

# CHINA AND NORTH KOREA: GEOPOLITICS AT PLAY

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**Publication date:** 11 September 2017

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China has a complex relationship with its geographic neighbor, North Korea. Their long and historic relationship has been tumultuous at times, but China's prominent policy is to promote stability and peace in the Korean Peninsula (Chung & Choi, 2013). In order to promote this policy, the Chinese government maintains a certain level of affiliation with the isolated North Korean regime in terms of trade, commerce, aid and assistance (Taylor 2013). North Korea benefits from this policy because it allows them to have some economic stability and keeps the state from failing. In the minds of the Chinese leadership, this affiliation provides Beijing with some amount of leverage over Pyongyang that no other country has (Chang, 2016). China uses its unique relationship with North Korea to gain geopolitical advantage in the Asia-Pacific region and throughout the rest of the international community.

With this unique relationship in mind, top global powers often turn to China to help control the Kim regime and the increasing growth of its nuclear program. North Korea's development of a nuclear program has been a major source of contention within the global community. With Beijing's rise as a world power, Washington has called on the state to be more internationally responsible in respect to China's assumed influence over North Korea and their nuclear program (Taylor, 2013). However, Beijing is reluctant to promote hard power punishment over Pyongyang in terms of following UN imposed trade sanctions.

The geopolitical benefits they receive out of their unique relationship with North Korea prevents the Chinese from pursuing these sanctions. Beijing continues trade with the state while publicly insisting that they do not (Chang, 2016). The imposed sanctions on North Korea only increase the amount of trade that the country does with China which, in turn, increases China's assumed bargaining power with North Korea. Even before the UN sanctions in March 2016, China accounted for 75% of trade to North Korea (Chang, 2016).

With the closure of the Kaesong Industrial Complex in South Korea, China is set to account for 90% of North Korea's international commerce (Chang, 2016). China also controls all the import of oil and jet fuel into North Korea (Chang, 2016). This amount of trade influence over North Korea signals that the isolated country cannot be self-sustaining. Therefore, North Korea relies on its' trade with China to feed its people and bring in other essential products to the country (Chang, 2016). Chinese reluctance to follow UN imposed sanctions is beneficial to North Korea because of the trade and aid that China gives to the isolated country.

Beijing benefits from their relationship with Pyongyang in several ways geopolitically. China sees their main international adversary as the United States (Chang, 2016). In the minds of the Chinese leadership, the US presence in the Asia-Pacific region is about keeping control of China's growth and influence in that area (Chang, 2016). If a denuclearized North Korea is the main policy goal of its adversary, China will be reluctant to help with that goal if their lack of assistance undermines the US national interest. A rogue regime in North Korea will keep the US preoccupied while China carries out geopolitical goals in other parts of the world (Chang, 2016). China also uses North Korea as a geographical buffer between the westernized South Korea and its US allies stationed there (Taylor, 2013).

If a regime collapse were to occur in North Korea, it would create the potential for South Korean and American troops to overtake that portion of the peninsula. This could create a unified Korean Peninsula under the management of Seoul, which is an ally of the United States. In seeing the United States as its main adversary, China may interpret that as a potential threat right at its border (Chang, 2016). China also benefits when the international community needs to discuss North Korea. When these discussions happen, they come to the Chinese for assistance on how best to leverage Pyongyang to roll back their nuclear program. This reason in particular gives Washington and Seoul a purpose for keeping friendly ties towards Beijing (Chang, 2016).

The unfortunate aspect for the international community is that North Korea understands that China uses this relationship to their advantage. While China does have an increasing influence over North Korea because of the amount of trade, this does not mean that China has complete influence over the decisions Pyongyang makes in regard to its nuclear program (Taylor, 2013). Therefore, the Kim regime can act out in defiant ways without worrying about hard power backlash from its lifeline, the Chinese (Chang, 2016). North Korea has a historical aversion to foreign interference in their domestic and international policies.

Once Beijing starts using their economic influence as leverage over Pyongyang, North Korea may start to look for ways to reduce that leverage in the long term (Chung & Choi, 2013). While North Korea continues to enhance their nuclear program, they will become more confident in their power projection capabilities and less likely to be coerced to coming to the international

diplomacy table (Chung & Choi, 2013). Despite this growing problem, China continues to reap the geopolitical benefits from its relationship with North Korea. Until the pressure from the global community outweighs these advantages, it is likely that China will continue to maintain this unique relationship with the isolated state.

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