



Kim Jong-un brings Beijing to heel

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Lest anyone imagine that Kim Jong-un is an international ingenue, consider how well he played the People's Republic of China. Long on Beijing's as well as Washington's naughty list, North Korea forced the PRC to come calling, finally inviting Kim to visit more than six years after he took power.

Then earlier this week Kim received a second invitation. Did President Xi Jinping also promise additional support to keep China involved?

Far from being "as close as teeth and lips," as commonly said, the PRC and North Korea were at best frenemies. Their differences go back to the Korean War. Only massive Chinese military intervention saved the North's founding dictator Kim Il-sung from defeat.

China suffered hundreds of thousands of casualties; Mao Zedong's son is buried in the DPRK. Yet Kim demonstrated little gratitude for the "fraternal assistance." Indeed, when I visited the Victorious Fatherland War Museum in Pyongyang last year, I saw no mention of the PRC's contribution.

Kim zealously guarded his nation's independence. Relations with Beijing worsened as Mao criticized the plan to turn the DPRK into a de facto monarchy, with Kim's son, Kim Jong-il, chosen as heir apparent.

Contrary to the claim that China was using North Korea against the U.S., the PRC was highly displeased with Pyongyang's nuclear program. Beijing wanted a docile client state on its border to provide a stable buffer. The DPRK was anything but pliable.

The PRC desired denuclearization and stability. However, the harder it pushed the former, the less likely it was to get the latter.

Nevertheless, even before President Donald Trump pushed China to do more, an irritated Beijing was steadily tightening sanctions and increasing enforcement. The PRC also downgraded official contact with Pyongyang.

The North responded with vitriolic public criticism of the PRC. The DPRK sometimes appeared to schedule its missile and nuclear tests on important Chinese dates to spite Beijing.

When I visited North Korea last year officials indicated their desire not to be dependent on "any single country."

Kim's execution of his uncle, Jang Song-thaek, reflected at least in part the latter's role as the DPRK's chief interlocutor with China; the list of charges against him included selling off land "to a foreign country."

Kim's apparent assassination of his half-brother probably reflected fear that the PRC might try to use Kim Jong-nam, who lived in Macau under Chinese protection, as front-man in a more pliant regime.

By the end of last year, the two countries had little political and fast-diminishing economic contact.

However, Kim's international pirouette changed everything. No doubt, Beijing was happy to see its supposed client turn toward diplomacy. But rather than resumption of the Six-Party Talks, or some other international forum that included the PRC, Kim threatened to build an exclusive bilateral relationship with the PRC's most important rival.

A "grand bargain" with the U.S. could result in Pyongyang looking to the U.S. for both economic aid and security assurances. Worse from Beijing's viewpoint, such an agreement could presage reunification, with creation of a united Korea allied with the U.S. and hosting U.S. troops on China's border.

Chinese policymakers and analysts know that the odds remain against such a transformation, but the mere possibility makes Beijing nervous. In the midst of potentially dramatic geopolitical changes, the PRC is largely out of action.

Kim will be negotiating the region's future without Xi's presence. Rumors that Pyongyang will not demand the withdrawal of U.S. troops from the South, long China's objective, may be intended as a not-so-subtle warning to Beijing.

All of this apparently encouraged the Xi government to show interest in its small ally. China's foreign minister visited Pyongyang in early May, the first trip by a Chinese foreign minister in 11 years. Moreover, there are reports that cross-border commerce has picked up, perhaps reflecting more relaxed Chinese enforcement. Then Kim and Xi met again, in northern China.

Of course, the PRC's friendlier attitude gives Kim a boost in advance of the latter's meeting with President Trump. While it is hard to imagine a bidding war over Pyongyang's allegiance, China's renewed warmth reduces pressure on Kim to make more concessions more quickly.

The upcoming Kim-Trump summit will be full of promise and peril. However, so far Kim has

proved adept on the international stage. He even forced his dominating neighbor and nominal ally to come calling, twice. Whatever happens next, Kim has transformed Northeast Asia.

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