

# Growing debate in Beijing over North Korea

Ben McGrath  
28 March 2017

The Trump administration is exploiting the growing confrontation with North Korea to significantly boost pressure on China. Trump himself has scathingly referred to Beijing's failure to use its economic muscle to assist the US in forcing Pyongyang to dismantle its nuclear and missile programs.

During his visit to Asia this month, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson warned that "all options" were on the table, including military strikes against North Korea, heightening the dilemma confronting the Chinese regime.

On the one hand, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) apparatus has been hostile to North Korea's nuclear tests and missile launches as they provide a convenient pretext for the US military build-up in Asia in preparation for war with China. They also fuel moves towards a nuclear arms race in North East Asia, with Trump suggesting during last year's US presidential election, that Japan and South Korea could develop their own nuclear weapons.

At the same time, Beijing has resisted demands that it cut-off key exports to Pyongyang such as oil, fearful that it would rapidly lead to an acute economic and political crisis that could be exploited by the US and its allies. China has always regarded North Korea as a useful strategic buffer and does not want a unified Korea aligned with the US on its northern border. Beijing has pushed for a restart of stalled six-party talks involving the two Koreas, the US, China, Japan and Russia as a means of defusing the stand-off. Tillerson bluntly rejected talks.

The US threat of war on the neighboring Korean Peninsula has further fueled the debate in Beijing over its policy towards Pyongyang, with a vocal minority suggesting that China abandon its longstanding ally. Nanjing University professor Zhu Feng told the *New Yorker* last month: "Beijing's patience is running out. The Kim [Jong-un] regime has done absolutely nothing

that is good for China's national interest."

Deng Yuwen—former editor of the *Study Times*, the prestigious journal of the CCP's Central Party School—wrote in a recent blog that North Korea had long overdrawn on "the friendship formed in blood" during the Korean War of 1950-53. He stated that it was time for Beijing to abandon its "appeasement attitude" towards Pyongyang, saying, "The North Korean issue is no longer its domestic affair; being a great threat to China and East Asia, it has become an international affair."

Deng was removed as *Study Times* editor after writing a comment in 2013 for the British-based *Financial Times* entitled "China should abandon North Korea." He argued that "Beijing should give up on Pyongyang and press for the reunification of the Korean peninsula" in order to "undermine the strategic alliance between Washington, Tokyo and Seoul" and "ease the geopolitical pressure on China."

More recently, others such as Professor Zhang Liangui, also of the Central Party School, have called into question Beijing's relationship with the North as well. Professor Zhu told the *New Yorker*, "There is no other issue that divides China's foreign-policy community more than the DPRK [North Korea]." The fact that the debate is public points to an intense discussion underway behind closed doors in the Chinese bureaucracy.

China's relations with North Korea have already deteriorated markedly as Beijing has supported punitive UN sanctions and imposed them. In February, the Chinese regime suspended coal imports from North Korea, provoking a rare public criticism of Beijing as "dancing to the tune of the US." After coming to power in 2011, Kim Jong-un sought to consolidate his grip through a series of purges, including the execution of his uncle, Jang Song-taek, who had close ties with Beijing and sought to implement pro-market

restructuring.

Since assuming office in 2012, Chinese President Xi Jinping has not met with Kim Jung-un. Nevertheless, there is no indication that Beijing is ready to abandon Pyongyang. A March 10 Op-ed piece in the state-owned *Global Times* placed much of the blame for the current situation at Washington's feet. "In the eyes of the Chinese people, the North Korean nuclear issue was not created by Pyongyang alone. The country's insistence on developing a nuclear program is without doubt a wrong path, yet Washington and Seoul are the main forces that have pushed North Korea to this path," it stated.

Xia Yanmei, an analyst at the China-based research company Gavekal, told the *Australian*: "[T]he reality is that Beijing is far more suspicious of Washington and its allies in Japan and South Korea than it is of North Korea... Its determination to help the Kim regime survive remains intact despite North Korea's provocations."

The Trump administration's decision to begin the deployment of a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battery in South Korea has only added more fuel to the debate in Beijing, which fears that the anti-ballistic missile system and its radar will be used to peer deep inside Chinese territory.

Those advocating that Beijing abandon North Korea argue that THAAD demonstrates the failure of the CCP's current policy. "The U.S. decision to deploy THAAD in South Korea is a disaster for China and it is time China changes its mindset," political commentator Zhao Lingmin wrote in a recent Chinese-language article for the *Financial Times*.

Further increasing the pressure on Beijing, the Trump administration announced new sanctions on 30 companies and individuals including several in China, claiming that they were involved in transferring ballistic missile technology to Iran and violating existing bans on exporting goods to North Korea. The US Congress is expected to pass a bill banning oil exports to North Korea, except for humanitarian purposes, and barring overseas companies from hiring North Korean workers. The bill would also re-designate Pyongyang as a state sponsor of terrorism.

If the US did launch military strikes on North Korea, China would not necessarily support Pyongyang, despite their security treaty signed 55 years ago. "The

treaty was a relic of the Cold War which made no mention of specific circumstances under which China would provide military aid," Professor Shen Jiru from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences told the *South China Morning Post* last April.

An article in the *Diplomat* on March 25 entitled "China's North Korea debate" stated that there was a "third camp" in the Chinese apparatus that was arguing for more pro-active measures—not simply to abandon North Korea but to "eliminate" it. The article does not make clear what its proponents propose, but it can only have one meaning—for China to pre-empt the US and its allies by carrying out its own regime-change operation in Pyongyang.

The debate going on in Beijing is an indication not only of the sharp tensions with Pyongyang but also the developing sense of crisis in China, which only heightens the danger of a minor incident triggering a catastrophic conflict engulfing the region and the world. While North Korea, South Korea, China and Japan are all contributing to the dangerous situation on the Korean Peninsula, the primary responsibility rests with the US, which under the Trump administration is considering the most reckless and provocative actions.



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