

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

China and North Korea Aren't Friends Yet Act Like Allies

Doug Bandow

July 10, 2021

Talks between North Korea and the United States plus South Korea have apparently stalled. Meanwhile, Washington policymakers have inevitably turned to China. Some speak hopefully of winning Beijing's support while others denounce the People's Republic of China (PRC) for its perfidious role. A few seem shocked that the PRC doesn't see the world as America does and refuses to act as Washington's catspaw.

In fact, Pyongyang and Beijing remain formal military allies, having inked the Sino-DPRK Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance on July 11, 1961. The pact with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea renews automatically and again is being extended. At the end of May, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi met with the North Korean ambassador to reaffirm the two nations' "traditional friendship."

Exactly how far the PRC would go in backing the North militarily is unclear. The treaty is explicitly defensive, obligating the parties to respond to an "attack." Moreover, some Chinese officials insisted that Pyongyang's nuclear program breached the agreement and negated the defense promise. For instance, citing "Chinese diplomatic and military observers," the *South China Morning Post* reported four years ago that "China is not obliged to help defend North Korea as the latter's development of nuclear weapons has breached a mutual defense pact."

The Xi government has not addressed the question. Bilateral relations often have been rocky. DPRK founder Kim Il-sung gave Beijing little credit for its military intervention, which saved his regime (and cost Mao Zedong his son). Kim also destroyed the pro-China faction as he consolidated power, turning himself into the Great Leader. Relations continued to be rocky as Kim criticized the Cultural Revolution and Mao denounced North Korea's slide toward quasi-monarchy. Most recently, Xi Jinping demonstrated his government's displeasure with the North by refusing to meet with Kim Jong-un while holding a half dozen summits with former South Korean president Park Geun-hye.

Wang's comments focused on economic issues—the foreign ministry reported that he noted Beijing's willingness “to provide the DPRK with more assistance” toward “developing its economy.” Indeed, North Korea's ambassador apparently was chosen by Pyongyang for his trade expertise. However, ties with the North traditionally received the strongest support from the Chinese Communist Party and the People's Liberation Army. Wang offered fulsome praise of the relationship.

“The traditional friendship between the two countries was forged and nurtured with blood by the older generations of our leaders in the joint fight against foreign aggression, and it is a valuable asset that should be cherished by the two sides, Wang said. “In recent years, under the strategic guidance and personal commitment of the top leaders of the two parties and two countries, the China-DPRK relationship has entered a new historical period, fully demonstrating the solid foundation and vitality of the traditional friendship. China has always viewed its relationship with the DPRK from a strategic perspective and deepened friendship and cooperation from a long-term perspective.”

Although Xi might still dislike Kim and his bizarre system of monarchical communism, the former responded to changes in the U.S. relationship with North Korea. Trump's overtures to Pyongyang apparently left Xi fearful that Beijing might lose its premier position in the North. The Chinese leader then ended his freeze on personal contact with Kim and initiated what became the first of five meetings.

In return, Kim warmed to the DPRK's large neighbor, despite his regime having privately and sometimes publicly demonstrated its antagonism. After the Xi-Kim meet-up the following year, the PRC is widely believed to have increasingly tolerated sanctions-busting smuggling and later provided food and oil that helped the DPRK survive its self-isolation in response to the coronavirus pandemic.

Some American policymakers propose attempting to convince or force the PRC to convince or force Pyongyang to halt its nuclear program. Some China hawks even charge that Beijing is advancing its own ends by manipulating North Korean policy. However, the PRC's influence in North Korea has always been limited, as the DPRK played Russia and China against one another. Indeed, nukes help ensure the North's independence from both of its “friends.”

Thus, this is one reason Beijing opposes the North's nuclear program. The former prefers a pliant buffer state, not a defiant, unpredictable nuclear power, on its border. That's why, during the latter years of the Obama administration, Beijing supported international sanctions, which it enforced with varying seriousness.

Equally important, however, the PRC does not want a failed state as a neighbor. It fears a messy implosion with factional fighting, loose nukes, mass refugee flows, and desperate humanitarian needs. Yet that could be the result of following U.S. demands for even tougher sanctions. Also, the PRC does not want on its border a united Korea allied with America and hosting U.S. troops, a possible longer-term result of encouraging a DPRK collapse.

What was a very faint chance of winning PRC cooperation before looks like a certain refusal today. China sees the U.S. engaged in a strategy of containment and does not want Washington to gain additional bases in the region. Rising antagonism is evident in the general decline in

bilateral relations and recent “Wolf Warrior” diplomacy. Moreover, Xi Jinping’s recent speech celebrating the one-hundredth anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party exuded defiance.

He indicated that he is in no mood to listen to Western demands. As he told his countrymen on July 1, “the Party and the Chinese people showed the world that the Chinese people had stood up and that the time in which the Chinese nation could be bullied and abused by others was gone forever.” He said the Chinese people “overcame subversion, sabotage, and armed provocation by imperialist and hegemonic powers.”

Sounding like a typical conservative Republican politician trolling for votes, Xi insisted that “A strong country must have a strong military, as only then can it guarantee the security of the nation.” Moreover, “we will never allow any foreign force to bully, oppress, or subjugate us,” he said. “Anyone who would attempt to do so will find themselves on a collision course with a great wall of steel forged by over 1.4 billion Chinese people.”

Indeed, he added, in words that may have been left out of the official English language version, “Whoever nurses delusions of doing that will crack their heads and spill blood.” Finally, he warned China’s adversaries against attempting to take advantage of the PRC: “No one should underestimate the resolve, the will, and the ability of the Chinese people to defend their national sovereignty and territorial integrity.”

No doubt, much of this was for the public consumption of China’s citizens. Nevertheless, Xi’s harshly confrontational rhetoric is consistent with the PRC’s increasingly confrontational foreign policy and diplomatic stance. That bodes ill for hope for China’s assistance against North Korea.

If Washington is serious about winning more serious Chinese cooperation, then it needs to convince Beijing that cooperating with the United States will not undermine the former’s interests. To start, improved overall relations probably would be necessary—the PRC has little reason to take American assurances seriously if Washington is pressing a global anti-China campaign. Also necessary would be serious concessions, perhaps promises of humanitarian support if the North Korean state collapsed and assurances of South Korean military neutrality, or at least an American military withdrawal, if the two Koreas reunite.

The China-North Korean alliance looked moribund when Donald Trump became president. Beijing enforced ever tougher sanctions against the North and paid far greater diplomatic attention to South Korea. However, Trump’s initiative toward Pyongyang threatened the PRC and forced Xi Jinping to respond accordingly. And the deterioration in U.S.-China ties further strengthened the relationship between the two communist states.

That means Washington should not look to Beijing for assistance in dealing with the DPRK. On the “friendship” treaty’s latest renewal relations between China and North Korea look stronger than ever. The marriage is still one of convenience, but the benefits of it have become more obvious to both parties.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is the author of several books, including Tripwire: Korea and U.S. Foreign Policy in a Changed World and co-author of The Korean Conundrum: America’s Troubled Relations with North and South Korea.