

## Backgrounders

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### The China-North Korea Relationship

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Authors: [Beina Xu](#), Online Writer/Editor, and Jayshree Bajoria

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#### Introduction

China is North Korea's most important ally, biggest trading partner, and main source of food, arms, and energy. The country has helped sustain what is now Kim Jong-un's regime, and has historically opposed harsh international sanctions on North Korea in the hope of avoiding regime collapse and a refugee influx across their border. But after Pyongyang's third nuclear test in [February 2013](#), analysts say that China's patience with its ally may be wearing thin. This latest nuclear test, following previous ones in 2006 and 2009, has complicated North Korea's relationship with Beijing, which has played a central role in the [Six Party Talks](#), the multilateral framework aimed at denuclearizing North Korea. The December 2013 execution of Jang Song-taek, Kim Jong-un's uncle and adviser with close ties to Beijing, spurred [renewed concern](#) from China about the stability and direction of the North Korean leadership. Furthermore, experts say that thawing relations between China and South Korea could [shift the geopolitical dynamic](#) in East Asia and undermine the China-North Korea alliance.

#### An Historic Alliance Under Stress

China's support for North Korea dates back to the Korean War (1950-1953), when its troops flooded the Korean Peninsula to aid its northern ally. Since the war, China has lent political and economic backing to North Korea's leaders: Kim Il-sung (1912-1994), Kim Jong-il (1941-2011), and Kim Jong-un (1983-). But strains in the relationship began to surface when Pyongyang tested a nuclear weapon in October 2006 and China supported [UN Security Council Resolution 1718](#), which imposed sanctions on Pyongyang. With this resolution—as well as [earlier UN sanctions](#) that followed the DPRK's July 2006 missile tests—Beijing signaled a shift in tone from diplomacy to punishment, which it sustained after Pyongyang's second nuclear test in May 2009. However, the PRC also pursued comprehensive engagement with North Korea on the occasion of Prime Minister Wen Jiabao's visit to North Korea in October of 2009 to mark the sixtieth anniversary of the establishment of Sino-DPRK relations. Following North Korea's third nuclear test in February 2013, Beijing returned to a harsher approach, summoning the North Korean ambassador to its foreign ministry to [protest Pyongyang's third nuclear test](#), implementing new trade sanctions, reducing energy supplies to North Korea, and calling for denuclearization talks. However, it stopped short of the harsh criticism it unleashed in 2006, when it described the North's first nuclear test as "brazen."

More recently, China [criticized](#) a February 2014 [UN report](#) that detailed human rights atrocities in North Korea, raising questions as to whether it would use its Security Council veto power to block international interference on the matter. In March 2010, China refused to take a stance against North Korea, despite conclusive evidence that showed Pyongyang's involvement in sinking a [South Korean](#)

[naval vessel](#). But during his June 2013 summit in the Sunnylands with President Obama, Xi Jinping publicly joined in calls for North Korea to pursue denuclearization.

Yet despite China's growing reservations about North Korea's erratic behavior, it has too much at stake to halt or withdraw its support entirely. "The idea that the Chinese would turn their backs on the North Koreans is clearly wrong," says CFR Senior Fellow [Adam Segal](#). Beijing only agreed to [UN Resolution 1718](#) after revisions removed requirements for tough economic sanctions beyond those targeting luxury goods. China's trade with North Korea has also steadily increased in recent years: in 2013 trade between the two countries [grew by more than ten percent](#) from 2012 levels to \$6.5 billion. "There is no reason to think that political risks emanating from North Korea will lead China to withdraw its economic safety net for North Korea any time soon," [writes CFR Senior Fellow Scott Snyder](#).

### Pyongyang's Gains

China provides North Korea with most of its food and energy supplies and comprises over sixty percent of its [total trade volume](#). Nicholas Eberstadt, senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, says that since the early 1990s, China has served as North Korea's chief food supplier and has accounted for nearly 90 percent of its energy imports. North Korea's economic dependence on China continues to grow, as indicated by the significant trade imbalance between the two countries. Some experts see the \$1.25 billion trade deficit as an indirect Chinese subsidy, given that North Korea cannot finance its trade deficit through borrowing.

China also provides aid directly to Pyongyang. "It is widely believed that Chinese food aid is [channeled to the military](#)," [\(PDF\)](#) the Congressional Research Service wrote in January 2010. That allows the World Food Program's food aid to be distributed among the general population "without risk that the military-first policy or regime stability would be undermined by foreign aid policies of other countries."

*"Washington believes in using pressure to influence North Korea to change its behavior, while Chinese diplomats and scholars have a much more negative view of sanctions and pressure tactics." – Daniel Pinkston, International Crisis Group*

### China's Priorities

China has long regarded stability on the Korean peninsula as its primary interest. Its support for Pyongyang ensures a friendly nation on its northeastern border, and provides a buffer zone between China and democratic South Korea, which is home to around [29,000 U.S. troops](#) and marines. Since the death of Kim Jong-il, planning for North Korean contingencies has become a priority for South Korean policy makers, who have sought since June of 2013 to bring American and Chinese counterparts together for detailed discussions on the subject.



"For the Chinese, stability and the avoidance of war are the top priorities," says [Daniel Sneider](#), the associate director for research at Stanford's Asia-Pacific Research Center. The specter of hundreds of thousands of North Korean refugees flooding into China is a huge worry for Beijing. "The Chinese are most concerned about the collapse of North Korea leading to chaos on the border," CFR's

**THE KOREAN PENINSULA** Segal says.

China has consistently urged world powers not to push Pyongyang too hard, for fear of precipitating a regime collapse. The refugee issue is already a problem for Beijing: its promise to Pyongyang to repatriate North Koreans escaping across the border has consistently triggered condemnation **from human rights groups**. **Jing-dong Yuan** of the Center for Nonproliferation Studies in California says Beijing began its construction of a barbed-wire fence along this border in 2006 to avoid a potential refugee problem.

Some experts say that the Obama administration's pivot toward the Asia-Pacific—which some Chinese leaders interpreted as containment of Beijing—made China less trusting of U.S. intentions regarding North Korea. To counter the U.S.-South Korea alliance, China has recently made persistent efforts to strengthen relations with Seoul. In 2014, Chinese president Xi Jinping completed an exchange of state visits with South Korean president Park Geun-hye in one year's time—a "remarkable intensification of the relationship," especially given the fact that Xi has yet to visit Pyongyang or receive Kim Jong-un, a first for a Chinese head of state, **writes Snyder**. Yet despite a burgeoning trade relationship with South Korea and eyes on setting up a bilateral FTA by year's end, the two states do not share strategic priorities, which will hinder the development of the political relationship, Snyder adds.

**Experts say** China has been ambivalent on the question of its commitment to intervene for the defense of North Korea in case of military conflict. The **1961 Sino-North Korean Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance** obligates China to defend North Korea against unprovoked aggression. But Jaewoo Choo, assistant professor of Chinese foreign policy at Kyung Hee University in South Korea, **writes in Asian Survey** that, "China conceives itself to have the right to make an authoritative interpretation of the principle for intervention" in the treaty. As a result of changes in regional security in a post-Cold War world, he writes, "China now places more value on national interest, over alliances blinded by ideology."

"For the Chinese, stability and the avoidance of war are the top priorities," says **Daniel Sneider**, the associate director for research at Stanford's Asia-Pacific Research Center. "From that point of view, the North Koreans are a huge problem for them, because Pyongyang could trigger a war on its own." The specter of hundreds of thousands of North Korean refugees flooding into China is a huge worry for Beijing. "The Chinese are most concerned about the collapse of North Korea leading to chaos on the border," CFR's Segal says. If North Korea does provoke a war with the United States, China and South Korea would bear the brunt of any military confrontation on the Korean peninsula. Yet both those countries have been hesitant about pushing Pyongyang too hard, for fear of making Kim Jong-un's regime collapse. The flow of refugees into China is already a problem: China has promised Pyongyang that it will repatriate North Koreans escaping across the border, but invites condemnation from human rights groups when sending them back to the DPRK. **Jing-dong Yuan** of the Center for Nonproliferation Studies in California says Beijing began its construction of a barbed wire fence along this border in 2006 for that reason.

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from taking military action against Pyongyang.

### **Beijing's Leverage**

Since September of 2013, Beijing has failed to spur the resumption of the [Six Party Talks](#) to implement a landmark 2005 [joint statement of principles](#). Washington [depends on Beijing's leverage](#) to push Pyongyang to return to denuclearization talks. Washington also cooperates with Beijing at the UN Security Council to punish the North for its development of its nuclear and missile programs. In addition, China's permanent seat on the UN Security Council secures veto power for any UN action directed at North Korea. "It's clear that the Chinese have enormous leverage over North Korea in many respects," says Sneider of Stanford's Asia-Pacific Research Center. "But can China actually try to exercise that influence without destabilizing the regime? Probably not."

[Analysts say](#) that with the removal of Jang Song-taek, who had been an important liaison to Beijing, China may further tilt toward prioritizing stability over denuclearization in the near term. However, his absence may also deprive China of strategic alternatives to cooperate with the United States and South Korea given the "skyrocketing reputational costs" of continued support for the North Korean leadership, [Snyder writes](#).

### **Washington's Role**

The United States has pushed North Korea to irreversibly give up its nuclear weapons program in return for aid, diplomatic benefits, and normalization of relations with Washington. But experts say Washington and Beijing have very different views on the issue. "Washington believes in using pressure to influence North Korea to change its behavior, while Chinese diplomats and scholars have a much more negative view of sanctions and pressure tactics," says International Crisis Group's [Daniel Pinkston](#). "They tend to see public measures as humiliating and counterproductive."

There were expectations at the start of Obama's first term in 2009 that the United States might pursue direct talks with North Korea, but Pyongyang's subsequent rocket tests dimmed such hopes. Washington later settled on an approach that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton described as "strategic patience" in close consultations with Six Party allies. "This emphasis on alliance coordination has been the first principle of any Obama administration discussion of policy toward North Korea," [Snyder writes](#). The Obama administration pursued several rounds of [bilateral dialogue](#) with North Korea during 2011, but weeks following parallel February 2012, announcements by both governments based on those talks (known as the Leap Day understanding), North Korea announced that it would test a multi-stage rocket in a failed effort to launch a satellite on April 12, 2012.

But this dynamic has been challenged with the Obama administration's 2011 "pivot" to Asia—a policy that strengthens U.S. political, economic, and military participation in the region. This tension "provides a backdrop to consider prospects for Sino-U.S. cooperation on [policies toward North Korea](#), and highlights Chinese wariness and strategic mistrust of U.S. policy intentions," writes Snyder. Other observers have also questioned the Obama administration's commitment to the region, charging that North Korean denuclearization and regional stability have been put [on the back burner](#).

*"Without a more candid conversation among Beijing, Seoul, and Washington, the latent risk of an acute threat on the peninsula remains uncomfortably high." —Jonathan D. Pollack, Brookings Institute*

### **Looking Forward**

"Everyone who deals with North Korea recognizes [it] as a very unstable actor," Sneider says. However, some experts believe that North Korea's increasingly assertive stance with China and on the world stage also reveals a level of political calculation. "The North Koreans are developing a much more realist approach to their foreign policy," Pinkston says. And though China may be unhappy about North Korea's nuclear brinkmanship, analysts say it will avoid moves that could cause a sudden regime collapse. A January 2008 report by the [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#) and the [U.S. Institute of Peace](#) says [China has its own contingency plans \(PDF\)](#) to dispatch troops to North Korea in case of instability. According to the report, the Chinese army could be sent into North Korea on missions to keep order if unrest triggers broader violence, including attacks on nuclear facilities. But for now, policy failure on the peninsula has dampened hopes for a de-escalation of regional tensions. "Without a more candid conversation among Beijing, Seoul, and Washington, the latent risk of an acute threat on the peninsula remains uncomfortably high," writes Jonathan D. Pollack, director of the John L. Thornton China Center at the Brookings Institute.

## Additional Resources

This [November 2012 report](#) from the Center for Strategic and International Studies discusses Chinese priorities on the North Korean peninsula.

A [2012 Congressional Research Report](#) discusses Kim Jong-il's death and its implications for U.S. policy.

China has long been regarded as North Korea's best friend, but that sense of fraternity appears to be souring, the *New York Times* writes in this [in-depth report](#) from 2013.

VICE's founder took a press trip to North Korea in 2013 and produced this revealing [guide to the country](#).

Victor Cha talks with CFR's Bernard Gwertzman about North Korea's nuclear needs in [this CFR interview](#).

This [CFR Backgrounder](#) examines the power handover of China's Communist Party and its governing challenges.

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