

North Korea and China Relations in the Era of Xi Jinping¹

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Abstract

China is a substantial factor dealing with North Korea and its nuclear adventurism because of the well-known ‘China loophole.’ The Communist Party of China has been providing the North regime with the lifeblood in spite of the North's nuclear program. The Chinese assistance to the North will be continued until China's geo-strategic interests in the North regime is disappeared. The paper explores; first, the China's grand strategy and baseline of its foreign policy on the Korean Peninsula; second, historical contexts of the relations; and the regional strategy of the CPC especially under the Xi government in the context of Sino-US competition over the Asia-Pacific regional primacy. It then argues that the North regime and the CPC share with each other mutually complementary interests in maintaining the status quo of the Korean Peninsula. Furthermore, the CPC's strategic interests in the North will be strengthened as much as China and US deepen their strategic competition in Asia-Pacific region. Although there are tension and friction in DPRK-PRC relations and the CPC does have limited influences on the North regime, the Beijing's policy toward Pyongyang revolves around the CPC's regional strategy and Sino-US competition. Consequently, China will continue to tether North Korea to the bilateral relationship explicitly and implicitly with giving security assurance. Also, Pyongyang will take its advantage of China's security dilemma on the North, trying to interrupt Beijing's intervention in the North. The cohabitation based on calculated interests is expected to go until a structural factor of Sino-US competition is resolved.

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1. Introduction

As North Korea succeeded in launching its ICBM on July 30, 2017, South Korea, the US, and Japan were in shock at the news because it may threaten the American homeland directly and make the US change its security plan over the Northeast Asia. Then, the South Korean government, grappling with the issue of THAAD deployment since the former opposition party took the presidential office, radically changed its position to rapid deployment of the THAAD system. In the US, many of security specialists raised the needs to make substantial measures on the North. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe urgently made a call with the US president Donald Trump, and agreed to take a new action against the North. By contrast, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs just expressed nothing but opposition to the North's ICBM test and simultaneously condemned the deployment of THAAD system in South Korea. China rather tended to condemn the US as the major cause of the North's provocation. Speaking of China's reaction, it has been a typical behavioral pattern when the Chinese government faced with the North Korean nuclear provocation. While condemning the North's provocation and officially joining in international sanctions against the North, China used to not only call for calm and restraint handling of the North but also return to the Six Party Talks initiated by Beijing. Beijing also tries to attribute the North's provocation to the US threat. Finally, the Chinese government tacitly has resumed trades with North Korea again, keeping its oil and food aids to the North.

It raises some of questions about the China's behavioral pattern. What strategic interests in North Korea the Communist Party of China (CPC) does have? Is it fixed or changeable? To what extend the CPC does have influences on the North regime? What has changed in DPRK-PRC relations? If it has changed, what has changed and what has never changed? Lastly, what is the CPC's policy toward/against the North regime since the Xi government? What will be the future of DPRK-PRC relations?

With the questions, the chapter explores; first, the China's grand strategy and baseline of its foreign policy on the Korean Peninsula; second, historical contexts of the relations; and the regional strategy of the CPC especially under the Xi government in the context of Sino-US competition over the Asia-Pacific regional primacy. It then argues that the North regime

and the CPC share with each other mutually complementary interests in maintaining the status quo of the Korean Peninsula. Furthermore, the CPC's strategic interests in the North will be strengthened as much as China and US deepen their strategic competition in Asia-Pacific region. Although there are tension and friction in DPRK-PRC relations and the CPC does have limited influences on the North regime, the Beijing's policy toward Pyongyang revolves around the CPC's regional strategy and Sino-US competition.

2. Explaining DPRK-PRC Relations

Thinking of North Korea-China relations, it is general to mind China's intervention in the Korean War in 1950 to support North Korea and the Sino-North Korean Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty in 1961. In other words, China and North Korea are recognized as 'brothers in arms.' It is said that the two countries have been keeping a particular relationship of party-to-party and China still has a substantial level of influential power to North Korea. Meanwhile, the mainstream views of the relationship contend that the relationship has changed from a special relationship of the party-to-party to a state-to-state, so that China does no longer provide unconditional supports for the North. Wang Jiarui, the former director of the International Department of the CPC Central Committee, stated that the relationship became normal state relations.² However, it should be noted that the change of relationship does not mean a change of China's strategic interests in the North. China still maintains strategic interests in North Korea, and therefore keeps the alliance and strategic cooperation with the North. China keeps providing its economic aids for the North. Especially, Chinese aids of oil and foods for the North are a vital source of North Korean survival, which implies that China may have a substantial influence on the North. It follows as a logical consequence that China's role in sanctioning the North is 'a crucial key' to make Pyongyang abandon its nuclear program. Based on that assumption, the U.S. and South Korea have been accentuating the China's role in negotiating an end to North Korea's missile and nuclear programs.

² <http://news.dwnews.com/global/news/2015-12-13/59702858.html>

However, ‘the key’ of the China’s role has proved itself to be nothing but ‘an inactive key’ during last twenty years of the North Korean nuclear adventurism at the very least. It again raises a question about China and North Korea relations; what is the Chinese strategic calculation on North Korea?; is China having influence over Pyongyang at all?; is the Sino-North Korea alliance still working? With those questions, this chapter explores historical trajectories of China and North Korea relations since the Korean War, focusing on particular aspects of the Sino-North Korea alliance.

The Sino-North Korea alliance had been shaped in acute tensions among China, the former Soviet Union, and North Korea.³ The tensions had revolved around establishing relationship in the communist bloc in terms of party-to-party relations(黨際關係) versus state-to-state ones.⁴ Therefore, it is important to explain how China and North Korea has attuned the relationship. With asymmetrical relations of power between the two since the initial stage of bilateral relations, China has tried to wield its influence over North Korea and has been able to have some degree of impacts on North Korea whereas the North has made efforts to maintain its own autonomy from China. The tension between the two is largely related to China’s role in deterring the North Korean nuclear adventurism. Particularly, it illuminates China’s measures and limits on the North Korean nuclear program.

Mutually Calculated Strategic Interests of North Korea-China Relations

The backbone of the North Korea-China relationship should be first defined before explaining the relations. After clearly defining it, we will be able to separate ‘what can be changed’ from ‘what cannot be changeable’ in the relationship. In advance, the relationship can be defined as a mutually calculated strategic coexistence, which means that both North Korea and China share with strategic interests in regime survival of the other and make full use of the strategic calculation of the other in spite of conflicts or frictions of interests between the two. By that means, the basic interests have not been changed while the relations

³ See Shen Zhihua and Yafeng Xia. China and the Post-War Reconstruction of North Korea, 1953-1961. NKIDP Working Paper #4. May 2012. https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/NKIDP_Working_Paper_4_China_and_the_Postwar_Reconstruction_of_North_Korea.pdf

⁴ 최명혜, 『중국과 북한 동맹관계: 불편한 동거의 역사』, (서울:오름, 2009), pp. 90-1; 106-129.

have been plagued with conflicts and frictions since 1949, which has been translated into the Sino-DPRK alliance, too. In addition, it is true that the relationship tended to be switched from a special relationship of ‘brothers in arms’ to a normal relation. However, ‘what has not been changed’ is the mutual interests based upon strategic calculations, which have depended substantially on international dynamics of power politics. While the Sino-Soviet conflict and the assumed threat from US were previously consisted of substantial motive for the alliance during the Cold War period, the Sino-US competition has replaced the previous driver in the strategic calculations between North Korea and China. Rather, the strategic value of North Korea for China has been increasing as Beijing strives to oust the US from Asia and thereby strengthen its influence over the region.

China’s limited influence on North Korea

It is true that China is a substantial factor dealing with North Korea and its nuclear adventurism because of the well known China loophole. The CPC has been providing the North regime with the lifeblood in spite of the fact that the North's nuclear program goes to a red-line and the international society pushes China to take actions against the North as a responsible stakeholder. However, the Chinese aids to the North has remained almost the similar level and, furthermore, will be continued so long as China's geo-strategic interests in the North regime are not changed. It is the strategic interests that have limited a scope and range of China’ policy options over the North. In other words, Beijing cannot cut off oil supplies to North Korea so long as it does not discard Pyongyang. Also, Pyongyang clearly understands the limit of Chinese options over the North, and makes full use of it.⁵

Indeed, North Korea typically has been using “power of the weak”⁶ since North Korea and China has established the bilateral relationship. Generally speaking, the strong power has capability to make the weak do something as it wants the weak to do. However, there are many of exceptions in history of international politics. Specifically, for Wolfers, the strong state is to have limited influences on the weak if the weak is crucial in terms of geopolitical

⁵ A North Korean defector who was a high-level of official speaks of how the North Korean leadership perceives China and its strategic interests in North Korea. see an interview with him at <https://www.voakorea.com/a/high-level-north-korean-official-defected-after-watching-executions/3918627.html>

⁶ Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration: Essays on International Politics* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1962), pp. 110-112; 최명해, 『중국과 북한 동맹관계: 불편한 동거의 역사』, pp. 54-59.

status. Even though the strong possesses political, economic, and military power to the weak, it is not easy to wield its influences on the weak because the strong has to consider dynamics of power politics among the Great Power. It may not be the Great Power but the more venturesome state that makes a policy decision of socialist bloc in the case of crisis because the leading state like the Soviet or China cannot leave the venturesome state in the lurch so as to maintain the unity of socialist bloc.⁷

It is the case of North Korea and China relations. China has not been able to discard North Korea because North Korea holds a key geopolitical value for China's security. Still, it is questionable that China sincerely does have intentions to wield its power to North Korea in the case of North Korea-US and South Korea confrontation and especially at a time when China tries to strengthen its influence in Asia and thereby to drive US out the region.⁸

China's policy on the North Korean nuclear program

Beijing has been consistently objecting to the North Korean nuclear program since Kim Il Sung asked for the Chinese nuclear technology to Mao Zedong in 1964.⁹ Beijing officially contends that China has been holding three objectives on the Korean Peninsula. It is consisted of 'no nuclear, no war, no instability.' For the Beijing's strategic calculation, a nuclear North Korea does not contribute to its interests because a nuclear North Korea may walk away from China's sphere of influence. Also, it is better for China to tether North Korea to China-DPRK alliance so as to check and control the North for its interests. Furthermore, China is concerned about side effects of nuclear North Korea since it may either prompt proliferation of nuclear to other Asian countries like South Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and Taiwan or strengthen a U.S. military presence and alliance system in Northeast Asia.¹⁰

⁷ For more details, see Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1979), pp. 165-168.

⁸ It represents major views of Chinese on China's policy toward both of North and South Korea. For example, see 仇发华 *新时期中国朝鲜半岛战略调整的变化、动因与趋势* 《国际关系研究》2014 年第6 期, p. 82; For Chinese view on strategic value of the Korean Peninsula, see 陈峰君, 王传剑. 『亚太大国与朝鲜半岛』(北京: 北京大学出版社, 2002), p. 134.

⁹ 李元焯, 『中美两国的朝鲜半岛政策演进历程研究』, 香港: 社会科学出版社, 2003, p. 232.

¹⁰ Zhang Liangui, "Coping with a Nuclear North Korea," *China Security*, Autumn 2006, pp. 11-13; Gu Guoliang, "China's Policy toward the DPRK's Nuclear and Missile Programs," in Freeman, Carla (ed.) *China*

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the Beijing simultaneously may have another calculation over a nuclear North Korea because there have been many of evidences that the Beijing indirectly and tacitly allow North Korea to develop the nuclear program.¹¹ In this respect, it cannot be ruled out the possibility that Beijing may have strategically its own calculations over a nuclear North Korea, in a case that Beijing recognizes that it cannot control the nuclear program of the North at all. For Beijing's side, a nuclear North Korea may secure the regime survival of Pyongyang. At the same time, it would be a stronger deterrent power against US. The U.S. force would be deterred by the nuclear North Korea not only in the Korean Peninsula but also in the field of Taiwan. Beijing would be able to gain the benefits if US consequently acknowledges a *de facto* nuclear North Korea without a military measure against the North and proliferation to East Asian countries.

The North Korean nuclear crisis in 2017 tends to show the Beijing's position. The Beijing tries to maximize its strategic interests by suggesting a 'double freeze,' which means that the North freezes its nuclear and missile activities and simultaneously ROK-US alliance stops its joint military exercises. Also, it goes as far as to suggest exchange of a denuclearization of the North and withdrawal of the U.S. force in South Korea, which fits with the Beijing's goal to drive the U.S. out of the Korean Peninsula. By the contrast, Beijing has been keeping quite reluctant and passive reactions in sanctioning the North, and nothing but compulsively joining in the sanction.

China's strategic interests in the Korean Peninsula and North Korea

There are some misunderstandings in explaining Sino-North Korean relations. They consist of either explaining the relationship with assumed linkages of 'the Beijing's policy toward/against the Pyongyang' and 'the Beijing's strategy, strategic interests in Sino-North

and North Korea: Strategic and Policy Perspectives from a Changing China. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

¹¹ Many of experts on North Korean nuclear program have raised doubts about Chinese intentions since they have got evidences of indirect or tacit involvement in the North's nuclear program. Anders Corr, Chinese Involvement In North Korea's Nuclear Missile Program: From Trucks To Warheads, *Forbes*, July, 2017; Walter C. Clemens Jr. North Korea's Quest for Nuclear Weapons: New Historical Evidence, *Journal of East Asian Studies* 10 (2010), pp. 127–154; Samuel Ramani, The Long History of the Pakistan-North Korea Nexus, August 30, 2016; Prakash Nanda, Why the Pakistan-China-North Korea nexus is dangerous to India and the rest of Asia. September, 14, 2016; Bernstein, Jeremy. 2007. *Plutonium: A History of the World's Most Dangerous Element*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press. Bernstein, Jeremy. 2009. "What A. Q. Khan Really Did." *New York Review of Books* 56, 9 (May 28), p. 46.; Mohan Malik, A.q. Khan's China Connection, China Brief Volume 4, Issue 9. <https://jamestown.org/program/a-q-khans-china-connection/>

Korean relations,' or a clear-cut understanding of 'blood alliance relationship' and 'normal state relations,' or lastly tenuous arguments of 'strategic asset' and 'strategic burden/liability.'

First of all, 'policy,' 'relations,' 'strategy' should be distinguished. For example, Beijing may change its policy toward/against the North based on issues and situations, so that it may change Sino-North Korean relations temporarily. Still, it should not mean that the temporary changes of 'policy' and 'relationship' are to be those of Beijing's strategy or strategic interests in the North. For example, the fact the Beijing's decision to join in the UN sanction against North Korea does not mean that Beijing has changed its strategic interests in the North although the decision has worsened the relationship.

Second, some contend that North Korea and China are not a 'blood alliance' any longer but just a 'normal relations.' It is true that the relationship has remarkably changed since the CPC has especially taken the reform and opening policy. Furthermore, international environment in the era of Post-Cold War and normalization of ROK-PRC relations in 1992 has substantially accelerated the normalization of North Korea - China relations. However, it should not be translated into a misleading assumption that Beijing would treat North Korea as like, for example, South Korea.

Lastly, there are some of tenuous arguments that Beijing may perceive the North as a 'strategic liability' rather than 'strategic asset,' just based on quite a few Chinese experts or newspapers.¹² While Pyongyang gives burdensome to Beijing especially in the case of nuclear provocations, it does not have the Beijing's strategic interests in the North changed at all because Beijing considers strategic value of the North and the Korean Peninsula in its strategic context of Sino-US competition.

It is essential to analyze both China's general North Korea strategy and its particular security considerations in order to understand China's strategic approach to North Korea. The China's policy toward North Korea is based on Beijing's top policy priorities for securing

¹² Particularly regarding the 'strategic burden,' only a few stated it in China while South Korea and US tend to overstate the value of argument. Surprisingly, many of papers and debates regarding the argument, including even Chinese scholars, are just based only on Zhang Liangui and Deng Yuwen while it is highly questionable that they indeed represent mainstream views of China, not to mention views of the Chinese leadership. For the newspaper articles of them, see <https://www.ft.com/content/9e2f68b2-7c5c-11e2-99f0-00144feabdc0>; Zhang Liangui, "Coping with a Nuclear North Korea," *China Security*, Autumn 2006.

regime survival. Beijing wants to maintain stability and peace along its border, because any political and security turbulence will harm the international environment for Chinese economic growth as well as political stability. In geopolitical terms, China historically has regarded the Korean peninsula as a strategic ‘buffer zone.’ China may face a direct threat from an enemy if an anti-Chinese regime is established in the Korean peninsula. Indeed, the situation would be a heavy security burden for China.

Table 1. China’s Strategic Goals over the Korean Peninsula in Order of Policy Priorities¹³

Order	Preferred situations in the Korean peninsula		
1st	The status quo	Maximum Objectives	‘The status quo plus PULS’: North Korea’s economic reform and open policy under the current regime, SINO-ROK Pseudo-alliance
			‘The status quo plus’: North Korea’s economic reform and open policy under the current regime
		Realistic Objective	‘The status quo’ including Nuclear North Korea
		Unlikely but blocking it if realized	‘The status quo minus’: an anti-China policy of North Korea
2nd	A pro-China regime in North Korea after break down of the status quo		
3rd	A pro-China regime or a neutral regime in the Korean peninsula after collapse of the North’s regime		
4th	A pro-U.S. but friendly regime to China		

¹³ The table is based on analyses on Chinese literatures and historical behaviors over the Korean Peninsula as well as interviews with Chinese experts. For more details, see Jonghyun, Cho, Dongho, Han and Ji-Yong Lee, “North Korean Contingency and Resolving Conflicts among Regional States,” *North Korean Review* 8:1(May, 2012), pp. 42-43; Ji-Yong Lee, “North Korea’s Current Economic Policy and Strengthening North Korea-China Economic Cooperation,” *International Issues & Prospects* (Spring, 2010), pp. 239-264.

5th	 [unacceptable marginal line] A pro-U.S. and anti-China regime in the Korean peninsula
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In this context, China is likely to set up its strategic priority, considering anticipatable scenarios in the Korean Peninsula. It largely consists of *the status quo* and breaking *status quo*. China may prefer the status quo in the Korean peninsula to any kinds of change. By the way, the *status quo* can be further divided into four of categories: the *status quo* plus-Plus,¹⁴ the *status quo* plus,¹⁵ the *status quo*, and the *status quo* minus (see Table 1). It seems that Beijing intends to achieve the maximum objectives of the *status quo* plus-Plus and the *status quo* plus. While it is unlikely of Beijing to achieve the maximum goals, the Chinese leadership is likely to realize that maintaining the *status quo* may be a realistic goal. By maintaining the *status quo*, Beijing would be able to maintain its strategic buffer zone and use North Korea as leverage against South Korea and the United States as well.

In a case of breaking the *status quo*, a pro-Chinese regime in North Korea may be the second preference to the Beijing. China will make an all-out effort to establish a pro-China regime or at least a non-hostile regime in the Korean Peninsula. The worst-case scenario for China would be unification of two Koreas wherein the North is absorbed by a pro-U.S. South Korea. It would be an unacceptable marginal line for Beijing. Therefore, Beijing will look for every avenue possible to avoid the worst case.

III. Continuity and Change in DPRK-PRC Relations

¹⁴ See the following articles for Chinese strategic interests in the Korean Peninsula, 石源华, 论中国对朝鲜半岛和平机制问题的基本立场, 『同济大学学报』, 第17卷 第3期, 2006年 6月, pp. 72-78; 崔立如, 朝鲜半岛安全问题: 中国的作用, 『现代国际关系』, 2006年 第9期, pp. 42-47.

¹⁵ 최명해, 「북한의 2차 핵실험과 북·중 관계」, 『국방정책연구』, 85권 3호. 2009, p. 116. ; Avery Goldstein, “Across the Yalu: China’s Interests and the Korean Peninsula in a Changing World,” in Alastair Iain Johnston and Robert S. Ross (eds.), *New Directions in the Study of China’s Foreign Policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), pp. 139-143.

North Korea and China have been reiterating amity and enmity since both countries established diplomatic relations on 6 October 1949. Although both parties formally confirm the relationship as a blood tie and call each other a ‘comrade,’ it has been full of mutual distrust, wariness, slander, and exploitation. The tension between the two comes from a clash of interests between a leading country and a weak one in the socialist camp. While China as the leading tries to make North Korea follow its goals by name of “the overall interests of the socialist camp,” North Korea as the weak regards the interests nothing but defined in accordance with those of China.¹⁶ In other words, the relationship is essentially based on the state-to-state relations, which each state should secure its own survival by herself and pursue its own interests while they claim a special relationship of a blood tie or a common interest of the socialist camp.

It is useful to trace North Korea and China relations focusing on critical events so as to examine ‘what has changed’ and ‘what has not changed.’ The critical events between the two countries may include, among many, the Korean War and China’s intervention in 1950, the formation of DPRK-PRC alliance in 1961, the normalization of diplomatic relations between South Korea and China in 1992, Chinese reaction to the Cheonan incident in 2010, and China’s retaliation against the deployment of THAAD system in South Korea as well as the North Korean nuclear crisis in 2017. These cases clearly show the Chinese position, strategic calculation, and policy toward the North as well as the Korean Peninsula. It also exhibits how the Pyongyang strategically reacts upon China.

When the CPC made a decision to intervene in the Korean War in 1950, the top priority of the communist party should have first stabilize and corroborate the regime because it had declared the establishment of the regime in less than one year. Nevertheless, Mao Zedong pushed for the intervention even though many of the party leadership objected to the intervention.¹⁷ There are still debates about the factors that had led Mao to make the decision

¹⁶ Shen Zhihua, “Sino-North Korean Conflict and its Resolution during the Korean War,” *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Issue 14/15, p. 21.

¹⁷ The CPC held the central politburo meeting on October 4, 1950. It was right before the CPC decided to intervene in the Korean War. It is reported that most of the politburo members either objected to the intervention or to express deep concerns. They were concerned about the CPC capability to engage in a new war in the situation that the party had not completed consolidation of the regime. 張民, 張秀嫻, 『周恩來與抗美援朝』, (上海: 上海人民出版社, 2000), p. 257.

to intervene into the Korean War. While someone hold that Stalin pushed Mao to the War,¹⁸ others contend that domestic factors and regime survival were more significant factor. Some others stressed the shared interests of the socialist camp as the main factor.¹⁹ In addition, Kim Kyungil points out that it cannot be understood without considering the Taiwan factor because the CPC, at that time, had to complete the unfinished confrontation between the CPC and the Kuomintang.²⁰

Setting aside the debates on reasons of the Chinese intervention, what is certain about the Chinese intervention is that the Chinese leadership perceived the Korean Peninsula as a geopolitically crucial for its security. In the initial period that the CPC declared the establishment of People's Republic of China, the leadership could not afford to engage in another war for many reasons. First of all, the CPC had yet to complete a state building to govern the vast Chinese continent. The remnants of the Kuomintang as well as the previous war lords still remained the continent. There were innumerable problems and tasks, which the communist party had to exert all its endeavors. Also, Chiang Kai Shek was trying to recover the continent. Lastly, it was questionable that the CPC did have a military capability to counter the U.S. force. It was the reason that Mao had hesitated and grappled with the decision right before making the final decision. However, it is clear that the communist leadership at that time were extremely concerned about the U.S. as a substantial threat to the communist regime. For the leadership, the Korean Peninsula was the last bastion of the Chinese homeland defense from threats of the U.S.²¹

Regarding the tension between Pyongyang and Beijing, it should be noted that Kim Il Sung had constantly vigilant about China's interference in North Korean internal politics. In

¹⁸ Golam W. Choudhry, "Reflections on the Korean War(1950-1953)," *Korea and World Affairs*, No.14(Summer, 1990), pp. 258-274; Shen Zihua, "Sino-North Korean Conflict and its Resolution during the Korean War," p. 9. Shen especially contends that Mao made the decision because he was worried about Stalin's encroachment on the China's Northeast in a case of expanding the War to the Chinese territory under the pretext of the Sino-Soviet alliance. See, 沈志華, 『中蘇同盟與朝鮮戰爭研究』, (廣西師範大學出版社, 1999), p. 194.

¹⁹ 최명해, 『중국과 북한 동맹관계: 불편한 동거의 역사』, p. 82.

²⁰ 김정일, 『중국의 한국전쟁 참전 기원』, (서울: 논형, 2005), pp. 349-411.

²¹ 劉金質·楊淮生 主編, 『中國對朝鮮和韓國政策』, (北京: 中央文獻出版社, 1997), pp. 4-53; 『毛澤東軍事文集 第六卷』, (北京: 軍事科學出版社, 1993), pp. 90-91; 106-139; 中共中央文獻研究室編, 『周恩來年譜』, (北京: 中央文獻出版社, 1997), pp. 62-92.

the course of gripping on political power, Kim tried to exclude the Yan-an faction that was a group of pro-Chinese.²² Kim had purged the Yan-an faction even during the Korean War for the purpose of fending off the strengthening Chinese influence.²³ Since China intervened in the Korean War for North Korea, Beijing had tried to wield its influences on the Pyongyang. The typical case is the August Faction Incident that China and the Soviet Union, initiated by China, attempted to remove Kim Il Sung from power at the 2nd Plenary Session of the 3rd Central Committee in 1956. However, Kim finally succeeded in purging the opposite groups like the Yan-an and the Soviet-Korean factions. It intensified Kim's vigilance over China and the Soviet. Finally, Kim asked for withdrawal of the Chinese People's Volunteer Army.

The Korean War and China's intervention show that China does have crucial interests in North Korea and the Korean Peninsula. The North Korean regime was able to survive due to China's intervention. Since the Korean War, North Korea and China have stressed on their blood alliance. However, the relationship has been an "uncomfortable cohabitation"²⁴ full of tension, mutual suspect, and calculation of strategic interests. While China attempts to wield influence on the North, the North tries to keep its autonomy and independence from China. It continues to create tensions between the two countries. The process of signing a "Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance" between Pyongyang and Beijing reveals how they strategically exchanged mutual interests. Also, it implies that Pyongyang was wary of shaping a hierarchical relation with the hegemonic power in the socialist group, so that both of China and the former Soviet Union had been able to wield fairly limited influence on Pyongyang.

When Kim Il Sung asked for making an alliance treaty to Mao and Khrushchev in 1960, both were reluctant to accept it. However, they finally signed an alliance treaty with the North in July, 1961. The main reason that Mao and Khrushchev consequently accepted Kim's demand was related to Sino-Soviet split. In the situation that Sino-Soviet relations had been aggravated, the Soviet leadership could not leave Pyongyang to stand by Beijing. It was the

²² Kim Il Sung had not talked with Mao about the war plan even when he had a meeting with Mao on May 13, 1950. It was a month before Kim invaded South Korea (June 25, 1950). 金東吉, "三國同謀論'分析: 朝鮮戰爭起源的再思考," 『當代中國史研究』, 第2期(2006), pp. 112-121.

²³ 최명해, 『중국과 북한 동맹관계: 불편한 동거의 역사』, pp. 88-90.

²⁴ Ibid.

same case to Beijing. Particularly, Beijing was concerned about the Khrushchev policy of "Peaceful Coexistence" and improvement of US-Soviet relations. It was the time that the Chinese leadership began to speak of 'two middle zone,'²⁵ which implied that China met a double challenges not only from the U.S. but also from the hegemonic Soviet and therefore had to strengthen countries sharing with security concerns with China. Consequently, Mao was forced to accommodate Pyongyang when Kim attempted to sign an alliance treaty with the Soviet.²⁶ Eventually, Kim made use of Sino-Soviet split to counter threats from strengthening US-South Korea alliance associated with Japan.

By the way, Kim's diplomatic finesse achieving the alliance treaty from Stalin and Mao was based on the premise that Kim should establish his unitary power. Without establishing his power, the alliance rather could invite interferences from China and the Soviet. Kim has finished the fierce struggle for power against the opposites backed by Beijing and the Soviet by 1960. Also, he could oust the Chinese army by 1958, so that he came to feel free from Chinese influences.²⁷ For Chinese side, Beijing had to tether Pyongyang by the name of blood alliance under the pressures not only from US but also from the Soviet. Especially Beijing had begun to get threatened more by the Soviet than US. In the situation, Beijing would fall into a double jeopardy if Pyongyang took side of Moscow. Thus, North Korea and China alliance treaty was based on cold calculation of strategic interests although both countries have apparently stressed on the blood alliance and friendship.

Explaining the relationship after the post-Cold War period, it can be said that the end of the Cold War imposed a condition that North Korea and China fundamentally reconsidered and redefined the relationship. The former Soviet Union went to collapse and discarded the socialist regime, so that China did not need to be concerned about the threat from Moscow. Although Beijing worried about 'peaceful evolution (*hepingyanbian*),' suspecting that it was a US strategy, Deng Xiaoping took China's course of Open and Reform policy and looked for co-existence and co-prosperity with the West in areas of foreign policy. By the same token, Beijing made a decision to establish a diplomatic tie with South Korea. After the post-Cold

²⁵ 毛澤東, 中間地帶有兩個, 『毛澤東外交文選』, (北京: 中央文獻出版社, 1994).

²⁶ 최명해, op cit. pp. 211-221.

²⁷ For more details of North Korean position, see 殷天基. 『北韓의 對 中蘇 外交政策』 (서울: 南芝, 1994), pp. 72-82.

War era, North Korea and China relations have more soured. The two countries had stopped an exchange of high-level officials until mid-1990s. Also, China began to claim a 'normal relations' rather than 'special relationship of party-to-party blood tie' with North Korea. However, it never means that China may discard North Korea. Diplomatic relations and strategic interests were totally different story.

China has maintained a position of "calculated ambiguity" over the bilateral relationship, which means that Beijing tries to control a scope of Pyongyang's foreign policy decision by means of keeping friendly relations while assuming an ambiguous attitude to its security commitment.²⁸ Beijing began to resume economic and military aids for the North in 1996 when North Korea went through so-called 'Arduous March,' which was caused by collapse of economy and then governing system. It was time when Pyongyang provoked South Korea and US with its nuclear development program. For Chinese side, Beijing had to control Pyongyang's radical behaviors so as to stabilize North East Asian security environment since China has pursued policies of opening-up and economic development in the post-Cold War international environment, on the one hand. On the other hand, Beijing still has security interests in regime survival of the North. Therefore, Beijing hoped that Pyongyang adopts a reform and opening-up policy as China does, and thereby enhances the foundation for regime survival.²⁹

However, North Korea has had a deep degree of distrust on Chinese commitment to the alliance. When Pyongyang accepted China's involvement of the Four Party Talks (later, the Six Party Talks asked by North Korea) in 1996, the aim of Pyongyang was only to receive economic aids from Beijing. Still, Pyongyang was reluctant to recognize China's role. Meanwhile, US and South Korea have recognized China's engagement in North Korea. They have expected that China, as a party concerned of the Korean Armistice Agreement signed in 1953, would play a role in dealing with North Korean adventurism. Eventually, China took an intermediary role between US-South Korea and North Korea as a chair of the Six Party Talks. Problem was that Pyongyang has not trusted Beijing and the Chinese role. Furthermore,

²⁸ Ibid. p. 373.

²⁹ The Chinese leadership has made efforts to persuade Pyongyang to take a reform policy, speaking of the Chinese achievement. Recently, the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao had contended that North Korea needed to consider taking the Chinese reform and opening-up policy when he met Kim Jong Il in 2010.

China has only committed to crisis management rather than crisis resolution, with keeping its stakes over North Korean issue. Actually, the limited role of Beijing partly came from limited influence on Pyongyang. Pyongyang has revealed a deep sense of distrust on Beijing and China's limited influence on North Korea.³⁰ Meanwhile, Beijing's passive role came from its security dilemma on North Korea as well as the Korean Peninsula. Beijing cannot discard the North Korean card for its security while it also suffers from Pyongyang's adventurism.

The Beijing's dilemma has been exhibited in moments of security crisis in the Korean Peninsula so far. When the South Korean Navy corvette Cheonan was sunk in March, 2010 and North Korea attacked on Yeonpyong-do in November, 2010, a border island, Chinese responses have shown the Beijing's dilemma. As North Korea provoked South Korea, South Korea-US alliance has planned a joint naval exercise in the Yellow Sea in response to the North's provocation. Facing the soaring tension over the Korean Peninsula, China first called for calm and restraint to South Korea and US in the early stage of the Cheonan sinking. By contrast, Beijing's stance appeared firmer as US was planning the joint naval exercise. China began to strongly oppose any military exercises in the Yellow Sea, fearing a possible case of radical change in North Korea. The behavioral pattern has repeated in case of North Korean bombing on the Yeonpyeong Island.

By the same token, the Chinese pattern has repeated the North Korean nuclear provocations. That is, when China faces with a security issue caused by North Korean provocation, Beijing tends to blame the North and simultaneously urges calm to South Korea and US. If South Korea and US strongly react upon the provocation, Beijing quickly shifts its criticism and blame to ROK-US alliance, fearing a possible change of the status quo in North Korea. The consistent pattern of Chinese response tells us that Beijing puts top priority on the North Korean issue. It reflects China's strategic interests in North Korea and the Korean Peninsula. Beijing clearly shows the pattern facing the North Korean nuclear crisis in 2017.

³⁰ Many of North Korean high-level officials have stated Pyongyang's distrust on China. Take a notable example, Kim Kye Kwan, the 1st Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, has clearly expressed North Korean view on China. For him, the PRC is "only trying to use" the DPRK. While the US has relied on the PRC for the solution to the nuclear issue, North Korea has test-fired missiles and conducted a nuclear test, doing what Pyongyang wanted to do. China has solved nothing and does not possess influences on the North unlike the US assumed. <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-daily-report/napsnet-daily-report-monday-march-12-2007/>

IV. DPRK-PRC Relations in the Era of Xi Jinping

What kinds of change and continuity are characterized in DPRK-PRC relations in the era of Xi Jinping and Kim Jong Un? Is there a particular change of the relations? What are changed and unchanged?

As the North Korean nuclear crisis of 2017 has reached to a red-line for all interested parties, Chinese response can be seen as a litmus test of North Korea and China relations. The Chinese actions show that there is no meaningful change of Chinese strategic interest in North Korea, at the very least. Rather, Xi Jinping's China has stubbornly reacted upon South Korean decision to allow the US Forces Korea (USFK) to deploy THAAD system, retaliating against South Korea. The case implies that the top concern of Xi's Beijing is neither North Korea nor South Korea in itself, but the strategic competition with US in North East Asia. In other words, the security issue of the Korean Peninsula is a dependent variable of Sino-US strategic competition. As Xi especially has spurred expanding sphere of China's influence in Asia-Pacific, Beijing comes to have stronger security concerns about US presence in North East Asia. It brings about tougher attitudes and responses of China against US.

Since Xi took the power in 2012, China's foreign policy has been turning to more aggressive and expansive direction although it partly has reflected China's confidence in its capability, especially with the Global Financial Crisis of 2008. China became more aggressive in maritime dispute and regional security (South China Sea, Asian Security Concept), more enthusiastic in regional economic development (One Belt, One Road), more ambitious in international economic and financial institutions (AIIB, BRICS Development Bank, RCEP, FTAAP, etc.). It is associated with domestically strengthening authoritarianism and nationalism. Xi has been consolidating his power and reinforcing the power of the CPC. He also proposed to construct the "Chinese Dream" whereby the leadership inspires Chinese confidence and enhances peoples' supports for the Party. It tends to foster patriotism and nationalism.

As China under Xi's leadership began to enlarge its political, military, and economic power in Asian-Pacific region, Beijing tends more to unwelcome the US presence in Asia. Although US has not accepted it, Beijing has continued to call for making the New Type of Great Power Relations that implies *de facto* Chinese desire to get US recognition of a

privileged Chinese sphere in Asia while Chinese makes efforts to stress on *de jour* ‘peaceful coexistence’ as well as to deny the ‘privileged sphere.’ The desire may be translated into an elevated sense of rivalry against US. In this context, China may give more strategic value to North Korea as well as the Korean Peninsula because the Korean Peninsula is geopolitically located in a key point. For Chinese side, the Korean Peninsula has a strategic meaning not only as a security buffer but more importantly becomes a platform to enlarge its influence in East Asia.

Beijing’s dilemma is that it is not easy to subordinate Pyongyang to its control while having a strategic interest in maintaining the *status quo* in the North. Kim Jong Un remains extremely vigilant against Beijing’s intention that makes an effort to grasp greater influences on Pyongyang. For Kim’s side, it may be the best choice to make use of China to secure its survival by using the “power of the weak” while keeping the independence of the regime. In fact, Kim has tried to cut the Chinese influences by purging potential rivals since he held the weak foundation of power. He has shown how sensitive he has been to his power.³¹ What has been happening between Pyongyang and Beijing since Kim Jong Un resembles what Kim Il Sung had dealt with Mao’s China during/after the Korean War. In other words, the tension between Pyongyang and Beijing comes out much of domestic politics over power and autonomy, which means that Beijing has very limited influences on Pyongyang. Still, Beijing will continue its efforts to maintain the relationship and the status quo in North Korea.

Considering foreign policy of the Xi government, the CPC’ policy position on the North as well as the Korean Peninsula is based on its strategic goals of strengthening its influence in the Asia-Pacific. Consequently, Beijing adheres its policy of ‘no war, no instability’ and the status quo in North Korea. In addition, under Xi’s leadership, Beijing will make further efforts to strengthen its influence on both Pyongyang and Seoul.

V. Conclusion

What meaning has North Korea had for China? What strategic values will it have for China? What does North Korea expect from China? These questions need to be asked before

³¹ Kim Jong Un executed Jang Song Thaek, his uncle, in 2013. It is reported that it was partly related to Jang’s China connection and business. In 2017, Kim assassinated Kim Jong Nam, his brother. Kim Jong Nam was considered as an option replacing Kim Jong Un by China, reportedly.

we have either a vague suspicion about North Korea-China collaborations or a groundless expectation about China's role and influence on the North. Particularly, there have been lots of groundless expectations that China may have either powerful influences on North Korea or take positive actions in response to international society in order to prevent Pyongyang from radical provocations. Furthermore, some others, especially in South Korea, have even had a groundless wishful thinking that Beijing may discard Pyongyang if South Korea strengthens its relationship with China because South Korea becomes more and more valuable for China whereas Pyongyang becomes a strategic liability. For them, Seoul may persuade Beijing not only to stand by Seoul in cases of North-South disputes but furthermore to plump for Seoul when Beijing has to make a choice between the North and the South.

Regarding China's political and economic influence over the North, it can be said that Beijing does have very little political and economic clout with Pyongyang. The limitation comes not only from geopolitical status of North Korea for China's security but also from Pyongyang's wariness of China's intervention to domestic politics. Although China's aids to the North are decisively important to the North Korean survival, the problem is that Beijing cannot easily use the clout in order to compel Pyongyang to fulfill its will because Beijing does have its own strategic interests in the North regime survival, that is, the Beijing's dilemma on the North. Furthermore, Pyongyang penetrates Beijing's interests in North Korea, so that the Pyongyang leadership does not feel indebtedness to China. Rather, Pyongyang believes that the North nothing but gets rewarded for its role. Pyongyang also has attempted to wield 'the power of the weak' to Beijing in order to constrain the scope of Beijing's policy to the Korean Peninsula.

Meanwhile, it is another story whether Beijing has intention to wield its clout to Pyongyang as US and South Korea wants Beijing to do. Even though China has political and economic influences in North Korea, to what extent Beijing is willing to wield its influences? As it is mentioned, Beijing regards the survival of the North regime directly connected to its security. For that very reason, Beijing never accepts any kind of measure especially from US and South Korea, which may endanger the regime survival. What Beijing wants to make it in North Korean issues is consisted of control, management, and exploitation of the North. It would be the best for Beijing that Pyongyang follows Beijing's demands. Thinking of

strained relations between the two, Beijing seems to realize that it is beyond the realm of feasibility. Instead, Beijing has tried to manage the scope and range of North Korean security issues including the nuclear program, so as to achieve its security interests.

Instead and simultaneously, Beijing has exploited the North by using of its assumed leverage over North Korea. China has made efforts to lead the Six Party Talks while the North regime has been reluctant to accept China's role in the Talks. China has taken the role in the Six Party Talks in response to US and South Korean expectations. However, the aims of Beijing in the Six Party Talks are first to manage and stabilize the North Korean nuclear crisis not to trigger a conflict, and to achieve its leverage over the North Korean issues.

Lastly, the strategic value of North Korea for China has been increasing as Xi Jinping's China pursues to enlarge its sphere of influences in Asia-Pacific region so that Sino-US strategic competition is more intense than ever before. In this context, Beijing may have another calculation about the North Korean nuclear program. The North Korean nuclear weapon may not only secure the North Korean regime survival but also be a powerful means to restrain the US military projection in Northeast Asia. For Beijing's side, it would do little harm in achieving its goal to deter US in this region if Beijing's concerns, like nuclear proliferation, the US MD system, or armed conflict in Korea, can be manageable, although Beijing has been officially speaking out against a nuclearizing North Korea.

Beijing under Xi's leadership has been making efforts to achieve the Korean Peninsula as its own sphere of influence because the Peninsula geo-strategically is like a stepping stone or outpost to advance its power to Asia-Pacific. Therefore, North Korea should be secured for its strategic interests at the very least. Beijing further may aim to win South Korea over the US alliance system as part of greater goal of its strategic enlargement. Consequently, China will continue to tether North Korea to the bilateral relationship explicitly and implicitly with giving security assurance. Also, Pyongyang will take its advantage of China's security dilemma on the North, trying to interrupt Beijing's intervention in the North. The cohabitation based on calculated interests is expected to go until a structural factor of Sino-US competition is resolved.

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