

China's Xi Jinping and North Korea's Kim Jong-un, Frenemies at Best

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Shortly after presiding over a grand celebration of the 70th anniversary of the creation of the People's Republic of China, President Xi Jinping is expected to receive North Korea's Kim Jong-un. In June, Xi visited Pyongyang, the first trip to North Korea by a Chinese leader since Hu Jintao in 2005.

If this upcoming meeting occurs, it will be the two leaders' sixth in two years. Many American policymakers take a cynical view of the latest North Korean-Chinese snuggle. Attitudes in Washington have been steadily hardening against the PRC. Even before President Donald Trump's trade war, some officials and analysts viewed the Democratic People's Republic of Korea as Beijing's puppet. In their view, Chinese officials have turned North Korean provocations on and off at will.

In truth, the PRC's influence is much less. The historical relationship between the two governments is fraught, with abundant competition, derision, and antagonism ever since the two opened diplomatic relations 70 years ago.

As Kim Il-sung's regime teetered near defeat in late 1950, after the U.S. intervened in the Korean War, China entered to block an American victory. Beijing effectively took over the conflict, leaving Kim on the sidelines, a slight he never forgot. The DPRK never gave its larger neighbor credit for preventing an allied victory, even though hundreds of thousands of Chinese soldiers died, including Mao Zedong's son, who is buried in North Korea. Today the Victorious Fatherland War Museum still largely ignores China's role while glorifying Kim's leadership.

Kim later consolidated power, balancing the U.S.S.R. and China. Along the way he wiped out the pro-PRC faction, much to Beijing's annoyance. Mao Zedong also criticized Kim for turning a Communist state into a quasi-monarchy when the latter made his son, Kim Jong-il, his successor. Despite Chinese officials' claims that the two nations' relations are as close as lips and teeth, dissatisfaction long was evident on both sides. The Xi regime was irritated that after supporting North Korea for years, the latter pursued missiles and nukes, thereby creating instability and inviting American intervention in Northeast Asia. Beijing rejected Kim's request for an invitation to visit the PRC—even though Xi repeatedly met with South Korean President Park Geun-hye.

This obviously is not a beautiful friendship. Indeed, the Chinese public, expressing itself through Weibo and other forms of social media, is actively hostile, viewing North Korea as an ungrateful troublemaker. Chinese gave Kim several unflattering nicknames, including "Fatty Kim," which later was censored by Beijing. Academics, too, became critics, arguing that support for Kim was a bad bargain for the PRC. The military and Chinese Communist Party, which traditionally

handled relations with the DPRK, remained supportive, but more for realpolitik reasons than ideological or historical considerations.

This strained relationship offers the best evidence against the contention that the PRC is encouraging North Korean recalcitrance to spite America. A nuclear North greatly annoys Washington, but also possesses the means to ensure its historical independence from China. Moreover, by creating a perceived threat to the U.S., Pyongyang's acquisition of nukes increases the risk of a reckless American response which could create instability and conflict.

Beijing has two overriding interests regarding the Korean peninsula. The PRC does not want the North to implode, potentially spreading conflict, nuclear weapons, and refugees north of the Yalu and beyond, nor does China want a united Korea, allied with and hosting troops from America. Indeed, in 1950 Beijing went to war to bar U.S. forces from its border, hence the policy Beijing has consistently followed: measured but increased sanctions, adjusted to reflect changing circumstances, including the state of Pyongyang's and Beijing's relations with Washington. Xi's sudden enthusiasm for meeting with Kim after years of rejection likely reflected the former's fear that the DPRK might make a deal with the U.S., cutting out China. If Washington ended its threats, Pyongyang might see the distant great power as less likely than the PRC to meddle in North Korean affairs. Beijing responded by increasing its support for the North. Today, every additional Xi-Kim summit strengthens the DPRK's position against America. The Korean peninsula has become a complex foreign policy game.

To increase Chinese pressure on North Korea, Washington first needs to improve overall relations with Beijing. If the two governments head toward a new cold war, the PRC will be less helpful on most everything as a matter of course. Moreover, the administration needs to set priorities in dealing with China: even if relations improve, Washington cannot win concessions on everything.

The U.S. also needs to address Chinese concerns. How can the chances of a North Korean collapse be reduced, and, equally important, how can PRC exposure to such an implosion be limited? Moreover, how can the possibility of reunification be made less fearsome—perhaps by promising military neutrality and no American bases or troops in a united Korea?

Finally, Washington needs to demonstrate that it is not to blame for any stalemate. Demand for instant, complete denuclearization is a non-starter. Proposals for “Libya-style” denuclearization suggest a commitment to a regime change. Failure to implement the Singapore summit's call for improved bilateral relations and regional security discourages disarmament.

Despite a welcome renewal of bilateral talks, chances of successful negotiations between the U.S. and North Korea seem likely to further diminish. Beijing's role is secondary, and so far, the PRC does not appear to be seeking to thwart American objectives. However, China has little reason to spend its limited political capital to sway North Korea on Washington's behalf. The Trump administration should work to change that, and should engage China to assist Washington's strategy towards the North.

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