

Pyongyang's Future Is in Beijing

Doug Bandow | August 29, 2012

During the Korean War, American forces could not venture past the Yalu River even after China entered the war. Today, the water separates China from its ally North Korea—and the future from the past.

The People's Republic of China is on the move. Once an isolated and impoverished empire, the Chinese people suffered even greater horror when Japan invaded and the communists seized control. Only after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 did the madness cease. Economic reforms began soon thereafter. Although the Chinese Communist Party jealously retained its monopoly on political power—highlighted by the killings in Tiananmen Square—the apparatchiks relaxed their control over most life decisions. Today, the Chinese enjoy a world of opportunities long denied their ancestors.

Dandong, a city of some 2.4 million, sits on the Yalu. The port is connected by rail to Shenyang, the capital of Liaoning Province. A Chinese university student who grew up there told me that the city has changed dramatically over the last ten years. High-rise office and apartment buildings dominate the skyline. The riverfront bustles, its pedestrian promenade overrun by tourists. Traffic fills the streets.

The city of Sinuiju on the North Korean side of the river is very different. Much of the land is undeveloped. The few buildings are low and old. There are no parks. The pace of life is languid. No tour boats take tourists for a peak at the Chinese side. It “looks the same” as a decade ago, commented my friend.

The so-called Democratic People's Republic of Korea glories in its philosophy of *Juche*, or self-reliance. However, a one-way bridge called the China-North Korea Friendship Bridge long has served as the North's lifeline. Every morning, traffic shifts back to the DPRK, and a steady stream of trucks, buses, automobiles and pedestrians head south.

Next to it is the so-called “Broken Bridge,” which was bombed by the United States during the Korean War. The span was never repaired—it now is protected as a cultural icon—to illustrate America's wartime role. The bridge, which ends mid-river, is a major tourist attraction.

With Dandong accounting for about half of the North's trade with China, the Friendship Bridge is no longer enough. A couple of years ago, China began constructing another connection, the New Yalu River Bridge, nearby. Even though North Korea, unlike the South, is no export giant, there are still hundreds of millions of dollars in commerce. Beijing also provides substantial energy and food aid. This steady flow across the Yalu has helped North Korea survive, despite its Stalinist economic model.

Even as Pyongyang's behavior has grown more provocative—sinking a South Korean warship and bombarding a South Korean island in 2010—Beijing has strengthened bilateral ties. Indeed, China has been investing in the DPRK economy, apparently planning for the long term. Although Beijing has never evinced much enthusiasm for the North Korean system of monarchical communism, the PRC leadership appears to have accepted Kim Jong-un just as it adapted to his father's ascension. Kim accompanied his father to China before the latter's death, and Beijing sent a delegation to the latter's funeral. China has tightened its embrace of Pyongyang despite American requests that the PRC “solve” the North Korean problem.

Unfortunately, the current situation nicely serves Chinese interests: the DPRK's existence gives Beijing a close geopolitical ally, prevents reunification of the Korean peninsula under an American-allied government, keeps U.S. troops off of its border, and encourages South Korea, Japan and even America to seek Chinese assistance. One U.S. diplomat stationed in China told me he believed Washington's intervention in the South China Sea almost guaranteed greater Chinese backing for the North as one of its geopolitical cards.

Jang Song-taek, Kim's uncle—who likely has more practical power than Kim despite the latter's important symbolic role—recently visited Beijing, which may signal even closer bilateral economic cooperation. He met Chinese president Hu Jintao and premier Wen Jiabao and reportedly requested the PRC's assistance in developing two special trade zones near the border. Although no major new agreements were announced, Beijing long has advocated reform along Chinese lines and could be expected to reward the North for positive change, easing a potentially difficult political transition.

Although Pyongyang has publicly derided South Korean predictions of economic reform, the DPRK can be expected to resist the appearance of doing anything under pressure. Jang long has been thought to be involved in economic policy and appears to have gained authority from recent political machinations in Pyongyang. The regime appointed his close ally to oversee the military and reportedly reestablished civilian control over economic enterprises being operated by the military. Then a military rival, vice marshal and army chief of staff Ri Yong-ho unexpectedly “retired” for “health” reasons.

Economic reform would be good for the North Korean people, who have been reduced to malnutrition and, at times, starvation. Even a limited economic

opening would improve their standard of living. Over time the process might encourage a more open society and an eventual shift away from the Kim dynasty's "military-first" policy and toward greater political pluralism.

Nevertheless, in the short-term a Jang-dominated, reformist DPRK could prove to be an even more serious geopolitical problem. First, increased foreign transfers would strengthen the current political players and help stabilize the political system. The North Korean governing elite likely will continue to root its power in the Kim dynasty, necessarily limiting the opportunity for political reform. Moreover, while economic liberalization has made China vastly more prosperous and even freer, the process has yet to deliver liberal democracy or dampen nationalism.

Second, though Seoul hopes economic growth would enable eventual reunification, increased wealth would aid the DPRK's *nomenklatura* in preserving what officials referred to as their "social system" when I visited years ago.

A couple million residents of Pyongyang effectively hold more than twenty million of their mostly rural countrymen in bondage. Economic reform wouldn't necessarily change that. To the contrary, if the ruling class tasted more of the good life, members might fight even harder to preserve the existing system.

Third, China is likely to more strongly support a reformist North Korea. Of course, Washington hopes the latter would be better behaved. With alternative sources of revenue and a greater stake in regional economic cooperation, Pyongyang might well eschew militaristic confrontation.

However, the North's incentive to continue its nuclear program would remain strong. No civilian leader seems likely to soon amass the sort of political authority held by the two older Kims. However much Jang and his colleagues might desire to limit military authority, they will probably be cautious about directly challenging the institution by seeking to trade away its most important weapon. Indeed, an obvious compromise to maintain political stability would be to swap continued generous support for the military for reduced political influence.

Possessing a nuclear capability is even more important internationally. The DPRK is a small, impoverished and essentially irrelevant state. Without its nuclear program, no one other than its immediate neighbors would pay it the slightest attention. Moreover, the North has even had to guard its independence from its nominal friends Beijing and Moscow. The fact that both China and Russia tossed Pyongyang overboard when recognizing the Republic of Korea two decades ago further demonstrated to North Korea that it can trust no one. Thus, Pyongyang may see nuclear weapons as the most effective means to preserve its independence.

A nuclear DPRK could exist for years to come. The Chinese model offers an example where authoritarian politicians have retained control over economic development despite liberalization. If the North Korean leadership gradually loosens controls while winning increased Chinese support, the regime might be able to hold its restive population in check indefinitely.

Look south from Dandong and you see North Korea's past, an underdeveloped backwater just a short boat ride away. Look at the traffic going south and you see the North's potential future, increased economic cooperation with China built on a new reform agenda in Pyongyang. If so, the United States and South Korea risk relearning the truth of the adage "be careful what you wish for, it might come true."

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