



# NORTH KOREA'S DIVERSIFYING DIPLOMATIC TIES

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*While a fourth nuclear test would appear to have been delayed, North Korea is currently seeking to break out of its economic and political isolation by diversifying its diplomatic ties with Japan and Russia, among others. This policy brief outlines Pyongyang's new diplomatic maneuvers amidst deteriorating relations with China, South Korea, and the United States.*

Just over a month ago, North Korea's threat of a fourth nuclear test heightened tensions on the Korean Peninsula. However, North Korea appears to be delaying any test for the time being. Instead, Pyongyang is seeking to diversify its diplomatic ties in an effort to break out of its isolation. In the last few months, for instance, Pyongyang has appointed new ambassadors to several countries: Spain in January, Laos and Nepal in February, Syria and Cuba in May, and it is set to soon appoint a new ambassador to Sweden. Furthermore, it has recently been making efforts to strengthen diplomatic and economic ties with Japan, Russia, Europe, and Brazil.

## New Diplomatic Moves

**Japan:** North Korea has moved to improve its strained relations with Japan. North Korean and Japanese government officials held talks in Stockholm a few weeks ago. It was reported that during the Stockholm meeting, North Korea agreed to open a new investigation into the fate of Japanese citizens abducted during the Cold War. In response, Japan will lift some financial sanctions against North Korea and provide humanitarian aid. According to the international media, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is scheduled to visit Pyongyang later this year, and the two countries will discuss the possibility of normalizing relations.

**Russia:** Ties between Russia and North Korea are being bolstered. Over the past few months Russia has promised increased trade and development projects. A vote in the Duma on April 18 wrote off nearly \$10 billion in debt held over from the Soviet era. North Korea has further

agreed to lease Pier 3 of Rajin port (a warm-water port) to Russia.

**Europe:** North Korea has been striving to improve relations with European countries since the beginning of this year. 26 of the 28 nations of the European Union have established diplomatic relations with North Korea, and the European Union has been a major donor of humanitarian assistance to North Korea, albeit still maintaining a strong stance against the North Korean nuclear issue. According to informal diplomatic sources, the North Korean delegation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs visited Europe in May and enquired into the possibility of opening a DPRK Mission in Brussels.

**Brazil:** North Korea has extended economic ties with South American countries in recent years. According to data released by the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, North Korea's imports from Brazil increased significantly from only \$2.4 million in 2012 to \$13.4 million in 2013.

## Souring Relations

Pyongyang's diversification and deepening of ties with other countries has come amidst souring relations with its more traditional interlocutors: specifically, relations with South Korea and the United States appear to have reached an impasse, while ties with China have also weakened considerably.

**South Korea:** North Korea has indicated a willingness to create a more conducive atmosphere for improving relations with South Korea since the beginning of 2014. Some



positive steps to reduce tensions on the Korean Peninsula had been taken, namely holding family reunions in February. However, North Korea has since regularly fired short and mid-range missiles, which has created a negative public opinion towards engagement in South Korea. In light of this, the Park Geun-hye government has been less willing to engage with North Korea.

**U.S.:** It seems that North Korea has no expectations of a change in U.S. policy under the Obama administration. Pyongyang has realized that political will in Washington for engagement with Pyongyang is very low. Further, given that the U.S. Congress has taken a tough stance against North Korea's human rights abuses, it remains difficult for the Obama administration to engage with North Korea. In any case, Iran's nuclear program, the Ukrainian issue and the recent Iraqi military conflict are currently more pressing for the Obama administration.

**China:** Whereas the North Korean regime's durability has owed much to China's support, Pyongyang has long feared becoming overly dependent on Beijing. Xi Jinping's relatively "hard" stance towards North Korea after the country's third nuclear test, among other signs of cooling relations, has illuminated the growing distrust between the two countries. As such, China's customary provision of financial support to the DPRK has significantly decreased. On April 24, the Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA) revealed that oil exports (based on Chinese customs data) from China to North Korea stood at "zero" for the first quarter of 2014. While not verified, it is likely that China cut oil supplies to North Korea for a while as a way of exerting pressure on Pyongyang not to conduct a fourth nuclear test.

## China: A Fear Factor?

The current cooling relations between North Korea and China are not only caused by the North Korean third nuclear test and a prospective fourth test, but also by North Korea's intention to decrease China's influence, in particular economically. Over the past two decades, China has pushed North Korea to follow its transition path, which prompts fears that economic reforms following the Chinese model could also bring political risks. This might be a main reason that late last year Kim Jong Un's powerful uncle, Jang Song Thaek, was purged from the regime and immediately

executed; Jang was known to be close to China and to have significant economic interests. Furthermore, according to the NK News, Radio Free Asia reported on June 17 that North Korea imposed restrictions on Chinese traders conducting business in North Korea. Under the new rules, Chinese traders are only allowed to stay for 15 days during one visit per year.

The best option for North Korea's regime survival is to receive generous and financial support through investment and humanitarian aid which could finance Kim Jong Un's leadership without reforming the domestic economy based on a market mechanism. As relations with China, the U.S., and South Korea continue to sour, it therefore makes sense that Pyongyang is seeking to diversify its diplomatic ties so as to obtain economic and diplomatic support from other countries. Therefore, Pyongyang's motives can be traced to obtaining "relief" from its current diplomatic and economic isolation. As such, the North Korean regime is looking to Japan, Russia and Europe, as potential economic donors to, at least somewhat, "replace" China, South Korea, and the U.S. Moreover, in the absence of improved relations with the latter, promoting ties with the aforementioned countries will also serve in part to politically counterbalance China, South Korea, and the U.S.

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