

# China Courts South Korea: Opportunities and Risks for the United States

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Chinese President Xi Jinping's recent state visit to South Korea raised more than a few eyebrows in both East Asia and the United States. Most notably, the way the visit was handled constituted a monumental snub to Beijing's long-time North Korean ally. Xi did not even bother to stop in Pyongyang either before or after his trip to Seoul. The Chinese are skillful diplomats, and one can be confident that the decision was no mere oversight. Indeed, it was likely a deliberate, blunt message to North Korea.

If China is de-emphasizing its ties to Pyongyang and seeking stronger ties to Seoul, that change creates both opportunities and potential problems for the United States. It is imperative that Washington explore and carefully gauge the nature and extent of China's policy shift on the Korean Peninsula. A stodgy, obtuse U.S. response could waste an unprecedented chance to reduce or even end the North Korean threat to regional peace and stability.

The bilateral relationship between Beijing and Pyongyang has been under considerable stress for several years. The main source of irritation has been North Korea's repeated defiance of China's warnings not to conduct nuclear tests or missile tests. Both Kim Jong-un and his father and predecessor as North Korea's supreme leader, Kim Jong-il, ostentatiously ignored Beijing's admonitions that such conduct was provocative and disruptive. In early April 2013, Xi stated bluntly that no country "should be allowed to throw a region and even the whole world into chaos for selfish gain." Foreign Minister Wang Yi added that his government would "not allow troublemaking on China's doorstep." Although neither leader explicitly named North Korea, there was little doubt that Kim's regime was the target. Xi's courtship of Seoul, and what that move symbolizes, sends a new warning to Pyongyang that there is a substantial price to pay for such defiance.

But tensions involving nuclear and missiles tests are not the only source of China's annoyance. Long gone is the once-common view in Beijing that China and North Korea "are as close as lips and teeth." Especially to younger Chinese officials and other members of the country's elite, the alliance with North Korea seems more an embarrassment than an asset. Even the financial drain is resented, as China has to provide more than half of North Korea's food and energy supplies. Worse, Beijing can no longer count on cooperation, much less gratitude, in exchange for its exertions.

The underlying annoyance deepened in early June when a key document from North Korea's Central Party Committee leaked to the outside world. That document contained passages ordering members to "abandon the Chinese dream" and accused China of "being in bed with the imperialists and dreaming dreams with them." It also scorned Xi Jinping as being insufficiently dedicated to socialist principles.

In light of such developments, it is not surprising that Beijing would want to distance itself from Kim Jong-un's regime. But without major incentives from the United States, the distancing process is likely to remain limited. China still regards North Korea as a crucial buffer between the Chinese homeland and the rest of Northeast Asia that is heavily oriented toward, if not dominated by, the United States. Xi's courtship of South Korea is an attempt to see if Seoul is willing to adopt a more even-handed policy. The alternative, Chinese leaders fear, is a trilateral alliance (formal or informal) among the United States, Japan, and South Korea, designed to contain China's power and influence. Beijing regards such an outcome as profoundly undesirable, even menacing.

Now is the time to see whether, for the right price, Chinese leaders might be willing to dump North Korea and treat South Korea as its future partner on the Korean Peninsula. Clearly, that would require not just the apparent ongoing modest shift, but a more drastic one, in China's policy. Although it would disrupt Washington's containment ambitions in Northeast Asia, it could provide even greater offsetting benefits to the United States. To realize those benefits, though, Washington would have to make a policy change even greater than Beijing's regarding the Korean Peninsula.

China has never been known for foreign policy altruism. Dumping North Korea runs the risk of an imploding North Korean state, resulting in a variety of problems and dangers, not the least of which would be possible massive refugee flows across the North Korea-China border. The United States would have to offer a very attractive package of incentives for the Chinese government to incur the potential costs and risks.

Beijing certainly will not even consider such an initiative if the outcome is a united, noncommunist Korea allied militarily with the United States. That would likely be unacceptable even if Washington promised not to establish bases or station forces in the northern part of a unified Korea. The only chance of success requires a willingness by the United States to make an explicit pledge that if China abandons North Korea and the outcome is political reunification of the Peninsula, Washington will terminate the defense treaty with Seoul and withdraw all U.S. troops by a given date.

In essence, the United States would implicitly acknowledge that China was positioned to become the leading outside power on the Korean Peninsula. Neither Japan nor Americans accustomed to U.S. hegemony in Northeast Asia would be happy about that development. But if the arrangement ended the tragic division of Korea and extinguished the odious North Korean state, it is arguably a price well worth paying.

There is, of course, no guarantee that Beijing would accept such a deal, but the time is ripe at least to explore that possibility. Chinese leaders are clearly disenchanted with their North Korean

ally. We need to find out just how disenchanted, and that requires flexibility and creativity in U.S. foreign policy—something that has been sadly lacking on so many issues.

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