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Issue Brief

China's Contentious Relationship with North Korea: Recent Developments

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Summary

China is seen as an enabler or a benefactor of North Korea due to its economic, trade and military assistance. As a result, China is often called upon to influence North Korea's nuclear choices, especially towards denuclearisation. While it supports denuclearisation as it wants to maintain geopolitical influence in North Korea, its motivations to maintain that influence are due to the historic understanding of the geopolitical reality of the Korean peninsula.

Introduction

China’s relationship with North Korea is often viewed through the prism of a benefactor, where the regime’s survival is seen as dependent on economic trade with and assistance from China. Many argue that China’s international support is enabling North Korea’s nuclear ambitions, leading it to defy international sanctions on its nuclear programme.¹ Consequently, China is often urged to convince North Korea to limit its brinkmanship. As a result, most analyses are focused on whether China can leverage its relationship with North Korea to restrain its nuclear belligerence.² This brief argues that China’s perceptions about the geopolitical reality of the Korean peninsula lead it to influence North Korea in specific ways, and the limits of that leverage result in Beijing prioritising the stability of the bilateral relationship with Pyongyang.

China’s Difficult Relationship with North Korea

When President Xi Jinping met North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un in Beijing on 4 September 2025, they reiterated their commitment to each other’s sovereignty. This is unsurprising as both countries renewed their China–North Korea Treaty of Friendship, Co-operation and Mutual Assistance in 2021. This mutual defence treaty commits China to come to North Korea’s military assistance in case of an attack and vice versa.

However, in the September 2025 joint statement, both countries only discussed ways to strengthen ‘strategic communication and high-level visits’, a euphemism in the Chinese political lexicon for a constrained political atmosphere between the two countries. From the North Korean side, the reference to ‘strengthening strategic cooperation and defining common interests in international and regional affairs’ does not inspire the possibility of any newfound engagement with the international system.³

One would expect close political coordination between the two countries, given China’s military intervention in the Korean War in 1950 against the United States and the continued political and economic assistance given to North Korea by China. However, North Korea was quite opposed to China’s help in the Korean War in 1950, and only agreed to accept Chinese assistance at the insistence of Soviet leader

¹ [“Security Council Fails to Adopt Resolution Tightening Sanctions Regime in DPRK, as Two Members Wield Veto”](#), 9048th Meeting, 26 May 2022.

² Luo Shuxian, [“China’s North Korea Problem: How America Can Encourage Beijing to Rein in Pyongyang”](#), *Foreign Affairs*, 21 August 2025.;

³ [“Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Has Talks With Comrade Xi Jinping”](#), KCNA, 5 September 2025; also See, Rachel Minyoung Lee, [“Kim Jong Un’s Beijing Visit: A View from North Korea”](#), 38 North, 8 September 2025.

Joseph Stalin.⁴ Moreover, China’s observance and support of UN sanctions against Pyongyang’s nuclear tests show that North Korea’s nuclear decisions have always been independent of China’s influence. Therefore, China’s leverage over North Korea has always been subject to limitations, and the relations between the two countries have been strained.⁵

In addition, the September 2025 meeting also showed that China has prioritised the stability of the bilateral relationship with North Korea. Beijing did not mention denuclearisation in the Korean peninsula, which was a diplomatic advantage for North Korea. China had earlier supported various sanctions to convince North Korea to come to denuclearisation talks, especially after Xi Jinping came to power in 2012. Since North Korea’s first test in 2006, China has voted for various UN Security Council sanctions against North Korea. The relations came under considerable strain in 2013, when China backed a UN Security Council Resolution⁶ against North Korea for its third nuclear test.

The relationship further deteriorated in 2016, when China supported UN sanctions on restricting coal exports to North Korea and in 2017, when it supported a UN resolution on limiting oil supplies. China’s efforts to leverage its influence on North Korea through sanctions might have temporarily made North Korea agree to negotiations. Still, it did not lead them to abandon their nuclear ambitions. In fact, North Korea’s preference to negotiate with the US directly and its desire to seek Russia’s support have been evident.

Chinese Perceptions about the Korean Peninsula

China is known for its reluctance to support North Korea’s denuclearisation efforts at the cost of the regime’s stability. During the Cold War, China saw North Korea as a buffer zone, where the presence of the US in the Korean peninsula was seen as a threat to its borders. Therefore, a stable North Korean regime was preferable to a unified Korea under US influence.

China perceives that throughout its imperial history, a weaker Korean peninsula did not threaten the borders of the central governments (中央政权) of that time. However, whenever the empires in the Korean peninsula became powerful, the region often threatened imperial China’s borders.⁷ China had to send military resources to

⁴ Shen Zhihua, “Sino-North Korean Conflict and Its Resolution During the Korean War”, *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Issue 14/15, p. 9.

⁵ Charles Parton OBE and James Byrne, “[China’s Only Ally](#)”, *RUSI Newsbrief*, Vol. 41, No. 6, 2 July 2021.

⁶ Peter Green, “[China-US Accord Sets UN Vote on North Korea Sanctions](#)”, *Bloomberg*, 7 March 2013.

⁷ For a detailed view, see Yong-ku Cha, “One Goguryeo and Chinese Dynasties Spatial Perception of the Manchu Region”, in *The Borderlands of China and Korea: Historic Changes in the Contact Zones of East Asia*, 2020, Bloomsbury Publishing.

suppress or pacify the threat to maintain stability on the border.⁸ Therefore, preventing the Korean peninsula from becoming a major strategic threat has been in China’s interests for a long time.

China had a tributary relationship with the Korean peninsula, intervening militarily during the Ming dynasty (1592) to counter the Japanese invasion against the Joseon dynasty.⁹ Overall, in the Chinese view, successful dynasties throughout history had varying tributary relations, including vassal status with the Korean peninsula. Only during the modern period did China’s dominance in the Korean peninsula weaken after a series of defeats from Japan and other Western powers.

Great powers used the Korean peninsula’s geo-strategic position (as a bridge between the Eurasian continent and the Pacific) as a strategic gateway for territorial expansion.¹⁰ The Mongols, for instance, invaded Japan in 1274 and 1281 through the Korean peninsula. Therefore, in China’s view, the influence of major powers, whether continental or maritime, is not conducive to its security. This undoubtedly affects China’s perception of the role of the US, Russia or Japan in the Korean peninsula. As a result, its relations with North Korea assume importance, leading it to compromise whenever other major powers attempt to gain prominence in the Korean peninsula.

Moreover, the Korean peninsula’s maritime borders are essential to China. For instance, the maritime waters of the Yellow Sea and the East China Sea are strategic gateways for China. In any military action, continental powers are always reduced to a stalemate in the land areas of the Korean peninsula unless these powers, just like the US during the Cold War, utilise the maritime space and their naval superiority to improve their supply chains.¹¹ In this context, control of the maritime waters is crucial for any dominance in the Korean peninsula.

Therefore, the geo-strategic position of the Korean peninsula makes it a focal point, where these major land and maritime powers attempt to dominate, which invariably affects China’s security. The Chinese leadership throughout history has either repelled these powers or has become weakened due to their presence in the Korean peninsula. On the other hand, whenever the Korean peninsula became powerful,

⁸ Wang Hongguang, “[The Korean Peninsula: Beginning to Burden China During the Sui and Tang Dynasties](#)” (朝鲜半岛：隋唐时开始“拖累”中国), *People’s Digest*, 2014, Issue 6, 1 June 2014.

⁹ “[The Sino-Korean Victory and Yi Sun-shin’s Fall – The Naval Battle of Noryang](#)” (中朝的胜利和李舜臣的陨落——露梁海战), Anti-Japanese War Memorial Network, 29 October 2023; also see, Kenneth M. Swope, “Ming Grand Strategy During the Great East Asian War, 1592-1598”, in Stephen Haggard and David C. Kang (eds), *East Asia in the World: Twelve Events That Shaped the Modern International Order*, Cambridge University Press, 2020.

¹⁰ Zhang Xiaoming, “[Imagination and Dilemma: What Lies Behind Crisis?](#)” (想象与困境：危机后面是什么?), *The Paper*, 11 June 2021.

¹¹ “[China’s Strategic Relationship with Korean Peninsula: A Historic Perspective](#)” (从大历史的角度看中国与朝鲜半岛的战略关系), *The Paper*, 22 October 2020.

alongside the inability of China’s leaders to devote resources to keep a check on their growing powers, they attempted to capture China’s territory.¹²

More or less, in China’s historic narrative, the Korean peninsula has never maintained a prolonged independent status in the region. In addition, in China’s view, maritime and land powers like Japan, the US and Russia have been involved in the Korean peninsula, affecting each other’s security.¹³ Therefore, China’s policy is to maintain its influence on the Korean peninsula, which affects its policy towards North Korea. Its leverage is about reducing the dominance of other major powers as well as punishing the independent foreign policy of North Korea, which would lead it to seek policies that could be detrimental to China’s interests.

Does China have Leverage over North Korea?

There are reasons to believe that the survival of the North Korean regime depends on Chinese assistance. As a result, China does have leverage over North Korea if it has the political will to exercise that leverage.¹⁴ However, it is also evident that China’s leverage is more complex than assumed.¹⁵ Geopolitics plays a significant role in the Korean peninsula and, by extension, in North Korean politics. It is no different in China, but the historic perspectives are essential to its geopolitical perceptions. As a result, China’s perceptions about the geopolitical nature of the Korean peninsula drive its policy towards North Korea.

In this regard, North Korea’s nuclear programme is not in China’s interest as it may lead to a more independent foreign policy by Pyongyang. After supporting several sanctions, China had to reassess its relationship when North Korea was willing to engage in diplomatic talks with the Trump administration over denuclearisation in 2018. Xi Jinping then attempted to revive the partnership in 2018. It improved to some extent when Xi visited North Korea in March 2018, followed by Kim’s visit to China in May 2018, and Kim’s meetings with Xi in June 2018, January 2019, and June 2019 in China.

But the pandemic’s impact on North Korea, as well as the collapse of the US-North Korea denuclearisation talks in 2019, changed the regional situation once again. Instead of pursuing denuclearisation talks with the US in exchange for sanctions

¹² [“The Sino-Korean Victory and Yi Sun-shin’s Fall – The Naval Battle of Noryang”](#) (中朝的胜利和李舜臣的陨落——露梁海战), n. 9; Kenneth M. Swope, “Ming Grand Strategy During the Great East Asian War, 1592-1598”, no. 9.

¹³ Zhang Xiaoming, [“Imaginary Geopolitics and Historical Memory of the Korean Peninsula Dilemma”](#) (朝鲜半岛困境“想象中的地缘政治和历史记忆”), *The Paper*, 20 April 2021.

¹⁴ Yang Jiang, [“Sanctions Are An Important Tool in China’s North Korea Diplomacy”](#), DIIS Policy Brief, 22 February 2019.

¹⁵ Niklas Swanstorm, [“China as a Mediator in North Korea: Facilitating Dialogues or Mediating Conflicts”](#), Stimson Center, 5 June 2024.

relief, on 8 September 2022, North Korea instead revised its law on nuclear policy to indicate that its status as a nuclear-weapon state has become irreversible. According to this law, North Korea would launch a nuclear strike if the state’s leadership and nuclear command were placed in danger owing to an attack by hostile forces.¹⁶ The US-South Korea military exercises from 2016, which had included the simulation of decapitation strikes that targeted the North Korean leadership and subsequently, South Korea’s Yoon Suk-yeol’s call to its military for ‘three-axis system’ in July 2022¹⁷ (an operational plan targeting the North Korean leadership), became a major contributing factor.

China has expressed concerns regarding military exercises. It suited its interests to reduce the US military presence in the Korean peninsula in exchange for denuclearisation, which would have ensured China’s dominance in the region. This would have reduced the presence of great powers and maintained China’s influence in the region by attempting to mediate between North Korea and the US.

In Chinese calculations, North Korea’s regime stability translates to economic and trade relations that make it easier to survive the sanctions, including the vetoing of harsher UN sanctions and a mutual defence treaty. On the other hand, North Korea’s nuclear sabre-rattling gives China an advantage in pressuring the US to reduce its military presence and increase its ability to influence the process of denuclearisation through its role as a mediator.

However, North Korea’s nuclear modernisation and improved relations with Russia have altered Chinese security interests. North Korea has capitalised on the changed international situation after the Ukraine crisis by strengthening its diplomacy with China and Russia. For instance, for a cash-strapped North Korea, its security and defence cooperation with Russia would mean that it can initiate economic recovery in its country and improve its defence modernisation. Beijing and Pyongyang are interested in opposing the US as it deploys new regional capabilities, such as missile defence and conventional precision-strike systems. Conversely, the US wants to reduce the Chinese diplomatic space in the denuclearisation efforts.

As a result, Beijing’s frustrations with Pyongyang’s provocative behaviour, which has destabilised the region and resulted in international criticism directed at China, have not translated into policy changes that increase pressure on North Korea and are not likely to do so, at least not to the extent that will risk destabilising North Korea.¹⁸ The September 2025 meeting is a case in point, where most likely the

¹⁶ [“Law on DPRK’s Policy on Nuclear Forces Promulgated”](#), *KCNA Watch*, 9 September 2022.

¹⁷ Lee Haye-Ah, [“Yoon Orders Military to Swiftly Punish N. Korea in Case of Provocations”](#), *Yonhap News Agency*, 6 July 2022.

¹⁸ Kelsey Davenport, [“China, Russia Propose North Korea Sanctions Relief”](#), *Arms Control Today*, December 2021.

denuclearisation efforts were not mentioned because the stability of the bilateral relationship was paramount amidst increasing great power intrusion in the Korean peninsula.¹⁹ Besides that, the US military presence and the US-Japan military alliance still threaten both countries. China have to regard North Korea as an ally regardless of the adverse impact of North Korea's missile and nuclear weapons programmes on the overall situation in Asia.

This is reflected in Xi Jinping’s reaching out to the North Korean regime in 2018 and 2025. After the global pandemic made North Korea close its borders with China, in 2022, freight train operations resumed, and bilateral trade surged between the two countries. The infrastructure investments that China had initiated would likely continue in the long run. The Chinese government can be expected to ensure that its infrastructure investments will not go unused forever. Eventually, it may well prioritise the economic interests of the border regions over compliance with international sanctions.²⁰ This assumes that the US doesn’t take actions that would make increased trade with North Korea prohibitively costly for China, such as cutting the latter out of the US financial system or levying substantive secondary sanctions. Nevertheless, the increased economic interaction does not mean China can achieve its goal of denuclearisation in North Korea.

Conclusion

China’s attempt to punish North Korea’s nuclear ambitions by supporting sanctions while making sure that it does not lead to the collapse of the regime was viable before, as long as North Korea was willing to offer denuclearisation in exchange for sanctions relief. However, the formalisation of North Korea’s nuclear policy, including rapid nuclear and missile forces modernisation and intensification of US-China power competition, has made this policy difficult in the current situation, as North Korea can navigate the fissures in the US-China relations.

China’s historic narrative of the Korean peninsula prioritises keeping the major powers out and maintaining its presence in the region. Its robust economic ties with North Korea do not translate into pressuring Pyongyang to denuclearise, even as international sanctions have failed to curb North Korea’s nuclear ambitions. China’s responses have changed from overtly supporting sanctions to prioritising its trade and economic relationship with North Korea. It will likely continue to follow this policy path to maintain its relevance in the Korean peninsula.

¹⁹ Kim Min-Seo, “[North Korea-China Summit Omits ‘Denuclearisation’ Reference](#)”, *The Chosun Daily*, 8 September 2025.

²⁰ Jeong Tae Joo, “[New Yalu River Bridge Preparations Accelerate After North Korea-China Summit](#)”, *Daily NK*, 18 September 2025.

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