

# Will China Allow North Korea to Collapse?

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## Abstract

Relations between China and North Korea have deteriorated during the last year, but Beijing has not fundamentally changed its approach toward its neighbor because that approach serves vital Chinese interests. If the regime of Kim Jong Un should look like it might fail—and there are several reasons why it could—Beijing’s leaders will undoubtedly do all they can to effect a rescue. The Chinese state, however, is not as stable or as capable as it appears, and it may not be in a position to lend needed assistance.

Keywords: China, North Korea, South Korea, United States, Korean People’s Army, Korean Workers’ Party, People’s Liberation Army, Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il, Kim Jong Un, Jang Song Thaek, Xi Jinping, Park Geun-hye, Ri Su Yong

## Introduction

Xi Jinping, the Chinese leader, did not call Kim Jong Un “comrade” in May 2016 when he congratulated the North Korean on his election as chairman of the Workers’ Party of Korea. Xi, however, did use the term, connoting close ties, the previous October in a message marking the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the Korean ruling organization.<sup>1</sup>

As the difference in the two congratulatory messages suggests, relations between the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea and the People’s Republic of China have frayed in recent months. These days, the two fraternal states—they are each other’s only formal military ally—hardly talk. Chinese diplomats and officials often complain to outsiders about how difficult the North Koreans can be, and some believe—and almost everyone hopes—Beijing is changing its policies toward Pyongyang.

And because the North Korean state now appears fragile, many have wondered whether China will come to its rescue should it look like failure is imminent. In short, Beijing will try to do so, but internal

difficulties and other factors may prevent Chinese officials from saving their ally in Pyongyang.

### **The Stability of the North Korean State**

The DPRK, as the North Korean regime likes to call itself, has been staving off collapse since at least the end of the 1980s. The constant destitution of a large portion of the population, of course, naturally suggests the possibility of failure.

The famine of the 1990s, closely following the death of Kim Il Sung, seemed to be a time of extreme vulnerability for the Kim family. Yet the Great Leader's successor, son Kim Jong Il, was able to steer the regime through that period, the so-called Arduous March, in which as many as three million people perished.

How could Dear Leader Kim survive such a severe crisis? Principally because the hardship for most people was so great that they had no means to resist his rule. The impoverished, because they must devote all their energy to day-to-day survival, rarely start successful revolts or revolutions. Famine almost always reduces a populace's ambitions.

Today, the North's economy looks to be far more stable, yet the political system could be less resilient, in large part because of society's changing perception of Kim rulers. In the era of regime founder Kim Il Sung, people genuinely worshipped their leader as divine. Children were indoctrinated to believe that the charismatic Kim had powers possessed by no other—the ability to transcend time and space, for instance, and the knack for turning pine cones into grenades—and, in a completely closed off society, people believed these and other equally absurd notions.

The first Kim ruler, therefore, did not have to worry much about legitimacy, but his aura has naturally dimmed over time. Kim Jong Il, so unlike his father in temperament and demeanor, hastened the erosion. Kim Jong Un, young and in power for only a few years, of course does not have a stature comparable to the Great Leader.

The current Kim ruler, the grandson, evokes Kim Il Sung in his dress, physical appearance, and mannerisms, and it should come as no surprise that he does so in an apparent attempt to bolster legitimacy. No one, however, thinks he is other than mortal. Moreover, he does not hold the same place in society as his predecessors. Many North Koreans do not bother referring to him as “General” or “Supreme Leader,” instead

daring to use disrespectful terms such as “that guy Jong Un” or “that kid.”<sup>2</sup> It appears that many ordinary North Koreans are just faking emotions when publically showing reverence to the young Kim, believed to be 33.

The lack of real devotion would not pose a crisis in most states, but it does in North Korea, which many argue makes best sense if viewed as a cult.<sup>3</sup> A cult needs a leader held in mystical regard, and no one today thinks of Kim Jong Un, however he dresses or whatever he may do to imitate Kim Il Sung, in such a way.

As Marzuki Darusman said while he was UN Rapporteur for Human Rights in North Korea, there is these days a “legitimacy gap.” And at the same time, the regime’s ideology “is totally defunct.”<sup>4</sup> The core tenet of the Kim family is *juche*, introduced within two years after the end of the Korean War. The term literally means “master of one’s self” or self-reliance, but it encompasses much more. In the world of *juche*, the state is an organism with the leader being the head and the people the body. Ordinary folk, therefore, must follow their leader as the body follows the head.

That concept has lost resonance, but the North Korean people, outside of official realms, have indeed become their own masters as *juche* tells them they are. And in a real sense they accomplished that on their own and out of necessity.

Kim Jong Il during the Arduous March cut people loose from the protection and care of the state, which no longer provided food or essential social services for most civilians outside the capital of Pyongyang. Moreover, social and political controls broke down as people roamed the country—and crossed back and forth across the border with China—looking for food. Those who did not perish survived by thinking for themselves. For the first time in their lives, people, who had grown up in the embrace of a totalitarian system, acted without state direction or approval.

Then, many parts of North Korea became free societies, and ordinary citizens on their own figured out how free economies work. They developed markets in their own hamlets, and itinerant traders linked those communities together.

Kim Jong Il tried many times to rein in those free markets, most notably with the changes put in place in July 2002, but he never quite managed to do so.<sup>5</sup> Returning to a totally planned economy was no longer possible for several reasons. For one thing, the second Kim ruler

did not have the resources to do so. And more important, there could be no going back once people had learned on their own what was possible. The regime could reverse a particular change by fiat, but the process of transformation over time in North Korea had been inexorable. Change, unfortunately for the last two Kims, continued under the surface, unstoppable because it happened—and still is happening—inside people’s minds.

In their minds, the common folk of North Korea no longer define themselves in relation to the Kimist state. They now do so in relation to the market.<sup>6</sup> Kim Jong Un has no choice but to recognize that reality because the North has developed a “money culture.”<sup>7</sup> That culture puts the current supremo under pressure to meet the expectations of an increasingly demanding populace, one that values prosperity far more than ideology.

The change in values, beliefs, and attitudes is no longer evident just in villages far from the center. It is on display in Pyongyang, now called “Pyonghattan,” where “One-Percenter” or the “*donju*,” the “masters of money,”<sup>8</sup> flaunt privilege and affluence.

Kim Jong Un, whose wife Ri SolJu dresses stylishly and flaunts wealth, seems to understand the societal changes undermining the basis of his family’s rule. In his three-hour speech in May 2016 at the 7<sup>th</sup> Workers’ Party Congress, for instance, he emphasized the beleaguered economy and, according to *Rodong Sinmun*, announced a “five-year strategy for the state economic development from 2016 to 2020.”<sup>9</sup>

Although he provided almost no detail and outlined few objectives, Kim essentially made himself accountable for economic development by nothing more than outlining the North’s first multi-year program since the Third Seven-Year Plan ended—two years late—in 1995. Reinforcing accountability, he promised to hold the 8<sup>th</sup> Congress at the end of the plan in 2020.<sup>10</sup>

The announcement of the plan came amid a downturn. The authoritative Bank of Korea, the South Korean central bank, believes the North’s economy contracted 1.1% in 2015, a reversal after four years of around 1% growth.<sup>11</sup> Among other things, the drop suggests Kim’s signature *byungjin* line, or progress in tandem of developing both the country’s nuclear arsenal and the economy, is unrealistic. Few economies—and certainly not ones as regulated and cut off as Kim’s—can over time deliver both “guns and butter.”

His grandfather tried the same feat toward the end of his rule and predictably failed. His father, however, had more modest goals. Kim Jong Il's *songun*—military first—policy starved civilian society of funds. The generals and admirals had first call on the meager resources of the state, and as a consequence the economy, starved of capital, stagnated during the Dear Leader's 17-year reign.

Kim Jong Un's problem is that he has put himself in what former American official Victor Cha calls a "legitimacy spiral."<sup>12</sup> His two sources of legitimacy—prosperity and nuclear weapons—conflict. The commitment to building arsenals, for instance, has resulted in other nations imposing costs on his state. UN Security Council Resolution 2270, adopted early March 2016, contains the global body's tightest sanctions regime on the North.

Nations on their own have added punitive measures. President Obama imposed secondary sanctions in mid-March pursuant to H.R.757, the North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act. Japan extended its sanctions, a ban on North Korean ships and other measures, that month as well. The European Union put in place its own set of coercive measures.

Furthermore, South Korea, in a tangible demonstration of political will, in February 2016 closed the Kaesong Industrial Complex, depriving Pyongyang of a crucial flow of cash, specifically \$120 million in 2015.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Seoul, in the following month, slapped unilateral sanctions on 40 individuals and 30 entities believed connected to the North's many weapons programs.

The South Korean reaction is particularly striking because Seoul's measures make good on President Park Geun-hye's unusual public threat, uttered in the middle of February 2016, to adopt "stronger and more effective measures" to "speed up regime collapse."<sup>14</sup> Greg Scarlatoiu of the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea notes

For more than twenty years, Seoul had tried to seek peace and rapprochement with the Kim regime, through unconditional trade, investment, and aid during the Sunshine Policy decade, or through forwarding far-reaching proposals for national reconciliation, such as President Park Geun-hye's 'trustpolitik.'<sup>15</sup>

Now, however, Seoul is leading the charge against Pyongyang in what David Maxwell of Georgetown University's Center for Security Studies calls "a campaign of strategic strangulation."<sup>16</sup>

Yet Kim has to be worried by more than that campaign. He cannot just opt for economic growth, because growth, which can only come about by economic liberalization, will eventually undermine the stability of the regime. Georgetown's Maxwell calls it the "ultimate North Korea paradox." "The North needs to reform to survive but if it reforms the regime will not survive," he writes. "The regime has to be afraid that economic development will cause it to lose control of the population, which will lead to political resistance over time. In the regime calculus, it cannot give up *juche* and ideological indoctrination."<sup>17</sup> In short, Kim Jong Un cannot afford to deliver on promises of improving livelihoods without changing the nature of the fundamentally closed system he inherited from his grandfather and father.

There have been throughout the decades various attempts to make the North's Stalinist system more flexible, but they have all eventually failed because there was no sustained commitment to reform; in other words, there was no commitment to end central control. And that history, in sum, is the context for Kim Jong Un's tentative *pojon* and related reforms. The June 28 Measures of 2012 and the May 30 Measures of 2014 involve moving some decision-making to lower levels in both the farm and factory.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, there have been no big-bang changes as was hoped when the regime, at the end of October 2015, announced the holding of the 7<sup>th</sup> Congress. Ruediger Frank of the University of Vienna, for instance, then thought there was some possibility that Kim would use the event to introduce "a North Korean version of reform and opening—'glasnost' and 'perestroika.'"<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, however, Kim stuck to the time-worn principle of central direction, inherent in the notion of a five-year plan.

It is undoubtedly significant that Kim Jong Un has refused to go to China, where officials would almost certainly hector him to adopt economic reforms of the type that Deng Xiaoping, Mao Zedong's successor, sponsored beginning at the end of 1978. Kim's father, on his trips to China, used to make a show of listening intently to his hosts as he toured some modern factory or brand-new city or zone, but as soon as he returned home he would completely ignore their advice to open up his economy.

It is clear what the current Kim ruler thinks of China's economic policies. In his 14,000-word May 8 speech at the 7<sup>th</sup> Congress, he took the time to refer to "the filthy wind of bourgeois liberty and 'reform' and 'openness' blowing in our neighborhood."<sup>20</sup>

So far, he has stood against structural "reform," a word that cannot be used in the DPRK because it implies past failure, but he has yet to figure out how he will satisfy an increasingly demanding population. This dilemma between the need to create prosperity on the one hand and the political requirement of central control on the other, inherent in every authoritarian state but especially Kim's, will make the regime unstable for as long as it remains unresolved.

Yet there are more immediate—and far more serious—concerns about the sustainability of the regime. Intense infighting has marked Kim's rule since he took over on the unexpected death of his father in December 2011. Unfortunately, politics in the northern half of Korea during this period became brutish.

So brutish that many senior regime figures lost their lives. Seoul's National Intelligence Service reported 68 senior officials were killed from 2012 to 2014. In April 2015, South Korean lawmakers released a NIS assessment indicating Mr. Kim had ordered the execution of 15 senior officials so far that year. In addition to those deaths, high-ranking army officers disappeared.<sup>21</sup>

Disappearances often resulted in death. "Most of these executions are not public," noted Bruce Bechtol of Angelo State University. "Guys disappear or they end up in a camp where they die."<sup>22</sup> Some Korea watchers like Bechtol estimate that once junior officials and officers are counted, total deaths for the period could number closer to 500.

There are indications that the executions—President Park in May 2015 said there was a "reign of extreme terror"<sup>23</sup>—have ended, at least for the meantime.<sup>24</sup> For instance, two senior figures thought to have been put to death, Ri Yong-gil and Choe Ryong-hae, reappeared after unexplained absences. Ri showed up in public in May 2016 at the Party Congress, with three stars on his shoulders instead of the four he wore when he dropped out of sight the preceding February. That February, a South Korean official said the general had been executed for "factionalism, misuse of authority, and corruption."<sup>25</sup>

Choe, the regime's second- or third-ranked official, did not attend a state funeral in November 2015, and his name did not appear on the list of the event's organizing committee. He may have been spared a

gruesome fate because he was needed to fill a spot vacated by the death of another official, Kim Yang-gon, who was involved in a highly suspicious early-morning car crash in Pyongyang in late December 2015.

Some attribute Choe's apparently light punishment to Kim Jong Un's realization that there had been too many executions, that the regime had to demonstrate that it was, in the words of NK News, "not indiscriminately ruthless and intent on killing everyone for even minor infractions." As the news site noted, "Even an authoritarian government can only carry out violent purges for so long and needs to limit them."<sup>26</sup>

And others think Kim can spare lives because he is in control. The Kim-in-command narrative is becoming fashionable again because of the flawless holding of the 7<sup>th</sup> Congress. Professor Frank of the University of Vienna noted that Kim would not have called the Congress, the first in 36 years, "if he were not certain he could control even the smallest detail."<sup>27</sup>

It is possible that Kim has finally been able to take command, but there is no final victory in a regime that is inherently unstable. Kim Il Sung created a system where no one element—the Korean People's Army, the Korean Workers' Party, or the security services—dominated politics, and the scheming leader was a master of keeping all the elements in check, surveilling, reporting on, and challenging each other. The Great Leader had, by blending ruthlessness with benevolence, perfected the art of keeping everything in balance, which meant everything revolving around himself.

Kim Jong Il, Kim Il Sung's son, was a far weaker figure, and as a result felt he had to build a power base. He did that with his *songun*, military-first, policy, putting the generals and admirals at the core of his rule.

Kim Jong Un, however, rejected *songun* and has been returning the regime to what Kim Il Sung would find familiar, a balance of competing groups. Kim, to do that, has stripped the military of power, prestige, and cash, specifically the trade flows the military appropriated during his father's time. The replacement of the National Defense Commission by the State Affairs Commission as the regime's highest organ in June 2016 is another move by Mr. Kim to downgrade the influence of generals and admirals.

This downgrading has meant turmoil at the top of the army as flag officers resisted moves to deemphasize *songun* policies. Kim, himself called the "Young General," has attempted to suppress discontent by



shooting generals. Since taking over, he has had five defense ministers and four chiefs of general staff.

Analysts naturally believe Kim's election as chairman of the Party is a significant milestone, and in many ways it is, but it is important to remember that his new title is a recognition that he is in control of the Party.<sup>28</sup> The chairmanship does little to help him with the military, and the real test going forward is whether the flag officers accept his rule. If we see more disappearances and executions of generals and admirals, we will know that the struggle between senior officers and Kim is not over.

In any event, the situation in Pyongyang, Congress or no Congress, still looks unsettled.<sup>29</sup> It is said that Kim is so fearful that he will not travel to large portions of the DPRK.<sup>30</sup> And there may be good reason for his reluctance: Explosives were placed in a ceiling at the Wonsan International Airport in late 2015 in an apparent attempt on Kim's life.<sup>31</sup>

There have been assassinations, plots, coup attempts, and even insurrections throughout the history of North Korea. None, however, has come close to dislodging the Kims because officials and officers derive legitimacy from the family lineage, the "Paektu bloodline," as it is known. Therefore, those vying for power realize they have to compete inside the ruling group rather than displace it. Yet as the aura surrounding the Kim family erodes—due to the bloodletting, hunger, poverty, and the like—the chances of regime failure increase. No ruling group lasts forever, especially one as precarious as North Korea's.

And that regime looks, at least at this moment, to be vulnerable. The extraordinary measures to lock down the country before the 7<sup>th</sup> Congress—travel bans, prohibitions on family gatherings, the rechecking of the loyalty of every citizen, and similar measures<sup>32</sup>—suggest the regime is insecure to a degree not seen in decades.

Moreover, not only is President Park talking about North Korea's fragility, so are Americans. In May 2016, the former Undersecretary of State Wendy Sherman repeatedly mentioned the possibility of North Korea's collapse in a talk in Washington, D.C.,<sup>33</sup> signaling a concern that had not been evident in the American capital since the mid-1990s. Moreover, in the same month retired General Walter Sharp, who commanded U.S. Forces Korea, said that "there will be instability in North Korea that I believe will lead to the collapse of North Korea much sooner than many of us think."<sup>34</sup>

Furthermore, two leading Chinese academics in May 2016 published a piece arguing that the appearance of "stability is very superficial"—

perhaps a dig at leading Pyongyang watcher Andrei Lankov and others—and that the collapse of the Kim regime is “just a matter of time.”<sup>35</sup>

Is North Korea once again close to failure? The DPRK looks to be far from reaching the last of the seven phases of collapse outlined by defense analyst Robert Collins.<sup>36</sup> He believes the North is only “deep” into the fourth such phase, regime suppression of hostile elements, as evidenced by the December 2013 execution of Jang Song Thaek and the elimination of the department he directed inside the ruling party. The South Korea-based Collins, however, acknowledges the regime could jump a phase and fail. As he noted in May 2016, “things are deteriorating badly and it appears that a second ‘Arduous March’ is about to ‘forward march’ due to sanctions and poor food crops.”<sup>37</sup>

One-man systems, like North Korea’s, are the least stable forms of government. And it doesn’t take much to end them. All it would require, for instance, is one bullet.<sup>38</sup> Collins notes there has never been a successful coup in a communist state, but North Korea always brags that it is different.

Despite everything, American policy has been crafted to work with the Kimist state, not to end it. As Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Russel said in early May 2016, “[t]he sanctions are designed to bring the North to its senses, not to its knees.”<sup>39</sup>

Yet there are signs Washington is moving from what Russel characterized as “a policy of attrition” to something more coercive. Former State Department official Evans Revere, in an interview published at the end of May 2016, argued that Washington should “take North Korea to the edge and have them stare into the abyss of the possible collapse of their system if they do not return to the negotiating table.” Moreover, Revere, once a tireless advocate of patience toward and engagement of Pyongyang, said that the U.S. was already on that course, that Washington’s policy was to continually increase pressure until the North faced such a stark prospect. “I think there is a lot more coming,” he noted, referring to tougher U.S. actions.<sup>40</sup>

And Revere was correct. Two days after his interview was released, the U.S. Treasury Department, on June 1, declared North Korea a “primary money laundering concern” under the Patriot Act,<sup>41</sup> a designation that will lead to financial institutions severing ties to the North. Moreover, a little more than a week after the designation, the State Department said it was considering further sanctions, “other measures” in the words of spokesman Mark Toner.<sup>42</sup> The next month,

Treasury imposed sanctions on Kim Jong Un, ten other officials, and five entities for human rights abuses.<sup>43</sup>

Not since the end of the Korean War has a Kim ruler faced a foreign adversary willing to risk destruction of the regime. As Revere suggests, that is changing. Kim Jong Un has apparently unnerved U.S. policymakers with continual threats to kill Americans by the tens of millions. That Washington would move toward far more coercive actions is a natural consequence of not only those increasingly belligerent—and explicit—statements but also Kim’s technicians perfecting long-range launchers, such as the road-mobile, nuclear-capable KN-08, and miniaturized atomic warheads.

For the longest time there was minimal official reaction as Washington practiced “strategic patience,” but American policy now appears to be passing an inflection point, moving to something far more dangerous to Kim.

### **Beijing’s Attitude Toward the Kim Regime**

Washington’s new posture, in short, puts North Korea at risk, and a North Korea at risk requires us to ask what China would do if Kimist rule looked to be on the verge of failure.

There are many analysts in the Chinese capital who believe Kim Jong Un’s failure would work to China’s benefit. In the case of an imminent collapse, some of them believe Chinese leaders should send the People’s Liberation Army across the border to annex the North as China’s “fourth northeast province” or ensure transition to a new ruling group, one more friendly to Beijing. Shi Yinhong of Renmin University has even been arguing that China should promote a unified Korean state under management of Seoul. Such a Korea, he persuasively contends, would move closer to China, distance itself even further from Japan, and eventually eject American troops.<sup>44</sup>

Shi’s innovative idea, however sound, is not the Chinese policy of today. At this moment, Beijing is supporting Kim.

It is not as if the Chinese like, admire, or respect the North Korean leader. Xi Jinping is said to loath his North Korean counterpart, and his diplomats “cannot hide their disdain” for him.<sup>45</sup> None of this matters, however. The Chinese are ruthlessly pragmatic, and Kim, they believe, is useful in the grand scheme of things.

Xi, like Hu Jintao before him, sees the United States as China’s main adversary, blocking Beijing’s ambitions in almost all directions.<sup>46</sup> In

these circumstances, Xi is not about to further goals, like the denuclearization of North Korea, that Washington promotes. As Lee Seong-hyon of the Sejong Institute in Seoul notes, “From China’s point of view, if its rise will inevitably clash with the U.S., why then should Beijing help Washington and Seoul over Pyongyang when doing so would go against its own geopolitical interests?”<sup>47</sup>

Therefore, the Chinese leader is not about to let the North Korean state fail and thereby lose a valuable tool. The DPRK’s provocations tie down American forces in North Asia, distract Washington from other issues Beijing cares about, and give America and South Korea one more reason to keep on China’s good side. As geopolitical thinker George Friedman points out, Pyongyang’s “escapades” are quite useful to the Chinese.<sup>48</sup>

Almost every time a Kim ruler acts up, American diplomats reflexively run to the Chinese capital. For instance, Secretary of State John Kerry in April 2016 hurried to Beijing after a series of North Korean provocations beginning with the detonation of a nuclear device in early January of that year. China, as the NK News site observes, is considered “a necessary partner for the U.S. and South Korea to maintain the stability of the region.”<sup>49</sup> The Chinese, for their “assistance,” extract concessions from Washington and Seoul in one way or another. North Korea is so beneficial to China that if it did not exist Beijing would surely want to invent it.

The Kim family has understood its importance to China, and that realization explains a paradox. How can one state, so weak and dependent on another, defy its powerful benefactor?

The North Koreans certainly like to defy the Chinese. And Chinese officials, seeking to avoid responsibility, these days try to give the impression that they cannot rein in their obstreperous allies. For instance, veteran diplomat Fu Ying in February 2016 insisted China had no control over them.<sup>50</sup>

At first glance, Fu’s assessment looks correct: Beijing and Pyongyang are obviously not getting along and North Korean attitudes are an obstacle to good ties. Kim Jong Un apparently detests the Chinese, as did his father.

And these views are apparently shared by others in the DPRK. As Jamil Anderlini of the *Financial Times* reported in May 2016, when North Korean officials and ordinary citizens repeated Pyongyang’s propaganda about the U.S., Japan, and South Korea in interviews given

to the paper, they seemed to be “going through the motions.” The tone changed, however, when the topic turned to China. Then, Anderlini noted, “the insults were more spontaneous and the depth of feeling obvious.”<sup>51</sup>

There are various reasons for genuine hatred for the Chinese. The two peoples have been at odds for millennia, and in recent times the North Koreans have felt betrayed by, among other things, Beijing’s diplomatic recognition of the other Korea in 1992 and its repeated Security Council votes this century to sanction Pyongyang.

The North Koreans look like they have done everything possible to annoy the Chinese, including building an arsenal of nuclear weapons and even moving—and permanently basing—heavy armor close to the Chinese border in 2014.<sup>52</sup> At the end of March 2016, North Korea launched a projectile from a location near Wonsan, the port city, on a northeast track toward China, and it landed in a spot near the border. The action, as the NightWatch site correctly noted, was “unprecedented.”<sup>53</sup> Pyongyang sent an unmistakably hostile message to Beijing.

Kim Jong Un deliberately downgraded relations with Beijing, and he has taken actions that would inevitably have that effect, especially the execution of Jang Song Thaek, who as part of his portfolio was responsible for dealings between the two capitals. Moreover, he killed and imprisoned Jang supporters who handled day-to-day matters with the Chinese.

The Chinese have tried to keep relations on an even keel, but they too bear responsibility for the deterioration. Beijing, over the last several years, has been trying to change the nature of the ties, from fraternal, party-to-party ones to state-to-state dealings. State-to-state dealings imply, especially in the minds of one-party rulers, that China’s ties with the DPRK are no more special than they are with any other nation. North Korea, always conscious of slights to its dignity, resisted the Chinese effort and still does not seem to have acquiesced in the change. In fact, the last meeting of high-level officials, which occurred in May and June of 2016 when foreign policy chief Ri Su Yong went to Beijing, was conducted on a party-to-party basis.<sup>54</sup>

China and North Korea, as a result of the turbulence, do not seem to be communicating well. In early 2016, the relations looked rocky as the two states were talking only at the “working level,”<sup>55</sup> as Dai Bingguo, once one of China’s state councilors, told the *South China Morning Post*

in the middle of May of that year. Since then, both Beijing and Pyongyang have pulled back and sought to repair ties, but long gone are the days when Mao Zedong and Kim Il Sung simply picked up the phone when they wanted to get something across to the other.

The poor state of relations between China and North Korea would seem to indicate that, as Madame Fu maintains, China cannot control its unruly neighbor. The reality is that, with Kim under pressure to provide a certain amount of prosperity, the DPRK needs China more than before. China, even before the imposition of the March 2016 UN sanctions, accounted for at least 75% of North Korea's trade.

Moreover, Beijing's bargaining power is set to grow with those sanctions<sup>56</sup> and the closure of the Kaesong Industrial Complex. Due to the resulting drop in inter-Korean trade, China will probably account for about 90% of the North's international commerce in 2016.

Beijing's power is even greater than that figure suggests because the North gets from China almost all its oil and virtually all its jet fuel. No other country is in a position to take up the slack should Beijing cut off these flows. North Korea is now more dependent on China than it has been at any time since the Korean War.<sup>57</sup>

Kim, therefore, is at Beijing's mercy because he simply does not have the resources necessary to maintain his economy on his own. Yet his extreme dependency does not translate into day-to-day Chinese control.

The Chinese, despite whatever they think of Kim, will tolerate almost anything the North Korean says or does. And Kim, like his father before him, knows that as well, so there is almost no need for him to placate Beijing. He apparently believes he can still get what he wants, or at least needs.

The North Korean knows that his benefactors in Beijing do not expect his obedience all the time. Beijing leaders, he has figured out by now, support him because the patronizing Chinese believe in the longer run he will realize his debt. As China watcher Chung Jae-ho of Seoul National University notes, they know they have influence and can use it when needed. It is good enough for them that Kim knows his obligations and will be compliant when they demand.<sup>58</sup>

Xi Jinping's Beijing is, in the final analysis, confident, perhaps even to the point of arrogance. After all, Chinese officials can see that, year by year, they are gaining power over Pyongyang as they tie the North Korean economy to theirs by trade, investment, and aid. Their influence,

they apparently believe, permits them to push the DPRK in directions they choose.

China's power to bend North Korea to its will is apparent in Pyongyang's reaction to Beijing's enforcement of Resolution 2270, the fifth set of UN sanctions on the North's weapons programs. Beijing began by showing that it was, as Xi pledged, "completely and fully" enforcing the UN's coercive measures.<sup>59</sup> Following their passage, for instance, Beijing announced restrictions on trade.<sup>60</sup> Chinese ports did not accept coal shipments from the North, prohibiting fully laden boats from unloading cargoes.<sup>61</sup>

There were also unprecedented restrictions on trade of various items, especially rice and construction materials, even though they were not formally subject to the UN sanctions.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, Beijing, in response to UN measures, put 31 North Korean vessels on a "blacklist."<sup>63</sup>

Most significantly, Beijing clamped down on financial transactions. Bank of China, China Merchants Bank, and Bank of Dandong stopped doing business with North Koreans.<sup>64</sup> Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, China's largest financial institution, reportedly froze accounts of North Korean customers in Dandong,<sup>65</sup> the trading hub across the Yalu River from the North.

Wu Dawei, China's always-discreet point man on North Korea, captured the mood of the times when he told Pulse, a South Korean news site, that the North had "signed its own death warrant."<sup>66</sup>

Despite Wu's attention-grabbing comments, Beijing's enforcement of the sanctions was not intended to cripple the regime. In the past, Chinese officials made ostentatious shows of compliance when sanctions were first put in place and then, when the international community was no longer looking, flouted them across the board. That's how Kim Jong Un could buy the ski lifts for the Masikryong resort<sup>67</sup> or how his father could obtain the 16-wheel transporter-erector-launchers for the KN-08 missile. There was almost nothing Pyongyang could not get from or through the other people's republic.

And in 2016 Beijing followed the playbook of the past: A significant amount of goods and commodities under sanction are now finding their way across the China-North Korea border, especially items considered vital to the maintenance of Kim rule. For instance, Chinese authorities did nothing to stop the export of sanctioned luxury goods intended to be handed to the attendees of the 7<sup>th</sup> Congress as gifts.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, China did not interrupt the flow of materials and

components for Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program, such as cylinders of uranium hexafluoride. Also allowed in, worryingly, were vacuum pumps, valves, and computers.<sup>69</sup>

Trade in other sanctioned items continued. The DPRK seems to have suffered no interruption in supplies of jet fuel from China.<sup>70</sup> Shipments of iron ore, subject to Resolution 2270, increased substantially after a pause caused by the imposition of these measures.<sup>71</sup> Finally, North Korean ships are making surreptitious visits to Chinese ports,<sup>72</sup> a sure sign the two countries are back to engaging in prohibited commerce.

And trade in unsanctioned items remains brisk. Chinese statistics show no oil flowing to the North, but in fact it is, as South Korean media reports.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, during the first half of 2016 North Korea's exports of other unsanctioned items to China jumped, nearly making up for the fall in sanctioned ones.<sup>74</sup> As the DailyNK site reported in August 2016, "The number of trucks coming out of the North to Dandong has also climbed, energizing trade and overall activity in the border area—so much so, in fact, that some residents have asked whether sanctions on the North have been lifted."<sup>75</sup>

There have been innumerable pronouncements that Beijing is changing its policies toward North Korea,<sup>76</sup> but until it vigorously enforces sanctions—and cuts back trade in other items—we cannot really say that it has. Beijing, as evident from its spotty enforcement, will not take actions that can cause the failure of Kim rule.

Beijing's diplomats privately argue that it is unwise to press the militant regime hard. "The Chinese position is that if you back the North Koreans into the corner and put a knife to their throat, they'll just blow up the room," notes John Delury of the Graduate School of International Studies of Yonsei University in Seoul.<sup>77</sup> Whether the Chinese actually believe what they are saying or are merely making excuses, these words show, year in and year out, they stand with their difficult North Korean allies. As Joshua Stanton of the One Free Korea site tells us, "This pattern and practice of non-enforcement is just too extensive to be anything but a deliberate policy."<sup>78</sup>

And it appears that China's actions are having the desired effect, as can be seen by Ri Su Yong's trip to Beijing, the first time a high-ranking North Korean official had visited China since the January 2016 nuclear detonation.<sup>79</sup> Analysts disagree on the significance of the trip,<sup>80</sup> but it's apparent that Pyongyang, by sending Ri, showed respect and essentially



acknowledged it needed relief from the new UN sanctions.<sup>81</sup> Beijing, therefore, obtained what it needed from Kim, confirmation of its primacy in the relationship.<sup>82</sup> And now that North Korea has essentially acknowledged its inferior status, China has, as predicted, loosened enforcement of the sanctions.<sup>83</sup>

“China has control, absolute control of North Korea,” said Donald Trump, then running for the Republican Party nomination for president, in February 2016. “They don’t say it, but they do.”<sup>84</sup> After the visit of Ri Su Yong to pay homage to the Chinese, the candidate’s sweeping statement, although an exaggeration, comes closer to explaining the paradox described above than Ms. Fu, the Chinese diplomat.

Beijing, in short, ultimately calls the tune in its dealings with the Kims. The Chinese are confident they can get the North Koreans to do what they want—at least when it is important to China—and are therefore willing to tolerate a certain degree of disobedience in Pyongyang on other matters.

Paradox solved.

### **Chinese Stability and Capability**

Those discussing relations between China and North Korea invariably assume that China is the more resilient of the two people’s republics. The Chinese one is certainly larger and at the moment more prosperous and powerful, but that assumption about resilience may not be correct.

There are two principal reasons to doubt Chinese strength, especially in the long-term. First, China’s economy is showing signs of severe distress. It is slowing toward a contraction, the country is accumulating debt at alarmingly fast rates, money has been stampeding out of the country at a record pace, and Xi Jinping has been spearheading a return to regressive policies that can only have adverse consequences in the medium and long term.

As a result, many now believe the economy is headed to a crisis, perhaps sharp and of long duration. Yet whether the crisis is long or short or deep or shallow, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the economy has reached the limits of what is possible in China’s current political framework. In sum, the Chinese economy is far more volatile than North Korea’s, and the risk is to the downside.

Second, as the economy is stumbling, the Communist Party is going through another bout of infighting. Xi, by launching an unprecedented

campaign to consolidate power, has roiled the Communist Party and disrupted governance.

His campaign, styled as an attack on corruption but really a political purge, continues to this day, a sure sign that Xi still has not secured his position. Another indication he is on shaky ground is that critics have become more vocal. Some now call his audacity to rule like a strongman a symptom of “new Caesarism.”<sup>85</sup>

Like Caesar, Xi has enemies. Not only is there elite disagreement in Beijing, but that disagreement has become so fierce that senior leaders are having difficulty adhering to Party norms that have kept peace for a generation.

For instance, leaders cannot keep their arguments behind closed doors. The Party’s Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, Xi’s main tool in the “anti-corruption” effort, in early March 2016 posted on its website an attack on his authoritarianism in the form of an essay titled “A Thousand Yes-Men Cannot Equal One Honest Advisor.” That month there was also a demand for him to resign, carried on a semi-official website, and the official Xinhua News Agency published a piece identifying Xi as “China’s last leader.”

The infighting affects the ability of the Communist Party to govern. The ruling organization, as it fractures, looks unable to deal with, among other things, systemic economic problems. In May 2016, disagreements over technical economic issues between Xi and Premier Li Keqiang, the country’s economic czar and nominally No. 2 political figure, played out in *People’s Daily* and other official media outlets.

The tumbling economy constitutes an existential emergency because the Party’s legitimacy, for more than three decades, has been primarily based on the continual delivery of prosperity. Now, most Chinese know nothing but a continually improving life and have, as a result, become demanding. And unlike most of their North Korean counterparts, they are in a position to make demands.

Some of those demands the Party has been able to meet, yet Xi has become increasingly coercive. His regressive moves, like show trials and publicized confessions, are hard to sustain in a modernizing society, and there is now an unresolvable tension between political elites and the people they try to govern but more often have to restrain. In short, the Chinese state is far less stable than it appears, and Beijing leaders, preoccupied by worsening turbulence at the top of the Communist Party,

may not be able to deal effectively with external challenges, such as a failure of the North Korean system.

Korea analysts naturally focus on Beijing's policy toward Pyongyang and, when considering Chinese capabilities, look at China's resources. Yet Beijing has assumed many commitments, all around the globe, and cannot meet all of them. Furthermore, China is provoking disputes in an arc from India in the south to South Korea in the north, including surrounding seas, the South China Sea, the East China Sea, and the Yellow Sea. At a time of crisis in North Asia, Beijing could be tied down elsewhere.

Even before China has risen very far, the Chinese leadership has contracted a particularly severe case of Paul Kennedy's "imperial overstretch." And it has done so without an ally in sight, other than of course the burdensome Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

## **Conclusion**

China-North Korea relations are odd and opaque, but they do have a certain logic and there are recognizable patterns.

China will almost certainly back North Korea, despite nasty disagreements between the two states, because Beijing believes it is in its long-term interest to do so. There has been in this decade no fundamental change in China's policy toward North Korea.

Yet the assumption that the People's Republic will always be able to support the North could be wrong as China appears to be on the edge of twin economic and political crises. The People's Republic, once both stable and prosperous, looks like it has passed crucial inflection points, and the country going forward could be far less capable than the one we see today.

North Asia is volatile, and much of what we think we know about it could become obsolete with a regime-shaking crisis in China.

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<sup>2</sup> See Elizabeth Shim, "Activist: Ordinary North Koreans Have Little Respect for 'That Kid' Kim Jong-un," United Press International, May 20, 2016,

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[http://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/World-News/2016/05/20/Activist-Ordinary-North-Koreans-have-little-respect-for-that-kid-Kim-Jong-Un/5661463768869/?utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_source=flipboard](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2016/05/20/Activist-Ordinary-North-Koreans-have-little-respect-for-that-kid-Kim-Jong-Un/5661463768869/?utm_medium=email&utm_source=flipboard).

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Chuck Williams, “‘It Is Almost Like a Cult,’ Retired Army General Says of North Korea,” *Stars and Stripes*, May 14, 2016, [http://www.stripes.com/news/veterans/it-is-almost-like-a-cult-retired-army-general-says-of-north-korea-1.409632?utm\\_source=feedburner&utm\\_medium=feed&utm\\_campaign=Feed%3A+stars+and+stripes%2Fgeneral+%28Stars+and+Stripes%29](http://www.stripes.com/news/veterans/it-is-almost-like-a-cult-retired-army-general-says-of-north-korea-1.409632?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+stars+and+stripes%2Fgeneral+%28Stars+and+Stripes%29).

<sup>4</sup> ‘Sanctions Against North Korea Are Not Working,’ Marzuki Darusman, interview by Alexander Freund, Deutsche Welle, May 24, 2016, <http://www.dw.com/en/sanctions-against-north-korea-are-not-working/a-19279278>.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the end of the Arduous March in 1998 and subsequent developments, see Charles K. Armstrong, “The Nature, Origins, and Development of the North Korean State,” in *The North Korean System in the Post-Cold War Era*, ed. Samuel S. Kim, pp. 39-64 (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> See Burt Herman, “Signs of Capitalism Seen in North Korea,” Associated Press, January 2, 2005 (comments of North Korea business consultant Roger Barrett), <http://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/signs-of-capitalism-seen-in-north-korea/>; Andrei Lankov, “Welcome to Capitalism, North Korean Comrades,” *Asia Times Online*, December 14, 2004, <http://atimes.com/atimes/Korea/FL14Dg01.html>.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Lucy Williamson, “Shadowy World of Korea’s People Smugglers,” BBC News, July 7, 2011, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-14044794>.

<sup>8</sup> Anna Fifield, “North Korea’s One-Percenters Savor Life in ‘Pyonghattan,’” *Washington Post*, May 14, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/north-koreas-one-percenters-savor-life-in-pyonghattan/2016/05/14/9f3b47ea-15fa-11e6-971a-dadf9ab18869\\_story.html?hpid=hp\\_hp-top-table-main\\_pyonghattan-930pm%3Ahomepage%2Fstory](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/north-koreas-one-percenters-savor-life-in-pyonghattan/2016/05/14/9f3b47ea-15fa-11e6-971a-dadf9ab18869_story.html?hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main_pyonghattan-930pm%3Ahomepage%2Fstory).

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<sup>11</sup> Bank of Korea, “Gross Domestic Product Estimates for North Korea in 2015,” July 23, 2016, <http://www.bok.or.kr/contents/total/eng/boardView.action?boardBean.brdid=16313&boardBean.rnum=71&menuNavId=1959&boardBean.menuid=1959&boardBean.cPage=8&boardBean.categorycd=0&boardBean.sdt=&boardBean.edt=&boardBean.searchColumn=&boardBean.searchValue=>.

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<sup>27</sup> "Is North Korea's Party Congress a Hint of 'Perestroika'?"

<sup>28</sup> With regard to his control of the Party, Kim did not, as many had predicted, remove virtually all the older regime figures at the 7<sup>th</sup> Congress. There has been turmoil in governing circles since Kim took power, and a wholesale generational change in leadership at that time was undoubtedly considered too destabilizing. For the change that did occur, see Michael Madden, "Deciphering the 7<sup>th</sup> Party Congress: A Teaser for Greater Change?" 38 North, May 20, 2016, <http://38north.org/2016/05/mmadden052016/>.

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<sup>31</sup> See J. H. Ahn, "Rumors of Bombing Attempt on Kim Jong-un Spread in N. Korea," *NK News*, December 4, 2015, <https://www.nknews.org/2015/12/rumors-of-bombing-attempt-on-kim-jong-un-spread-in-n-korea/>.

<sup>32</sup> See, e.g., Choi Song-min, "Authorities Step Up Control of Residents Ahead of Party Congress with 'Ideological Re-Examinations,'" *DailyNK*, April 20, 2016, <http://www.dailynk.com/english/read.php?num=13864&catId=nk01500>.

<sup>33</sup> See "May 2016 JoongAng Ilbo-CSIS Forum Luncheon Address: The Honorable Wendy R. Sherman," Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 3, 2016, [https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/160503\\_WendyShermanLuncheonAddress.pdf](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/160503_WendyShermanLuncheonAddress.pdf).

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<sup>57</sup> See Samuel Oakford, "No One Really Knows How Many Nukes North Korea Has," *Vice News*, April 24, 2015 (comments of James Person of the Wilson Center), <https://news.vice.com/article/no-one-really-knows-how-many-nukes-north-korea-has>.

<sup>58</sup> Chung Jae-ho, interview by author, Seoul, May 4, 2004.

<sup>59</sup> Kim Kwang-tae, "Key Question Unanswered on Whether N. Korea Yields to Int'l Pressure," *Yonhap News Agency*, April 2, 2016, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/northkorea/2016/04/02/040100000AEN20160402002900315.html?ba604840>.

<sup>60</sup> See "China Announces List of Restrictions on Mineral Trade with N. Korea," *Yonhap News Agency*, April 5, 2016, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/northkorea/2016/04/05/040100000AEN20160405011200315.html>.

<sup>61</sup> See Choi Song-min, "Coal-Laden Ships in Limbo Out at Sea," *DailyNK*, March 24, 2016, <http://www.dailynk.com/english/read.php?num=13819&cataId=nk01500>; Sarah Kim, "China Tells Border Firms Not to Buy North's Coal," *Korea JoongAng Daily* (Seoul), March 17, 2016, <http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3016320&>.

<sup>62</sup> See Ha-young Choi and Jennifer Dodgson, "China Seen Banning Non-Sanctioned Trade with North Korea," *NK News*, May 5, 2016, <https://www.nknews.org/2016/05/china-seen-banning-non-sanctioned-trade-with-north-korea/>.

<sup>63</sup> See Ruby Lian and Megha Rajagopalan, "China Orders 'Blacklist' of 31 North Korean Vessels: Document," *Reuters*, March 4, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us->



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<sup>64</sup> See Emily Rauhala, “China, U.S. Cite Progress on N. Korea Sanctions Deal. But There’s No Quick Fix,” *Washington Post*, February 24, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/china-us-cite-progress-on-n-korea-sanctions-deal-but-theres-no-quick-fix/2016/02/24/66bc7081-68db-4612-a9b6-f75bbf73ae82\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/china-us-cite-progress-on-n-korea-sanctions-deal-but-theres-no-quick-fix/2016/02/24/66bc7081-68db-4612-a9b6-f75bbf73ae82_story.html).

<sup>65</sup> See “China’s Biggest Bank Freezes N. Korean Accounts,” *Dong-A Ilbo* (Seoul), February 22, 2016, <http://english.donga.com/Home/3/all/26/525957/1>.

<sup>66</sup> Kim Dae-gi, “Wu Dawei Says ‘N. Korea Signed Its Own Death Warrant,’” *Pulse*, March 3, 2016, <http://pulsenews.co.kr/view.php?year=2016&no=168073>.

<sup>67</sup> See Jane Perlez and Yufan Huang, “To Build a Ski Resort Under UN Sanctions, North Korea Turned to China,” *New York Times*, February 5, 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/06/world/asia/north-korea-china-sanctions-luxury.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/06/world/asia/north-korea-china-sanctions-luxury.html?_r=0).

<sup>68</sup> See Charlie Campbell, “Inside the Rare Meeting of North Korea’s Communist Elite,” *Time*, May 5, 2016, <http://time.com/4318957/everything-you-need-to-know-about-north-koreas-workers-party-congress/>.

<sup>69</sup> See Elizabeth Shim, “North Korea Keeps Importing Banned Components from China, Analyst Says,” United Press International, May 11, 2016, [http://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/World-News/2016/05/11/North-Korea-keeps-importing-banned-components-from-China-analyst-says/3631462990916/?spt=sec&or=tn](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2016/05/11/North-Korea-keeps-importing-banned-components-from-China-analyst-says/3631462990916/?spt=sec&or=tn).

<sup>70</sup> See Kang Seung-woo, “China Expected to Renege on Sanctions Against North Korea,” *Korea Times* (Seoul), July 25, 2016, [http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2016/07/116\\_210271.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2016/07/116_210271.html).

<sup>71</sup> See Choi Song-min, “North Korean Iron Ore Exports to China Booming Despite Sanctions,” *DailyNK*, August 12, 2016, <http://www.dailynk.com/english/read.php?cataId=nk01500&num=14034>; Elizabeth Shim, “Report: North Korea Exports of Iron Ore to China Surging,” United Press International, August 11, 2016, [http://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/World-News/2016/08/11/Report-North-Korea-exports-of-iron-ore-to-China-surging/3681470932108/](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2016/08/11/Report-North-Korea-exports-of-iron-ore-to-China-surging/3681470932108/).

<sup>72</sup> See Leo Byrne, “Blacklisted North Korean Ships Appear Close to Chinese Ports,” *NK News*, June 27, 2016, <https://www.nknews.org/2016/06/blacklisted-north-korean-ships-appear-close-to-chinese-ports/>.

<sup>73</sup> See Shin Jin-ho, “Despite Official Claims, Crude Still Flows from China,” *Korea JoongAng Daily* (Seoul), May 16, 2016, <http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3018740&cloc=joongangdaily|home|top>.

<sup>74</sup> See “N. Korea’s Exports of Unsanctioned Resources to China Jump in H1: Report,” *Yonhap News Agency*, July 29, 2016, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/search1/2603000000.html?cid=AEN20160730001600315>.

<sup>75</sup> Choi, “North Korean Iron Ore Exports to China Booming Despite Sanctions.”

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<sup>76</sup> See, e.g., Zhu Feng, "China's North Korea Policy Is Definitely Changing," *New York Times*, March 31, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2016/03/31/is-chinas-policy-toward-north-korea-changing/chinas-north-korea-policy-is-definitely-changing>.

<sup>77</sup> Campbell, "Inside the Rare Meeting of North Korea's Communist Elite."

<sup>78</sup> Joshua Stanton, e-mail to author, March 6, 2016.

<sup>79</sup> See Choi, "North Korean Diplomacy Head Visits Beijing."

<sup>80</sup> Yu Shaohua of the China Institute of International Studies took a sunny view of the visit: "The meeting sent out a positive signal that both countries are actively seeking to improve bilateral relations." Cary Huang and Catherine Wong, "North Korean Envoy Tells Xi Jinping Nation Will Not Scrap Its Nuclear Programme," *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), June 1, 2016, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1961300/north-korean-envoy-tells-xi-jinping-nation-will-not>. On the other hand, Adam Cathcart of the University of Leeds states, "I would be careful about labeling the visit a breakthrough. If anything, it is a return to quasi-normal between two neighboring Leninist parties who need to talk." Cheng, "China and North Korea Seek to Mend Ties Tested by Nuclear Ambitions." Whatever the case, China showed it wanted to talk with the North Korean official by not cancelling his meeting with Xi Jinping even though the North fired a missile just a few hours before they were scheduled to get together. See Chang May Choon, "China, North Korea Seeking to Amend Ties," *Straits Times* (Singapore), June 10, 2016, <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/china-north-korea-seeking-to-mend-ties>.

<sup>81</sup> North Korea's launch of a salvo of Musudan missiles may have been an attempt to influence Chinese behavior. See Choe Sang-hun, "North Korea's Missile Tests Timed to Bolster Standing With China, Analysts Say," *New York Times*, June 2, 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/03/world/asia/north-korea-musudan-missile.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/03/world/asia/north-korea-musudan-missile.html?_r=0). If this interpretation is correct, then it appears the North Koreans understand that China holds the high cards in their relationship.

<sup>82</sup> As CNN noted, "By receiving the North Korean delegation in Beijing, like the emperors of old receiving visits from tributary states, China is demonstrating to Pyongyang its senior status, with the power to grant or deny." Tim Schwarz, "Friends, Foes or Frenemies? North Korea and China Appear to Patch Things Up," CNN, June 2, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/06/02/asia/north-korea-china-friends/>.

<sup>83</sup> Many analysts attribute Beijing's increasingly lax attitude on the UN sanctions to the decision, announced in early July 2016 by Seoul and Washington, to deploy in South Korea the Terminal High Altitude Air Defense System. Anger over THAAD deployment certainly contributed to China's decision to loosen enforcement practices, but the country had been violating the UN measures well before that announcement.

<sup>84</sup> "Trump on Assassinating Kim Jong-un: 'I've Heard of Worse Things,'" CBS News, February 10, 2016, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/donald-trump-assassinating-north-korean-leader-kim-jong-un-china-role/>.

<sup>85</sup> Liang Jing, "Implications of the 'Ten-Day Cultural Revolution,'" Radio Free Asia, March 8, 2016, <http://www.rfa.org/cantonese/commentaries/com-03082016075812.html>.