula.

China's concern over being left out of North Korea's negotiations with the United States was fed by decades-old fears over North Korea's potential betrayal and engagement with the United States and its allies at China's expense. As the United States and North Korea prepared for their summit, concern grew among Chinese observers over China's exclusion from denuclearization talks and even potential negotiations for a peace treaty for the Korean Peninsula.⁸³ Central to this anxiety, according to Ms. Sun, was China's "deeply embedded concern that North Korea and the U.S. might engage in secret dialogues without China's knowledge and reach agreement at the expense of Chinese national interests."⁸⁴ "Most importantly," she continued, "Beijing is concerned with any concessions that North Korea might make toward the U.S. in exchange for a U.S. security guarantee."⁸⁵ Some Chinese commentators described similar fears of North Korea sacrificing China's interests while pursuing a strategic realignment with the United States and South Korea. As Mr. Shen told the *New York Times*, "The worst outcome [for China] is that the United States, South Korea and North Korea all get together and China gets knocked out."⁸⁶

China's fears reached an "unprecedented level" in April 2018—just one month after Kim's inaugural summit with Xi in Beijing—when North and South Korea released a joint statement listing China as an optional participant in a potential future peace declaration ending the Korean War.⁸⁷ Chinese state-run media pushed back firmly against this suggestion, warning it would be "impossible to reach an agreement on ... permanent peace on the peninsula" without China's involvement.⁸⁸ This messaging reversed Beijing's longstanding insistence that instability on the Korean Peninsula linked to North Korea's nuclear program could only be resolved through bilateral U.S.-North Korean dialogue.⁸⁹ Instead, the state-run tabloid *Global Times* now insisted China was "indispensable" to denuclearization talks and angrily refuted the "theory that China is being marginalized."⁹⁰

China moved quickly to reassert its ties with North Korea, hosting Kim Jong-un before his summit with South Korean President Moon Jae-in in May and again after his historic meeting with then President Trump in Singapore in June. China's influence was further felt at the Singapore summit, with Kim Jong-un arriving in the Chinese state-owned Air China Boeing 747-400 jet that reportedly normally carries General Secretary Xi.⁹¹ Meanwhile, China began easing economic sanctions against North Korea by increasing agricultural assistance and resuming Chinese tour group visits and flights between the two countries.⁹²

Continuing Distance in Sino-North Korean Ties

Although the United States and North Korea did not reach a denuclearization agreement in Hanoi in February 2019, China's concerns over Pyongyang's continued engagement with Washington did not entirely subside. According to John Delury, professor of Chinese studies at Yonsei University, General Secretary Xi's visit to North Korea in June 2019—the first by a top Chinese leader in 14 years—reflected not strength but weakness and "the Chinese government's anxiety that Mr. Kim might be tempted to defect, as it were, to the other side."⁹³ General Secretary Xi's visit, while receiving extensive coverage in the Chinese press, was notable for its brevity and lack of deliverable

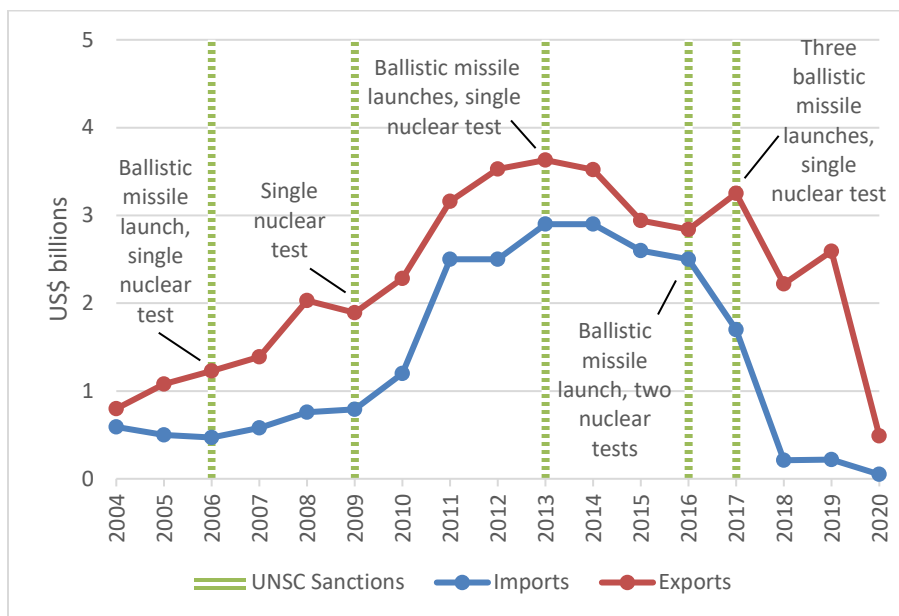
outcomes. No major agreements were announced despite “widespread speculation prior to the trip of increased agricultural and development assistance and new economic deals.”⁹⁴

Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s trip to Pyongyang in September 2019 resulted in similarly little measurable improvement in bilateral ties. Despite his declaration in Pyongyang that China would “always stand on the road as comrades and friends of the DPRK,” the foreign minister was not received by Kim Jong-un, a diplomatic snub that stood in contrast to Kim’s personal welcome of a lower-ranking Chinese official in April 2018.⁹⁵ Pyongyang also remained notably absent from the list of signatories to the Belt and Road Initiative, General Secretary Xi’s flagship economic and geopolitical project, despite its promise of much-needed investment and public encouragement to join from the Chinese government and state-run media.⁹⁶ Close to 40 countries—including Italy, Austria, and Portugal—sent their heads of state to the second Belt and Road Forum in 2019.⁹⁷ North Korea, however, sent only its minister of external economic relations—the same low level of representation it had sent to the first summit in 2017.⁹⁸

China Reverses Sanctions Compliance, Boosts Exchanges

Despite uncharacteristically strict compliance with UN sanctions between 2016 and 2017, Beijing appeared to ease its sanctions enforcement by 2019 as it sought to improve ties with Pyongyang. That year, China continued to officially refuse North Korean imports while increasing its exports to North Korea by 13.9 percent (see Figure 3).⁹⁹

Figure 3: Estimated Chinese Goods Trade with North Korea and UN Sanctions Imposition, 2004–2020



Source: Various.¹⁰⁰

China took additional steps to ease sanctions on North Korea while the two sides undertook a limited number of personnel exchanges. Following General Secretary Xi’s visit to Pyongyang, China hosted visits by senior officials from the KWP’s International Department, the Korean People’s Army, and North Korea’s Ministry of People’s Security and Central Court.¹⁰¹ Throughout 2019, Chinese officials called on the UN to discuss easing sanctions on North Korea, particularly in seafood and minerals, which were main North Korean exports prior to August 2017 sanctions.¹⁰² Evidence later emerged that China was clearly violating its sanctions commitments as early as 2018 by enabling the large-scale illicit transfer of coal and other prohibited goods from North Korea, such as through

conducting ship-to-ship transfers, hosting North Korean laborers,* and reviving other informal trade and illicit financial transfers.¹⁰³

COVID-19 and an Uncertain Future: 2020–Present

China has continued its efforts to repair ties with North Korea throughout 2020 and early 2021 amid the near-complete shutdown of North Korea's external trade during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the two countries exchanging public congratulations on their respective handling of COVID-19, North Korea was one of the first countries to seal its border with China to protect itself against the spread of the virus.¹⁰⁴ Trade between the two partners reportedly fell by more than 80 percent in 2020.¹⁰⁵ The Bank of Korea, South Korea's central bank, estimates that in 2020, North Korea's economy shrank by 4.5 percent to a gross domestic product of approximately \$29.7 billion.¹⁰⁶ Evidence suggests the two sides have maintained informal trade, however, with China continuing its violations of UN sanctions on North Korea. For instance, despite a sanctions-imposed limit of 500,000 barrels of refined oil per year, in 2020 China facilitated the transfer of nearly 1.6 million barrels to North Korea through illicit ship-to-ship transfers.[†] ¹⁰⁷ Reports from September 2021 indicated that the Chinese government overlooked imports of smuggled North Korean coal due to ongoing energy shortage issues throughout China.¹⁰⁸

Official diplomatic and economic contacts between the two neighbors remain limited. Reuters reported that in late April 2020, China welcomed a North Korean economic delegation in Beijing; the delegation met with China's Ministry of Commerce to discuss trade and strengthening food imports, although Chinese government spokespeople denied knowledge of the delegation's visit.¹⁰⁹ In March 2021, a North Korean business delegation visited China seeking to obtain access to materials for key construction and tourism projects.¹¹⁰ Satellite imagery indicates that in late 2021, North Korea began building or repurposing sites to turn them into disinfection centers for rail imports near both the Chinese and Russian borders.¹¹¹ Rail trade between China and North Korea resumed in January 2022, nearly a year later than initially projected for spring 2021, while North Korea reportedly continued to prohibit Chinese trucks from transporting freight into the country.¹¹² China had partially normalized far less restrictive commercial arrangements with other countries in the region far earlier in 2020 and 2021 for the movement of both goods and personnel.¹¹³ In November 2021, China and Russia submitted a draft resolution similar to an earlier attempt in 2019 to encourage the UNSC to ease sanctions on North Korea to “enhanc[e] the livelihood of the civilian population.”¹¹⁴

In contrast to Chinese criticism of North Korea and the Kim regime in 2017 and 2018, General Secretary Xi's message to Kim Jong-un in October 2020 praised the Kim regime's “remarkable achievements in building the grand cause of socialism” and gave special attention to Kim Jong-un's personal “strong leadership.”¹¹⁵ In early 2021, Chinese state-run media reported that Kim Jong-un had exchanged messages with General Secretary Xi stressing the importance of cooperation between China and North Korea in the face of new perceived pressure from the United States.¹¹⁶ Still, Chinese concerns over potential North Korean engagement with the United States have not entirely subsided. For instance, Li Nan, senior fellow at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, wrote in August 2021 that China remained “worried about the possibility of closer U.S.-DPRK relations for the purposes of containing China,” comparing such a geopolitical shift to the establishment of U.S.-China diplomatic ties to “contain the Soviet Union during the Cold War.”¹¹⁷

Moreover, politically sensitive economic cooperation between the two sides appears to have stopped. Despite a reported pledge from General Secretary Xi in 2019 to fund construction on the North Korean side of a new major Yalu (Amnok) River bridge connecting the two countries, the project remained incomplete as of 2021. Experts have

* While observers struggle to determine exact numbers, the State Department estimated that in 2017 North Korea sent at least 100,000 laborers overseas, with the majority destined for China and Russia. Prior to the imposition of sanctions, an estimated 50,000 of those workers were in China. China claims it complied to terminate visa and work eligibility for North Korean laborers, but prevailing evidence points to the continued presence of “tens of thousands” of North Korean laborers in China. Shin Watanabe, “Stranded North Koreans in China Keep Earning for Homeland,” *Nikkei Asia*, October 22, 2020. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/N-Korea-at-crossroads/Stranded-North-Koreans-in-China-keep-earning-for-homeland>; U.S. Department of State, *Democratic People's Republic of Korea 2017 Human Rights Report*, 2017, 24. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/North-Korea.pdf>.

† Oil prices have remained stable in North Korea, indicating that supply has also remained relatively constant. Choi Ji Young, “Recent Trends in Price and Exchange Rate in the North Korean Market,” *Korea Institute for National Unification*, July 7, 2020, 3–4; Kyoochul Kim, “Finding Loopholes in Sanctions: Effects of Sanctions on North Korea's Refined Oil Prices,” *KDI Journal of Economic Policy* 42:4 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.23895/kdjep.2020.42.4.1>.

speculated that the project stalled on account of North Korean concern over establishing a large-scale access point on the Sino-North Korean border, though past disagreements on funding responsibilities have also played a factor. While roads on the North Korean side of the bridge have yet to be finished, the bridge and supporting infrastructure on the Chinese side were completed in 2014.¹¹⁸

Implications for the United States

In the context of intensifying U.S.-China competition, the implications for the United States of the strategic rift between China and North Korea are significant and include at minimum the following:

- *China-North Korea tensions reflect the broader challenge China's diplomacy faces in the Indo-Pacific region.* The distrust accorded to China by its sole treaty ally underscores the opportunistic nature of many countries' relationships with Beijing and the challenges China faces in expanding its influence in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond. China's economic influence in North Korea is considerable but has not prevented its smaller neighbor from defying Beijing and maneuvering at its expense. Similarly, China's economic leverage over North Korea has not and will not allow it to control Pyongyang's decision-making regarding its nuclear weapons program. North Korea's longstanding efforts to avoid excessive dependence on China highlight the enduring interest of many of China's neighbors in counterbalancing Beijing's influence, including through ties with the United States.
- *China will challenge any attempt by North Korea to negotiate with the United States that excludes China and could undermine China's security interests.* Since U.S.-North Korea discussions began in 2018, China has attempted to ensure North Korea remains in its orbit by increasing diplomatic and economic support to Pyongyang, including by violating UN sanctions. China almost certainly would apply significant economic and diplomatic pressure against North Korea to prevent it from jeopardizing China's security interests in negotiations with the United States. Moreover, China and North Korea both benefit from maintaining a stable relationship. As it did with China and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, Pyongyang would likely attempt to exploit competition between the United States and China to maximize its interests while remaining independent from both countries.
- *The divide between China and North Korea presents an opportunity for U.S. diplomacy.* North Korea has never accepted China's attempts to exert undue influence over its foreign and domestic affairs. Instead, it has made consistent efforts to establish itself as an independent power and balance China's influence by strengthening ties with other powerful countries, such as the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Prior to negotiating with the United States in 2018, North Korea dropped its demand that U.S. troops be removed from the Korean Peninsula as a condition for giving up its nuclear weapons program, according to South Korean President Moon.¹¹⁹ With South Korea and Japan both expressing their willingness since 2018 to join the United States in discussions with Pyongyang, there may be an opportunity to work in tandem with the United States' most important East Asian allies to advance shared interests in regional stability.¹²⁰ Recent overtures for a joint declaration ending the Korean War from President Moon create further opportunities for a focused diplomatic campaign conducted alongside U.S. allies.¹²¹

Any U.S. and allied dialogue with North Korea would need to be approached with caution and clarity of purpose. In the past, changing geopolitical realities have driven the United States to reconsider relations with erstwhile U.S. adversaries, such as Vietnam. While conditions for U.S.-Vietnam rapprochement were unique and distinct, at a minimum, improving U.S.-Vietnam ties today provide one example of a former Chinese ally rejecting Beijing's control and successfully overcoming wartime differences with the United States. Measured progress toward demilitarizing the border between North and South Korea, as occurred during the period of inter-Korean and U.S.-North Korea negotiations in 2018 and 2019, could stabilize the Korean Peninsula and generate similar U.S. influence in Northeast Asia.¹²²

Today, North Korea seeks to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic while maintaining its autonomy from China. Reports this month of Pyongyang's continued testing of hypersonic missiles underscore the perils of engaging with a potentially nuclear- and hypersonic-armed North Korea firmly committed to pursuing its own interests.¹²³

Nevertheless, the possibility remains that creative U.S. diplomacy recognizing China-North Korea tensions, conducted in lockstep with U.S. allies in the region, could produce opportunities to identify common interests and take initial steps toward resolving longstanding regional security issues.

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