

"The military alliance between North Korea and China"

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Introduction

China and North Korea have one of the longest lasting military alliances between non-democratic states. But despite China's rise as a regional great power and North Korea's emergence as the ninth nuclear weapon state hardly anyone talks about this alliance: How come? What may happen if the DPRK starts a military altercation, intentionally or not, and China is called upon to react? Is China's response during the Cheonan and Yongpyeong incidents (2010) a good indicator for future alliance behavior? The following brief paper describes in three episodes the demise and dilemmas of China's only treaty-based military alliance and gauges its potential behavior in times of a military crisis on the Peninsula.

The paper argues that the near-death experience of the Sino-DPRK alliance is largely a product of the shifting international roles the DPRK and China have pursued in a changing international community. Socialist solidarity, which shaped China's intervention in the Korean War (1950-1953), and the intra-socialist rivalry between China and the Soviet Union in the late 1950s, resulted in two almost identical Sino- and Soviet-DPRK Friendship Treaties in 1961 while jockeying for DPRK cooperation through unconditional alliance commitments (Episode 1).

China's rapprochement with the US in the early 1970s, which triggered a similar move between Pyongyang and Seoul, and its subsequent opening towards the capitalist world economy in the late 1970s have failed to induce the Kim regime onto a similar economic development pathway (Lin 2015), leading to estrangement. Rather than following the Chinese model and thereby re-invoking historical patterns of Chinese preeminence, the Kim regime started to expand its autonomy by seeking nuclear weapons when Beijing normalized relations with South Korea in the early 1990s (Episode 2).

More recently, US interventions in Iraq, Libya and subsequent China's acquiescence as well as Beijing's siding with the US in the Six-Party talks have triggered a rush by Pyongyang to test and deploy nuclear-weapons capable intermediate ballistic missiles and to purge those parts of the regime elite that were closest to China. It follows that the Sino-DPRK military alliance is practically defunct and not shape Beijing's (military) response to a militarized crisis on the Peninsula (Episode 3).

Episode 1: The Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation

Long before the People's Liberation Army (PLA) came to help the North Korean regime resist UN-led troops during the Korean War (1950-1953), China had regarded Korea both as a model tributary, fervently following China's ideology and statecraft, and a potential geostrategic challenge. Although highly controversial in the Chinese Party elite at the time, Chairman Mao envisioned North Korea to serve as a first line of defense (lips), whereas China itself would be the second line (teeth) in a common struggle against Western capitalism (Chung/Choi 2013: 246).

Instrumental to this common effort was a group of Korean communist veterans who participated in the Chinese Civil War - the Yan'an faction. When the Yan'an faction rose in influence, due to its privileged access to China's military and political leadership, the Manchurian faction and Kim Il-Sung became increasingly concerned about a possible coup. After demoting several members during the war effort, Kim Il-Sung introduced Juche ideology in the mid-1950s, stressing that the Korean revolution had to be carried out by Koreans and in accordance with Korean principles to achieve "self-reliance" in all spheres. The struggle for autonomy first came to a head, when Kim purged large parts of the Yan'an faction at KWP Central Committee plenary session in August 1956 and then faced a concerted effort by the Chinese and Soviet Communist party to mediate between factions and reinstate Yan'an members. Kim first made concessions to Chinese and Soviet emissaries, but later waged more massive purges, consolidating his dictatorial leadership and demanding the withdrawal of all PLA troops from North Korea to "end the violation of North Korea's sovereignty and prevent further meddling in internal affairs" (Chen 2003).

To avoid further alienation of the North and to seize the leadership in the global communist movement, Chairman Mao conceded the Chinese withdrawal and considerable additional economic assistance. As the Soviet Communist party struggled with the impact of the Stalin era and the Polish-Hungarian crisis, the Chinese Communist party under Mao constrained its criticism and actively helped Kim Il-Sung to bolster his grip on North Korea. Seizing this opportunity, the North Korean leadership immediately expanded its discussions with Moscow beyond economic support to include defense cooperation. After starting discussions in 1957, both sides concluded the Soviet-North Korean Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance on 6 July 1961 (Shen/Xia 2015: 98).¹

To better understand how skillfully Kim Il-Sung used the increasing competition for leadership in the communist world, one has to acknowledge that North Korea succeeded in extracting considerable military, political and economic concession by China in the early 1960s. After having successfully pressed for the withdrawal of Chinese troops from the North in 1958, the North Korean leadership let it known to the Chinese Communist party that it was negotiating a mutual defense arrangement with the Soviet Union, including a draft text of the later Soviet-North Korea Friendship Treaty. Right before leaving for the Soviet Union to sign the treaty, Kim agreed with the Chinese ambassador to Pyongyang that he would immediately sign a similar treaty with China (Shen /Xia 2012: 32-35).

Thus, it comes as no surprise that the Chinese-DPRK treaty features several special characteristics when compared to the Soviet-DPRK agreement: First, the Chinese drafters of the treaty sought to devise a comprehensive security alliance treaty, which renders military assistance not only in the event of an attack but foresees comprehensive arrangements for consultation and military assistance. In the central clause, Art. 2, the parties agree that "the two parties undertake jointly to adopt all measures to prevent

¹ The text of the treaty can be found at:
<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/3005971-1961-Treaty-of-Friendship-Cooperation-and-Mutual.html>.

aggression against either party by any state". Art. 2 then goes on to specify the conditions under which military support will be given: "In the event of one of the contracting Parties being subjected to the armed attack by any state or several states jointly and thus being involved in a state of war, the other contracting party shall immediately render military and other assistance by all means at its disposal". This provision is not only considerably broader and more specific than the equivalent in the Soviet-DPRK treaty. It also contains language that assuages the respective concerns of the parties on an equal basis: On the one hand, the treaty renders military support only in the event of an external military attack on one of the parties. Moreover, Articles 1, 4 and 6 commit the contracting parties (read especially) North Korea to the peaceful conduct of foreign affairs and particularly Korean unification. This clearly addressed the concern by the Chinese leadership that Kim Il-Sung may use the ongoing turmoil in South Korea to provoke a military conflict (Lee 2011). On the other hand, Art. 2 specifically calls for an "immediate" military response with "all means at its disposal", reflecting China's hesitating and often halting military assistance during the Korean War (see Shen 2012).

Moreover, and in contrast to the Soviet-DPRK clause spelling out a 10-year effectiveness, the treaty between Beijing and Pyongyang contained no expiration date. Rather, in Art. VII, the treaty requires both parties to agree on its amendment or expiration, thereby setting a high standard for its abrogation. In practice, both parties have agreed twice to extend the treaty, un-amended for another 20-year period, while the Soviet-DPRK friendship treaty was revised, dropping the military cooperation clause, in 1999. The treaty also contains an all-inclusive "consultation clause" (Art. IV), stipulating that "parties will continue to consult with each other on all important international questions of common interests to the two countries". Interestingly, the accord also constrains the parties in that "neither contracting party shall conclude any alliance directed against the other contracting party or take part in any bloc or in any action or measure directed against the other contracting party" (Art. III). While this certainly is directed against either party cooperating with Western powers, it also may be interpreted as a plea for neutrality in conflicts between a contracting party (China) and other socialist or neutral states (read Soviet Union and India) (Lee 2011).

Episode 2: The first nuclear crisis in 1993/1994

With the Cold War coming to an end in Asia, the United States started to withdraw its short-range nuclear weapons from the Korean Peninsula in 1991. In return, both Korean states engaged in bilateral negotiations on a Denuclearization Agreement, thereby setting the stage for wider normalization of diplomatic relations in the region. In August 1992, and after much haggling, China then normalized its diplomatic relations with South Korea, arguably, triggering the consultation clause of its Friendship Treaty with the North (see Kim 2001). But Pyongyang rejected any further opening towards the South and soon the implementation of the Joint Denuclearization Agreement of 31 December 1991 came to a halt. In December 1992, Pyongyang threatened to suspend bilateral exchanges with China and demanded relief from its bilateral debt (US\$ 3 Bio.). China's leadership then invited Kim Jong-Il, the heir apparent to

Kim Il-Sung, to China, but Pyongyang rejected the invitation. In return, the Chinese side decided to substantially reduce its bilateral relations with the North in early 1993. Under the so-called eight principles (February 1993), Beijing not only pushed for bilateral negotiation for the peaceful reunification of the Peninsula but also limited its political and military ties with the DPRK. Specifically, the Chinese side suspended political and military conferences with the North, failing to recognize contacts for these meetings and stopping to supply modern military technology to North Korea (Lee 2011).

Against this background of strained Sino-DPRK relations, the first so-called North Korean Nuclear Crisis erupted in February 1993.² At the time, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) found substantial discrepancies in Pyongyang's declaration of nuclear activities under its IAEA Safeguards Agreement. When IAEA inspectors demanded additional access to critical sites and the IAEA Board Governors called for special inspections, the DPRK regime announced on 12 March 1993 that it intended to leave the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), which it had entered upon urging by the Soviet Union in 1985. Upon request from the US, the UN Security Council adopted resolution 825, which called upon the DPRK to reconsider its withdrawal from the NPT, to cooperate with the IAEA and to engage in diplomatic talks in order to defuse the dispute. While the DPRK suspended its withdrawal decision after bilateral negotiations with the US, Beijing held several secret bilateral meetings with Pyongyang, insisting on the DPRK's cooperation (Wit et al 2005: 154-155).

The crisis reached its hiatus in early June 1994 when the Kim regime refueled its reactor in Yongbyon without proper IAEA monitoring, leaving open the possibility to use 8,000 used fuel rods to produce weapons-grade plutonium after reprocessing. In early June, China signaled for the first time to its ally that it would abstain on an IAEA Board of Governors resolution to suspend technical aid to North Korea. It also explicitly warned Pyongyang that if their actions provoked Washington to a military reaction, they should not expect Chinese military support. Already in April 1994, Pyongyang had unilaterally withdrawn from the Armistice Committee - without prior consultation with the Chinese government - and called for a new bilateral peace mechanism between the DPRK and the US, leaving the PRC out of the process (Chung/Choi 2013: 252).

The crisis was diffused only after former President Jimmy Carter proposed a temporary freeze on critical DPRK nuclear activities during a track-two mission to Pyongyang. This was followed by a negotiated comprehensive settlement, the so-called Geneva Agreed Framework, trading nuclear restraint by North Korea against economic support and the normalization of relations between Pyongyang and Washington. Subsequently, an international consortium was established - the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) - which supplied critical energy support and should have transferred proliferation-resistant Light-Water Reactor technology to the DPRK. By the time critical components of the first LWR should have been installed in exchange for Pyongyang's full cooperation

² The best accounts of the first North Korean nuclear crisis are: Martin 2002; Mazarr 1995; Sigal 1998; Wit/Poneman/Gallucci 2004.

with the IAEA regarding its nuclear past, the second North Korean nuclear crisis broke out (2002/2003) (Harnisch/Roesch 2011).

The DPRK's role as a military ally to China and the Soviet Union (then Russia) changed dramatically over the course of the first nuclear crisis, as both of its allies came to establish good and even privileged relations with archenemy South Korea. By then the relationship between the Korean People's Army (KPA) and the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) had been in decline for several decades. Some military-to-military visits continued during this period despite their suspension under Premier Li Peng (February 1993). But more often than not, the meetings appeared to be symbolic in nature. In contrast, Beijing started to hold regular and high-level military and defense policy talks, functional exchanges and research cooperation with South Korea (Allen/McVaden 1999: 66-67).

The 1990 Soviet decision to normalize its relations with South Korea and the subsequent demand to start to pay back its debt (estimated around US\$ 4.6 Bio.) came as a complete shock to the regime, clearly posing an existential threat. As the Soviet Union accounted for 50% of overall DPRK external trade in 1990, the Party newspaper, Rodong Shimun, used no unclear terms to describe the Soviet "betrayal".³

„When it comes to the USSR, it is the country that was responsible for the division of the Korean peninsula together with the US after the World War II and also conceded the DPRK as the sole legitimate state of the Korean nation... If there exists the power of hegemonism, weak states and nations would be victimized... According to South Korean newspapers, South Korea is going to give 2.3 billion dollars to the USSR. That means that the USSR sold out its dignity as a socialist superpower and its trust from alliances at the price of 2.3 billion“ (Rodong Sinmun, 5 October 1990 as cited in Nam 2012: 181).

With the Soviet trade and assistance in free fall, China's relative impact on North Korea's external trade rose substantially, from 10% in 1991 to 30% in 1996. But China, while trying to accommodate Pyongyang's fear of abandonment while normalizing relations with the South through extensive secret diplomacy, also demanded from the Kim regime to pay back its substantial debt and to adjust its basic economic line (Kim 2001: 384-386). Faced with a dire economic situation and a deepening food crisis, the Kim regime again lashed out against what it once had considered an alliance as close as "lips and teeth":

„Opportunists and betrayers of socialism have discarded the socialist task regarding people's thought, and instead encouraged individualism and selfishness through the introduction of a capitalist market economy. They claimed multiplicity in ownership and thus, caused the total destruction of the socialist economic system, which is based on socialist ownership. There is no need for discussion that schemes by opportunists and betrayers of socialism are anti-socialist and anti-revolutionary [Their schemes] distort socialism in favor of imperialists, paralyze the superiority [of socialism], and open a way for the collapse of socialism and a return to capitalism“ (Rodong Sinmun, 21 June 1995 as cited in Nam 2012: 182).

³ The Soviet Union/Russian-DPRK Friendship Treaty was soon amended (2000), from then on lacking a military cooperation component.

Facing a present and clear economic danger to the political survival of the regime rather than a rivalling faction to exploit the leadership transition after the death of Kim Il-Sung (June 1994), the North Korean leadership diversified its alignment behavior in the mid-1990s. This time the regime leaned towards the US (and the KEDO implementing the Geneva Agreed Framework), hoping for additional economic assistance. Accordingly, Kim Jong-il himself called upon the US in August 1997 to improve the bilateral relationship, as foreseen in the Geneva accord:

„The US should fundamentally change its anachronistic policy toward us, and should no longer impede the peaceful unification of Korea. We will not see the US as an unswerving enemy, and we want to normalize relations with the US“ (as cited in Nam 2012: 178).

Episode 3: The near-death experience of the Sino-DPRK alliance

In the current episode, starting in 2006, the Sino DPRK alliance is experiencing a near-death experience because both alliance partners regularly violate their alliance obligations and openly and militarily challenge their partner. This state of affairs substantially differs from a “virtual alliance”, in which it remains unclear whether partners remain committed to their obligations (Scobell/Cozard 2014: 56), but where their respective behavior does not openly contradict these obligations.

Systematically, both partners have not consulted each other regularly. Political and military consultations are at an all-time low since the mid-2000s. The DPRK's current leader Kim Jong-un has neither met President Xi, nor has he travelled to China or received senior Chinese dignitaries.⁴ In fact, as Victor Cha and Andy Lim (2017) have found, China-DPRK high-level exchanges have dramatically decreased under Kim Jong-un's reign and each nuclear test has extended the time period between the test and the next high-level meeting. Moreover, while China has started to support UN SC resolutions sanctioning the DPRK regime in 2006, North Korea has openly defied the pressure by the international community, and specifically China, to refrain from building and testing nuclear weapons and ballistic missile systems. Responding to the censure of the NPT review conference about its ongoing nuclear weapon's activities, the North Korean foreign ministry stated:

“The DPRK does not want anybody to recognize it as a nuclear weapons state nor feels any need to be done so. It is just satisfied with the pride and self-esteem that it is capable of reliably defending the sovereignty of the country and the security of the nation with its own nuclear weapons” (as cited in Hayes/Bruce 2011, FN 16).

⁴ While Xi Jinping has reportedly sent a telegram in 2016, commemorating the 55th anniversary of signing the SINO-DPRK Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation (Lee 2016), China has reportedly rejected a North Korean proposal for a joint military maneuver and cooperated in interdicting illegal DPRK weapons exports on a Chinese ship to Syria (cf. Perlez/Choe 2013; SCMP 2012).

In return for North Korea's unabashed nuclear activities, China's leadership has not only exerted increased political and economic pressure on Pyongyang - including the ad-hoc suspension of energy supplies - but it has also repeatedly called its defense obligation under the treaty into question. In 1997, Foreign Minister Tang called the treaty a "remnant of the Cold War, no longer relevant to the situation". In 2002, Pyongyang refused a Chinese proposal to modify alliance clause "immediately render military and other assistance". Against the background of the US intervention of Iraq, Shen Jiru, a scholar at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, publicly called in 2003 for the treaty's mutual defense clause to be revoked (Glaser/Billingsley 2012: 7-8). While several scholars supported Shen, a plurality of analysts argued in favor of keeping the treaty in its existing form in order to deter North Korea from further developing its nuclear weapons capacity (Freeman 2015b; Ru 2016)⁵ As a consequence, the Chinese leadership decided to keep the treaty (clause) intact after 2003, but also reportedly continued to press repeatedly for its revision (Glaser/Billingsley 2012: 8; Zhu/Beauchamp-Mustafaga 2015: 46).

Against this background, it is plausible to suggest that China's ambivalent position on its alliance obligations may have added to the North Korean motives to advance its nuclear program. But most likely it has not caused the DPRK to become a nuclear weapons state with a substantial operational arsenal. As Joseph Bermudez (2015) has argued, it is more plausible that the US intervention in Iraq in combination with the failure of the September 9, 2005 agreement in the Six-Party Talks and the Israeli destruction of the DPRK-supplied reactor in Syria on 6 September 2007 first triggered the DPRK's decision to develop an operational nuclear weapons capacity. But a detailed tracking of the key developments of the nuclear doctrine and weapons as well as ballistic missile system suggests that only under Kim Jong-un did the DPRK further produce, test and started to deploy all the necessary components and establish the necessary procedures and policy guidelines to operate its growing arsenal (Lewis 2015; Mansourov 2014; Smith 2015).

More specifically, while the DPRK leadership under Kim Jong-il conducted only one nuclear test and 17 missile tests between 1994 and 2008, the number has risen since then to 62 missile tests and 4 nuclear tests in total, including 20 missile tests and 2 nuclear tests in the past year under Kim Jong-un alone (Cha 2017). The quantity and quality of the DPRK weapons program and the speed of growth over time (i.e. up to 20 warheads until the end of 2016 and a potential of 50 operational warheads until the end of 2020) suggest that the new DPRK leadership seeks a second-strike capacity against the US and other Great Powers, including China, by dislocating its missile launch sites close to the Chinese border and building solid-fuel missiles with short launch-on time and submarine-based missiles

⁵ Thus, when North Korea shelled South Korea's Yeonpyeong Island, raising inter-Korean tension to the brink of war, then Chinese leader Hu Jintao's emissary, Dai Bingguo, warned the late North Korean leader Kim Jong-il: "If North Korea would first attack South Korea and, as a result, there were full-scale arms clashes, China wouldn't aid North Korea." (cf. Lee 2011).

for extended distance with miniaturized warheads.⁶ This indicates that North Korea has left the transactional period of its nuclear doctrine development and has entered the phase in which it seeks "Mutually Assured Destruction" capacity (see Table 1).

⁶ Cf. for analysis on the quantity and quality of the DPRK nuclear weapons program: Wit/Sun 2015; Wallerstein 2015, Chanlett-Avery et al. 2016; on miniaturization: Lewis 2015; on submarine based DPRK missile systems: Schilling 2016.

Table 1: DPRK Nuclear doctrine development since 1994

Nuclear doctrine	Primary goals	Transparency	Nuclear Arsenal: Size / Diversity	Operational Complexity	Problems
Political/Diplomatic 1994-2003	Bargaining / blackmail	Low: demonstrate nuclear components	None	None	Trustworthiness over time
Transactional 2004-2012	Internationalize, facilitate third party assistance	Low: demonstrate technical prowess	Small: crude weapons capacity on standby	Low: central authority	Relies on third party calculations
Assured Strategic Destruction 2013-??	Deter regime-threatening attacks/coercion	Medium: second-strike capacity	Medium: survivability of counter-weapons	Medium: central or delegated authority; weapons assemblage	Credibility against conventional threats
Nuclear War doctrine	Deter or Defeat on broad spectrum of threats	High: demonstrate survivability	High: large, diverse arsenal for first use/second strike	High: prepared for pre-delegation; integrated into military doctrine	Expensive and pressure on command & control

Source: based on Smith 2015: 12

As the 2013 DPRK "Law on the consolidation of the position of a Nuclear Weapons State for Self-Defense" states:

"Having an independent and just nuclear force, the DPRK put an end to the distress-torn history in which it was subject to outside forces' aggression and interference and could emerge a socialist power of Juche which no one dares to provoke" (as cited in Mansourov 2014: 4).

As the consequence of this escalation, China has most recently supported UN SC Res. 2321 (2016) under Article 41, Chapter VII of the UN Charter, condemning the DPRK's fifth nuclear test conducted on 9 September 2016 and restricting the DPRK's export of coal and iron ore substantially. Moreover, since 2013, China's leadership has allowed a somewhat pluralistic public debate, including senior military officials, over its North Korea policy, ranging from positions calling for the provision of an extended deterrence by China to revoking the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation (cf. Beauchamp-Mustafaga 2014, 2015a, b; Gries 2012).⁷

⁷ Interestingly, the Chinese military has obviously leaked documents indicating that it is actively planning for a collapse of the regime, following up on reports that PLA forces have been reinforced to protect China against incursions by North Korean individuals and rogue commandos searching for food or bounty (cf. Ryall 2017).

Moreover, after a period of relying on the personnel and structures put in place by his father to facilitate the regime's dynastic transition, the new leader, Kim Jong Un, has systematically purged the upper echelon of the military and most high-ranking party officials associated with China and its economic opening. These officials include among others: Jang Song-thaek, the uncle of KJU (National Defense Commission), Ri Ryong-Ha and Jang Su-Gil (Deputy KWP leaders), Ri Yong Gil (oder abgesetzt) Hyon Yong-chol Ri Yong-ju (all leading officers of the Korea People's Army) (cf. Gause 2015, 2016; Harnisch/Friedrichs 2017). Most recently, it appears that Kim Jong Un has had his half-brother, Kim Jong Nam, killed in a WMD attack at Kuala Lumpur airport, thereby sending a chilling warning to any potential opposition within the country or defector outside of the DPRK (Choe/Gladstone 2017).

Conclusion

This brief study of the Sino-DPRK military alliance suggests that the treaty served more political than military purposes because the DPRK feared that deep and sustained exchanges would undermine the regimes autonomy in the asymmetric relationship. The analysis of the foundational episode indicated that North Korea's alliance strategy foresaw to align with both, the Soviet Union and China, to use the tension between the two to maximize its autonomy - thereby avoiding the humiliating dependence during the Korea War - and to limit the probability of foreign-sponsored coup d'etats. It followed that the Sino-DPRK alliance (after the purge of the Yan'an group) never allowed for foreign troop dislocation on DPRK territory or developing an integrated alliance military training and defense planning.

During the second episode the evidence suggests that China's opening towards the West, and South Korea in particular, informed Kim Il Sung's decision to pursue a virtual nuclear weapons program which he then used to extort concessions from the United States and the KEDO consortium. Given China's role in the Korea war and Korea's long-time subordinate position vis-à-vis the Middle Kingdom, North Korea's refusal to adopt China's economic reform and opening remains deeply disturbing to the Chinese leadership, fueling an increasing frustration and dissociation from its military ally. But a major difference between the second and third episode appears to be that neither the external threat by the United States nor the domestic opposition to the Kim Il Sung regime seemed to be as imminent and deadly as under Kim Jong Un.

The highly personalistic regime of Kim Jong Un obviously sees itself in a deadly struggle for domestic and external survival. It follows that it is more likely to pursue both operational nuclear weapons and domestic purges in parallel despite a military alliance, because it fears that its alliance partner may seek to cooperate with internal opposition forces. For the young Kim then the episode of his grandfather with the Yan'an faction may show that he will have to radically escalate Juche through the Byungjin line in order to survive a concerted assault by an alliance of internal and external enemies.

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