

Measuring China's Influence over North Korea*

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Whenever the existence of North Korea is threatened, China always has in the past come to its aid by opposing both economic sanctions and military pressure against Pyongyang, and most likely will continue to do so in future. At the same time, China prefers to orchestrate stability on the Korean Peninsula by restraining military adventurism by Pyongyang that might lead to the collapse of the regime. For China, the survival of North Korea is key to maintaining stability on the Korean Peninsula. In this regard, China has continually expanded its economic relationship with North Korea, as well as hosting the series of six-party talks. However, some questions still remain: How much influence does China really have over North Korea, and what kind of leverage does China have? This paper will argue that China's influence over North Korea is greater than that of the United States, Japan, South Korea, and Russia. China's influence extends from the economic, political/diplomatic, through to the military fields. However, due to the complex security and political environment in Northeast Asia, it is uncertain whether China will actually exercise its influence over North Korea. Rather, China's influence over North Korea is limited at best, because if China were to use all the instruments it has at its disposal to bring

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pressure to bear on North Korea, it would endanger its larger strategic objectives for the region.

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In recent years, some dark clouds have appeared on the horizon of North Korean-Chinese relations, such as the establishment of diplomatic relations between South Korea and China in 1992, the end of solidarity between the top leaders of China and North Korea after the deaths of Kim Il Sung and Deng Xiaoping (鄧小平), the absence of solidarity between the fourth generation leaders on both sides, including Hu Jintao (胡錦濤) and Kim Jong Il, as well as the increasing Chinese tendency to give priority to domestic interests. Increasingly, China is showing a negative attitude toward the refusal of the Kim Jong Il regime to adopt economic reform and opening-up policies, as this increases China's burden of economic assistance to North Korea. There is no longer a Cold War and Beijing is no longer working to export revolution. These are indicators that relations between the two countries have ceased to be a "blood alliance."¹

Nevertheless, China still wants to maintain its influence over North Korea by continuing to provide political/diplomatic support and economic assistance, and it is doing this for several reasons. Although China is moving toward a relationship of full cooperation with South Korea, it cannot replace the United States as an alliance partner for Seoul. In addition, China needs North Korea as a buffer to check the military advance of maritime powers like the United States and Japan.² Above all, because

¹For a description and analysis of changes in the relationships between China and the two Koreas, see Zhang Xiaoming, "China and Inter-Korean Relations," *Asian Perspective* 26, no. 3 (2002): 131-44; and Chae-jin Lee, *China and Korea: Dynamic Relations* (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, 1996).

²See Willy Lam, "U.S.-Japan Security Declaration Causes China to Reconsider Stance on North Korea," *China Brief* 5, no. 5 (March 1, 2005): 1-3; for further regional implications, see "North Korea Exploits Northeast Asia's Shifting Strategic Balance," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, July 1, 2005.

the stability of Northeast Asia is essential for China to continue with its top national goal of modernization through economic development, China still has an interest in strengthening its traditional friendly relationship with North Korea.³

For these reasons, whenever the existence of North Korea is threatened, China has in the past and will in the future come to its aid by opposing both economic sanctions and military pressure against Pyongyang. At the same time, China prefers to orchestrate stability on the Korean Peninsula by restraining military adventurism by Pyongyang that might lead to the collapse of the regime.⁴ Accordingly, China has continually expanded its economic relationship with North Korea, as well as hosting the series of six-party talks. A reciprocal visit by Kim Jong Il in January 2006, after Hu Jintao's visit to Pyongyang in October 2005, was a sign of a deepening relationship.

In this context, it has become conventional wisdom to say that China is the country which, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rest of the socialist bloc, exerts the most influence over North Korea. Beginning from the second North Korean nuclear crisis of 2002, it seems that China's influence is the strongest of all countries. However, some questions still remain: How much influence does China really have over North Korea and what kind of leverage does it possess?⁵ This paper will argue that China's

³Samuel S. Kim and Tai Hwan Lee, "Chinese-North Korean Relations: Managing Asymmetrical Interdependence," in *North Korea and Northeast Asia*, ed. Samuel S. Kim and Tai Hwan Lee (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 109-38; and Denny Roy, "China and the Korean Peninsula: Beijing's Pyongyang Problem and Seoul Hope," *Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies* 3, no. 1 (January 2004): 1-4.

⁴David Shambaugh, "China and the Korean Peninsula: Playing for the Long Term," *The Washington Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 43-56.

⁵For an assessment of Sino-North Korean relations, see Kosuke Takahashi, "China's Worsening North Korean Headache," *Nautilus Institute Policy Forum Online* (February 8, 2005), http://www.nautilus.org/fora/security/0510A_Takahashi.html; Antoaneta Bezlova, "Beijing's Limited Clout with Pyongyang," *Asia Times* (Online edition), April 23, 2004; Howard W. French, "Chinese Reluctant to Lean on North Korea," *International Herald Tribune*, February 19, 2005; You Ji, "China and North Korea: A Fragile Relationship of Strategic Convenience," *Journal of Contemporary China* 10, no. 28 (2001): 387-98; Sukhee Han, "Alliance Fatigue amid Asymmetrical Interdependence: Sino-North Korean Relations in Flux," *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 16, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 155-79; Yongho Kim, "Forty Years of the Sino-North Korean Alliance: Beijing's Declining Credibility and Pyong-

role is greater than that of the United States, Japan, South Korea, and Russia. Chinese influence extends from the economic and the political/diplomatic to the military fields. However, due to the complex security and political environment in Northeast Asia, it is uncertain whether China will in practice exercise its influence over North Korea. Furthermore, whatever influence China possesses will likely restrict its role within the parameters of maintaining stability in the region.

Current Situation

In order to gain a greater appreciation of the scale of China's influence over North Korea, we will look at it in the categories of economic, political/diplomatic, and military.

Economic Field

In the 1990s, China's economic influence over North Korea was absolute. Before China launched its reform and opening-up policy, trade relations consisted of providing loans and trade opportunities through agreements based on concessionary prices that were roughly half the normal market price. This changed to hard currency payment methods in the early 1990s, when China began to place more importance on practical economics. However, from the mid-1990s China reverted to the previous method, due to the worsening economic situation in North Korea.⁶

Although North Korea's foreign trade in 1998 decreased by 33.8 percent over the previous year, since 2001 it has recovered to the level of 1994. By 2004, North Korea's foreign trade totaled US\$2.86 billion,

yang's Bandwagoning with Washington," *Issues & Studies* 37, no. 2 (March/April 2001): 147-76; and Andrew Scobell, "China and North Korea: From Comrades-in-Arms to Allies at Arm's Length" (March 2004), <http://www.carlisle.army.mil/ssi>.

⁶The economic situation of North Korea has been the strongest catalyst for its China policy-making. See Lee Jong-Seok, "China-North Korea Relations in the Post-Cold War Era: Continuity and Change," in *North Korean Politics, Diplomacy, Economics, and Philosophy under the Kim Jong-il Regime*, ed. Jang Dal-joong (in Korean) (Seoul: Ayeon, 2004), 100-102.

an increase of 19.5 percent compared with the previous year (US\$1.61 billion). Exports totaled US\$1.02 billion, up 31.3 percent compared with the previous year (US\$780 million), and imports totaled US\$1.84 billion, up 13.8 percent compared to 2003 (US\$1.61 billion). North Korea's main trading partners are China (US\$1.39 billion), Thailand (US\$330 million), Japan (US\$250 million), Russia (US\$210 million), and India (US\$140 million), and the total amount of trade with these five countries came to US\$2.32 billion, comprising 81 percent of the North's total trade.⁷

In 2004 the total trade between North Korea and China amounted to US\$1.38 billion, an increase of 35.4 percent over the previous year according to *Trade Trends between North Korea and China and Current Topics* issued by the Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA).⁸ And in 2005 North Korea's trade from January to March soared to US\$214 million, an increase of 62.2 percent compared with the same period of the previous year, with exports up by 47.6 percent (from US\$68 million to US\$101 million), and imports increased by 70.1 percent (from US\$126 million to US\$316 million). During the first quarter of 2005, North Korea's trade with China focused on imports of foodstuffs and daily necessities for its citizens, as well as providing energy and fuel to operate factories and enterprises. Exports mainly consisted of primary products such as marine products, mineral fuels, and minerals.⁹

Although Chinese investment in North Korea amounted to a meager US\$1.3 million in 2003, it skyrocketed to US\$170 million in 2004; and

⁷In terms of trade volume in 2003, Japan ranked second (US\$260 million) but dropped to third place in 2004. When including the North-South trade of US\$700 million, the total trade volume of North Korea reached US\$3.55 billion. See *Bukhan Gyungje, Odiggajiwanna?* (North Korea's Economy: Where Is It Leading?) (Seoul: Unification Education Center, 2005), 223-24.

⁸Of this, North Korea's exports to China showed a 48.1 percent increase over the previous year to US\$585.7 million. This was largely based on the increase in exports, as well as the rise in international costs of fishing products, iron ore, and anthracite. Imports increased 27.4 percent to US\$800 million, largely consisting of pork and crude oil. See *Trade Trends between North Korea and China and Current Topics* (in Korean) (KOTRA, January 31, 2005).

⁹"Trends of Exports and Imports by North Korea to and from China during the First Quarter of 2005," *Joogan Bukhan Donghyang* (Weekly Report on North Korea), no. 743 (May 20-26, 2005): 20-26.



if we include small investments, the scale of actual investment probably exceeded US\$200 million. Since 2002, Nanjing (南京) Electronics Group, in a joint venture with North Korea, has been manufacturing Pentium-class computers, and since 2004 it has been constructing a full-scale glass factory in North Korea, with aid promised gratis by Wu Bangguo (吳邦國), chairman of China's National People's Congress, during his visit to North Korea in October 2003. In September the same year, Zhaoyuan (招遠) Company, based in Shandong Province (山東省), signed a memorandum of understanding with the Foreign Trade Promotion Committee of North Korea on the exploitation of gold and development of the metal refining business in North Korea.¹⁰ In addition, China is investing in various fields, such as slate factories, the operation of department stores, coal mining, tobacco, and transportation.

China's economic aid to North Korea is concentrated on foodstuffs and energy. At the request of Hong Sung Nam, the vice premier of North Korea who visited China in May 1996, China agreed to provide North Korea with 500,000 tons of food aid every year during the Ninth Five-Year Plan period (1996-2000). China provided US\$40-50 million worth of aid gratis to North Korea each year from 1996 to 1998 and over US\$60 million in 2003. Before 2002, Chinese aid to North Korea consisted mainly of items related to the people's livelihood, such as foodstuffs, mineral fuel, clothing, and fabrics. Since 2002, however, except for soybeans, aid has shifted to industrial products like steel and steel products, machinery, and electrical products. The conditions attached to the aid provision were 50 percent gratis and 50 percent at preferential prices.¹¹

If we examine it in more detail, in the case of foodstuffs, China supplied 720,000 tons of food in 1996; 1,500 tons of seeds and 150,000 tons of food in 1997; 100,000 tons of food and 20,000 tons of fertilizer in 1998;

¹⁰Myungchul Cho, "Current Situation and Prospects for the Sino-North Korean Economic Relationship," *KIEP Segye Gyungje* (World Economy) (in Korean), July 2005, 28.

¹¹"Chinese Fever on Investment in North Korea: What Does It Mean?" *North Korean Economic Information*, KOTRA (in Korean), globalwindow.org/front/main.html. See also Myungchul Cho et al., *The Deepening of North Korean Economy's Reliance on China and ROK's Policy Response* (in Korean), Policy Research 05-17 (2005): 122.



and 1 million tons of food and 25,000 tons of soybeans in 2004. In the case of fuel, China supplied 996,000 tons of crude oil and 2.5 million tons of coke in 1996; 506,000 tons of crude oil and other materials worth US\$2.41 million in 1997; 504,000 tons of crude oil in 1998; 317,000 tons of crude oil, 450,000 tons of coke and 11 tons of petroleum gas in 1999; 389,000 tons of crude oil and 46 tons of petroleum gas in 2000; and 610 tons of refined oil in 2004.¹²

Evaluated collectively, in scale and composition recent bilateral trade is approaching the level of 1994. Bilateral trade and China's investments in North Korea are increasing on a large scale, and food and energy resources are still the main items imported by North Korea. As of 2004, aid given gratis comprised 43 percent of North Korea's total trade, and 30 percent of total food imports and 100 percent of oil imports came from China.¹³ If we consider that almost all the products sold in general markets in North Korea are Chinese, North Korea's economic dependence on China is sure to grow. Concerns are being voiced in many circles in Seoul that North Korea could become the fourth province of northeast China, as Chinese aid, comprising mainly strategic goods and factory construction, plays an important role in North Korea's economy.

Political and Diplomatic Field

China is the only country among the four major regional powers to have strong diplomatic ties with both North and South Korea, and its policy objective is to maintain and strengthen Chinese influence on the Korean Peninsula. North Korea's geopolitical value and its role as a buffer between China and the United States and Japan is increasing in strategic importance for Beijing. China's ability to play the "North Korea card" in peninsular affairs is an increasingly important aspect of China's relations with the other major powers. China will inevitably acquire a growing level of polit-

¹²Jaeho Hwang, "China's Military Policy and the Sino-North Korean Military Relationship in 2005" (Unpublished manuscript, Korea Institute for Defense Analyses, 2005), 44-47.

¹³Kim Gwang-Il, "2004 First Half China-North Korea Trade," *North Korean Economic Information* (in Korean) (Seoul: KOTRA, 2004), 1-22.

ical and diplomatic influence through its economic aid to North Korea. And Beijing will use this influence to work toward peacefully resolving the North Korean nuclear issue, easing security tension within the region, and stabilizing North Korea's economy through supporting economic reform and opening trade barriers.

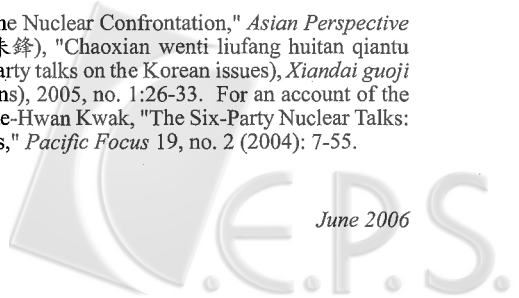
Regarding the North Korean nuclear issue, China initially insisted that North Korea's sovereignty should be respected, and that Pyongyang's intention to develop nuclear weapons was an inevitable defensive choice, because it could not ensure its national security with conventional weapons alone.¹⁴ However, since the second North Korean nuclear crisis developed, China has changed its stance, realizing that North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons could increase the possibility of nuclear conflict or war on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia, which would be contrary to China's strategic interests.¹⁵ For this reason, China has since 2003 been active in attempting to break the deadlock over the North Korean nuclear issue. This is in contrast to the first nuclear crisis, when China was more passive.¹⁶

The reason why China is intervening positively in the North Korean nuclear issue this time around is firstly that it can raise its status by taking the initiative in solving the problem of the Korean Peninsula and create an image at home and abroad of China as a "responsible state" (責任大國). Second, since the time of Deng Xiaoping, China's policy toward the United States has been to increase trust, develop cooperation, reduce inconveniences, and avoid confrontation (增加信任, 發展合作, 減少麻煩, 不搞對

¹⁴Park Doo-Bok, *Chinese Policy toward North Korea's Reform, Opening, and China-South Korea Cooperative Measures* (in Korean) (Seoul: Institute for Foreign Affairs and National Security, 2002), 52-53.

¹⁵Anne Wu, "What China Whispers to North Korea," *The Washington Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (Spring 2005): 38.

¹⁶See Samuel S. Kim, "China's New Role in the Nuclear Confrontation," *Asian Perspective* 28, no. 4 (2004): 147-84; and Zhu Feng (朱鋒), "Chaoxian wenti liufang huitan qiantu fenxi" (An analysis of the future of the six-party talks on the Korean issues), *Xiandai guoji guanxi* (Contemporary International Relations), 2005, no. 1:26-33. For an account of the unfolding of the second nuclear crisis, see Tae-Hwan Kwak, "The Six-Party Nuclear Talks: An Evaluation and Policy Recommendations," *Pacific Focus* 19, no. 2 (2004): 7-55.



抗). Based on these principles, China wants to improve its relations with Washington so as to get help from the United States in the modernization of its economy. In return for assisting the United States by hosting the multiparty talks on the North Korean nuclear issue, China is seeking U.S. help in blocking Taiwan's independence movement. Third, although China's interests do not always coincide with those of North Korea, the existence of the North Korean regime, a socialist country like China, is useful for China's foreign policy. Hence, China wants to reflect North Korea's standpoint and recover the influence it lost when it established diplomatic relations with South Korea in 1992 and in the process of achieving the Geneva Agreement. Last but not least, China wants to preempt the domino effect that North Korea's development of nuclear weapons could produce. Moreover, China does not want to give the United States cause to strengthen its regional alliance systems and build the controversial National Missile Defense (NMD) program.

In this regard, in July 2003 China's Deputy Foreign Minister Dai Bingguo (戴秉國) visited North Korea in order to deliver a personal letter to Kim Jong Il urging Pyongyang to take part in the first round of six-party talks, and also to provide North Korea with 10,000 tons of diesel fuel. North Korea accepted the offer and the talks were set for August 2003. In October 2003, Wu Bangguo visited Kim Jong Il and secured North Korea's commitment to attend the second round of six-party talks. He also demonstrated China's support for North Korea by contributing US\$50 million in economic aid. Before the third round of six-party talks, Kim Jong Il's visit to Beijing reaffirmed the strengthening ties between leaders on the two sides. Heavy oil shipments to North Korea, estimated to be worth about 300 million *yuan*, also helped to guarantee Pyongyang's participation in the next round of talks.

North Korea's declaration that it had achieved nuclear capability and its stated intention of withdrawing from the February 2005 six-party talks, once again put China's mediatory and diplomatic skills vis-à-vis Pyongyang in the spotlight internationally. Wang Jiarui (王家瑞), head of the International Liaison Department of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee, visited North Korea in February 2005, with a message



from Hu Jintao proposing that the six-party talks be held on an expedited schedule. As a follow-up to Hu's message, China and North Korea agreed upon the Foreign Investment Promotion and Protection Act (投資促進保護協定), signaling a reinforcement of economic cooperation between the two countries. China made efforts to promote friendship with North Korea in order to see the fifth round of six-party talks come to fruition in November 2005. As a key indicator of the increasing strength of the relationship, Hu Jintao paid an official visit to North Korea on October 28-30, 2005. Thus China was able to show the global community the breadth and depth of its influence with North Korea in setting the stage for a peaceful resolution of the nuclear issue.

In an effort to ensure the survival of its regime through economic development, Pyongyang is trying to spur reform and open trade barriers. China sees that the North Korean economy is in a very difficult situation and that the regime cannot be maintained without this being resolved. Beijing recognizes that if North Korea does not implement substantial economic reforms and open its doors to foreign countries, it will go bankrupt. So it can be said that the economy is the Achilles' heel of the Kim Jong II regime and the biggest political challenge it faces.¹⁷ China wants to secure its economic bond with North Korea by actively transplanting its economic model in order to fundamentally influence the North Korean economy. China is playing a positive role in this by continuing to push North Korea toward economic reform and opening-up.¹⁸ Kim Jong II's visit to Shanghai

¹⁷See Park, *Chinese Policy toward North Korea's Reform*, 42-43. Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao (溫家寶) invited a North Korean delegation headed by North Korean Prime Minister Park Bong Joo to visit China on March 22-27, 2005. The delegates included Ro Doo Chul (vice minister), Kim Kwang Rin (National Planning Committee chairman), Lim Kyung Man (minister of trade), Kim Hyung Joon (vice minister of foreign affairs), Kim Hyuk Jin (vice minister of agriculture), and Han Seung Joon (vice minister of chemical industries). During the visit, unconditional aid and expansion of mutual trade and investment were likely discussed as core issues, while visits to industrial sites such as Shanghai's Pudong (上海浦東新區) were added to showcase China's economic reform, development, and urban planning, as was the Liaoning (遼寧省) Academy of Agricultural Sciences for its advances in agricultural development. See "Summary of Prime Minister Park Bong-Joo's China Visit," *Joogan Bukhan Donghyang*, no. 735 (March 25-31, 2005): 5-8.

¹⁸See Shambaugh, "China and the Korean Peninsula," 45. However, North Korea's reform and opening-up policy must be in accordance with China's interests. For conflicting



in January 2001 and successive visits to China by other members of the North Korean leadership have given Pyongyang an opportunity to witness the impact of China's reforms and led them to implement a partial opening of their economy, including the July 1 economic measures.¹⁹ Kim Jong Il's recent visit to China's southern regions in January 2006 was further evidence of North Korea's resolve to implement reforms.

Military Field

One of the indexes for evaluating the closeness of military relations between two countries is the number by party, political, and military personnel in both directions. Chinese-North Korean political and diplomatic relations have mainly affected their military exchanges. Although meetings between high-level leaders reduced in number after the death of Kim Il Sung in 1994, exchanges have resumed since the visit to China of Kim Young Nam, speaker of the People's Supreme Committee, in June 1999.

Among visits to China by senior North Korean personnel, a North Korean military delegation headed by Lieutenant General Han Won Hwa, deputy commander of the KPA, visited China in July 2000 and held meetings with Lieutenant General Zhang Li (張黎), deputy chief of the PLA General Staff. In November 2003, six or seven personnel, including General Lee Tae Il, vice minister of the KPA, visited China at the invitation of the PLA General Political Department (總政治部). In April 2004 Kim Jong Il himself, as chief of the National Defense Committee, visited China, accompanied by the chief of the General Staff of the KPA. In July of the same year, Kim Il Chul, minister of the KPA, visited China and held meetings with Wu Bangguo and Defense Minister Cao Gangchuan (曹剛川).

national interests and opening-up policies of China and North Korea, see Kim Heung-Kyu and Choi Myung-Hye, "The Yang Bin Incident and China-North Korea Relations" (in Korean), *Journal of Korean Political Science Association* 39, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 325-45.

¹⁹Hu Jintao's explanation of "Chinese-style socialism" was an indirect way of stressing of the importance of reform and opening-up to Kim Jong Il, and Kim's response that "the Chinese Communist Party is achieving many results in building its Chinese-style socialism" is evidence of his positive evaluation. In addition, the presence of the theorist Wang Huning (王滄寧) in Hu's entourage suggests the possibility that the North Koreans were educated in the political responses to Chinese reform and opening-up as well as its economic aspects.



And in November, Youn Hyung Mook, deputy chief of the Military Committee, visited Beijing.²⁰ In April 2005, General Park Jae Kyung, chief of the propaganda division of the General Political Department of the KPA, visited China and held meetings with General Li Jinai (李繼耐), chief of the PLA General Political Department.

There have also been a number of visits by Chinese military personnel to North Korea. In October 2000 Chi Haotian (遲浩田), China's defense minister, visited North Korea in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Chinese alliance with North Korea against the United States. In September 2001 Lieutenant General Wu Yuqian (吳玉謙), deputy commander of the Shenyang Military Region (瀋陽軍區), visited North Korea, and in August 2003 a high-level military delegation headed by Xu Caihou (徐才厚), director of the PLA General Political Department, visited North Korea and met Kim Jong Il. In June 2004, a delegation of the border guard of the Chinese army, headed by assistant chief of the General Staff Headquarters Li Yu (李玉), visited North Korea, meeting Kim Il Chul, minister of the KPA, and Major General Han Dong Soo. China's defense minister, Cao Gangchuan, made a visit to North Korea in April 2006.

North Korea's foreign military exchanges mostly involve China. Take the year 2004 as an example—North Korea conducted a total of 160 exchange visits with foreign countries, of which 50, or almost 30 percent, were with China. North Korea's military diplomacy is biased toward China to such an extent that in 2004 exchanges with China represented 80 percent of all its military exchanges at colonel to general level.

Next, China's arms exports and military aid to North Korea are also good indicators of the intimacy of Beijing-Pyongyang military ties. Although there is no doubt that North Korea has the capacity to produce

²⁰*North Korea Annual* (in Korean) (Seoul: Ministry of National Defense Office of Intelligence, 2004), 108-9. At the time, Kim Il Chul commented that North Korea must consistently value relations with China while working toward furthering the amicable relationship. In particular, exchanges between the militaries of the two countries are mentioned as crucial to future relations. In response, Cao Gangchuan said that although there were small difficulties, China-North Korea relations are very important and that the two countries have a very rare and traditional friendly relationship for the long-term revolutionary struggle and the advancement of socialism.

various kinds of conventional weapons, it is generally considered that its domestically-produced armaments are outdated and of low quality. In order to maintain its military influence, North Korea needs weapons systems, technology, and spare parts from external sources. North Korea's defense industry was modeled on that of the Soviet Union and it still uses Soviet-style weapons systems. Up to the late 1980s, North Korea depended deeply on advanced arms systems and production licenses from the Soviet Union.²¹

In contrast, China's exports of arms to North Korea were not crucial for the armed forces for the DPRK. In fact, Chinese arms exports to North Korea have fallen since 1995 and the only items for which North Korea has acquired production licenses appear to be surface-to-air missiles (HN-5A), spare parts for Romeo class submarines, and parts for all kinds of old armaments and machine tools for repair.²²

As far as military aid is concerned, China used to supply North Korea with 100 million *yuan*-worth of military supplies gratis every year, in accordance with the 1961 Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance,²³ but since the death of Kim Il Sung in July 1994, this aid seems to have been suspended. Before 1990, China provided North Korea with aircraft, ballistic missiles, and coastal defense missiles, and after 1990 mainly with blankets/clothing, aircraft spare parts, engines for tanks, military jeeps, and spare parts for arms systems.

In addition, arms and equipment aid includes four radars in 1995; two MI-8 helicopters in 1996; clothing worth US\$880,000, 4.9 million tons of TNT, and 200 tank engines in 1998; weapons and ammunition of unknown

²¹Taeho Kim, "Strategic Relations Between Beijing and Pyongyang—Growing Strains amid Lingering Ties," in *China's Military Faces the Future*, ed. James Lilley and David Shambaugh (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1999), 304.

²²Taeho Kim, "Sino-North Korean Security-Military Relationship" (in Korean) (Paper presented at the Second Network Seminar—Peace Process in the Korean Peninsula in 2005, Institute for Foreign and National Security, Seoul, June 2005), 7.

²³The Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance (朝中友好協力相互援助條約) was signed by Kim Il Sung and Zhou Enlai (周恩來) in Beijing in July 1961. This treaty, concluded during Kim's visit to China, comprises seven articles. See Appendix 1.

value in 1999; and 500 GPS units for warships, 1,400 jeeps, gunnery/ammunition/tank parts of unknown value, and 4 million military blankets in June 2001. It also seems that the old Chinese-made tanks, warships, and aircraft currently used by the North Korean army were granted to them by China. China's military aid has had a significant influence, perhaps, especially on missile projects (SA-2, Haiyang-1, and Scud-B) and the production of submarines (Romeo class), combat aircraft (J-7/MiG-21), tanks (T-59, PRC-62), and cannon.²⁴

In brief, although relations between China and North Korea are unique, the Chinese leadership has not appeared to be supporting North Korea in its rapid military build-up. Judging from overall exchanges among party, government, and military personnel of the two countries since the 1990s, it can thus be said that military ties are more symbolic than substantive, as military contact has mostly consisted of friendly and goodwill visits. For the most part, China's military aid to North Korea is also limited to formal types of aid, and even in military education, Beijing gives North Korea small amounts of equipment and limited technical education rather than battle training.²⁵

China's Leverage over North Korea

Whenever crises have been created by North Korea, the international community has always looked to China to play a crucial role. Perhaps the most immediate concern surrounding North Korea is its latent nuclear capability. If Pyongyang were to refuse to heed China, or even choose to cross the threshold by carrying out nuclear weapons testing or the export of nuclear weapons technology to terrorist organizations or Third World

²⁴Kim, "Strategic Relations Between Beijing and Pyongyang," 304-5.

²⁵See Eric A. McVadon, "Chinese Military Strategy for the Korean Peninsula," in Lilley and Shambaugh, *China's Military Faces the Future*, 288-89. For a brief description of China's formal military relations with the two Koreas, see also Kenneth W. Allen and Eric A. McVadon, *China's Foreign Military Relations* (Washington, D.C.: The Henry L. Stimson Center, 1999), 65-68.

countries, what would China do? In this regard, it is important to estimate the degree of China's leverage over North Korea, an issue that has even been raised by Chinese diplomats. For example, Fu Ying (傅莹), China's former deputy representative at the six-party talks and currently ambassador to Australia, confirmed that although neighboring countries were expecting China to take a greater role in resolving the North Korean nuclear issue, China's leverage over North Korea was not significant, because North Korea was a recognized sovereign state.²⁶ However, how shall we evaluate Chinese leverage on North Korea? It also falls into three categories, namely, economic, political/diplomatic, and military, which coincide with the analytical framework in section two.

Economic Leverage

In the event that the West imposes sanctions on North Korea following confirmation that it possesses nuclear weapons or has conducted a nuclear test, the first option China could consider would be economic sanctions. However, trade restrictions, one form of economic sanctions favored by the West, would not greatly affect the North Korean economy. The recent recovery in North Korea's foreign trade is mainly due to increased North-South exchanges, and the country's current foreign trade is worth between US\$2.5 and US\$3 billion, which is only 50-70 percent of the level in the late 1980s. Also, because this is comprised mainly of consigned processing trade, its added value is very low at less than 10 percent.²⁷

The United States does not have diplomatic or trade relations with North Korea anyway, so sanctions imposed by Washington would be meaningless. Because China, followed by South Korea, Japan, Thailand, and Singapore, is the top trading partner of North Korea, China should be included in the list of the countries that take part in any sanctions imposed on North Korea. Without the participation of Beijing, North Korea's main trading partner, sanctions would be useless as most of the trade affected

²⁶"China's Limited Influence on North Korea," www.pressian.com (February 18, 2005).

²⁷Seokjin Kim, "Effectiveness of Economic Sanctions on North Korea," *LG Weekly Economics* (in Korean), no. 730 (June 4, 2003): 5-6.



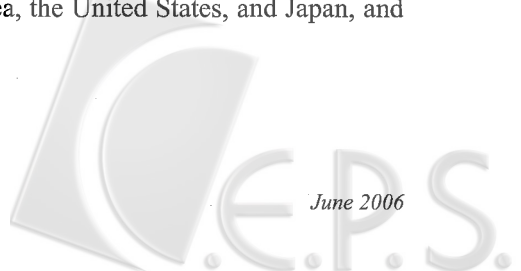
by the sanctions would be diverted to China.

A cut in aid would be more of a shock to North Korea than restrictions in trade. Aid to the North from South Korea and the international community that began in 1995 is worth almost US\$600 million per year and North Korea's earnings from this are almost equal to those from commercial trade. A reduction in food and fuel aid would have a more direct effect on national livelihood than, say, restrictions on imports of machinery.²⁸

If the United States, the country that has provided the largest amount of aid (about US\$1 billion), were to initiate sanctions and be joined by South Korea, the European Union, and Japan, North Korea would suffer considerably. However, if China did not join, North Korea might be able to muddle through. It is important to bear in mind that China's food aid to North Korea was concentrated in the period 1996-97, when South Korea, the United States, and Japan were providing only limited aid. Although the relative importance of China's aid was small (approximately US\$300 million), if we add on goods that were traded at concessionary prices and those for which payments were postponed (not to mention goods that escapees from North Korea introduced into the country from China's north-east provinces), the scale of China's aid to North Korea is actually no less than that of the United States.

It is estimated that North Korea's actual annual demand for food totals about 6.5 million tons and the minimum needed for physical survival is approximately 5 million tons per year. However, recent annual food production in the country is estimated at between 3.5 million and 4 million tons, and in years like 1995-96 when the harvest was very bad due to a natural disaster, food production was reduced by 0.5 to 1 million tons. Consequently, in order for its people to survive, North Korea must obtain at least 1 million tons of food every year from overseas, and it is estimated that during the eight years from 1995 to 2002, the total quantity of food imported into North Korea was actually over 10 million tons, with 4.44 million tons coming from South Korea, the United States, and Japan, and

²⁸Ibid., 6-7.



more than 4 million tons from China.²⁹

As for fuel, North Korea imported more than 3 million tons per year in some years during the late 1980s and China was the largest supplier, providing about half of the total. Since 1991, when Pyongyang's imports of crude oil were cut due to the collapse of the Soviet Union, China has been almost the sole supplier of crude oil to North Korea. Because the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO), which was supplying 500,000 tons of heavy oil annually to North Korea, reduced its supplies at the end of 2002, China is now in fact supplying 500,000 to 600,000 tons of crude oil per year and also supplying up to 100,000 tons of petroleum products.³⁰ Obviously, if China were to join in sanctions against North Korea, the country would face a major energy crisis.

Political and Diplomatic Leverage

In the event of North Korea's collapse, China fears the destabilizing influence of a wave of North Korean defectors arriving in China, or a non-friendly government emerging on the peninsula. Moreover, North Korea's collapse could bring China into direct friction with South Korea and the United States. This is the key to understanding China's strategic reasoning in maintaining the status quo of the Kim Jong Il regime.

However, North Korea's long-running nuclear crisis is taking its toll on China. One may speculate that the crisis could further fuel the fears of U.S. and Japanese conservatives, creating more friction with China and then leading to an escalation of military tension within the region. This may eventually push the United States into making extreme policy decisions—forcing China to show its hand. In addition, the nuclear crisis also increases the possibility of North Korea's collapse. As long as the North Korean nuclear issue persists, it is unlikely that the region will become more secure or that Pyongyang will attract economic aid, adding to the likelihood of a North Korean collapse.

²⁹Ibid., 7-8.

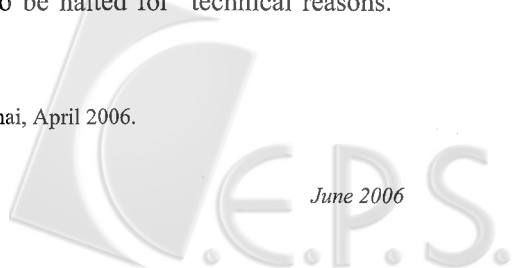
³⁰Ibid., 9.



Ultimately, the future of China's relations with North Korea is critically dependent on how the nuclear issue is resolved. It would be in China's interests if North Korea could be persuaded to accept a peaceful resolution, and North Korea's neighbors would offer to provide aid, thus ensuring the strategic interests of all parties involved. To bring this about, China could use political and diplomatic leverage on North Korea by refusing to support Pyongyang during the six-party talks, abstaining in the United Nations Security Council, or voting in favor of U.S. policy toward the North. However, it would not be realistic to try to solve the nuclear issue through military pressure on North Korea. It could have the effect of accelerating the collapse of what is an inherently fragile socialist regime. The result would be confusion and disruption of the security balance in the peninsula and throughout Northeast Asia, brought on by the lack of an agreed framework for systematic contingency planning by the nations that have the biggest stake in peninsular affairs.

During such a period of turmoil, China would have to make diplomatic concessions in order to keep North Korea within its sphere of influence. However, it would be difficult for Beijing to maintain its special bond with Pyongyang while at the same time applying pressure to resolve the nuclear crisis. As long as Pyongyang does not conduct nuclear tests or try to sell or transfer nuclear weapons, China will be justified in vetoing any attempt by the international community to apply sanctions against North Korea. China will oppose any action that may bring about regime change or the collapse of North Korea, which would be detrimental to its own national security and interests. One Chinese source has suggested that China fears Pyongyang might be driven to desperate measures if it were forced into a corner (狗急跳牆, *gouji tiaoliang*).³¹ Were North Korea to attempt to lure the United States into military action, China could then initiate economic restrictions on North Korea by cutting its food and fuel supplies. However, even in such a scenario, the Chinese would give the excuse, as they have before, that supplies had to be halted for "technical reasons."

³¹Interview with a Chinese professor in Shanghai, April 2006.



China would take measures to move away from direct outside involvement and use unofficial modus operandi.

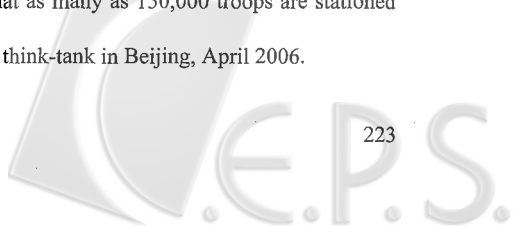
Military Leverage

The first method China might use to pressure North Korea militarily in certain circumstances would be to impose tighter restrictions on the frontier. There used to be quite free movement of people crossing the border due to the alliance between the two countries, but more recently stricter border controls have been imposed for reasons of China's national interests.³² For example, China has replaced the security forces with PLA troops. This relatively new measure is designed to put military pressure on North Korea regarding the nuclear issue, impede the influx into China of North Korean refugees, and prepare for possible armed conflict. This deployment of troops took place at a sensitive point after the second North Korean nuclear crisis, and it can be seen as a very significant move by China. If China were to impose a blockade of the border, the psychological impact on North Korea would be substantial. Unable to cross the border to buy food, North Koreans might even start rioting at home.

Perhaps, the most powerful leverage that China could use against North Korea would be military intervention in the event of an emergency. China's standpoint on this up to now has been that it would not intervene if North Korea were to invade the South, or if limited local conflicts were to break out between North and South Korea. China strongly opposes Pyongyang invading the South, and if such an invasion took place, China would cut off supplies of resources to the North in order to put a stop to the provocation.³³

³²See John Hill, "China Upgrades Border Security," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, October 1, 2004. In June 2004, General Li Yu visited North Korea and signed a China-North Korea Border Cooperation Agreement. General Li asked Pyongyang to understand that the PLA deployment was part of the consolidation of China's land border management model, under which the management of border controls is transferred from the Chinese police to the PLA. Several media outlets have reported that as many as 150,000 troops are stationed there.

³³Interview with a Chinese researcher of a state think-tank in Beijing, April 2006.



Furthermore, if China attempts to intervene militarily for any reason, it would be based on the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance. The core content of this treaty is that when one party is in a state of war, caused by armed invasion by one country or an alliance of several countries, the other party will supply military and other aid without delay. It is stipulated that unless there is mutual agreement on its amendment or in the event of abrogation, this treaty is in continuous effect. Even though there is a need to amend the treaty,³⁴ neither of the parties is taking any steps to do so at present nor are they showing any intention of complementing it, so the treaty automatically remains in effect. Despite China's increased economic cooperation with South Korea, its political and military relations with North Korea are still more important to China, and Beijing understands that maintaining the present treaty with the North, despite all the accompanying problems, is better than concluding a new one.³⁵

Whether China decides to intervene in any internal crisis in North Korea will depend on what form the crisis takes. In case of riots provoked by deepening economic difficulties, China is likely to stand by while they are suppressed by the Pyongyang regime. China's greatest fear would be if such riots gained support from sections of the North Korean military, or if a new regime emerged after a coup d'état and the exile or death of Kim Jong Il. In the event of the latter, one of the following three scenarios might emerge: (1) the rise of a military junta that wanted to preserve the present

³⁴Some Chinese academics have asserted recently that the treaty should be abrogated. Given the strict vetting that scholars within Chinese government circles undergo, these assertions are noteworthy. Shen Jiru (沈骥如), a senior fellow at the Institute of World Economics and Politics of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), has insisted that the mutual automatic intervention clause stipulated in Article II of the Treaty of 1961 should be deleted, and that so doing would prevent a latent tendency toward war on the Korean Peninsula. See Shen Jiru, "Weihi Dongbeiyuan anquan de dangwu zhiji" (Urgent mission to maintain Northeast Asian security), *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* (World Economics and Politics), 2003, no. 9:53-58. Another scholar, Wang Zhongwen (王忠文), also criticized North Korea as a "hereditary monarchy" that does not warrant Chinese support and assistance. See Wang Zhongwen, "Yi xinde jiaodu miqie guanzhu Chaoxian wenti yu Dongbeiyuan xingshi" (Pay close attention to the North Korean problem and Northeast Asian situation from a new perspective), *Zhanlue yu guanli* (Strategy and Management), July 2004.

³⁵This is the view of some Chinese scholars. Interviews with several Chinese researchers of state think-tanks in Beijing, April 2006.



system; (2) a coalition between conservative political elements and economic reformists; or (3) the emergence of a reformist regime that aimed to completely open up the country.

In the first scenario, the military junta would likely be more pro-China. In this case, China would not intervene. In the second scenario, if the coalition adopted a neutral position between China and the United States, or if the coalition showed a more pro-China character, China's decision on whether or not to intervene would be more cautious, although there is a possibility of intervention. And in the third scenario, if the new regime showed pro-American or anti-Chinese sentiment, China would probably intervene immediately.

Indeed, these three scenarios could be too simplified to describe the possible situations likely to occur in North Korea; however, in all three scenarios, if China was uncertain if its interests would be secured, it would intervene immediately. In this case, China's military intervention would have an immediate and significant impact on the fate of the North Korean regime and also on the balance of power in the region.

Conclusion

The long-term objective of China's national strategy is to become a responsible superpower, while the short to mid-term objectives are to reform its internal politics, resolve domestic economic problems, and establish a stable security environment in which to advance its own national development. China's policy toward the Korean Peninsula is aimed at maintaining the status quo as a part of creating this stable environment. Although ties with Pyongyang might not be as close as before, North Korea will continue to be prominent in China's strategic considerations. China's leading the six-party talks is a clear indication of its intentions in relation to the Korean Peninsula, including the North Korean nuclear issue.

In this regard, the international community, including the United States, sees China as having the greatest capacity to exert influence on North Korea. The United States has asked China directly to assume a more

active role in peninsular affairs. Donald Rumsfeld, the U.S. secretary of defense, said in his keynote speech at the Fourth Asian Security Conference in June 2005 that China's influence in relation to North Korea is stronger than any other country's, because China maintains political and economic relations with North Korea on many fronts. In addition, the comment by Christopher Hill, the assistant secretary of state in charge of East Asia, that "China is unwilling to use wholly the lever that it is believed to have toward North Korea" is an indication that the return of North Korea to the talks is being delayed and the solution to the problem is becoming more complicated.³⁶

However, the degree of influence China has over North Korea in resolving issues on the peninsula is still questionable. When it comes to economic influence, North Korea's economic dependence on China is clearly growing and its industrial production is sustained by imports of Chinese raw materials. Nevertheless, this has not caused North Korea to lower its trade barriers, nor has China's economic support had an effect on the absolute size and sovereignty of the North Korean market. Although Chinese trade and supplies of heavy oils and food have had an effect on North Korea's economy, it cannot be said that North Korea has been totally "subjugated" by the Chinese.

China clearly enjoys a certain degree of political and diplomatic influence on North Korea. However, the fact remains that such influence is backed by limited reductions in economic aid and token persuasion. Relations between the two nations are more and more based on the principles of reciprocity and national interest, which is leading to a decline in North Korea's political dependence on China. Moreover, exercising this influence has not always been plain sailing for China. China's political and diplomatic leverage has been limited, as shown by the case of a communiqué issued by North Korea and Russia that expressed dissatisfaction with China's support for the United States. This shows that China's influence

³⁶Hill Doubting North Korea's Abandonment of Nuclear Ambitions and Asks for Greater Chinese Role," <http://www.pressian.com>, June 14, 2005.

is limited, despite the fact that Beijing was able to bring North Korea into the six-party talks.

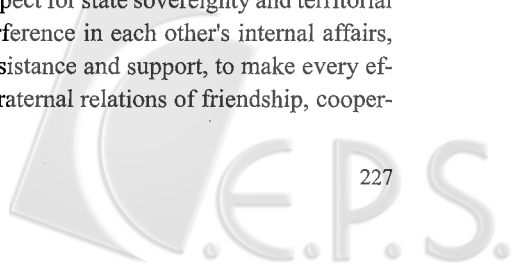
China's influence has limitations from a military point of view also. Although military emissaries have continued to exchange symbolic visits, it seems that China is not giving actual military aid to North Korea. Future military aid to North Korea could take the form of closing down and fortifying China's borders or executing military intervention within North Korea.

Taking all these aspects into account, it is apparent that although China has more influence over North Korea than the United States, Japan, South Korea, and Russia, Beijing lacks the resolve to assert its influence due to the complexity of the political and security situation in Northeast Asia. If China were to use all the instruments it has at its disposal to bring pressure to bear on North Korea, it would endanger its larger strategic objectives for the region. Therefore, China's influence over North Korea is limited at best, and China will not take any action to escalate the situation in North Korea in order to prevent instability or even the collapse of North Korea. In this sense, while the international community always expects China to play a crucial role in the event of North Korean crises, the question of how much influence China has over North Korea will surface again and again.

APPENDIX 1

Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance between the People's Republic of China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea

The Chairman of the People's Republic of China and the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, determined in accordance with Marxism-Leninism and the principle of proletarian internationalism and the basis of mutual respect for state sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and mutual assistance and support, to make every effort to further strengthen and develop the fraternal relations of friendship, cooper-



ation, and mutual assistance between the People's Republic of China and Democratic People's Republic of Korea, to jointly guard the security of the two peoples, and to safeguard and consolidate the peace of Asia and the world, and deeply convinced that the development and strengthening of the relations of friendship, cooperation, and mutual assistance between the two countries accord not only with the fundamental interests of the two peoples but also with the interests of the peoples all over the world, have decided for this purpose to conclude the present Treaty and appointed as their respective plenipotentiaries:

The Chairman of the People's Republic of China: Chou Enlai, Premier of the State Council of the People's Republic of China

The Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea: Kim Il Sung, Premier of the Cabinet of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea

Who, having examined each other's full powers and found them in good and due form, have agreed upon the following:

Article I. The Contracting Parties will continue to make every effort to safeguard the peace of Asia and the world and the security of all peoples.

Article II. The Contracting Parties undertake jointly to adopt all measures to prevent aggression against either of the Contracting Parties by any state. In the event of one of the Contracting Parties being subjected to the armed attack by any state or several states jointly and thus being involved in a state of war, the other Contracting Party shall immediately render military and other assistance by all means at its disposal.

Article III. Neither Contracting Party shall conclude any alliance directed against the other Contracting Party or take part in any bloc or in any action or measure directed against the other Contracting Party.

Article IV. The Contracting Parties will continue to consult with each other on all important international questions of common interest to the two countries.

Article V. The Contracting Parties, on the principles of mutual respect for sovereignty, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit and in the spirit of friendly cooperation, will continue to render each other every possible economic and technical aid in the cause of socialist construction of the two countries and will continue to consolidate and develop economic, cultural, and scientific and technical cooperation between the two countries.

Article VI. The Contracting Parties hold that the unification of Korea must be realized along peaceful and democratic lines and that such a solution accords

exactly with the national interests of the Korean people and the aim of preserving peace in the Far East.

Article VII. The present Treaty is subject to ratification and shall come into force on the day of exchange of instruments of ratification, which will take place in Pyongyang. The present Treaty will remain in force until the Contracting Parties agree on its amendment or termination. Done in duplicate in Beijing on the eleventh day of July, nineteen sixty-one, in the Chinese and Korean languages, both texts being equally authentic.

(Signed)

Chou Enlai

Plenipotentiary of the People's Republic of China

(Signed)

Kim Il Sung

Plenipotentiary of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea

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