



Asia Pacific Bulletin

Number 158 | April 5, 2012

China-North Korea: Renewal of the “Blood Alliance”

BY MASAKO IKEGAMI

Masako Ikegami, Professor of Political Science at Stockholm University, argues that “Recently, the China-North Korea ‘blood alliance,’ a concept of allies that originated during the Korean War, has been renewed, and it is in China’s interests that North Korea consolidates its ‘absolute deterrence’ capability to deter US forces in the region.”

As North Korea’s latest rocket-missile launch approaches, there is speculation whether Beijing can halt Pyongyang’s missile ambitions. In my view, Beijing will turn a blind eye towards North Korea’s latest provocation, while simultaneously calling for restraint by all parties. Recently, the China-North Korea “blood alliance,” a concept of allies that originated during the Korean War, has been renewed, and it is in China’s interests that North Korea consolidates its “absolute deterrence” capability to deter US forces in the region.

North Korea’s late leader, Kim Jong-il, broke diplomatic protocol when he made three trips to China within twelve months—May and August 2010, and May 2011. During this period, Kim further solidified his strategic decision to turn towards China for the survival of his regime by virtually abandoning the North Korean policy of *Juche*—an ideology of national self-reliance devised by his late father Kim Il-sung. The intensive interaction between Beijing and Pyongyang in the past few years suggests that China and North Korea both seek to reconfirm their blood alliance, notwithstanding occasional disagreements on certain economic issues. Chinese President Hu Jintao met twice with Kim Jong-il in 2010 amidst the controversy of the sinking of the South Korean corvette, the *Cheonan*, and the US government’s announcement of broadened sanctions in response. Furthermore, it was beyond normal protocol for Hu to personally travel to the north-eastern Chinese city of Changchun to greet Kim and his son Kim Jong-un during their secretive August 2010 trip. This was when the elder Kim reportedly stated North Korea’s “in-depth experience of the preciousness...of the friendship created by older generations [Mao Zedong and Kim Il-sung] of revolutionaries of both countries.”

Today, Changchun is the provincial capital of China’s Jilin province, which acts as the lifeline for supplying Chinese economic aid to North Korea. The city also has special symbolic significance; Changchun was developed by Imperial Japan in the 1930s as the capital and industrial center of Manchuria, and according to Pyongyang the late Kim Il-sung started his anti-Japanese rebellion there. The ancient Koguryo/Goguryeo Kingdom, according to Koreans, was also founded in this area, which recently the Chinese have been claiming as “an inalienable part of China.” Presumably, this is aimed at securing historical justification for communist China’s right to intervene in the event of North Korea’s collapse.

These extraordinary summit meetings in 2010 amidst international criticism condemning North Korea’s aggression are clear signals that China, at that time, endorsed Kim Jong-un as Kim Jong-il’s heir apparent, as is the protocol of a suzerain with a vassal tributary. Evidently the two regimes share the “military-first policy,” in that the Communist Party’s political monopoly in both states is secured by the military. Clearly, the People’s Liberation Army and the Korean People’s Army are not playing the same role in state life

“China’s ultimate interest is to maintain North Korea as a hermit state, subject to Beijing’s influence.”

The East-West Center promotes better relations and understanding among the people and nations of the United States, Asia, and the Pacific through cooperative study, research, and dialogue. Established by the US Congress in 1960, the Center serves as a resource for information and analysis on critical issues of common concern, bringing people together to exchange views, build expertise, and develop policy options.

The *Asia Pacific Bulletin* (APB) series is produced by the East-West Center in Washington. The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the policy or position of the East-West Center or any organization with which the author is affiliated.

as the national armies of western states; their real role is to serve the communist party dictatorships in China and North Korea. This is where the iron ruling power of Chinese and North Korean communist dictatorship lies, and such an institutional trait is an essential shared value inside the China-North Korea blood alliance.

North Korea is virtually a failed state surviving entirely by relying on Chinese support. China fervently opposed economic sanctions against North Korea at the United Nations Security Council following the North Korean missile test-firing in April 2009, and second nuclear test in May 2009. China also blocked any tough measures against North Korea following the sinking of the *Cheonan* and shelling of Yeonpyeong island in 2010. In spite of stricter UN sanctions in 2009 banning the export of weapons and luxury goods to North Korea, China’s export of luxury goods to North Korea has significantly increased. In addition, Chinese ports and airspace provide safe channels for North Korea’s export of arms and sensitive WMD-related technology to states of concern such as Iran.

The Six-Party Talks framework is a Chinese trick to muddle through the North Korean nuclear crisis without jeopardizing the North Korean regime. In fact, through the Six-Party Talks process, North Korea was granted sufficient time to prepare for its nuclear tests and to establish itself as a *de facto* nuclear weapon state. Furthermore, this is based on the shared conviction of both Pyongyang and Beijing that nuclear weapons are the absolute deterrence against the threat of a US attack. This conviction originates from Mao Zedong and Kim Il-sung’s shared fear of a US nuclear attack during the Korean War. Consequently, Beijing and Pyongyang’s statements after their first nuclear tests, in October 1964 and October 2006, respectively, are basically identical. Both claimed that “the US nuclear threats compelled us to develop nuclear weapons.”

Against this background, it is reasonable to assume that the Chinese military has been consistent in supporting a nuclear-armed North Korea for China’s own strategic benefits. As Shen Dingli frequently asserts: “North Korea reduces the military pressure China faces from the United States in the contingency of Taiwanese independence” and “North Korea’s bold move to develop nuclear weapons is also to make war on the Korean peninsula more unlikely.” Taking this into account, the Chinese Foreign Ministry’s remarks condemning North Korea’s nuclear tests were rather misleading, if not deceptive. China’s ultimate interest is to maintain North Korea as a hermit state, subject to Beijing’s influence.

Previously, in *Asia Pacific Bulletin*, No. 122, I argued that China’s current strategy toward North Korea is similar to Imperial Japan’s Manchukuo policy in the 1930s with regards to: 1) Large investment in economic infrastructure for extracting natural resources, 2) Military interventions for protecting economic interests, and 3) Social-political absorption by supporting a puppet government. This sophisticated strategy of “stealth imperialism” is employed by a relatively weak latecomer imperial state trying to secure its own interests by avoiding direct confrontation with existing imperial powers.

For China, the quasi-Manchukuo strategy is the most cost-effective way to maximize its strategic gains. One of China’s major, yet hidden, strategic goals would be to secure naval access to the North Korean ports of Rason, Seonbong, and Wonsan, which are gateways to the Sea of Japan, while simultaneously expanding Dandong port to command the Bohai Bay and the Yellow Sea. Are these examples of Chinese attempts to build “Gwadar” port facilities in North Korea? Was North Korea’s offensive behavior throughout 2010, along with ongoing increased aggression by Chinese “fishing” boats against Japan and South Korea, part of China’s increasingly belligerent and imperialistic behavior in the East China Sea and the Yellow Sea? Either way, North Korea’s forthcoming long-range missile test perfectly serves China’s grand strategy.