



**Pyongyang needs Beijing more, not the reverse** by Ren Xiao

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Ri Su-yong's early June visit to China was the first by a high-ranking North Korean politician since the UN Security Council adopted the toughest sanctions ever against North Korea in March 2016. The high-profile delegation led by Ri, vice chairman of the seventh Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) and former minister of foreign affairs, has garnered wide attention.

On the surface, Ri visited China with the purported goal of briefing on the outcome of the just concluded seventh Congress of the WPK. But the real purpose was probably to break away from the sanctions by seeking a breakthrough in China.

The fourth nuclear test by North Korea in January has reinforced Pyongyang's determination to own nuclear weapons. Such an ambition has been harshly countered by the joint efforts of the UN Security Council. China has shown support for tough sanctions against North Korea and other previous Security Council resolutions on North Korea. Beijing has already put a lot of effort into implementing concrete measures, including the ban on the import and export of a number of specific items to and from North Korea.

Pundits and scholars have varied opinions about current Sino-North Korean ties. When I was in New York recently for a conference at the Korea Society, the head of a US think tank commented that China needs North Korea more than North Korea needs China, because Beijing doesn't want Pyongyang to fall apart.

Such a challenging view seems out of line with the facts. China is much better positioned than North Korea in all areas, especially foreign relations and the economy. Isolated by the international community and afflicted by long-standing economic difficulties, North Korea has a lot to ask from China, not vice versa.

But for a long time, Pyongyang might have tried to make Beijing believe in its importance to China in order to benefit from the bilateral relationship. For years, this idea left less wiggle room for China to deal with North Korea-related issues, and so China always resorted to compromises.

Regarding the current Sino-North Korean relationship, whether North Korea is still China's "buffer zone" is a question that cannot be evaded. During the Cold War, North Korea was indeed a buffer zone for China's national security. Over 20 years have passed since the Iron Curtain was lifted,

and the global landscape has gone through a makeover. In the Korean Peninsula, the South is rising and prospering, while the North is declining and lagging far behind. It is not hard to identify which development model is more progressive.

South Korea has also become a pivot in China's foreign relations. Since China's transfer of leadership in 2012, China and South Korea have ramped up their relationship to an unprecedented level, while the Sino-North Korean relationship remains lukewarm, and the top leaders of the two countries have not met each other.

Given globalization and the wide use of drones, the "buffer zone" idea is outdated and sticking to it may be a sign of a Cold War mentality.

In the past 20-plus years, North Korea has been wheeling and dealing in an attempt to become a nuclear power. The closer it gets to this goal, the more likely there will be a nuclear disaster. China will bear the brunt if a nuclear leak or accident occurs in North Korea. Given this scenario, China would rather embrace a "capitalist" South Korea than accept a "socialist" and nuclear weapon-armed North Korea. People have been talking about a North Korean collapse for over 20 years, but it hasn't happened. People are probably too worried about this.

Therefore, it is not a rising China that should cozy up to North Korea. Instead, while facing a serious problem of survival, North Korea needs to appeal to China for help.

Reluctant to give up its nuclear programs, Pyongyang must be feeling rising pressures caused by the sanctions including China's. Thus, Pyongyang might hope Ri could convince China to relax the sanctions, but it won't be easy.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.*