



## China Debates DPRK Policy by Ren Xiao

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Policy toward the DPRK is one of the few foreign affairs issues that has triggered great debate in China. Over the years, China's policy toward North Korea has been driven by inertia. There was a clear ideological element that regarded the DPRK as a "socialist country." The Chinese used an idiom "kukou poxin" – basically meaning to urge somebody repeatedly with good intentions – to describe efforts to persuade Pyongyang to constrain itself with respect to nuclear development and to take a new path of reform and opening-up.

North Korea's recent brazen moves again caused a policy debate in China. In the research community, analysts have been debating whether China should change course with regard to North Korea policy. A challenging question – whether the DPRK should be "abandoned" – has been raised. The "abandonment" school argued that after so many disappointments, China had to use pressure to rein in Pyongyang and not allow it to damage China's security interests. Pyongyang's brinkmanship had given the US many reasons to strengthen its military presence in the region, including the development of a missile defense system, which clearly is not in China's interest. If North Korea shows no regard for its national interests, why should China humor Kim Jong-un's wayward behavior? China should be prepared to accept that a change in policy would risk deterioration of the China-DPRK relationship.

Opponents of this shift do not accept the phrase "abandonment" and see it as naïve and extreme. According to a *Global Times* editorial, "The North has annoyed most Chinese. Voices pushing to 'abandon North Korea' can be heard. They have even become formal suggestions by some strategists. There is no need to hide Chinese society's dissatisfaction with the North, and the interests of the DPRK and China have never coincided. However, the North remains at the forefront of China's geopolitics. The US pivot to the Asia Pacific has two strategic prongs, namely Japan and South Korea, and North Korea is still a buffer closer to them. Whether there is a friendly North Korea toward China will impact the strategic posture in Northeast Asia." The influential newspaper believed China's policymakers will not follow the "abandonment" suggestion. A similar viewpoint cautioned against "demonizing the DPRK and the external forces driving a wedge between China and the DPRK," arguing that this was "simple logic."

A third view is that China should make policy adjustments. It is irresponsible to ignore the current state of China-DPRK relations, which can be dangerous. Those who

believe that criticizing the current China-DPRK relationship is to demonize the DPRK and split China and North Korea are overly ideological. They are not looking at the relationship from the vantage point of nation to nation, but rather seeing the DPRK as an ideological ally. What needs to be stressed is that the relationship has to become a normal state-to-state relationship, and only on this basis can choices be made. China should decide to upgrade or downgrade the level of this relationship according to actual needs, and this has to be clear rather than remain ambiguous or muddled. China can offer Pyongyang what it wants, but Pyongyang has to respect China's interests in return. China has given considerable resources as aid to the North, which has played a key role in North Korea's stability and its survival. Under these circumstances, Pyongyang has to consider China's interests or concerns rather than disregard them and even kidnap or loot Chinese fishing boats and fishermen working in adjacent seas. In this context, maintaining the current level of China-DPRK relations would be laughable and wrong and would not win the other party's respect. On the contrary, China ought to be very clear and make Pyongyang acknowledge China's national interests by making adjustments in its state-to-state relations with the DPRK, including respect for the safety of Chinese fishermen and their property. China is bound to adjust its North Korean policies, but it doesn't mean Beijing will side with the US, Japan, and South Korea. Rather, it will respond to the North's extreme moves that offend China's interests and will make the North correct those moves.

A fundamental question in the debate is this: is North Korea a buffer zone or a time bomb? There are people who believe that the North is a buffer in terms of China's security thinking, a counterweight to the US-ROK alliance, and China should not "lose" it. One argument in support of this approach asserts that a buffer zone would be useful in the event of a contingency in the Taiwan Strait during which the United States might mobilize its troops stationed in South Korea. A different school of thought contends that militarily, a "buffer zone" like the North does not matter today. Instead, the North has become a time bomb that could explode at any time. Beijing must dissuade Pyongyang from believing that China will always believe the DPRK is a buffer for China's security. In fact North Korea was oblivious of China's interests or concerns and made unbridled moves. Heightened tensions on the peninsula justified the upgrade of the US-ROK alliance, providing Washington with a further reason to "rebalance to Asia" by shifting more resources to East Asia and the Pacific region. This is not in China's national interest. At the end of the day, is North Korea an asset or liability? This continues to be a fundamental question for Beijing.

More broadly, quite a few Chinese observers argue that since the end of the Cold War, China has not had a clear idea about its relations with the DPRK. China did not adjust its

policies over time and they became disconnected from the realities of international and bilateral relations as well as from China's own development. This situation emerged partially because Cold War legacies lingered and partially because DPRK policy drifted along as there was a need for an ideological ally. As a result, China did not carry out appropriate analyses and planning for the bilateral relationship, which was in limbo and in effect wavering between socialist allies and a normal state-to-state relationship. The adverse consequences include: China being towed along by North Korea, Beijing lacking influence over Pyongyang, and a selfish North Korea largely ignoring China's national interests. The recent Chinese fishing boat incident was the latest example of these trends.

China had long been reluctant to use pressure in its foreign relations, to a large extent because of its own experience of being bullied or pressured. Many times, Beijing hesitated to use pressure in its dealings with North Korea but eventually did so as a result of Pyongyang's unscrupulous behavior. This seemed to have worked: that was the reason Kim Jong-un's sent his special envoy, Choe Ryong-hae, to Beijing in June, attempting to mend the DPRK-China relationship. More recently, China under the new Xi-Li leadership, gave visiting ROK President Park Geun-hye a warm embrace in Beijing, in part to redress the balance after its questionable handling of the *Cheonan* and Yeonpyeong Island incidents in 2010 that caused resentment in South Korea. However, these were more adjustments rather than a fundamental policy change on the part of China.

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