



UNISCI Discussion Papers

CHINA'S CHANGING RELATIONS WITH THE TWO KOREAS

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1. Introduction: China's Role and its Changing Relations toward the Two Koreas

During the six-party meetings held August 27-29, 2003, it was once again shown that China has an important role to play in the Korean peace process. During this time, South Korea, the U.S., and the Chinese observers all saw China's role as crucial. They came to a conclusion that China is the only remaining major ally of North Korea, and is the sole country that can communicate effectively with the completely isolated regime of Pyongyang. In their effort to solve the crisis over North Korea's nuclear weapons projects, the United States has asked China to use its strong historical ties with Pyongyang to try to persuade Kim Jong-il's regime to dismantle the program.

This paper will first examine the evolving strategic issues that the North Korean Nuclear Program is arousing in Northeast Asia. Then, it will look at China's role as a mediator between the U.S and North Korea but also its relations between the two Koreas to bring the peace on the Korean Peninsula and in the region as well.

2. Brief Historical View of Sino-Korean Relations

The Korean Peninsula and China share not only a border, but also a history and culture, which has aided in maintaining close ties between them.² The history of Sino-Korea relations can be traced back to the early Han Dynasty (206 B.C-219 A.D), when China destroyed the Weiman Chosun, which was the first Korean Dynasty, and then built 4 Chinese prefectures in the northern part of Korea by 108 B.C. From this early encounter with the Imperial China, Korea not only received the primary source of ancient Chinese culture and civilization, but it also had to confront with military expeditions.

Historically, there were massive Chinese interventions in the Korean Peninsula, especially when Korea challenged the Chinese empowered position over Korea. The peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula could only be restored when the Koreans gave in and promised to submit themselves to a "younger-brother" position. In other words, China tried to maintain Korea as its Middle-Kingdom, which in turn puts the later under the Chinese Imperial World Order. Because China would assume the role of the patron state towards Korea, Sino-Korea relationship was often characterized as the typical tributary system, at least

¹ Las opiniones expresadas en estos artículos son propias de sus autores. Estos artículos no reflejan necesariamente la opinión de UNISCI. The views expressed in these articles are those of the authors. These articles do not necessarily reflect the views of UNISCI

² The west coast of Korea to China's Shantung Peninsula is about 190Km. The land boundary between China and Korea is largely formed by two rivers: the Amnok-River (Yalu River in Chinese), and the Tuman-river (Tumen River in Chinese)



in pre-modern times³. However, toward the 20th century, even China became helpless amid the newly emerging World Order of the European, American and Japanese powers, which seemed to be making a serious impact on China's sovereignty. Little did either of the countries know, but the tragedy of China and Korea's modern history was in the making.

Among the new powers, Japan challenged the Chinese dominance over Korea, which resulted in the declaration of war on July 25, 1894. In April 1895, the Treaty of Shimonoseki was signed, which ended the war and gave Japan possession of the Liatung Peninsula (China), and Taiwan.⁴ This Sino-Japanese War not only brought the collapse of the Chinese world, but also resulted in the loss of their patron status in Korea. In fact, China was forced to concur with Japan, to make Korea an "independent state," which in turn led to the Korean dependence upon Japan. In doing this, Japan eliminated the Chinese influence over Korea. After a victorious result for the Japanese in the Russo-Japanese War of 1905, Japan's hegemonic influence over Korea had been finally established. As an end result, Japan had annexed Korea by 1910. Consequently, there were no state-to-state relations between China and Korea until after World War II when Korea was liberated from the Japanese colonial rule, and became an independent state.

China has been withdrawn from the Korean affairs since the defeat of the Sino-Japanese war in 1895, but it came back after its involvement in the 1950-1953 Korean War, in which it attempted to avoid the defeat of North Korea from the combined United Nations-South Korea Forces.⁵

Since the Chinese intervention in the Korean War, China was brought back as one of the four great powers in the region, together with the U.S, the Soviet Union, and Japan who have all been involved in the Korean issue either directly or indirectly since the beginning of the modern years. Among these four powers, the U.S. and China had clashed militarily in the Korean War. Since then, it has been the Sino-American relations that have made more impact on the two Koreas. After their involvement in the Korean War, both China and the U.S. recognized that at the very least, they must prevent any single power from dominating all of Korea. Of course, their main goal was to establish a dominant influence in Korea.

The price China paid for its intervention in the Korean War was high; it suffered almost one hundred thousand casualties. More importantly, because of the direct confrontation with the United States, who was the world's emerging superpower, China had to face the U.S. containment policy. Consequently, China was isolated from the international arena for two decades, until it gained a U.N. seat in October 1971, thanks to the "détente" during the Nixon Administration.

Following the Nixon-Doctrine and the Nixon's visit to Beijing in 1971, the antagonism between China and the U.S. officially ended, and the two countries entered a new phase of bilateral relations. The Sino-U.S. détente in the 1970s was a result of the significant changes

³ Jin-young Suh, "The Sino-U.S. Relations and the Two Koreas," This article was presented in the International conference on China & East Asia: A Critical Assessment at the Dawn of a New Millennium (August 3-4, 2001) in Korea University in Seoul.

⁴ Morinosuke Kajima (1968): *The Emergence of Japan as a World Power 1895-1925*. Tokyo:Charles E. Tuttle Co., p.157.

⁵ Although there were no state to state relations, there existed Korean independent Government first in Shanghai and later in Chungking and both China and Korea maintained close unofficial contacts during the Japanese colonial rule in Korea.



in China's strategic perspective, which focused on the reality of power politics rather than on ideology. Such pragmatic approach was shown in the gradual changes in China's Korea policy as well. In other words, China became more and more pragmatic towards the issue of peace and stability in the Korean Peninsula.

Furthermore, in the 1980s, which is referred to as the post-Mao period, China actively pursued cooperation with the U.S. and Japan, while at the same time discreetly developing unofficial ties with South Korea. The reform and open door policy expressed by Deng Xiaoping, gave China diplomatic flexibility to assume a more even-handed approach to both North and South Korea.

China's relations with both Koreas provided it with a distinct advantage vis-à-vis the U.S. and Japan. This is because China was often expected to exercise its reasonably good relations with the two Koreas, the U.S. and Japan. In particular, the Clinton Administration recognized China as a market-oriented and more pragmatic country, and admitted that it can play a constructive role in maintaining the stability and peace in the region. With the establishment of the "constructive strategic partnership" with China, both the U.S. and China could effectively deal with regional issues, such as the prevention of war on the Korean Peninsula, and the North Korean nuclear issue. Furthermore, with the growing preoccupation with North Korea's nuclear project, the U.S. realized that it was necessary to maintain cooperative relations with China, so they could help stop North Korea's Nuclear Weapons programs and restrict exports of ballistic-missile technology to the possible enemies of the U.S.⁶ Hence, China started assuming the role of an intermediary not only between North Korea and the U.S. but also between North and South Korea.

China's ability as a mediator was shown on various occasions. It was China that recommended North and South Korea to join the U.N. in 1991, and it was China who advised North Korea to accept the Four Party Peace Conference proposed by South Korea and the U.S. in 1996.⁷ These meetings were the first ones that involved the four leading participants in the Korean War.⁸ Also, China played an important role behind the stage in the process of the preparatory negotiations of the North and South Korea summit on June 2000.⁹ It is noticeable that just before the inter-Korean summit, Kim Jong-il, with an invitation from the Chinese Communist Party, made a secret visit to Beijing, followed by a visit to Shanghai in January of 2001.¹⁰ Lastly, as it was briefly mentioned above, China arranged the six party meetings of September 2003 in Beijing through extensive shuttle diplomacy, and took an unusually active role in trying to find common ground between the U.S., who does not appear

⁶ *Chosun Il-b*, June 28, 1998.

⁷ Jin-young Suh, p.8.

⁸ In the course of negotiation towards a permanent peace on the Korean Peninsula, China even succeeded in bringing together officials from North and South Korea in a cocktail party for the participants. BBC News Online: *Korean Peace Talks: China's shadowy role*. December 22, 1997. See also Kang In-duk, "1998 Perspective of the situation Around the Korean Peninsula, and the Roles of the Surrounding Countries", *East Asian Review*, Vol.10, No.1, Spring 1998, p.20-21

⁹ *Kanwa news* (China), "The Relations Between Korean Peninsula and Cross-strait." April 20th, 2000. www.Kanwa.com/free/0016/e0604c.htm

¹⁰ Park Doo-bok, "Sino-Korean Relations since 1992: Achievements and Prospects." *East Asian Review*, Vol. 14, No.1, spring 2002, p.7.



to have a negotiating strategy beyond using multilateral meetings to put pressure on Pyongyang, and North Korea, who does not accept these conditions.¹¹

In these circumstances, the role of China is viewed as essential in generating momentum between the two countries. The U.S. has declared that North Korea should dismantle its nuclear program “fully, verifiable and irreversibly,” in advance of dialogue. In return, North Korea has responded that by imposing those conditions, U.S. is demanding Pyongyang’s surrender and “surrender means death.”¹²

3.China’s Changing Relations toward the two Koreas

Clearly, China does not want North Korea to collapse. In addition, China doesn’t want to see the South take over the North in the same way West Germany took over East Germany in a democratic union. China fears a unified democratic Korea with U.S. troops at its doorstep (37,000 U.S. troops are deployed at present South Korea) that can turn against communist China. China still wants to preserve communism in the world and it does not want to see the few remaining communist parties in power into extinction.¹³

Bearing such geopolitical conditions in mind, China and North Korea have maintained close ties, particularly in the military and security sectors. Until the beginning of the 1990s, China had offered full support to the communist regime in North Korea, which they viewed as a buffer state. In addition, China regards any pressure or military threat toward the North as a serious challenge to its “authority” over the neighboring nation. In this context, it is understandable why China had dilemma dealing with South Korea other than economic issue. Nevertheless, in the 1990s there has been a considerable change in Beijing’s position regarding its policy toward the Korean Peninsula, as shown by the establishment of diplomatic relations with Seoul.

Following a normalization of relations with South Korea in 1992, Beijing gradually assumed a more balanced position in its policies toward the two Koreas. In recognition of a rapidly expanding trade and investment relationship with South Korea, China’s equidistance policy has been replaced by a more pragmatic approach, which reflects its own interest in stability and in the promotion of economic development.¹⁴

Another indication of change was that China’s official relationship with North Korea has been considerably weakened in the absence of direct personal ties. These ties were formerly enjoyed by first-generation revolutionary comrades, including Kim Il-sung, who spoke Chinese and Deng Xiaoping. Afterwards, although the official high-level ceremonial exchanges continued, the trust, which is essential for any alliance, was gone.¹⁵

To minimize the negative effects and damage to its relations with the North, China pursued an extremely discrete policy. In particular, it tried to limit cooperation with South Korea in the areas of politics and the military. This is something that could have seriously

¹¹ *International Herald Tribune*, “U.S. and North Korea open talks.” August 28, 2003. See also, “China takes new steps for talks on North Korea.” July 18, 2003. See also, “Chinese call U.S. an obstacle on North Korea.” September 3, 2003.

¹² *International Herald Tribune*, “North Korea brings its brinkmanship to Beijing” August 26, 2003.

¹³ *The Christian Science*, “For Korean neighbors, China suggests “two system.” September 6, 2000

¹⁴ Scott Snyder, “North Korea’s Decline and China’s Strategic Dilemmas.” United States Institute of Peace, October 1997. Marking the tenth anniversary of diplomatic relations in August 2002, between south Korea and China, the two countries reached the third-largest trading relations, recording 31.2 billion dollars in trade. The number of contacts between Chinese and South Koreans has reached 2 million, remarkable progress compared to the 90,000 contacts ten years ago.

¹⁵ Yu Bin, “China’s Dilemma in the Current Korean Crisis.” CSIS PacNet Newsletter. February 20, 2003.



damaged existing relations with North Korea. This policy, in return, produced a serious imbalance in the relations between China and South Korea. In recognition of this imbalance, some Chinese scholars started suggesting a policy change toward the Korean Peninsula. They suggested a pragmatic policy approach to the Korean Peninsula that accepts the reality that the status quo may be unsustainable. Among them, there was a clear recognition that the balance of power on the Korean Peninsula had shifted toward Seoul.¹⁶

1995 proved to be the turning point year because the two countries had made slow but steady progress to improve the imbalance (China tried to maintain only economic relations with south Korea) that characterized their relations since the normalization in 1992. In fact, the relations between China and South Korea were advancing from economic areas to areas of politics and military. This evolution indicated the fading away of the transitional and structural factors that had disturbed the balance and the progress in China-South Korea relations.¹⁷ Therefore, when the Chinese leadership shifted from Deng Xiaoping to Jiang Zemin, policy also moved away from the Mao's ideology and legacy. The new conditions gave China a more favorable way to think regarding their policy on the Korean Peninsula.

Late in 1995, the Chinese Premier Jiang Zemin went on a weeklong visit to South Korea with focus on the expansion of cooperation and additional ties in areas involving the fostering of economic relations.¹⁸ With President Kim Dae-jung's state visit to China in November 1998, the relations between the two were upgraded to a cooperative partnership. Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji's subsequent visit to Korea in October 2000 resulted in the further progress in relations-- from imbalanced, partial cooperation, to a more balanced and comprehensive partnership.¹⁹ Nevertheless, with the progress on development in relations between China and South Korea in mind, they saw that in order to expand the China/South Korea relations further (in the areas of politics and security), changing the nature of the special ties between China and North Korea was a prerequisite.

In this respect, it is important to note that the nature of the Chinese and North Korean relations was based on revolutionary and ideological solidarity, which was tied up with sentimental elements, rather than usual national interests. Thus, in order to minimize the damage and maintain stability between the Chinese and North Korean relations, the most important task for China was to normalize those special ties so they can act as a major factor between North Korea and the International community.

It seems understandable that while the China-South Korea ties were warming up, relations between China and North Korea were considerably cooling down, at least during the initial years. North Korea accused the Chinese of being "revisionist" and "betrayal" as establishing diplomatic relations with South Korea. China, in turn, criticized North Korea's nuclear program for being a destabilizing factor in the region and the North Korean leadership for its economic reforms. In addition, China was not content with the fact that North Korea failed to prevent the exodus of North Korean people crossing the Chinese border.²⁰ For these reasons among others, both allies had uncomfortable relations in the first half of the 1990s.

¹⁶ Scott Snyder. P.1.

¹⁷ Park Doo-bok, "Sino-Korean Relations since 1992: Achievements and Prospects." *East Asian Review*, Vol.14, No.1, spring 2002, p.4-6.

¹⁸ It is noticeable that since the death of Kim Il-sung in July 1994, China has sent only low-profile delegations to North Korea while top-ranking officials such as Premier Jian Zemin, Li Peng and Zhu Rongji visited to Seoul. Taeho Kim, p.47.

¹⁹ *CNN.com*, "China reaffirms commitment to peace talks between South, North Korea," October 18, 2000, web posted at 5:22 p.m. HKT (0922 GMT). See also Park Doo-bok, p.7.

²⁰ Yu Bin, p. 2.



However, both countries soon realized the necessity of restoring their special relations when they saw the rapidly changing political climate in Northeast Asia after the Cold War, along with the mutual needs of both countries. Under this circumstance, and with Kim Jong-il's visit to China, relations between the two countries entered in a new phase.²¹ Premier Jiang made a state visit to Pyongyang on September 3, 2001, which resulted in a high level of contacts and channels of communication to become restored. The new normalization of relations made the task for the countries to adjust their policies possible.²²

China viewed North Korea's attitude toward newly improving relations with it as a process of an adjustment. It also interpreted North Korea's initiative as acceptance of China's new policy, which now is based on the principle of independence, under the "post-ideological stance," "non-camp-based diplomacy," and "the end of special alliance of blood-ties," on Korea Peninsula.

Accordingly, improvements in the bilateral relations between China and North Korea moved toward normalization, based on national interests and reciprocity, which means that they would not go back to the past "special alliance." In this way, China has been liberated from its dilemma to apply balanced policies for both Koreas. The North Korean factor, which had been a major obstacle in China's Korean peninsula policy, has waned in importance. Consequently, China's attitude on the Korean Peninsula issue has changed from that of an indirect and passive attitude, to a more direct and active one. This implies that instead of giving automatic support to North Korea's position, China will seek an active, constructive role in dealing with the Korean question.

A mature and rational attitude is apparent in China's recent approach to its relations with the U.S. as well. Even the "hard-liners" of the Bush Administration recognize China's constructive role in maintaining the stability and peace in the region. As a result, the relations became more cooperative, and gave priority to shared interests, which include things like the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. They also discussed Sino-U.S conflicts surrounding such issues as the U.S. spy plane incident of April 2001, China's hard-line stance on Taiwan's independence, human rights in China, and the American MD (Missile Defense) program.²³

The evidence of the new role that China is playing has been shown in the recent six party talks in Beijing, in which both Koreas, the U.S., Japan, China, and Russia participated. In these meetings, the pragmatic diplomacy of Hu Jintao has made China get directly engaged in an active role in organizing the event and continuing its job as a go-between with U.S. and North Korea.²⁴ After the six-nation talks, China summarized its position toward the Korean Peninsula in three points: First, China wants the peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula to be preserved. Their aim is to prevent North Korea's collapse, and for that China is undoubtedly committed to ensuring that the Pyongyang's regime survives and opposes any military option U.S. might take to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue. Accordingly, China is against the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), a grouping of 11 countries led by the U.S. to hold air and ground interdiction exercises. Through this PSI, the committed countries can seizure the North Korean ships and air craft.²⁵

²¹ Kim also made two unprecedented visits to the Chinese embassy in Pyongyang in March and in July 2001.

²² Park Hahn-kyu, "Readjusting the National Interests: Four Power Relations and Korea's Strategic choices after the Summit." *East Asian Review*, Vol.14, No.2, summer 2002, p.32.

²³ Park Hahn-kyu, p.24. See also, Jin-young Suh, p.8.

²⁴ "China takes role of Korea mediator", *New York Times*, August 27, 2003.

²⁵ *Financial Times*, September 5, 2003.



Second, China stresses that the Korean Peninsula should remain nuclear-free because they have reasons to be worried if North Korea declares itself a nuclear power. The nuclearization of Northeast Asia, (with Japan, South Korea and Taiwan being nuclear capable), threatens China's national security. Third, the dispute should be resolved through diplomatic and political methods. In any case, because China is against U.S. military options, it might result in massive North Korean refugee flight into China, which would gravely disrupt the Chinese economic development.

In these circumstances, China's ultimate goal is to keep the stability of the Korean Peninsula, in which a non-nuclearized DPRK would be critical. At this point, Beijing has overlapping interests with the U.S., and in order to deter North Korea from becoming a nuclear power, it will apply its considerable leverage on Pyongyang.

When Beijing cut off the oil pipeline from China's northeastern province Liaoning to North Korea for three days in early March in 2003, Pyongyang quickly showed discontent. This happened soon after Pyongyang test-fired a missile into waters between the peninsula and Japan. After the incident, the Chinese reportedly told the North Korean government that the suspension was necessary for technical reasons, but it surely gave a warning to the DPRK.²⁶ It is also noteworthy that a partial Chinese troop movement began right after the six party talks. China has deployed up to 150,000 troops on its border with North Korea while its Air Force exercised over the capital Yanji, some 40 kilometers from the North Korean border.²⁷ The Chinese said that the troop deployment was to control the flow of North Korean refugees who were fleeing to China to escape the famine and recession, and also to control growing violence on the border, that was allegedly carried out by North Korean soldiers in the course of preventing the escape. Nevertheless, considering the fact that the Chinese government rarely comments on military issues, its announcement could be a sign of a strategic move aimed at stepping up pressure on North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapon program.

In these circumstances, the Hu Administration certainly assumes a key role on the international stage to get officials from Pyongyang and Washington meeting together with the R.O.K., Russia and Japan, to manage the crisis rather than turn it into a confrontation through non-diplomatic means. In doing so, even if the future negotiations collapse, China preserves its position as an essential intermediary between the U.S. and North Korea. Therefore, with its increasing role in the international community and the mutual cooperation in the scheme of "constructive strategic partnership" with the U.S., China can effectively deal with their issues. Whether it is the North Korean nuclear problem, which in fact is the most disturbing factor in the process of peace and stability in the Korean Peninsula, or other regional issues, China now has ample experience in handling problems, and is now ready to embark on its own to help to solve them.

²⁶ China fear of the U.S. deployment of theater missile defense justifying to protect its troops stationed in the South Korea.

²⁷ According to a statement of the Director of the Chinese policy program at George Washington University, David Shambaugh, the Chinese traditionally move troops to borders to send signals to others; this could be a signal to North Korea and to the U.S. as well.