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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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No. 079/2012 dated 3 May 2012

## **A Friend in Need: What Future for Sino-North Korea Relations?**

By Ong Suan Ee

### **Synopsis**

*Sino-North Korean relations are bound by history and tradition, but under strain thanks to growing nervousness over Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions and rising international suspicion. Is North Korea risking pushing its friend too far?*

### **Commentary**

CHINESE PRESIDENT Hu Jintao recently reaffirmed his country's ruling party's commitment to traditional ties with North Korea and lauded Kim Jong-Un's nascent leadership, despite concerns over Pyongyang's recent rocket launch and rumours of a third nuclear test. Hu made his statement in a meeting with Kim Yong-Il, the Korean Workers' Party director of international affairs, in Beijing. Hu and Chinese State Councillor Dai Bingguo both reiterated China's friendship with North Korea, calling for stronger communication and coordination on key international issues, particularly the Korean peninsula's peace and stability.

In covering this event, Chinese national broadcaster CCTV did not mention North Korea's 13 April rocket launch, which Pyongyang insists was to put an earth observation satellite into orbit. In fact, China was quick to reproach the launch, joining its fellow United Nations Security Council members in condemning the launch and warning Pyongyang of serious consequences if it were to carry out another missile launch or nuclear test. Alongside, however, China's response to calls for further sanctions on Pyongyang has been tepid at best.

### **Ties that bind**

China and North Korea are traditional allies. In 1950, China entered the Korean War in support of North Korea, and in 1961, the two countries signed the Sino-North Korean Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty, which charges China with defending North Korea in the event of unprovoked external aggression. This treaty has been renewed twice - in 1981 and 2001 - and is valid until 2021.

Some critics remain skeptical of this treaty as China arguably has the right to authoritatively determine the conditions that would invoke their intervention. Additionally, in the post-Cold War era, China has shown, in economic and trade practice at least, that it increasingly values national interest over ideology-based alliances.

China and North Korea are also bound by trade. China, North Korea's number one trade partner, comprises more than 70 per cent of North Korea's foreign trade, exporting mainly food, oil, machinery, consumer goods,

and refined petroleum products to North Korea. Meanwhile, North Korea sells commodities like copper, coal and iron ore to China. China's trade with North Korea has more than doubled since 2006, peaking at US\$ 5.1 billion last year.

Beijing's investment in North Korea and Chinese border infrastructure is also rising. Some believe this is part of Chinese strategy to encourage North Korea to institute Chinese-style market reforms. This is undoubtedly beneficial to Pyongyang as well, particularly in the aftermath of it declaring to its citizens that it would become a "strong and prosperous great nation" in 2012. In order to achieve this objective (no matter how far-fetched it may seem), it will need big brother China on its side.

### **External tensions**

The rest of the world, however, is turning an increasingly wary and weary eye towards Pyongyang – and by extension, towards China's approach to Pyongyang.

North Korea recently escalated its war of words against South Korea. In a show of bold bellicosity, national broadcaster Korean Central News Agency announced that the military would "soon" use "unprecedented peculiar means and methods" that would reduce the government of President Lee Myung-Bak and his supporters to ashes within minutes. Seoul responded by stating that the South Korean military and its US allies were prepared to cope with Northern provocation.

South Korean intelligence officials have also released satellite images showing that the North is preparing for a third nuclear test and predictions that the test could take place as soon as two weeks from now, aggravating concerns of further provocation. However, Reuters has reported that an inside source close to Pyongyang and Beijing said that North Korea might consider abandoning this test if the US were to agree to a peace treaty. This comes as no surprise to those who have long observed what has been called Pyongyang's 'cycle of provocation and accommodation'.

Also, US-North Korea relations at present can best be described as strained and suspicious. The US suspended its pledge of 240,000 metric tonnes of food aid to Pyongyang following the April missile launch, stating that if Pyongyang could not be trusted to honour its Leap Day Deal commitments to suspend major elements of its atomic programme, it could not be trusted to ensure the equitable distribution of aid.

The Obama administration recently revealed suspicions that a Chinese firm had supplied parts for a North Korean missile-transport vehicle displayed in a parade at the centenary celebrations of Eternal President Kim Il-Sung's birth. This has heightened Washington's apprehension of China's commitment to abiding by the prohibition of weapons sales to Pyongyang.

Beijing, meanwhile, has denied any violation of this rule and instead focused on calling for further dialogue and open communication with Pyongyang. The final objective, they maintain, is a return to regional denuclearisation talks that have been frozen since 2009. Meanwhile, the US continues to apply diplomatic pressure on China, asking it to exert greater pressure on North Korea.

### **Looking ahead**

In a year of leadership transition in both China and the US, neither of these major powers can afford to show weakness towards the other. As unlikely as it is for the US to back down on putting pressure on China, it also seems implausible for Washington to up the ante and outwardly incriminate Beijing over its support for Pyongyang. Furthermore, it would be unwise for the US to rock the boat too vehemently with a trade partner as important as China.

It therefore remains likely that China will continue to support North Korea in the manner it always has. Nonetheless, its backing of the UN Security Council resolution condemning the Pyongyang satellite launch suggests that Beijing still values its international credibility and legitimacy, perhaps even more so than Washington gives it credit for.

Over the years, Pyongyang has repeatedly shown Beijing that even at the best of times, it can be a vexatious friend. Fortunately or otherwise, it appears that we have yet to see the extent to which it can push Beijing without suffering serious consequences.

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