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3. Reassessing China-North Korea relations

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Zhang Liangui, “Does North Korea call itself a nuclear power?”, *Huanqiu Shibao*, 8 February 2013.²⁷

²² Deng Yuwen was deputy editor of the Central Party School’s *Zhongguo zhongyang dangxiao xuexi shibao (Study Times)*. He was reportedly suspended from his position after the publication of this article.

²³ Hu Yihu is a presenter for *Phoenix TV*. Su Hao is a professor of foreign affairs and director of the Asia-Pacific Research Centre at *China Foreign Affairs University*. Shi Yinhong is professor of International Relations and director of the Centre for American Studies at Renmin University. Peng Guangqian is a major general in the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and a former strategist for the PLA’s Chinese Academy of Military Sciences.

²⁴ Ren Weidong is a research fellow at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR).

²⁵ Shen Dingli is associate dean of Fudan University’s Institute of International Studies and director of its Centre for American Studies.

²⁶ Yu Shaohua is a senior research fellow at the China Institute of International Studies (CIIS) and director of the Department for Asia-Pacific Security and Cooperation Studies. She is a recognised expert on North Korea, where she was stationed as a diplomat between 1990 and 1993 and again between 2002 and 2006.

²⁷ Zhang Liangui is professor of international strategic research at the Central Party School in Beijing and a leading international expert on North Korea.

Ignoring repeated appeals for restraint from the international community (including China), North Korea carried out its third nuclear test on 12 February 2013. In response, on 7 March, the United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2094 (2013), condemning the nuclear test and broadening sanctions against the North Korean regime.

Many people in China spoke out against the North Korean test. In March and April, official China abandoned its previous silence and began to openly criticise the North Korean leadership. China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi, for instance, said that China “did not countenance troublemakers at its door”. This criticism was widely echoed within China’s academic community as well as in the official media. However, as early as summer 2013, these harsh critiques had already given way to more traditional analyses stressing Pyongyang’s strategic importance.

Reactions to North Korea’s third nuclear test

In the days immediately following the test, some of the editorial writers of *Huanqiu Shibao* were harsh on China’s North Korean neighbour. They said that it would be “naïve” to think North Korea’s insecurity would be lessened by this nuclear test and they called for sanctions to be imposed. The editorial of 17 February said China should reduce aid to its neighbour. On 18 February, an editorial said Beijing should have the courage to oppose Pyongyang: North Korea’s attitude went against China’s interests, and it was “necessary to punish” (惩罚是必要的, *chengfa shi biyao de*) the country. China should not allow itself to be forced to supply a “blind shield” (一味庇护, *yiwei bihu*), or unconditional protection, to its neighbour.

Some of the paper’s other editorials were less forthright. As early as 16 February, an editorial said that it was “unrealistic” (不切实际的假设, *buqieshiji de jiashe*) to believe that China could keep its neighbour in check without the support of other powers. So, China should negotiate a new balance with other stakeholders. Even so, it had to avoid making a complete reversal and falling in behind the United States, Japan, and South Korea. A full u-turn on policy would risk China becoming “Pyongyang’s enemy number one” (头号敌人, *touhao diren*), wiping out decades of efforts to build up the China-North Korea bilateral relationship. This would play into the hands of the other powers.

Su Hao, interviewed on *Phoenix TV* on 24 February, said China and the international community’s failure to denuclearise the peninsula would prove costly. In their articles, Shen Dingli and Zhang Liangui wrote that North Korea would inevitably continue “along the nuclear path” (核道路, *he daolu*). Shen Dingli said North Korea’s nuclear programme “cannot be stopped” (无可阻挡, *wuke zudang*), no matter what sanctions were applied. Pyongyang’s goal is to be recognised and accepted as a nuclear power, as Zhang Liangui has been saying since 2010. Shen Dingli

wrote that the US has always accepted the nuclearisation of other nations after the fact. Once Obama leaves office in January 2017, the US might well accept North Korea as a nuclear power, as might the international community as a whole, since it “would have no other choice” (无奈接受, *wunai jieshou*).

In the *Phoenix TV* broadcast, Shi Yinhong said that China could not be held responsible for North Korea’s behaviour, since North Korea acts in favour of its own national interests and has no regard for China’s. Peng Guangqian summed the discussion up: North Korea’s nuclearisation is not solely China’s problem; China is not the source of the problem; and China alone cannot solve the problem.

Should China abandon North Korea?

Deng Yuwen’s argument for abandoning North Korea in the *Financial Times* of 27 February was something of a bombshell, although the proposal gained much more attention in Western circles than within the academic debate in China.²⁸ The full version of the article, published in *Liaowang Zhongguo* in March, presents the writer’s proposal in greater detail. He says that China can continue to support North Korea for historical, ideological, and strategic reasons. Or, it can choose to “abandon” its neighbour (放弃, *fangqi*), which has spiralled off control and become a “bad asset” (负资产, *fu zichan*).

Deng goes on to try to dismantle the reasons for continuing to support North Korea. He says that the ideological argument for supporting North Korea is fallacious. China’s foreign policy should not be and is not based on ideology. If it were, China would have no relations with the West. In any case, the differences between the ideologies of China and North Korea are greater than those between the ideologies of China and the West.

He argues that the strategic argument is largely exaggerated. During the Cold War, North Korea was a useful buffer zone, but the emergence of modern technological warfare has made this function obsolete. Moreover, a buffer zone is supposed to keep out danger, but now the buffer zone is itself the source of the danger. China must avoid being dragged into a war with the US on behalf of another country, especially because it has no need of the alliance to ensure its security.

In spite of expectations raised by Kim Jong-un’s rise to power, North Korea is not reforming. In fact, Deng says, the country is unreformable. Any attempt at reform would lead to the collapse of the regime, which is anyway unsustainable in the long term. So, it is irrational for China to maintain special relations with the state.

²⁸ Deng Yuwen, “China should abandon North Korea”, *Financial Times*, 27 February 2013, available at <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/9e2f68b2-7c5c-11e2-99f0-00144feabdc0.html>.

Deng says that North Korea does not share China’s almost sentimental feelings about the historical intimacy between two closely interrelated countries (唇亡齿寒, *chunwang chihan*, “if the lips are gone, the teeth will grow cold”). Since the 1950s, North Korea has worked hard to undervalue China’s role in the Korean War. In 1956, it even purged the Workers’ Party of Korea of its pro-China elements.

Deng worries that Beijing could in the future become a target of Pyongyang’s “nuclear blackmail” (核讹诈, *he e’zha*). North Korea could get rid of its current alliances and align itself with the US. A shift like this would seriously threaten China’s security. Even without this kind of dramatic policy change, a nuclear North Korea would necessarily have more weight in international negotiations and would be able to obtain more important concessions from China.

China must therefore review its diplomacy and refocus on its own national interest. It must abandon North Korea, or

In North Korea, Beijing should give up its “non-intervention policy” and develop a system of “limited intervention” that could better serve its national interest.

at the very least, it should seriously consider the option of cutting ties with the country. Keeping the present regime in place prevents the reunification

of North and South Korea, which could benefit both the North Korean people and China itself. Reunification would delegitimise US regional military alliances, reduce international pressure on Beijing, and facilitate China’s reunification with Taiwan.

If the Chinese authorities do not choose to abandon North Korea, Deng says, they must at least try to install in Pyongyang a pro-Chinese regime that would denuclearise North Korea. Beijing should give up its “non-intervention policy” (不干涉政策, *bu ganshe zhengce*) and develop a system of “limited intervention” (有限干涉, *youxian ganshe*) that could better serve its national interest.

A speedy return to dogmatism

Deng Yuwen’s proposal was harshly criticised by Chinese experts such as Ren Weidong, a researcher at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR). Ren said that the US was most to blame for tensions on the peninsula, because the US has resituated the North Korean problem within a regional context that is marked by American dominance. Instead of overturning China-North Korea relations, the connection between China and North Korea should be strengthened.

In his 20 March article, Ren Weidong said that the Korean peninsula is a key element in the US’s long-term strategy. Ever since the fall of the USSR, the US has refused to normalise its relations with North Korea (whereas Beijing

has recognised Seoul), even including it in President George W. Bush's "Axis of Evil".²⁹ The US's long-term goal is to preserve the division of the peninsula in order to guarantee the US military presence in South Korea and secure the dependence of South Korea and Japan on the US. Washington wants to use the Korean peninsula to contain China. One of Washington's goals is thus to create friction between Beijing and Pyongyang. If relations deteriorate and China stops supporting the Pyongyang regime, South Korea will be able to annex the North, which would benefit the US and establish a new military demarcation along the Yalu River.

To prevent this from happening, China must invest in strengthening its relationship with North Korea to act as a counterbalance to the US. Ren says that American "hegemony" is unlikely to change and that it is a mistake to think that if China abandoned North Korea, the US would withdraw its troops from South Korea and Japan.

Ren explains the reasons why he believes that North Korea's nuclear and ballistic programme will not lead to an arms race. South Korea has no need to be concerned, since the programme is not aimed at South Korea, but instead is intended to act as a deterrent against the US. The US will not allow Japan to develop its own nuclear programme. And there has been a double standard in the international non-proliferation system from the very beginning (such as, for example, the cases of Israel and India).

Ren Weidong repeated his attack on Deng Yuwen's arguments in his article of 9 July. He writes that North Korea remains a "strategic barrier" (战略屏障, *zhanlüe pingzhang*) to American dominance. If, as some people think, modern warfare makes North Korea's function as a buffer zone irrelevant, then why does the US maintain its military presence in South Korea? Beijing should not try to get closer to Seoul at Pyongyang's expense, because Seoul is an ally of Washington in the US "Pivot to Asia" strategy. Since American troops are stationed on its soil, South Korea is not fully independent and must remain within America's "strategic orbit" (战略轨道, *zhanlüe guidao*).

Consensus for a modest shift in relations

Deng Yuwen and Ren Weidong represent the two extremes on the spectrum of Chinese opinion about North Korea. In between these two poles, a broad consensus has emerged for a limited development of China-North Korea relations. Yu Shaohua's article is representative of this new consensus. She talks about Chinese Vice President Li Yuanchao's July trip to North Korea, during which he participated in the commemorations in Pyongyang on 27 July of the sixtieth anniversary of the signing of the Panmunjom armistice that ended the Korean War. Li's meeting with Kim Jong-un is

a sign of Beijing's continuing attachment to Pyongyang. China is not going to dissolve ties with its neighbour.

However, Yu says that a change in the relationship between the two countries is needed. During the Cold War, China's fate was very closely bound up with that of North Korea. But since the break-up of the Soviet bloc, the two neighbours have taken different directions. China has broken free of its Cold War mindset and normalised its relations with South Korea. Even though China still has to manage its strategic rivalry with the US, it has largely benefited from the post-Cold War period of stability. On the other hand, North Korea remains belligerent, and Pyongyang's nuclear programme has created a point of disagreement between the two countries. China, which is opposed both to an alliance with the US and to North Korea's nuclear programme, wants to promote collective security and to turn the 1953 armistice into a peace treaty. If this is to be achieved, both North Korea and the US will have to modify their behaviour, get beyond their Cold War mentalities, and start making a positive contribution to building peace.

²⁹ In his State of the Union address on 29 January 2002, President George W. Bush spoke of an "Axis of Evil" made up of Iraq, Iran, and North Korea, three countries that he said represented a major threat to world peace.