



THE TWO KOREAS' RELATIONS WITH CHINA: VISION AND CHALLENGE

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Abstract

The relationship between China and the two Koreas can be considered as a friendship that is not completely reliable. North Korea and China have been considered strong allies by the outside world, but questions arise nowadays about whether that relationship is based on a true friendship. The relationship between South Korea and China is a somewhat ambiguous one. There exists a complex situation and dilemmas in that trilateral relation. This article examines the current trilateral relations between China and the two Koreas in order to draw the position of each other. For this purpose, we explore three different approaches: China's position toward North Korea and South Korea; the position of the two Koreas toward China and their defence; and the regime survival of North Korea and the political and economic interests of South Korea. The analysis of the relationship between China and the two Koreas is based on the context of a shared history, culture and the rapidly changing international economic and political situation together with the regional security hazards caused by the nuclear weapons essays and missile tests of North Korea.

Keywords: China, South Korea, North Korea, Asian History, security, geopolitics.

Titulo en Castellano: Las relaciones de las dos Coreas con China: Visiones y Desafíos

Resumen

La relación entre China y las dos Coreas puede considerarse como una relación de amistad no del todo fiable. Corea del Norte y China han sido vistos desde el exterior como fuertes aliados, pero hoy en día surgen preguntas sobre si esa relación se basa en una verdadera amistad. La relación entre Corea del Sur y China es un tanto ambigua. Existe una situación compleja y dilemas en esa relación trilateral. Este artículo examina las actuales relaciones trilaterales entre China y las dos Coreas con el fin de explicar la posición existente entre ellas. Para ello, presentamos tres enfoques diferentes: la posición de China hacia Corea del Norte y Corea del Sur; la posición de las dos Coreas hacia China y su defensa; y la supervivencia del régimen de Corea del Norte y los intereses políticos y económicos de Corea del Sur. El análisis de la relación entre China y las dos Coreas tiene en cuenta el contexto de la historia y cultura común, la situación económica y política internacional en un rápido proceso de cambio, junto con los riesgos de seguridad regionales causados por las pruebas de armas nucleares y misiles de Corea del Norte.

Palabras Clave: China, Corea del sur, historia de Asia, seguridad, geopolítica.

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1. Introduction

North Korea's missiles and nuclear tests pose a threat not only to the security of Northeast Asia but also the security of the whole world. Whenever North Korea tests missile and nuclear armament, the world's attention focuses on China. Particularly, the U.S President Donald Trump requested that China persuade North Korea to stop the development of weapons of massive destruction. The Trump administration knows well that China's role is important on the Korean peninsula issue. There is no doubt that there are obvious reasons why China is deeply implicated on the issue of the Korean Peninsula especially with North Korea. We will study these factors and analyse how these features effect the trilateral relations.

The geographical location is one of the most important factors that it often determines its fate and history: China is the closest neighbour to Korea with which it shares a long common border.² In the history of the world, there have always been confrontations amongst neighbouring countries. We have seen in world history. China and the Korean Peninsula are no exception. On the other hand, throughout their history, and still to this day China and Korea have vigorously engaged in exchanges of culture, commerce, and tradition and developed them in both directions. However, inevitably there were conflicts and wars between the two countries. In contemporary history, China's role was important for Korea's independence from Japan after the World War II, but on the other hand, China's intervention in the Korean War was unfortunate, resulting in the division of the Korean Peninsula.³

In the recent international political arena, especially regarding the North Korean issue, China is not comfortable with its ally and does not support North Korea's missile launches and nuclear tests. Yet, it cannot abandon the troublesome neighbour to fend for itself. The diplomatic relationship between China and South Korea, which was established in 1992 following Germany's unification in 1989, has developed a fast economic and cultural cooperation contributing to a political partnership in Asia. Thus, China is playing a political game between the two Koreas for its own sake.

2. Historical and Cultural factors: China's intervention in Korea

Throughout their long history, relations between China and Korea could be defined as close but far neighbours. In contemporary history, China and North Korea on one side, and the U.S. and South Korea on the other side have formed as the two close alliances, respectively. At present time, with the nuclear arms development of the DPRK, the attitude of China toward North Korea is more clearly seen. The world expects China to be more active to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue. There are sufficient factors for which China's role can be considered important.

China and Korea sharing a common border, it was inevitable for them to have conflicts and wars. Ancient Korea possessed a vast territory covering southern Manchuria and the present Korean peninsula. At that time, China considered Korea a formidable adversary in the North-eastern area. Gojoseon,⁴ the first kingdom of Korea, interacted with China during the period of the Jin and the Han dynasty. While China was struggling with other small kingdoms around its territory, Korea and China sometimes formed a temporary alliance to expel the disturbing forces in Manchuria, while other times they confronted each other. These situations

² China and Korea (North Korea) share a 1,420 (880 mile) kilometer long common border that stretches from west to east, the Amnok (Yalu) River, Paektu Mountains, and the Tumen River divide the two countries. Throughout the history, there were conflicts, and wars between China and Korea while ongoing trade, exchanges of culture, and tradition were developed in both directions and continued until the present time.

³ Hwang, Kyung Moo (2010): *A History of Korea*. London, Palgrave McMillian, p.4-10.

⁴ Gojoseon was the first ancient kingdom of Korea. The year of its establishment is unknown, but it lasted until 108 B.C



changed as the Han dynasty became stronger and more powerful and demonstrated its superiority. During the 2nd century BC, the Han dynasty defeated the northern part of the Korean peninsula and installed four commandries in 108 B.C.⁵ It was the first important Chinese military intervention in Korea.

China's second military involvement in the Korean Peninsula occurred during the period of the Three Kingdoms of Korea (Shilla: 57 B.C-668, Goguryeo: 37 B.C-668 and Bakje: 18 B.C-660) when Shilla proposed an alliance with the Tang dynasty to defeat Goguryeo and Bakje and thus unify the Three Kingdoms under Shilla's authority. Tang, then allied with Silla, defeated Bakje in 660 and Goguryeo in 668. Once Goguryeo and Bakje were conquered, China tried to overthrow Shilla as well; nonetheless, Shilla defeted the ambition of the Tang dynasty with the remnant forces of Baekje and Goguryeo and finally unified the three kingdoms.⁶

Ever since, there have been continuous political confrontations and interventions from the part of China. China's ill-fated intervention in Korean politics during the Joseon dynasty occurred in late 19th century when there were conflicts between the conservative and progressives in the last government of the Korean dynasty. The Joseon government was struggling to resolve the dispute between China-supported conservatives and Japan-backed progressists, but the conflict intensified and eventually the political and economic rivalry between the two over Korea led to the Chinese Japanese War (August 1, 1894-17 April 1895). China had been debilitated after fighting two Opium Wars against the British in 1839 and 1856, and another war against the French in 1885. Japan did not hesitate to seize the opportunity to take over China's place to control Korea. Japan defeated China without much trouble and the subsequent Shimonoseki Treaty consolidated Japan's exclusive influence on Korea. China's quasi close relations with Korea had to wait until Korea was liberated from Japan in 1945 and North Korea became a firm ally of China.⁷

China's third unfortunate intervention took place during the Korean War (1950-1953).⁸ China had to pay a high price from this intervention: between 180,000 and 400,000 Chinese lives. The Chinese military intervention only reconfirmed the division of the Korean Peninsula previously drawn by the allied forces of USSR and the United States. The Korean War lasted three years without producing a unification of the peninsula, but China, North Korea and the United States signed the Armistice Agreement in 1953.⁹ In 1961, China and North Korea signed the Sino-North Korean Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty, whereby China pledged to render military and other assistance to its ally against any outside attack. This treaty was extended twice, in 1981 and 2001, with validity until 2021.¹⁰ China's support of Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un has been vital to North Korea's development. China provided extensive assistance to North Korea to support its reconstruction through this treaty.

⁵ Pai, Hyung II: "Culture Contact and Culture Change: The Korean Peninsula and Its Relations with the Han Dynasty Commandery of Lelang," *World Archaeology*, Vol. 23, nº 3, 1992, p. 306-319. In 75 B.C three of the four commandries were dissolved, while the last commandry Naknang persisted nearly four centuries until 313.

⁶ Yi, Ki-baek (1984): *A New History of Korea*. Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, p. 67-75

⁷ Brook, Timothy; Tadashi Bob Wakabayashi (eds), (2000): *Opium Regimes: China, Britain, and Japan, 1839-1952*, University of California Press, p.102-165.

⁸ China for its part, entered the Korean War (1950-1953) with a total of 2.97 million soldiers that fought combined with North Korean forces. Mao Zedong's son died in combat in that war.

⁹ South Korea was against the Armistice Agreement and did not sign it.

¹⁰ Ankit Panda. "China and North Korea Have a Mutual Defense Treaty, But When Would It Apply?", *The Diplomat*, 14 August 2017, at <https://thediplomat.com/2017/08/china-and-north-korea-have-a-mutual-defense-treaty-but-when-would-it-apply/>

"China 'not obliged to defend North Korea from an attack", *The Straits Times*, 14 April 2017, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/china-not-obliged-to-defend-north-korea-from-an-attack>



The denomination of “blood allies” originated from this military alliance between China and North Korea. While China and North Korea maintained their strong alliance under the banner of the communist ideology, the South Korea, and United States relations began in 1948, when the United States helped to establish the Republic of Korea (South Korea) and fought alongside them in the UN forces of the Korean War. Similar to the Sino-North Korean Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty, the United States and South Korea signed the 1953 the Mutual Defense Treaty.¹¹ Under this agreement, U.S. military forces have maintained a continuous presence on the Korean peninsula and South Korea has received important financial aid which helped it to achieve great economic, and military growth. There were no diplomatic relations between China and South Korea until 1992 when both countries established them following the fall of Berlin Wall in 1989.

Regarding cultural factors: neighbouring countries are not only often prone to be engaged in wars and confrontations, but they are also well positioned to have intense cultural exchanges. Contact between Korea and China goes back to the period of prehistory. Since the Neolithic period, Korean ethnic groups lived in Manchuria, Siberia, China, and the Korean peninsula. Trade developed during the Bronze and Iron Ages. Raw materials and manufactured goods were exchanged in both directions for centuries thereafter. In addition to traders, beginning with the 4th-century those escaping from political conflicts of the *Warring States period*¹² in China came to Korea as migrants. Additionally, also, a regular stream of diplomats, monks, and scholars travelled in both directions, so the Chinese culture spread across the Korean peninsula. Writing, religion, ceramics, coinage, agricultural practices, sculpture, and architecture were some of the elements ancient Korea absorbed from China and later, adding its own original identity, developed into the unique Korean culture.¹³ Immigration was relatively free because borders were not completely blocked as they are nowadays; hence cultural circulation was active. After the territory of Korea in Manchuria, part of the Goguryeo (37a.C-668) and Balhae dynasty (689-926) were absorbed by China, Korean ethnic minorities continued living there maintaining their Korean language and culture. Also, many Koreans immigrated to China throughout history and especially during the Japanese occupation of Korea in the early 20th century. In the present day, a minority of around two million Koreans live in China.¹⁴ The existence of this Chinese cultural legacy in Korea and the Korean ethnic group in China is another reason why China disagrees with the imposition of harsh international sanctions on North Korea.

3. China’s relations with the two Koreas in the current international political situation

As previously mentioned, when North Korea announced that it was developing a nuclear program, most countries of the world expected China to do more to halt North Korea’s ambitions. The Six-Party talks were established to resolve the problem and China was

¹¹ The Mutual Defense Treaty is a treaty between South Korea and the United States signed on 1 October 1953, two months after the signing of the Korean Armistice Agreement which brought a halt to the fighting in the Korean War. The agreement pledges the two countries to provide mutual aid if either faced an external armed attack and, allows the United States to station military forces in South Korea in consultation with the South Korean government.

¹² The Warring States Period (475–221 BC) was an era of division in ancient China. Various states were at war before the Qin state conquered them all, and China was reunited under the Qin Dynasty.

¹³ Yi, *op. cit.*, p. 67-75

¹⁴ Chinese Koreans live mainly in the Korean Autonomous Prefecture of Yanbian in the Jilin Province near North Korea.



unquestionably one of the principal actors of these negotiations.¹⁵ The talks were hosted in Beijing and chaired by China.

China tried to lead the Six-party talks through negotiations with the participant countries in order to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue; therefore, it has demonstrated its role as the coordinator and negotiator. This seemed possible because China had relatively good political relations with all the other participants at that time, and especially with North Korea (DPRK). The problem was that the close relations of China with DPRK, and the Chinese intention of maintaining positive political interactions between her and the United States, at the same time appeared to be complicated factors. These contrary aspects have limited China's influence on both North Korea and the United States. It is because China could play a significant role only on certain topics on the Six-party talks negotiations but, in the fundamental issues such as verification and complete close down of North Korea's nuclear weapons program, it could not have sufficient leverage to push the parties to reach an ultimate procedure.

In the meantime, North Korea ignoring the China's advice, continued nuclear arms development and on May 25, 2009 conducted a second nuclear test. As it could be expected, the international community strongly condemned this action and the Chinese government was also firmly opposed to it and urged North Korea to stop the tests and return to the Six-Party Talks. Previously, China had issued a similar statement in response to Pyongyang's first nuclear test in 2006 and strongly condemned it. But this time, China was more upset because Pyongyang informed China of the test less than 30 minutes before it took place and repeatedly disregarded China's demands to denuclearize.¹⁶

Upon the North Korea's second nuclear test, the U.S and Japan pushed China to put pressure on North Korea because China is its closest ally, its largest trading partner and provides North Korea most of its fuel and food aid. However, although China oppose and condemn North Korea's nuclear arms tests its real position was constrained by two main factors: first, it believes the nuclear crisis is mainly an issue between the U.S and North Korea; and second, it wants to avoid an abrupt collapse of the Kim's regime because such a collapse could create a massive flow of refugees into China and such an endangered geopolitical situation could result in a unified peninsula allied with the United States and American troops deployed close to the border with China. Consequently, despite an initial tough posture against North Korea, China later softened its stance regarding the test, calling on "all parties concerned to respond in a cool-headed and appropriate manner and persist in seeking a peaceful solution through consultation and dialogue."¹⁷ However, in 2009 North Korea decided to no longer participate in the Six-Party process. In subsequent years other participants, notably China, have called insistently for a resumption of the process of Six-Party Talks without success. China's dilemma was that without abandoning North Korea it would have to draw a resolution to content all the other participants which was not feasible.¹⁸

¹⁵ The six-party talks aimed to find a peaceful resolution to the security concerns as a result of the North Korean nuclear weapons program and a series of multilateral negotiations held intermittently since 2003. The member states were: two Koreas, The United States, China, Japan and Russia.

¹⁶ Hui Zhang: "The North Korean Nuclear Test: The Chinese Reaction", *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 2 June 2009.

¹⁷ Marquina Antonio: "Las pretensiones nucleares de la República Popular Democrática de Corea y la aproximación de la República Popular China", *Comentarios UNISCI*, nº 124 (Unidad de Investigación sobre Seguridad y Cooperación), 18 September 2017, p.1-5. He emphasizes the role of the Central Military Commission in the adoption of a weak position, not seriously pushing North Korea to denuclearization.

¹⁸ Chu Shulong & Lin Xinzhu: "The Six Party Talks: A Chinese Perspective", *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 32, nº 4, 2008, Special issue on North Korea and Regional Security, p. 29-43.



4. China and North Korea

After the Six-party Talks stalled in April 14, 2009 as North Korea declared withdrawal from them and in sight of the North Korea's continuous nuclear tests, China supported UNSC Resolutions and sanctions on DPRK at least in paper. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) imposed sanctions on DPRK since 2006 up to 2017 with the following Resolutions: 1718, 1874, 2087, 2094, 2270, 2321, 2371, 2375, and 2397 aimed at forcing the dismantlement of the nuclear program of the country and in order to maintaining peace in the region. China agreed reluctantly on those resolutions.

Taking into consideration the fact that China is North Korea's largest trading partner, if China truly puts more pressure on North Korea, this might push North Korea back to the negotiating table. As sanctions from the international community against the DPRK were implemented, North Korea's dependence on China appears to have increased. Contrary to the U.N. Resolutions on economic sanctions against North Korea, China-North Korea trade has been increasing. According to the statistics of the International Trade Center of the World Trade Organization (WTO), the trade volume in 2016 between China and North Korea amounted to 5.51 billion USD, representing approximately 91.5% (previously around 70%) of North Korea's total trade volume.¹⁹ In view of the situation, U.S. President Trump compelled China to take action to restrain North Korea's arms development with Resolutions 2371 and 2375 of the UN Security Council, in 2017.²⁰ Nevertheless, trade between China and North Korea has actually increased in 2017 and North Korea's Foreign Trade reliance on China reached a record high.²¹

According to a report from the Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency, China accounted for 95.8 per cent of the total foreign trade in North Korea in 2018 – up by 1 percentage point from the previous year – with 80.2 % of exports and 97.2 % of imports.²² There are less countries involved in trade with North Korea due to the U.N. resolutions and this situation has drawn North Korea to become more dependent on China. Overall, Chinese economic sanctions over North Korea have not been effective and the UNSC sanctions did not have sufficient impact on North Korea as China did not implement the sanctions seriously.

At this point, we can perceive that China plays with two faces. From the Chinese security point of view, the stability and the avoidance of war on the Korean peninsula are its primary interests so that it can pursue economic development without conflict on its border. In terms of China's security, North Korea's collapse would destroy China's strategic buffer zone with South Korea, where around 28,500 U.S. troops, and marines are stationed. Another huge worry for China is that North Korean refugees would flood massively into China, if the DPRK regime collapses. Chaos on its border is a real worry for China: hundreds of thousands of refugees will get into China's economically weak northeast region.²³ Therefore, the support to

¹⁹ Boydston, Kent: "North Korea's Trade and the KOTRA Report," Peterson Institute for International Economics (PIIE), 2017, p.1-5. Also, Zhao Suisheng (1997), "The Sino-Japanese War (1894-1985)" in *Power Competition in East Asia*. New York, St. Martin's Press, p. 45-50.

²⁰ With these Resolutions 2371 and 2375 of the UN Security Council, exports of seafood, coal and textiles from North Korea were prohibited.

²¹ Although China is still North Korea's most import trade partner North Korea's trade foreign trade volume has fallen below US\$3 billion for the first time since Kim Jong-un took power in 2011. It was down by 48.8 per cent from 2017 to US\$2.84 billion.

²² Lee Jeong-ho: "North Korean trade with biggest partner China dives 48 per cent amid sanctions." *South China Morning Post*, 19 July 2019, at <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3019348/north-korean-trade-biggest-partner-china-dives-48-cent-amid>

¹⁰ Ever since the PRC and the DPRK exchanged diplomatic recognition on 6 October 1949, they became firm allies based on socialism and both consider the USA a common adversary.

²³ Skylar, Oriana Mastro: "China Won't Rescue North Korea", *Foreign Affairs* (February 2018), p.1-5.



North Korea, considering the American military presence in the region is pragmatic, and beneficial for its economy. Also supporting an ally is reinforced by an ideological justification.

In view of such geopolitical and security relations, China's position was demonstrated clearly once again on the side of North Korea when the *Cheonan navy vessel* and *Yeonpyong island incidents* occurred in 2010. The sinking of the *Cheonan*²⁴ in late March by a North Korean torpedo attack intensified the tension between the two Koreas and rebuked hopes for the resumption of the Six-Party Talks.²⁵

South Korea was upset by the handling of the incident by China. China maintained its position opposing any condemnation of and tough measures against North Korea and urged South Korea to refrain from escalating the tension without concrete evidence as that could disrupt its effort to resume the talks although the investigation concluded that a North Korean torpedo had sunk the ship. In response to the attitude of China, South Korea made it clear that it would not return to the talks until the UN Security Council issued a formal condemnation of Pyongyang for its provocation. As the result, disputes over the *Cheonan* incident have created a sort of a new Cold War divide set as rivals South Korea, the US, and Japan against China, Russia, and North Korea.²⁶

China's decision to protect North Korea reflects not only a careful policy calculation based on self-interest, but also Beijing's desire to maintain the regional security balance on a strong China-North Korea relationship. Failure to support North Korea could lead to its collapse which could bring undesirable consequences for China as mentioned above. A necessary matter to add is that China is very much concerned about the economy of its north-eastern provinces bordering North Korea. The integration of North Korea's economy and China's north-eastern provinces, particularly the provinces of Liaoning and Jilin where major Korean ethnic group live, means that northeast China will pay a significant price if North Korea breaks down. Economic stability in these provinces, an industrial region known informally as Manchuria, is a key concern for Beijing. Having invested on trade with North Korea as a central part of their development plan these northern provinces might suffer significant economic effects from further instability in North Korea.²⁷

Eight months after the *Cheonan* incident, North Korea again attacked, on 23 November 2010, *Yeonpyeong Island* where there were South Korean forces stationed. Following a South Korean artillery exercise in waters in the south, North Korean forces fired around 170 artillery shells and rockets at *Yeonpyeong island*, hitting both military and civilians, killing four South Koreans and injuring 19.²⁸ The international community had expected that China would then adopt a tough posture toward North Korea to press it to refrain from further attacks, but China failed to do so. After these two incidents, the favourable attitude of South Koreans towards China since the diplomatic normalization turned rather negative.

²⁴ Cheonan sinking occurred on 26 March 2010, when Cheonan, a Pohang-class corvette of the Republic of Korea Navy, carrying 104 personnel, sank off the country's west coast near Baengnyeong Island in the Yellow Sea, killing 46 seamen.

²⁵ The Six-Party Talks were significant because it was the only forum where North Korea was participating in negotiations concerning its denuclearization commitments. However, there was growing frustration and doubt about the talks' effectiveness since North Korea's second nuclear test that took place the previous year and the Cheonan incident.

²⁶ Ji-young Lee: "The U.S.-ROK Alliance and China: Beyond the Sinking of the Cheonan", *Asia Pacific Bulletin*, nº 62. 28 May 2010. And Drew Thompson: "China's Cheonan Dilemma", *Foreign Policy*, 7 June 2010, at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/06/07/chinas-cheonan-dilemma/>

²⁷ About half of the Chinese investors in North Korean joint ventures come from just these two provinces.

²⁸ Song Sang-ho: "N.K. artillery strikes S. Korean island", *Korea Herald*, 23 November 2010, at <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20101123001048>



In view of China's stance with North Korea, the U.S political analyst on the Korean Peninsula Victor Cha underlined that "China cannot afford to turn away from North Korea. China knows that if North Korea collapses, US-backed South Korea will border China and pose a threat".²⁹ Hence, economic exchanges and close relationship, with high-level State trips continue.³⁰ It is true that there were ups and downs in the relations between China and North Korea since Kim Jung-un inherited power from his late father Kim Jong-il in large part due to the continuous missile launches and nuclear arms experiments.³¹

In a brief review of the relationship of leaders of the two allies, it is also telling that the last visit of North Korean leader Kim Jong Il to China was in 2010. Since then, the relations between both countries have deteriorated because the weapons tests discredited Kim Jung-un and China has backed the US in voting for UN sanctions against Pyongyang. Kim Jung-un has also provoked China, being responsible of his uncle and his elder brother death which he ordered. In addition, the weapons tests showed the evidence that Kim Jung-un has been less willing to listen to China than his father. The relationship was one of distrust and even certain animosity during almost the past nine years between the two formal allies. A former U.S ambassador stated Xi's discredit of Kim as follow: "The most derogatory expression I've ever heard President Xi Jinping use was his description of Kim Jong-un," Mr Baucus said. "He just does not like that man at all." ³²

But in recent years, President Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-un took steps to improve bilateral relations. North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's first trip outside of North Korean territory since taking power officially in 2011 was to China and Xi Jinping was the first international leader he met with. Later, Kim and Xi held a summit meeting in Beijing from 25 to 28 March 2018.³³

Images appeared in mass media of Chinese president Xi Jinping meeting North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in Beijing, seemed to a father chastising an errant son. The visit between Kim and Xi was rather stunning considering the relationship that had been evidently frosty in past years.³⁴

Kim made his second trip to Dalian, China and held a meeting with Xi on 7-8 May 2018. It was before the Summit between Kim and U.S. President Trump on 10-12 June. Kim's visit to China was a signal that he was seeking Xi's views on the summit as well as a demonstration to the US of North Korea's historically strong ties with China.³⁵ On the other hand, China's willingness to exert influence on the Korean Peninsula issue was well presented in his

²⁹ Lim, Andy & Cha, Victor: Dataset: "China-North Korea High Level Visits Since 1953", Analysis, *Foreign Affairs*, March 2017, p.1-10.

³⁰ Senior C.C Party member Li Yunshan's visit to attend the seventieth anniversary of North Korea's ruling party in Oct. 2015. North Korea Workers' Party Politburo member Ri Su-yong's trip to Beijing in June 2016. On February 28th, 2017, North Korea's Vice Foreign Minister Ri Kil-song arrived in Beijing for talks with Chinese officials.

³¹ Kim Jong-un ordered the killing of his elder brother and Jang Song Thaek, the uncle of the two half-brothers because he was aware that Jang and his brother were in contact with China. The elder brother was assumed to have financial backing and implicit support from China. He seemed China's favourite.

³² Sharman Jon: "North Korea: China's Xi Jinping 'does not like Kim Jong-un at all' but will tolerate him, says former US ambassador", *Independent*, 30 August 2017, at <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/north-korea-china-xi-jinping-kim-jong-un-tolerate-us-ambassador-max-baucus-beijing-stability-a7919556.html>

³³ Lee Steven Myers & Jane Perlez: "Kim Jong-un Met with Xi Jinping in Secret Beijing Visit," *New York Times*, March 27, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/27/world/asia/kim-jong-un-china-north-korea.html>

³⁴ Charles Clover, "Xi Jinping adopts fatherly tone with wayward Kim Jong Un", *Financial Times*, 28 March 2018, at <https://www.ft.com/content/3a354fe0-3253-11e8-ac48-10c6fdc22f03>

³⁵ Kim told the Chinese leader that he was open to dialogue with the United States, including a potential summit meeting with President Trump, and was committed to the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, according to an account published by China's news agency Xinhua.



welcoming address to the Chairman Kim Jong-un. “China is willing to continue to work with all relevant parties and to play an active role in comprehensively advancing the process of peaceful resolution of the peninsula issue through dialogue, and realising long-term peace and stability in the region,” Xi said.³⁶ After one month or so, Kim Jong-un made a third trip to China on 19-20 June, one week after the Singapore Summit with Trump, apparently seeking advice from Xi about the future, mutually beneficial negotiation strategy.³⁷

China has been successful in keeping North Korea close by and leveraging the relationship to achieve its own primary goals beyond denuclearization. Specifically, the meetings in 2018 allowed China to establish its influence behind the scenes of Trump-Kim Jong-un Summit, shaping its image on the global stage solidifying progress in its broader goals for the future of the peninsula and U.S.-China relations. China implicitly demonstrated its intentions in several ways: first, the broader geopolitical competition with the United States was a central consideration for the meetings with Kim. Xi meant to clearly signal to the United States that China continues to play the pivotal role in shaping Kim. Secondly, to enhance China as a regional power, the Chinese leader most likely worked to promote an image of unity with North Korea. Although there were discomforts due to the nuclear issue it tried to demonstrate the bilateral relationship was rather strong. Lastly, China generating peace making regional power image likely to begin to push for a peace treaty talks that would undermine the legitimacy of a continued U.S. presence on the peninsula. Thus, solidify progress towards a reduced U.S. military presence on the peninsula.³⁸

All these intentions of China complicated by Trump’s trade war with China. Kim Jong-un made his 4th visit to China on 7-10 January 2019, before the upcoming Trump-Kim second summit in Hanoi. The visit also coincided with the negotiating team from the United States sent to mitigate the trade dispute with China. Kim’s intention was to ease the Chinese sanctions which are a critical component of the US ‘maximum pressure and engagement’ strategy in the process of negotiating and implementing the denuclearisation and peace mechanisms. Also, he may have wanted to prevent China from moving away from North Korea and prepare for the US-North Korean talks by strengthening the common front as long-time allies. But it seems like the Korean proverb, “sleep on the same bed, but dreams are different.”

To ease the trade war with the USA, China chose to maintain the sanctions on North Korea. Thus, the remittance to North Korea of its goods through the frontier has been restricted and trade between the two nations has been reduced considerably. China’s trade with North Korea fell 51.2 percent to \$2.43 billion in 2018. Imports from North Korea fell 87.7 percent to \$213.15 million, while exports to North Korea dropped 31.7 percent to \$2.22 billion. China’s total trade with North Korea was valued at \$228.89 million in December, down from \$247.75 million the previous month. Exports to North Korea in December were \$207.43 million, down from \$227.70 million the preceding month.³⁹ China had clear reasons for tying nuclear and trade diplomacy together. China tried to use its leverage over North Korea to achieve valuable concession in trade talks with the United States. In other words, China was committed to gaining trading flexibility from Washington in exchange for more pressure on Pyongyang.

³⁶ Haas Benjamin: “Kim Jong-un meets Xi Jinping in second surprise visit to China”, *The Guardian*, 8 May 2018 at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/08/kim-jong-un-meets-xi-jinping-in-second-surprise-visit-to-china>

³⁷ After the 1st Summit between Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un, China suggested sanctions relief for North Korea.

³⁸ Swaine Michael D. “China’s Role in North Korea Nuclear and Peace Negotiations,” United States Institute of Peace (USIP), 6 May 2019.

³⁹ Kim. Coghill: “China’s trade with North Korea falls 51% in 2018”, *Reuters*, 23 January 2019, at <https://uk.reuters.com/article/china-economy-trade-northkorea/chinas-trade-with-north-korea-falls-51-pct-in-2018-idUKB9N1ZF003>



After the 2nd Summit between Donald Trump and Kim Jong-Un in February 27-28, 2019, new sanctions were imposed.⁴⁰

In short, China was in a dilemma between the support to its long-time ally, North Korea or to the North Korean policies of the rival U.S. Xi appears to be a regional leader primary and a manager of the world leader. He stated in his first summit with Kim in march 2018 that China was willing to continue working with all relevant parties and play an active role in comprehensively advancing the process of peaceful resolution of the peninsula issue through dialogue for the long-term peace and stability in the region.⁴¹ Apart from its main concern to protect the economic development of the country, the central Chinese ambition is to become primarily the dominant military, as well as economic power in the region. It should be reminded the fact that China is one of the original signatories of the Armistice agreement after the Korea War. It does not want to be excluded from any talks that might discuss critical issues such as the establishment of a Korean peace regime and US military forces in South Korea. Thus, China does not want any major conflict at its border that could delay its ambition to reach an economic and security power status equivalent to that of the U.S. For China, the U.S. is always the top geostrategic concern and the top threat, not North Korea.

5. China and South Korea (Republic of Korea: ROK)

Although Korea and China have been exchanging bilaterally for two thousand years due to their geographical proximity and cultural similarities, China and South Korea did not set up diplomatic relations after the establishment of the South Korean government in 1948⁴² and when Mao Zedong of communist China won the victory over the nationalist China in 1949. From that time on the two countries became hostile to each other.

In 1950, the Korean War broke out, and the People's Republic of China fought on the side of North Korea. In 1953, North Korea, China and the U.S. signed an Armistice over South Korea's opposition. During several decades, the "South Korean" factor was put aside while close relations between North Korea and China was dominating. Such a long-time friendship can be explained not only by the nature of the Cold War itself but also by the personal ties between the leaders of both countries.⁴³

As a result, South Korea-China bilateral relations continued irreconcilable for several decades. However, on July 7, 1988, there was a turning point in Korean diplomacy during the 88 Seoul Olympic Games. Korean President Roh Te-woo declared that South Korea will improve relations with communist countries including North Korea. It was the so-called "Northern diplomacy."⁴⁴ After the fall of the Berlin Wall, in November 10, 1989, the United States and the Soviet Union declared the end of the Cold War in December 1989 at the Malta

⁴⁰ Ankit. Panda, "Trump's North Korean Blunder: The president is finally reckoning with the role of sanctions in diplomacy", *The Atlantic*, 26 March 2019.

⁴¹ China is Pyongyang's largest trading partner accounting for 90 percent of North Korea's international trade volume since 2000, according to a recent report from the Korea Development Institute. This is the reason why Trump's "maximum pressure" North Korea policy was persuading China to implement U.N. sanctions against Pyongyang. China has been reluctant to accept the U.S. pressure.

⁴² Korea got independence from Japan after the World War II in 1945 and established the Republic of Korea in 15 August 1948. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) was established in 9 September 1948 and it helped the Chinese communists in their conflict against the Chinese National Government.

⁴³ Kim Ilpyong & Lee Hong Pyo (1993): "China, Russia and the Two Koreas" in *Korea and China in a New World: Beyond Normalization*, Seoul, Sejong Institute, p.64-72

⁴⁴ Northern Diplomacy refers to especially Soviet Union and China.



Conference. Influenced by the international atmosphere, Korea-China diplomatic relations also began to improve, and they started to re-establish their relations.⁴⁵

As the first step, in 1990, Korea and China set up trade representatives on both sides to open exchanges with some consular work. In the fall of 1991, a Korea-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting was held. As the result, diplomatic relations between the People's Republic of China and South Korea were formally established on August 24, 1992.⁴⁶ At the end of the Cold War, China also sought a policy based on pragmatism and economic reform and it very much needed trade exchanges with South Korea as well as Korea's economic development experience. On the other hand, South Korea also welcomed the opportunities that the huge China market offered.⁴⁷ In addition, although the Korean Peninsula was divided by ideology, at present time in a rapidly changing international political arena, China should not be left permanently as a sole ally of North Korea. With the end of Cold War, and in the new international community it is observed that there is neither permanent alliance nor eternal adversary.

Once the diplomatic relations were established between China and South Korea, rapid improvements in the political, economic and cultural areas took place. In September of 1992, the President of Korea visited China and in November 1995, Chinese President Jiang Zemin visited Korea. The progress in relations between Korea and China expanded to many different fields. At the time of the 25 years diplomatic relations anniversary in 2017, Bilateral trade between South Korea and China amounted to \$ 240 billion from \$ 6.4 billion in 1992. It was enlarged about 40 times. China was Korea's fifth largest trading partner in 1992 but in 2003, it overpassed Japan and it beat the U.S the following year becoming Korea's first trading partner and its first investor country. Human exchanges between China and Korea have also increased about 80 times during this period.⁴⁸

Without a doubt, South Korea's interactions with China have been increasing and significant yet, bilateral frictions such as history controversy, territorial dispute, differences between the leaders of the two governments, etc. were also inevitable; this is named "soft clashes" by Min Ye.⁴⁹

The clash over Goguryeo historiography provides a insightful example of how easily the cooperative relationship can be suddenly disturbed. The Goguryeo controversies are disputes between China and Korea (North and South) on the history of Goguryeo, an ancient kingdom (37 BC – 668 AD) that had occupied territories that are now recognized as Manchuria in northern China and the Korean Peninsula. The Goguryeo issue is of great historical importance to Korea, being one of the kingdoms (along with Silla and Baekche) that were unified and formed the Goryeo dynasty (918–1392AD). For Koreans, Goguryeo is intrinsically linked to nationhood and identity formation. China, in contrast, claims that Goguryeo was but one territory that formed part of the multicultural Chinese civilizational sphere and tries to incorporate Goguryeo into Chinese local history. The attitude of the Chinese government over

⁴⁵ Yoo Yong-Tae (2013): "History and Reality of Korea-China Relations," A Study on the Modern Chinese Society of History 2. Mutual Perceptions of Modern Diplomacy, Hanul Publishing Co. p.190-220.

(유용태. 한중관계의 역사와 현실(중국 근현대사학회 연구총서 2. 근대외교 상호인식)

⁴⁶ Hong Liu: "The Sino-South Korean Normalization: A Triangular Explanation", *Asian Survey*, Vol. 33, nº 11, (Nov. 1993), p. 1083-1094.

⁴⁷ The Korea-China diplomatic negotiations did not last long. Negotiations began in 24 April 1992, in Beijing, and the agreement was signed about four months later in August of that year.

⁴⁸ Lee Sang-wan: "Cooperation System and Construction plan research between Korea and China Local Government," Working paper from the Ministry of Public Administration and Security, Seoul Korea. (한국과 중국 지방정부간의 협력 체계 구축방안 연구), February 2019.

⁴⁹ These clashes are usually not considered as essential in international relations and, correspondingly, have drawn little academic attention nevertheless, these soft clashes have gradually grown into a critical dimension of current Sino-South Korean relations.



the Goguryeo issue increased as sinophobia in South Korea and linked to South Korea's security strategy to become more pro-American and anti-China.⁵⁰

Human rights concerns have also emerged large in generating negative perceptions of China in South Korea. In several occasions since 2000, China extradited “refugees” to North Korea. This was done without any assurance of their safety upon returning, even though the deportees would surely be harshly punished or even executed.⁵¹

Under these circumstances with the inauguration in 2008 of the Lee Myung-bak government, a conservative, different from the previous leftist governments of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, its priority of the external relations has been readjusted to enhance the Korea-US alliance. In this conservative government, China's unconditional defense of North Korea demonstrated after the *Cheonan* sinking and *Yeonpyeong* shelling justified its alliance with the U.S. Beyond these incidents, there were also growing concerns in South Korea regarding China as a source of non-traditional security threat. Particularly in recent years, growing cyberattacks and hacking attempts have been traced to perpetrators residing in China. Furthermore, after the nuclear fiasco in Fukushima, Japan, growing concern is also discernible as to the safety of several dozen nuclear power plants currently operating or under construction in China.⁵²

During the Lee Myung-bak administration, if South Korea-U.S. relations were seen to be at its peak, South Korea-China relations were at its lowest. Although the mutual good feelings were to be repaired between President Park Geun-hye and Chinese President Xi Jinping at the time, the South Korea-China relationship was at rock bottom, it has to be passed to the next government as the President Park was impeached and removed from the Presidency in 2017.⁵³

In the field of international political context, it should not be discarded the fact that China considers South Korea is an ally of the U.S., its rival. In this logic, the China-South Korea bilateral relations are still subject to external influences, the most conspicuous of them is the tense relationship between the United States and China. In other words, the relationship between China and South Korea can be described as an incomplete and unstable partnership. China grew at a frightening pace and became the world's second largest economy and is the most powerful nation in Asia. It has a strong influence on political and security issues in the region. South Korea might hope that China, a world power, friendly neighbour of South Korea would lead North Korea to reform and openness what in turn, would create a friendly environment for the reunification of the peninsula. However, this proved to be a naïve South Korea's daydreaming.

The escalating competition between China and the United States leaves South Korea little room to manoeuvre, and this was clearly demonstrated by the South Korea's decision over the THAAD system. After the agreement between South Korea and the U.S. government to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) in South Korea in July 2016, the relationship between South Korea and China suffered a crisis and became tense. At the time

⁵⁰ Min Ye (2017): *China-South Korea Relations in the New Era: "Soft" Clashes in China-South Korea Relations*, New York, Lexington Books, p. 71-93.

⁵¹ Lankov Andrei, “North Korean Refugees in Northeast China”, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 44, nº 6, November/December 2004, pp. 856-873, and *Dong-A Ilbo*, 13 and 18 October 1999 and 18 June 2002; *Chosun Ilbo*, 27 January 2000, and 24 June 2002.

⁵² Grow Brian and Hosenball Mark: “Special report: In cyberspy vs. cyberspy, China has the edge”, *Reuters*, 14 April 2011; *Chosun Ilbo*, 13 July 2011.

⁵³ The court upheld the impeachment in a unanimous 8–0 decision on 10 March 2017, removing Park from office. The presidential election was held on 9 May 2017, and Moon Jae-in, leftist and former leader of the Democratic Party, was elected as Park's successor.



when North Korea is developing nuclear weapons and missiles faster than expected, the deployment of the THAAD was a purely defensive system that South Korea had no choice but to implement.⁵⁴

In fact, China's anger over THAAD has less to do with the missiles than with the sophisticated radar capabilities included in the system. These radars could be used to track China's own missile systems, potentially giving the United States a major advantage in any future conflict with China. Beijing is concerned that the United States is hoping to use both South Korea and Japan to contain China in the future.⁵⁵

Following the anti-missile dispute, China drastically adopted retaliation measures against South Korea. China's decision to boycott South Korea's tourism industry deteriorated strongly the business environment in areas such as tourism entertainment, cosmetics manufacturing, export companies, and duty-free shops in Korea. China had limited travel to Korea therefore most China's large travel agencies took down service offerings such as visa applications for group travel. In addition, Korean companies faced harsh difficulties as China took measures to strengthen import regulations and non-tariff barriers. In February 2017 the Small and Medium Business Association of Korea surveyed 300 small and medium-sized exporters and found that 26 % had experience protectionism in China after the announcement of the THAAD deployment.⁵⁶ There were also restrictions on popular Korean dramas, movies and TV shows although the Chinese public has voiced their dissatisfaction. As the result of China's retaliatory protection and trade measures, Korea-China relations have been rapidly cooling, and as mentioned, South Korea's domestic exporters are suffering considerable damage.

In view of this situation, South Korean president Moon Jae-in has tried hard to reconcile with Beijing and slowly the two countries agreed to normalize relations. Moon paid his first state visit to China, in December 2017 and pledged a "new era" in bilateral relations. The two leaders met again during the summit of the Group of 20 (G20) in June 2019 in the Japanese city of Osaka and agreed to further elevate bilateral relations with win-win cooperation and together safeguard multilateralism, free trade and an open world economy. This reset of relations helped out the way for the 2019 China-South Korea strategic dialogue.⁵⁷ While China's retaliatory economic measures against South Korea in 2017 did not reverse Seoul's decision to deploy THAAD, the U.S. did not help its ally but it appears to be using the South Korea-US alliance to build its goal of containing China.

At this point, it is essential to be noted that a paradox occurs in Sino-US relations. The relationship between China and the US is deeply dependent on economic interdependence, whereas on the political and military aspects there is an increasing competition and the risk of

⁵⁴ THAAD is one of the key elements in the US missile defense (MD) system. It means 'high altitude missile defense system'. Short-range and medium-range ballistic missiles with a range of 3000km or less are intercepted at altitudes of 40 ~ 150km and are deployed to defend military troops, equipment, population centers, and core facilities. It is a product of Lockheed Martin, the largest defense company in the United States.

⁵⁵ Taylor Adam: "Why China is so mad about THAAD, a missile defense system aimed at deterring North Korea?", *Washington Post*, 7 March 2017 at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/03/07/why-china-is-so-mad-about-thaad-a-missile-defense-system-aimed-at-deterring-north-korea/>

⁵⁶ Lim, Andy & Cha, Victor: Dataset: "China-North Korea High Level Visits Since 1953," Analysis, *Foreign Affairs* (March 2017), p.1-10.

⁵⁷ Rinna Anthony V: "Containing China through the South Korea/US alliance", *East Asia Forum*, 21 November 2019 at <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/11/21/containing-china-through-the-south-korea-us-alliance/>. South Korea and China held high/level defense talks for the first time in five years on 21 October 2019 and agreed to make joint efforts for the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. The annual dialogue, launched in 2011, had been suspended due to South Korea's decision to host the THAAD.



conflict. So far, the US policy toward China in recent years has wavered between the blockade of China based on the threat and cooperation based on interdependence rather than establishing a coherent strategy. Indeed, China's rising economic and military power is threatening to the United States. The US's top strategic goal for Northeast Asia is to keep China in check and maintain its own influence through a 'Pivot to Asia' or 'Rebalancing' strategy. For that strategy it needs the participation of Korea and Japan. In this respect what America aims at is the consolidation of a stable Korea-US-Japan triangular alliance. This triangular alliance would counter the trilateral alliance between China, North Korea and Russia. In the complex and unstable dynamics of Northeast Asia, and considering implications of the rise of China, the Korean peninsula is subject to permanent pressure from the big powers.

6. Conclusion

China is a strong and authoritarian communist country bordering the Korean Peninsula. Being an original signatory of the Korean War armistice agreement, its status cannot be overlooked, and it does not want either to be excluded from any talks on Korea that might discuss critical issues such as the establishment of a Korean peace regime. The recent international political environment, China demonstrated its own interests prior to the relations with either its long-time ally, North Korea or South Korea when it is engaged in competition with the U.S. The relationship between China and the two Koreas varies also depending on the state of the relationship between North and South Korea: if both Koreas are in a period of “detente”, the relations between China and the other two countries is a friendly one, but when there is tension between North and South Korea, this affects China’s relations with both of them. It is to be observed that China went along with the UN imposed economic sanctions against North Korea under the pressure of the U.S in order to mitigate its trade war with Washington. At the same time, China as an economic giant power does not hesitate on using its leverage to squeeze South Korea on the strategic issue of THADD. China pursues its own interests using a combination of strength and diplomacy with the two Koreas. To China, South Korea is an adversary of its ally and to the US, North Korea is one of its most dangerous foes at the moment. For South Korea it is important to maintain a balance between the two countries because China as a vital economic partner and the US as its main security partner.

The trade war and competition for hegemony in Asia and the world between China and the U.S. is an ongoing process and the future scenario of relations influenced by this international political situation that affect the trilateral relations. The China and the two Koreas relations in the coming years are not seen with much optimism. China and the two Koreas should move carefully in their tri-party interaction so as not to harm each other, in order to maintain security in the Korean Peninsula. It has been demonstrated through the current international political circumstances that there is no such a thing as an absolute trust, alliance and friendship between two nations. The two Koreas between the two “wales” should realize this and display pragmatic diplomacy to build a friendly relationship with both China and the U.S. as the best way to achieve peace on the Korean Peninsula.



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