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“Teeth and Lips”: A Resurgence in China-North Korea Ties

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The death of Kim Jong-il, and a possible succession struggle, has important implications for China-North Korea relations. Indeed, recent events and signals suggest Beijing and Pyongyang are moving closer, much to the dismay of Seoul and Washington. China will likely now re-emphasize, and perhaps further intensify, its commitment to North Korea—at least in the short term—because of an increased fear of possible instability. This prospect and the resurgence of China-North Korea ties will complicate Washington’s goal of curtailing North Korea’s nuclear program.

During the cold war heyday of political and military relations between Beijing and Pyongyang following the Korean War, leaders on both sides were fond of saying that the alliance was as close as “teeth and lips.” However, as tensions between China and the United States faded, and economic relations between China and South Korea soared, Beijing’s enthusiasm for its North Korean ally eroded. Pyongyang’s provocative decision to pursue a nuclear-weapons program, and North Korea’s stubborn refusal to adopt Chinese-style economic reforms (a refusal that produced famines and other catastrophic consequences), intensified the estrangement.

When I visited China in 2008 and 2009, officials there remained rhetorically committed to the alliance with North Korea, but even they seemed uncomfortable and conceded that Kim Jong-il’s regime was sometimes a “difficult” ally. Younger Chinese members of the policy and journalistic communities were often less diplomatic, privately describing the North Korean government as an “embarrassment” to China. A few even mused whether it was in China’s best interest to maintain an alliance with such an uncooperative, dysfunctional state.

There was every reason to expect that China’s gradual diplomatic drift away from North

Korea would continue. But recent developments suggest that Beijing may instead be tightening its links with Pyongyang. The death of Kim Jong-il will deepen that trend. Last year, it surprised and dismayed both Seoul and Washington when the Chinese government refused to condemn the North Korean attack on the South Korean naval vessel *Cheonan* and the later artillery barrage on a South Korean island.

The latest signal of a rapprochement between Beijing and Pyongyang was a November 18 press release in China’s official news agency, Xinhua, announcing that the Chinese military would strengthen its ties [3] with North Korea. That step was most unwelcome in Washington, since the Obama administration had been prodding Beijing to put more pressure on Kim’s regime to negotiate an end to its nuclear-weapons program. A public announcement of even closer Chinese-North Korean military cooperation was certainly not what U.S. officials had in mind.

The most likely explanation for the warming of relations between Beijing and Pyongyang is that Chinese leaders are angry at Washington’s increasingly obvious measures [4] designed to contain China. China’s annoyance at U.S. behavior has been growing for some time, and, at a minimum, PRC officials may be sending Washington a diplomatic signal that there will be a price to pay for such unfriendly actions. Beijing is not about to stand by while the United States endeavors to strengthen and broaden its military alliances with Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines, meddle in the South China Sea territorial dispute on behalf of China’s rivals, and establish new security ties with onetime adversaries like Vietnam and India.

Despite North Korea’s often disruptive behavior, Beijing has always been reluctant to throw its ally under the bus [5]. Aside from the historical and emotional ties, Chinese leaders worry about refugee flows [6] into China and other unpleasant consequences if the North Korean state implodes. Furthermore, those leaders view North Korea as an important buffer state between the Chinese homeland and the rest of Northeast Asia that is dominated by the United States and its allies.

With the emergence of an apparent anti-China containment policy on Washington’s part, the incentives for Beijing to restore and even strengthen its alliance with Pyongyang will likely increase. That is a bad outcome both for the goal of trying to resolve the North Korean nuclear crisis and for the future of cordial bilateral relations between China and the United States. Obama administration officials need to fully comprehend those unpleasant side effects if they decide to continue a de facto containment strategy toward China.

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