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Will China Save North Korea From Famine and Collapse?

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It took more than six years for Chinese president Xi Jinping to meet North Korean supreme leader Kim Jong-un after the latter succeeded his father. During the same period, Xi met with South Korean president Park Geun-hye a half dozen times, even giving her a spot of honor during the 2015 parade celebrating the conclusion of World War II.

Although officials on both sides of the Yalu routinely said the bilateral relationship was as close as lips and teeth, private conversations revealed substantially less warmth. A Chinese academic told me he wished that the United States would adopt the “Israeli solution,” meaning bomb the North’s nuclear facilities. A North Korean official told me that Pyongyang’s objective was not to be dependent on *any* single country, leaving little doubt about which “single country” he meant.

Indeed, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) had always guarded its independence, especially from its often-overbearing northern neighbors. Founder Kim Il-sung didn’t like the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, while China’s Mao Zedong detested Kim’s unique form of monarchical communism. Relations cratered during the latter part of the Obama administration when Beijing supported ever tighter UN sanctions on the North in response to its many nuclear and missile tests.

However, after President Donald Trump agreed to a summit with Kim, Xi warmed up to the latter. He recognized the danger of being cut out by a deal between Pyongyang and Washington. For the North, the latter was a meddlesome power, but was distant and, therefore, potentially less

dangerous. However, Kim also desired better ties with China. Another four meetings occurred, the most recent two years ago.

Kim has continued to benefit from the People's Republic of China's (PRC) favor, with Beijing widely believed to have relaxed sanctions enforcement and provided energy, fertilizer, and food aid to help the DPRK through its pandemic shutdown. Indeed, the commercial relationship between the two communist states appears to have revived in recent months.

In late May, the *Financial Times* reported: "At least 52 vessels that appear to be linked to Pyongyang were active in waters around North Korea and China in April and May, up from single digits observed for weeks at a time last year, according to data analyzed by NK Pro, a North Korea-focused information service." Moreover, the data "also showed a rise in the number of North Korea-flagged tankers operating in the area, suggesting a resurgence in Chinese fuel transfers or sales to Pyongyang." The conclusion of analysts: "Beijing was probably maintaining a years-long policy of supporting stability in Pyongyang through deliveries of food, fertilizer and fuel."

And the DPRK appears to hope to increase commerce with the PRC. For instance, Pyongyang sent a trade specialist, Ri Ryong-nam, as its new ambassador to Beijing. When greeting Ri in May Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi observed: "China firmly supports the DPRK in developing its economy and improving people's livelihood, and is willing to continue to provide the DPRK with assistance within its capacity."

Late last month NKNews reported that the North had resumed construction of a disinfection facility near the Chinese border "in a move that may signal Pyongyang is preparing to resume large-scale trade with China." Indeed, South Korean intelligence suggested that the delay in opening this facility was the "grave incident" which resulted in public criticism by Kim and punishment of several top officials in June. With Kim working to preserve his country's stability and the regime's survival amid another "arduous march," meaning a potential famine, increased aid from and trade with China is his best place to start.

The Biden administration has talked about seeking Chinese help in convincing the North to denuclearize. Perhaps Kim took note, since last week he visited Pyongyang's Friendship Tower to pay homage to the PRC. As the Voice of Korea explained, Kim "paid noble respects to the martyrs of the Chinese People's Volunteers who dedicated their precious lives in the Fatherland Liberation War of the Korean people against the imperialist aggression."

This is only the second time Kim has visited the monument. He said that bilateral relations "will be firmly carried forward on the road for the common cause generation after generation." Shortly before that he sent a sympathy message to Xi Jinping on severe flooding in the PRC. This attention to neighborly relations is a dramatic shift from the days when North Korean officials openly derided their giant ally's role.

Beijing reciprocated with a similar message. Last month Kim said that he hoped to raise bilateral relations to a "new strategic point." Xi responded in a letter that he planned to "defend, consolidate and develop" the two nations' ties. They planned to achieve "regional peace,

stability, development and prosperity by successfully implementing the important common understanding reached by the two sides.”

The recent warming between North and South Korea, if it deserves to be called that, has sparked discussion of the possibility of better inter-Korean relations and perhaps even another summit between Kim and South Korean President Moon Jae-in. However, the flurry looks more like an attempt to get Moon, ever anxious for détente to envelop the peninsula, to drop planned military exercises with the United States, than a sincere effort to reduce tensions. Absent a willingness by Seoul to bust international sanctions, the Republic of Korea can deliver only a fraction of the benefits available from the PRC.

Presumably, for this reason, if no other, Kim has sold his soul, or at least freedom of action, to Beijing. Pyongyang is acting like a supplicant. Moreover, the DPRK has avoided provocations, including the long ago threatened “Christmas present” as well as tests of the new intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) unveiled last October. In this way, the North appears to be acting as the dutiful buffer state long desired by successive Chinese governments.

The PRC’s apparent embrace also may reflect Kim’s domestic crackdown on Western and especially South Korean cultural influences. He appears to have decided that the evident appeal of life beyond the Hermit Kingdom and its stifling atmosphere poses an existential threat to the survival of the system and his dynasty. For him to expand ties with South Korea and the United States almost guarantees an expansion of their influences in the DPRK. In contrast, Xi is similarly committed to eradicating the slightest hint that individuals have rights and lives beyond that of the state as detailed by the communist party and its glorious leader. In this area, at least, the two communist leaders think and act as one.

When it comes to North Korea, nothing is certain or foreordained. However, with the DPRK in economic distress and fearful of cultural infiltration, its ties with China are only likely to increase. The upside is that Beijing will continue to use its increased influence to discourage potentially destabilizing provocations. But increasingly the Trump administration looks like a brief interlude, during which Kim tested the American option and found it wanting. The United States might find itself waiting a long time for another chance to transform relations in Northeast Asia.

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