

China resigned to its status as North Korea's frenemy

By: Doug Bandow
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The Democratic People's Republic of Korea never has been an easy client state for China. The DPRK's Kim Il-sung plunged the Korean peninsula into war barely a year after the founding of the People's Republic of China. The PRC then spent more than two years battling the U.S. and its allies to preserve a buffer state in the northern half of the peninsula.

Beijing succeeded, but only after suffering hundreds of thousands of casualties. Yet the North never fully recognized its ally's contribution. In the latter 1950s Kim Il-sung purged cadres friendly to the PRC and ordered China's troops home. Bilateral relations plunged after Mao Zedong's criticism of Kim's plans for a familial succession. Pyongyang later objected to Beijing's opening to the U.S. and recognition of South Korea.

Perhaps most striking has been the DPRK's refusal to take advice from its only important friend. For years China hosted Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, showcasing its dramatic development and urging economic reform. Just as regularly, North Korea's leaders returned home and enforced their policy of impoverished autarchy. Even mass starvation in the late 1990s resulted in few changes.

The DPRK also routinely ignored Beijing's pleas to reduce tensions on the peninsula. Instead, Pyongyang initiated nuclear and missile tests, challenged South Korean military forces, and spewed vitriolic threats far and wide.

Yet through it all the PRC has remained the North's most reliable ally. China provides the bulk of the DPRK's food and energy. Chinese companies are investing in North Korea and providing essential financial resources.

Beijing routinely shields the North from U.N. censure and sanctions, and only indifferently enforces those restrictions which it permits to take effect. Most recently the PRC denounced the United Nations' searing report on North Korea's grievous human rights violations.

Nevertheless, evident Chinese dissatisfaction with Pyongyang again has raised international hopes for a breach in relations. Academic and popular attitudes have turned sharply against the North. The Xi government appears to be taking a harder line.

A year ago top (though recently demoted) official Choe Ryong-hae visited Beijing and is thought to have requested a summit invitation for Kim. That evidently was refused. (In contrast, South Korean President Park Geun-hye has enjoyed a state visit to Beijing.)

Last December's execution of Jang Song-taek, Kim's uncle and the DPRK's most important interlocutor with the PRC, put the entire bilateral relationship at risk. Jang was thought to be an advocate of economic liberalization and to have played an important role during the waning years of Kim Jong-il's rule in spurring Chinese investment and trade.

Although Jang's ouster probably reflected internal power politics, he also was criticized for his economic activities — perhaps pushing unwanted reforms at home and openings abroad. Worse, from China's standpoint, Jang was charged with the “selling of precious resources of the country at cheap prices” and having “made no scruple of committing such act of treachery in May last as selling off the land of the Rason economic and trade zone to a foreign country.”

The charges seemed too detailed to be boilerplate, and suggested that Kim Jong-un, or powerful regime factions, decided that Jang was too close to the PRC, the unnamed “foreign country.”

More recently there were reports, denied by Beijing, that the PRC had created contingency plans for North Korea's collapse. In fact, it would be surprising if the Chinese government did not consider what to do in a worst case involving the North. But the leak, assuming it to be genuine, suggests that some officials may be fed up with Pyongyang. Even before Jang's ouster former Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell cited “indications that China has grown steadily more concerned by” events in North Korea.

Increasing concern with the North has not changed Beijing's policies. China continues to fear the impact of a North Korean collapse — especially chaos along the border and a united Korea allied with America while hosting U.S. troops.

North Korea probably is the most badly governed and most irresponsible state on the planet. However, from Beijing's standpoint, all other options are worse.

Only if the U.S., backed by the ROK and Japan, offers a better alternative — for instance, to share the burden of a North Korean collapse and withdraw U.S. troops in the event of reunification — is the PRC's calculus likely to change.

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