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ABSTRACT
This article examines Chinese views of North Korea’s nuclear-weapon program during the Donald J. Trump administration. It shows that China has portrayed itself as a responsible country that promotes regional stability, unlike the United States, which has engaged in military brinkmanship with North Korea. Some Chinese foreign-policy experts have asserted that Beijing should back Pyongyang in the event of war because of their shared history of humiliation by great powers, while others have favored working with other regional partners. Another theme in Chinese discourse about North Korea is that Pyongyang is an impetuous, ungrateful regime that impedes Beijing’s ability to attain its core interests of regional stability, economic development, and heightened global influence. This negative assessment of North Korea drove Beijing’s endorsement of stricter UN sanctions in 2017. While Beijing has punished Pyongyang for its wayward policies, China responded favorably to North Korea’s decision in April 2018 to stop nuclear tests and partake in international dialogue. Beijing seeks to help Pyongyang gradually disarm and develop its economy within a Chinese-led East Asian order. The article concludes by explaining how Beijing’s recent, more positive view of Pyongyang is likely to affect its support for American efforts to dismantle North Korea’s nuclear-weapon program.

On July 29, 2017, US President Donald J. Trump took to Twitter to express his anger about a North Korean ballistic-missile test the day before. Trump’s target of criticism, however, was not North Korea. Trump directed his ire toward the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership. Trump railed against China for doing “NOTHING for us with North Korea” but “just talk.” As Pyongyang’s most important ally, Beijing “could easily solve this problem,” and the Trump administration would make sure that China did. The United States would “no longer allow” China to avoid exerting its influence over North Korea and rein in its nuclear-weapon program. In asserting that the road to Pyongyang went through Beijing, Trump followed in the steps of a long string of American politicians and political analysts who have maintained that Beijing’s leverage over Pyongyang is the essential piece in settling the North Korean nuclear issue. But what exactly does China think about its role in handling North Korea’s nuclear-weapon program?

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This article explores Chinese views of North Korea’s nuclear-weapon development during the Trump administration. Its findings are based on interviews with Chinese scholars in Beijing and Shanghai in June 2018, in addition to a survey of Chinese government and official media sources. If we take a macro-view of Chinese-DPRK relations, it is clear that, during the first year of the Trump administration, tensions rose between the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) as Pyongyang undertook multiple nuclear and missile tests as part of Kim Jong Un’s byungjin line of simultaneously pursuing nuclear and economic development. China reacted to North Korea’s testing campaigns by curtailing trade and backing stringent United Nations (UN) sanctions, including limiting crucial oil shipments. Beijing also called on Washington to stop saber rattling and take a peaceful approach to regional affairs.

Beijing hopes that North Korea will, over the long term, abandon nuclear weapons, embrace Chinese-style “reform and opening up, and normalize diplomatic relations.” In the short term, the CCP has sought to end US-DPRK brinkmanship and implement China’s “double-suspension” policy of North Korea ending nuclear tests and the United States halting military exercises. The intense diplomatic heat surrounding the North Korean nuclear issue clearly rattled Beijing. According to US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Beijing even broached contingency planning with Washington about how to handle a North Korean collapse. The Chinese government also reportedly deployed troops to its northeast territory to secure the border and set up refugee camps. While China’s Ministry of National Defense has remained silent about whether Sino-American contingency planning took place, and it has denied increasing troops along the North Korean border, the semi-official Chinese newspaper the Global Times published a front-page report about Chinese troop deployments; there were contemporary discussions in the Chinese press about war preparations in northeastern China and the benefits of contingency planning with the United States, and South Korean media noted increased military activity in China’s northeastern region.

3 I have not included the names of Chinese interviewees because they requested anonymity.
In 2018, China developed more positive relations with North Korea after Kim Jong Un swapped nuclear tests for improved relations with the United States, South Korea, and China. Bolstering China’s more favorable opinion of North Korea was the fact that Kim’s international charm offensive bore fruit in the form of peace-promoting meetings with Xi Jinping—the first and most frequent foreign leader with whom Kim has met—meetings with South Korean leaders, and a Trump-Kim summit, which resulted in a pause in US military exercises and a joint statement calling for “new U.S.-DPRK relations … a lasting and stable peace regime … and complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.” China viewed this diplomatic turn as a confirmation of its double-suspension policy and its advocacy of dialogue over war preparations.

The remainder of this article is split into four parts. The first section places Chinese views of North Korea’s nuclear-weapon program during the Trump administration into historical context, by providing a brief overview of how China had previously positioned itself as a promoter of communication between North Korea and other regional players that opposes Pyongyang’s nuclear-weapon development and aims to cultivate a stable regional-security environment. The next section charts out three major themes in Chinese discourse about the DPRK during Trump’s presidency. The first theme is China’s continued self-portrayal as a responsible country that opposes military antagonism and seeks to foster regional peace. Some members of China’s foreign-policy community have argued that, as a responsible international actor, Beijing should participate in contingency planning with Washington or Moscow to ensure regional stability, whereas other Chinese foreign-policy analysts have opined that Beijing should stand up for small states like North Korea because of their similar history of humiliation by great powers. A second Chinese view is more critical of Pyongyang and depicts it as an impetuous, ungrateful regime that encumbers Beijing’s ability to achieve its core national interests of regional stability, economic development, and increased international influence. It is this latter view that motivated Beijing to sponsor more punishing sanctions on North Korea. Since Pyongyang shifted away from nuclear tests toward international dialogue in 2018, a third theme has become prominent in Chinese discourse about North Korea, which focuses on how Beijing can help it gradually “denuclearize” and prosper in a Chinese-led East Asian order. After laying out these three main themes, I discuss their continued importance in current Chinese attitudes toward North Korea, and describe how Beijing’s more favorable view of Pyongyang is likely to shape Chinese participation in efforts to denuclearize North Korea.


10 “Xinjiao lishi xing huihu, liuxia zhe si ge lishi xing de xuannian [The historic Singapore meeting: these four points of historic concern remain], Xinhua: Niu tan qin, June 13, 2018, <http://finance.ifeng.com/a/20180613/16366793_0.shtml>.

11 As nuclear expert Jeffrey Lewis has noted, the term “denuclearize” is a fuzzy, ill-defined term understood differently by the United States and the DPRK. I use it in this article because “denuclearize” (无核化 or wu he hua) is the term used in Chinese sources. Jeffrey Lewis, “The Word that Could Help the World Avoid Nuclear War,” New York Times, April 4, 2018, <www.nytimes.com/2018/04/04/opinion/avoid-nuclear-war-denuclearization.html>.
A history of opposition and mediation

China has opposed North Korea’s acquisition of nuclear weapons from the beginning. When North Korean leader Kim Il Sung requested Chinese assistance in 1964 with developing nuclear weapons, Mao Zedong rejected his entreaties. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, had already begun to assist North Korea with a civilian nuclear program, training North Korean scientists at the Joint International Nuclear Research Center in Dubna and helping to establish the Yongbyon Nuclear Research Center in North Korea. During the 1980s, Deng Xiaoping tried to position China as a communication facilitator between North Korea and the United States as part of the CCP’s broader push to promote a stable regional environment for Chinese economic growth. Wanting to reduce the likelihood of a conflict in China’s neighborhood, Deng told Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger in 1983 that “China must cooperate with the United States to mitigate tension on the [Korean] Peninsula.” In pursuit of this end, Beijing conveyed to Pyongyang an American offer to hold three-party talks with the two Koreas, which North Korea rebuffed.

China adopted a firmer stance against North Korea when the International Atomic Energy Agency became concerned in 1993 that facilities at Yongbyon were being used to advance Pyongyang’s aspiration to manufacture nuclear weapons. Two years prior to this event, Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen had reaffirmed Beijing’s aversion to “the existence of nuclear weapons on the Korean peninsula.” China followed through on this policy position when the Bill Clinton administration suggested in March 1993 that the United Nations impose sanctions on North Korea, and the Chinese Foreign Ministry signaled that it would approve this measure were it to be put to a vote. Beijing pressed Pyongyang even more vigorously to halt its nuclear program when it learned that the Pentagon might attack Yongbyon because North Korea had repurposed some plutonium from its civilian nuclear program to produce nuclear weapons. Feeling pressured by the US military and possible UN sanctions, Pyongyang signed the 1994 Agreed Framework, which stipulated that North Korea would shut down its indigenous reactor program and reprocessing plant in exchange for international assistance with constructing light-water nuclear reactors and supplies of oil prior to their completion.

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China again asserted itself as the key handler of the North Korean nuclear issue when the Agreed Framework fell apart in 2002 when President Bush designated North Korea as part of an “axis of evil” and Washington accused Pyongyang of circumventing the Agreed Framework and secretly starting up a uranium-enrichment program. Washington then terminated its agreement to provide North Korea with oil shipments, which had been repeatedly delayed, and revoked its offer to assist North Korea with its nuclear-energy program. As diplomatic tensions intensified between Washington and Pyongyang over the course of 2003, Chinese leaders became worried that the United States might act like it recently had in Iraq and undertake a pre-emptive strike on North Korea and thereby precipitate a regional security crisis.

Seeking to maintain a peaceful regional environment, Beijing helped arrange three-party talks between North Korea, the United States, and China in April 2003. China then shuttled diplomats back and forth between Washington, Pyongyang, Seoul, Moscow, and Tokyo in order to bring them all to the negotiating table in the Six Party Talks (6PT) in August 2003. China engaged in this diplomatic push at the exact same time that the Communist Party began to promote the idea that the PRC was undergoing a “peaceful rise” to great-power status and that Beijing strived to operate as a “peaceful broker of multilateral engagements in the region.” China’s efforts to mediate the North Korean nuclear crisis gave substance to the benevolent international image that Beijing endeavored to cultivate for itself when the 6PT resulted in a joint statement in 2005. This agreement, however, was undercut by Washington’s earlier designation of a Macao bank as a “primary money laundering concern” because of its business with North Korea. The 6PT were further undermined when, despite Chinese protestations, Pyongyang conducted missile tests and its first nuclear test in 2006. Beijing responded to these repeated slaps in the face by backing UN sanctions against North Korea for the very first time.

Beijing, nonetheless, still endeavored to keep the 6PT alive and hosted and mediated talks that led to two agreements in 2007, one in February and another one in October, which stipulated that North Korea would “shut down and seal for the purpose of eventual abandonment the Yongbyon nuclear facility … invite back IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency] personnel to conduct all necessary monitoring and verifications … [and] discuss with other parties a list of all its nuclear programs” in exchange for oil supplies and the gradual normalization of relations with the United States and Japan.

Realizing this initiative, however, encountered an insurmountable roadblock in 2009, when North Korea carried out a failed satellite launch, which foreign observers considered to be a cover for an intercontinental-ballistic-missile (ICBM) test. The UN Security Council reacted with even stronger sanctions, and North Korea pulled out of the 6PT.\textsuperscript{26} China supported even more severe UN sanctions after Pyongyang performed another satellite launch attempt in April 2012, a successful launch in December 2012, and a third nuclear test in February 2013, followed by a fourth nuclear test in January 2016, another space launch that February, and a fifth nuclear test in September.\textsuperscript{27} By giving its imprimatur to UN efforts to thwart North Korea’s nuclear ambitions, Beijing sought to uphold its stature as a responsible member of the global community, lending its political influence to checking and eventually rolling back Pyongyang’s nuclear-weapon program.

**Chinese views during the Trump era**

Three prominent themes have emerged within Chinese discourse on North Korea during the past three years of the Trump administration: China as a responsible nation; the DPRK as a hindrance to Beijing’s regional and international influence; and a China-led denuclearization of the DPRK under a Chinese-led East Asian order.

**China is a responsible nation**

During the Trump administration, the Chinese government has continued to portray its handling of the North Korean nuclear crisis as evidence of China’s status as a responsible peaceful country. The Foreign Ministry holds that Beijing is dedicated to world peace and “the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula and the protection of the international system of non-proliferation.”\textsuperscript{28} While China is against a nuclear-armed North Korea, it is not in favor of military action, due to proclaimed respect for national territorial integrity. China thus rejects overthrowing Kim Jong Un. China is also against conflict because of how nuclear fallout and a large number of refugees might affect northeast China. The state-run Xinhua News Agency professes that Beijing has at heart the security of Northeast Asia, since war would generate a regional crisis, and “nuclear pollution may turn Northeast Asia into hell.”\textsuperscript{29}

Although China is in principle opposed to pre-emptive attacks, some Chinese foreign-policy experts have argued that, to maintain regional stability, Beijing should undertake contingency planning with the United States.\textsuperscript{30} General Wang Haiyun suggested, on the contrary, in a *People’s Daily* editorial in March 2017, that “China and Russia should closely collaborate on relevant military intelligence and troop deployments” and warned that, if war broke out on the Korean peninsula, “The United States will inevitably take


\textsuperscript{30} “Pingchang dongyun heping chuangkou yi kaiqi, ‘dongyun waijiao’ wailai you san ge keneng zuoxiang.”
this opportunity to strengthen its military presence in South Korea, and its long-planned plot to create a ‘small Asian NATO’ targeted at China and Russia may succeed.” In order to ensure China’s safety, Beijing

must prepare for military action in response to the danger of war as soon as possible … [and] consider moving troops stationed in the northern region to frontlines. Navy, air force, and missile troops should be appropriately redeployed and undertake preparations for an attack … Considerations should additionally be made about setting up international refugee camps within North Korea in order to prevent North Korean refugees from flooding into our borders. In the event that the United States and South Korea hit the North Korean nuclear weapons and related facilities, it would cause large-scale nuclear pollution, and so our chemical troops should rapidly perform decontamination measures within our borders or even within the north of the DPRK.31

Other foreign-policy analysts contend that, despite Chinese disapproval of North Korea’s nuclear tests, Beijing signed the Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty in 1961, and North Korea should still, as the Global Times asserted, “make [China] a foundation for its national security,” since “any country that underestimates China’s determination and power will have to pay the price.”32 While such forceful statements of China acting as North Korea’s military backstop are not the norm in Chinese government discourse, declarations of this sort are rooted in a widely shared Chinese view that links the PRC’s backing of North Korea to their shared history of humiliation at the hands of great powers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.33

According to this popular Chinese viewpoint, Western and Japanese imperialists took advantage of China’s weakness in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and thus China should exert its newfound power to stand up for “the little guy” in international affairs. China, in this view, is justified in engaging in such conduct, since the United States continues to use its global weight to contain the PRC and impede its global rise through actions such as the American-led “trade war [and] driving a warship through the Taiwan Strait.”34 Chinese semi-official webpages, likewise, emphasize that the DPRK has nuclear weapons because the United States’ regional military presence has convinced North Koreans “that peace must be guaranteed by a military build-up.”35

North Korea is a dangerous nuisance

Not every member of the Chinese foreign-policy community agrees with this more favorable view of North Korea. One outspoken critic is East China Normal University Professor Shen Zhihua. As Shen stated in a lecture in Shanghai in 2018, China’s core interests lie in maintaining border stability and developing internationally, “But since North Korea acquired nuclear weapons, that periphery has never been stable … [and] if a Korean

31 “Miandui Chaoxian bandao jushi, fanzhan ye xu beizhan.”
33 Chan and Bridges, “Divergence and Diversity,” p. 18.
nuclear bomb explodes, who’ll be the victim of the nuclear leakage and fallout?”

Although the Chinese press does not typically criticize North Korea so strongly, netizens regularly show disdain for Kim Jong Un, or, as they often call him, “Fatty Kim,” supposedly “because he’s a dictator … ruling over people who … weigh half what he does.”

Many Chinese also privately attest to thinking that North Korea is “like China in the Mao era”—economically backward, dictatorial, and militaristic.

While the popular perception of North Korea as an unjust, impoverished dictatorship is useful to the CCP because it highlights China’s general prosperity and relative openness, Chinese also often question why Beijing supports an ally who “does not listen” to its sage advice to “reform and open up” and is recklessly indifferent to Chinese concerns about a nuclear war in its own backyard. Chinese ire grew especially high in the northeast after the DPRK’s purported hydrogen bomb test in September 2017. In response to the DPRK’s wayward policies, a Chinese Financial Times editorial argued that, “if a buffer area becomes a nuisance area, then its strategic use as a buffer has disappeared.” If North Korea is going to act like a bull in a china shop, then, as stated by a netizen on the CCP-curated People’s Daily’s internet bulletin board, Beijing “has no obligation to serve as the father of a disobedient child.”

Indicative of Chinese discontent with North Korea was the CCP’s decision to endorse tougher UN sanctions in 2017, which restricted oil imports to North Korea to 500,000 barrels a year, prohibited North Korea from exporting coal, iron, and seafood, ordered countries to repatriate all North Koreans working abroad within two years, and permitted the seizure of any ship illegally furnishing the DPRK with oil or other sanctioned products.

One important factor behind China’s support for stricter sanctions was Xi Jinping’s more commanding approach to intra-CCP politics. Former CCP Chairman Hu Jintao heeded the advice of the International Liaison Department to protect its ally from crushing sanctions in the hope that Pyongyang would someday learn from China and pursue economic reform and open up to international trade. Xi Jinping, on the other hand, opted to implement stronger sanctions in order to compel North Korea to act more in line with Chinese interests. By endorsing harsher sanctions, Beijing was also able to extract concessions from the United States; Secretary of State Rex Tillerson backed China’s “Four Nos” principle and publicly stated that “The United States does not seek regime change, the collapse of the regime, an accelerated reunification of the peninsula or an excuse to send the U.S. military into North Korea.”

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38 Author’s interviews in China, June 13 and 18, 2018.
39 Author’s interviews in China, June 13, 15, and 18, 2018.
41 Renmin ribao qiangguo lunan [The People’s Daily Great Power Forum].

that Xi Jinping may have endorsed more severe sanctions was that he shares the opinion of many Chinese that the PRC’s current core national interests are regional stability, raising national living standards, and developing internationally; giving the DPRK a long diplomatic leash hinders the advancement of these three goals.45

Denuclearizing North Korea with Chinese help

Chinese foreign-policy experts disagree about what role the PRC’s more assertive stance played in Pyongyang’s recent emphasis on economic development and making peace with its neighbors. Some Chinese think that Pyongyang sought better relations with Seoul, Beijing, and Washington because “North Korea’s economy has been difficult to sustain” under the American-led maximum-pressure campaign.46 Other scholars accord less weight to UN sanctions. They hold that North Korea has long endured sanctions and has become inured to the resultant hardships. According to this interpretation, North Korea changed its diplomatic tune because it “thinks that nuclear-weapons development has already been completed” with the successful testing of an ICBM capable of reaching the continental United States, and so Pyongyang has discontinued nuclear tests “to create a peaceful and relaxed external environment for economic construction.”47

Whatever caused North Korea to cease nuclear testing and increase regional engagement, China’s Foreign Ministry has declared that the PRC “endorses North Korea’s strategic center of gravity shifting towards economic construction.”48 Chinese commentary has noted that North Korean development will require cooperation with international partners and diversification of trade investments.49 China is intent on being one of those partners. The Xinhua News Agency praised Kim Jong Un’s first visit to Beijing in March 2018 as rekindling the partnership of “several generations of leaders” who have “maintained close exchanges and paid frequent calls on each other like relatives.”50 During Kim’s four trips to China in March, May, and June 2018 and January 2019, the Chinese Foreign Ministry stated that the PRC was determined to cooperate with North Korea on “promoting regional peace and stability,” and Xi Jinping assured Kim that the PRC would support his efforts “to develop the economy and improve people’s


livelhood.”⁵¹ In June 2018, Kim also toured the Chinese Academy of Agricultural Sciences and the Beijing Infrastructure Investment Company, which are both part of China’s Belt and Road Initiative—an ambitious infrastructure investment sometimes referred to as “the New Silk Road”—suggesting that Beijing envisions making North Korea part of this globe-spanning development effort.⁵²

Were the PRC to succeed in this politico-economic endeavor, the Chinese government would be realizing the nearly century-old East Asian dream of creating an integrated industrial economy in Northeast Asia that could serve as a beacon of progress for the whole world. There would be one very important difference. Imperial Japan had similar ambitions in the early twentieth century when it was trampling on Chinese sovereignty.⁵³ This time, it would be a resurgent China proudly declaring that the CCP had not only overcome the century of humiliation, but had put the Chinese nation back on top in East Asia and was guiding the region toward an ever more prosperous and harmonious future.⁵⁴

Principal expert at the Liaoning Academy of Social Sciences’ Korean Studies Center Lu Chao recognizes that “Kim’s aspiration to … unlock his country’s economic potential” needs American endorsement of sanctions relief “to amount to anything.” Lu holds that, since North Korea has already “shown good will” by stopping nuclear tests, American “extension of unilateral sanctions … is totally irrational and not conducive to building … trust.”⁵⁵ The Chinese understand that for the United States to loosen sanctions, North Korea must take measurable steps toward denuclearization. Beijing, however, is sensitive to North Korea’s lack of interest in following the same path to denuclearization as Libya. According to the Chinese Foreign Ministry, Beijing does not “agree with the ‘Libya model’” and does not think that it provides a roadmap for solving the North Korean nuclear issue.⁵⁶ Chinese foreign-policy experts know that, when North Korean leaders hear talk of Libya, they think of Muammar Gaddafi, who abandoned his nuclear-

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⁵⁵ “Mei dui Chao ‘shuangchong zitai’ yin guoji piping zhuanyijia: shifang shanyi, Meiguo xianran zou de by gou” [American “double standards” towards North Korea have elicited international criticism from experts: show good will. The United States is clearly not doing enough], Huanqiu shibao, June 25, 2018, <http://world.huanqiu.com/exclusive/2018-06/12336472.html>. Lu Chao is widely cited in China as an expert on North Korean affairs. He regularly consults for the Liaoning provincial government about North Korean issues and often speaks to police and troop deployments in China’s northeast.

weapon program during the Bush presidency and then was overthrown and killed during the Barack Obama administration.

As Sun Chengwu of the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations has stated, “North Korea is very dissatisfied with the Libya model and thinks that the United States is trying to force North Korea to make concessions that are “not in line with North Korea’s security demands.”

North Korean concerns about regime security are why many Chinese scholars think that denuclearization will only be effective if Pyongyang gradually concedes pieces of its nuclear program in exchange for political and economic rewards. Given the size and complexity of the DPRK’s nuclear program, Chinese experts estimate that denuclearization will take five to ten years, and North Korea will likely demand the right to a civilian nuclear sector and to keep ICBMs until the final stage for security reasons.

Other Chinese scholars argue that North Korea will never denuclearize. One such person is Professor Shen Dingli of Fudan University’s Institute of International Studies, who agrees with Russian President Vladimir Putin that Pyongyang “would rather eat grass” than give up nuclear weapons. However, in his view, a nuclear North Korea does not pose a security threat, because its nuclear weapons are meant for “self-protection, not to make an attack.”

Other Chinese foreign-policy analysts have pointed to a fundamental misunderstanding between the United States and North Korea about what “denuclearization” means; whereas Washington views denuclearization as something that only involves North Korea ceding its weapons program, Pyongyang considers denuclearization part of a broader process in which the United States significantly reduces its military presence on the Korean peninsula.

Vice Director of Beijing Foreign Studies University Wang Fan is more optimistic but cautions that “there is no way that North Korea will give up its nuclear weapons all at once. There must be several stages,” and North Korea needs “irreversible security guarantees” to push the process along. The Chinese say discussions about American military exercises are required, and that Washington should follow through on agreements, because Pyongyang will be watching American military activities. In addition, a peace treaty needs to be signed by all signatories to the 1953 Korean Armistice Agreement that ended the Korean War, and temporary diplomatic offices should be set up in Pyongyang, followed later by embassies. Chinese analysts think that strong nationalism in the DPRK,

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59 Author’s interviews in China, June 11–18, 2018.
60 “Shen Dingli: Bu renwei Chaoxian you qihe keneng” [Shen Dingli doesn’t think North Korea will give up its nuclear weapons], Xinhua, December 16, 2017, <http://military.news.sina.com.cn/2017-12-16/doc-ifyptfcn1146035.shtml>. Shen Dingli is a prominent Chinese scholar of international relations who is frequently cited by the Chinese press.
61 Author’s interviews in China, June 11, 13, 15, 18, 2018.
62 Author’s interview in China, June 15, 2018; “Telangpu he Jin Zheng’en jiang yao huiwu: Chaoxian qihe huo zui nan dacheng gongshi” [Trump and Kim Jong Un will meet: North Korea abandoning nuclear weapons will be the most difficult consensus to reach], Wangyi xinwen, June 11, 2018, <http://news.163.com/18/0611/08/DKONKVQ200018750.html>. Wang Fan is a well-known Chinese scholar of international relations. His institutional home—the Beijing Foreign Studies University—produces many graduates who go on to work in the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
devotion to the leadership, and the non-existence of an organized political alternative would preclude significant domestic resistance to improved international relations.\textsuperscript{54}

The Chinese Foreign Ministry has praised South and North Korean agreements to eliminate ten observation posts along the border and has expressed support for “the North and South peninsula continuing to promote reconciliation and cooperation. It is beneficial for consolidating trust between both sides.” The Foreign Ministry views improved North-South relations as a positive step toward the further “promotion of the peninsula’s denuclearization.”\textsuperscript{65} Chinese foreign-policy experts, however, do not generally think that warmer intra-Korean relations will lead to reunification, due to concerns about US troops on the border.\textsuperscript{66} The Foreign Ministry has additionally affirmed its support for “the DPRK’s reasonable security concerns.”\textsuperscript{67} This stance suggests that Beijing prefers to keep North Korea as a buffer state, since, if Korea reunified, DPRK elites would surely lose their current powers and privileges.

China is also interested in providing North Korea with developmental assistance. The government think tank Pangoal, whose research output is supported by the CCP’s International Liaison Department, has suggested that China draw on its own reform experience to help North Korea “move toward the international market under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative.”\textsuperscript{68} China could aid with improving agricultural production, agro-product processing, and scientific farming techniques as well as assist with reforming the banking sector, building nuclear power plants, opening special economic zones, increasing the housing stock, and developing the consumer-electronics and transportation sector.\textsuperscript{69}

Even if North Korean economic reforms move forward, the Chinese think that the DPRK will probably not significantly reduce its military because of ongoing security threats and the benefits North Korean elites obtain from the regime’s military-first policy. Some Chinese are, however, in favor of retraining North Korean nuclear scientists and military personnel to apply their technical and administrative skills to managing economic growth. Chinese nuclear specialists could additionally cooperate with other international actors in dismantling North Korean nuclear weapons and weapons facilities, and Beijing could hold warheads or missiles in storage for Pyongyang.\textsuperscript{70}

Some Chinese foreign-policy experts think that Beijing will not commit much money to North Korean denuclearization, since it is mainly an American, South Korean, and Japanese issue. Others say that since the United States will not bear the whole cost, various stakeholders will have to “share the expense of denuclearization.”\textsuperscript{71}

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\textsuperscript{54} Author’s interviews in China, June 13, 15, and 18, 2018.


\textsuperscript{65} Author’s interviews in China, June 13, 14, 15, 2018. For an earlier statement of this view, see Zhu, “Flawed Mediation and a Compelling Mission,” p. 198.


\textsuperscript{67} “San ge yue, zui gao lingdao ren san ci fanghua, zhe ge zhoujia zhede yao jubian le me? Chaoxian jingji xianzhu, qushi, yiji kunnan” [In three months, the Supreme Leader had visited three times. Is this country really going to undergo a major change? North Korea’s economic conditions, current situation, and predicament], Pangoal, June 19, 2018, <http://m.sohu.com/a/236669721_117959>.

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{70} Author’s interview in China, June 13, 2018.

\textsuperscript{71} “Telangpu he Jin Zheng’en jiang yao huiwu.”
concern to Chinese nuclear experts is shutting down the Yongbyon nuclear reactor, because, when Pyongyang blew up the cooling tower in 2008, it damaged the cooling system so badly that it would likely be unable to handle overheating and could yield a regional nuclear disaster.\(^7\) Though Chinese concerns about Yongbyon’s cooling system are unfounded—it has been dumping heat for years into the Kuryong River—they nonetheless highlight Beijing’s worry that Pyongyang might be unable to safely manage its nuclear program.

**Current trends and future relations**

Nearly three years into Donald Trump’s presidency, the denuclearization of North Korea does not look any more certain than it did at the start. Tensions between Washington and Pyongyang rose precipitously in the first year of the Trump administration, and the United States and North Korea appeared at times to be on the brink of war. Yet, after all of the military posturing, the hot air rapidly cooled in 2018 as Kim Jong Un worked to mend relations with the United States and his East Asian neighbors, with the notable exception of Japan, and received a propitious reaction from South Korea, China, and the United States. This whole process of de-escalation culminated in June 2018 with the historic Trump–Kim summit in Singapore, which spurred Trump to declare that North Korea is “no longer a nuclear threat” and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to express hope that a “major disarmament” of the DPRK can be achieved in two-and-a-half years.\(^3\)

These hopes have significantly dissipated over the last year, as North Korea has not shown interest in rapidly giving up its nuclear-weapon program, and the United States has not worked towards developing new diplomatic relations with North Korea. The failure of the second Trump–Kim summit in Hanoi in February 2019 only further dampened expectations of a quick solution to the North Korean nuclear issue, though Trump and Kim’s call to resume talks during their meeting at Panmunjom in June 2019 has assuaged concerns that dialogue between Washington and Pyongyang had been completely derailed.\(^4\)

It is difficult to predict the future of Chinese-DPRK relations, since the situation on the Korean Peninsula is still evolving and President Trump has made unpredictability a key instrument of his diplomacy. That said, there are some core trends that are likely to endure in Chinese-DPRK relations. The Chinese will probably remain in favor of North Korea slowly giving up its nuclear-weapon program, and Beijing will not be sympathetic if efforts to denuclearize North Korea fall apart because of American insistence that denuclearization proceed at a fast clip. From a technical standpoint, Chinese nuclear specialists do not think it is possible for North Korea to denuclearize quickly, because their nuclear-weapon sector is very large and cannot be physically taken apart within a compressed time schedule. The Chinese are also in favor of a more drawn-out North Korean denuclearization process because they generally

\(^7\) Author’s interviews in China, June 15, 2018.


accept that North Korea’s security concerns are legitimate and that Pyongyang has a right to defend itself against American military intervention.

Even if the United States were to abandon its push for a short clock on North Korea’s denuclearization, some Chinese experts are still skeptical about whether North Korea will denuclearize, because a basic lack of trust is so ingrained in both North Korea and the United States that they both often suspect that any concession made by the other side is just a ruse to gain the upper hand. Vice Director of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences’ National Institute of International Strategy Wang Junsheng has cited this lack of trust as playing an important role in the overall stalling of the denuclearization process since the first Trump-Kim summit. In his view, both the United States and North Korea “have a long-term extreme trust deficit and a divergence of opinions about the path toward denuclearization.” This is probably one important reason why China’s Foreign Ministry has urged Pyongyang and Beijing to engage in “phased and synchronized” negotiations, so that they can “continue to actively promote mutual trust and gradually build consensus” about how to denuclearize North Korea.

Wang Junsheng believes that Trump’s hope for a dramatic, rapid “breakthrough in the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula” has exacerbated the dearth of trust between North Korea and the United States because it has led to “impatience” on the American side. As for North Korea, it has developed a “sense of disappointment,” because it had “hoped for the removal of international sanctions and the gradual restoration of North Korean–American diplomatic relations.” As frays in US-DPRK relations grow, Wang thinks that it is quite possible that Secretary of State Pompeo will stop his visits to North Korea and that Washington will return to the maximum pressure policy advocated by National Security Adviser John Bolton and other power players in Washington.

Based on current trends, it seems unlikely that Beijing will be willing to further tighten the proverbial sanction screws on Pyongyang, because the Chinese government wants North Korea to continue to make peaceful economic development a top priority. In the past year, Beijing has abandoned its critical stance toward Pyongyang. As a sign of the times, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lu Kang stated in late August 2018 that “China and North Korea are friendly neighbors” and that “The Chinese Communist Party and the Korean Worker’s Party will continue to maintain a friendly future.”

Chinese media now regularly praise what one *China National Defense News* report has characterized as “Kim Jong Un’s full pursuit of the development of the economy and promotion of political stability.” The Chinese press has noted that Kim’s efforts to bring about change in North Korea are not just for show. They have brought about tangible

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77 “Meiguo zai chaoxian wenti shang zheme jiaozao shi zhen ji le ma?”


79 Li Gaozhe, “Chao Han shounao huiwu liangdian jiexi” [Analysis of the highlights of the DPRK–ROK summit], Zhongguo guofang bao, September 21, 2018, <www.81.cn/gfbmap/content/2018-09/21/content_216377.htm>.
results in the economic and political situation. Chinese journalists who visited Pyongyang in September 2018 “felt the relaxed atmosphere and sense of goodwill towards international society.” Photographers were not limited in what they could photograph on the street. Chinese journalists also remarked that North Koreans “will spontaneously wave and say hello” to them and noticed that “the best-selling book is The Investment Guide for the DPRK, and anti-American books and posters have visibly decreased.”

UN sanctions had not perceptibly worsened living standards in the capital. Fudan University Korean Studies Center Director Zheng Jiyong observed the same trends during his visit to Pyongyang in late August 2018. He pointed out that, although there was still a big economic gap between Pyongyang and the rest of the country, he could still clearly feel that some changes are occurring in North Korea. … Some North Koreans are not like before, only discussing political propaganda. They pay attention to the situation at Chinese universities’ school-run enterprises. They also focus more on courses related to finance and economic management. You can feel that North Korea is already preparing on several fronts to undertake economic development.

The state-run Xinhua News Agency has noted that one important front is the strengthening of North Korea’s relationship with South Korea. In mid-September 2018, Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong Un held a summit in Pyongyang in which they agreed not to use military pressure against each other. Kim also said he would soon visit Seoul, and that North Korea could dismantle the Yongbyon nuclear facility after further improvement in US-DPRK relations.

After the first Trump-Kim summit, the PRC’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations Ma Zhaoxu declared that China “hoped that all parties concerned will work to consolidate the momentum of dialogue on the Korean Peninsula, jointly promote the peace process on the peninsula, and achieve long-term stability in the region.” Continuing China’s recent move away from a more negative view of North Korea, Ma also emphasized that “there is no military option to solving the Korean peninsula issue” and warned that “recourse to force will only have disastrous consequences for the peninsula.” In the wake of the second Trump-Kim summit, the Chinese foreign-policy community expressed similar views.

Director of the Heilongjiang Social Sciences Academy’s Northeast Asia Research Institute Da Zhigang argued that the failure of the summit was predictable, because there was no way that North Korea would have agreed to American demands to immediately relinquish their entire nuclear program, since “national security concerns do not allow” such a maneuver on Pyongyang’s part. Echoing similar statements by China’s Foreign Ministry,

81 Ibid.
82 Fudan University’s Korean Studies Center is financed by the Chinese and South Korean government along with private Chinese and South Korean foundations. It is known to be tasked with writing research reports for the CCP on Korean affairs. Ibid.
83 Ibid.
84 “Zhongguo daibiao xiwang gefang xingcheng heli gongtong tuijin Chaoxian bandao heping jincheng” [The Chinese representative hopes that all parties will work together to advance the peace process on the Korean Peninsula], Xinhua, September 17, 2018, <www.xinhuanet.com/world/2018-09/18/c_1123446789.htm>.
85 Ibid.
86 Ibid.
87 “Jinte hui tang beng le? NO, ta liang dou shi gaoshou!” [Did the Kim–Trump meeting collapse? No, they are both master negotiators], Huangqi shibao, February 28, 2019, <http://hqtime.huanqiu.com/article/a-XE2LSWCE06E281930A3672 >.

The Northeast Asia Research Institute advises the Heilongjiang provincial government on affairs in Northeast Asia.
Chinese foreign-policy experts have not deemed the collapse of the second Trump–Kim summit to be a reason to despair, because they never envisioned a North Korean settlement as a matter that could be solved in a short time. As Professor Li Donghai of China Foreign Affairs University, which is administered by the Foreign Ministry, has said, North Korean denuclearization is a complex problem which cannot be cracked “in one or two years” with “one or two Trump–Kim summits,” but will rather require “at least a decade.”

According to Professor Da Zhigang, what Beijing would like to see is for Washington and Pyongyang to work together, so that China can have a “stable and peaceful [regional] environment” and better contribute to building a prosperous “Northeast Asian economic arena.” To advance this aim, Beijing is in favor of regional “bilateral and multilateral cooperation” that seeks “to advance the flows of goods and energy cooperation between Europe and Asia … and expands the Belt and Road Initiative” to North and South Korea. Da Zhigang, however, acknowledges that “economic and trade cooperation cannot go too far” under the current UN sanctions regime. This is likely one major reason why Xi Jinping urged Washington at the Group of 20 summit in June 2019 to show “flexibility” and allow the “timely” loosening of sanctions. Barring the United States’ adoption of this more accommodating approach to North Korea, Fudan Professor Lu Chao has stressed, like the Chinese Foreign Ministry, that Beijing prefers both sides remain “willing to engage in talks” and strive for the peaceful denuclearization of North Korea, so that “the war clouds of a little over a year ago” never again return to the Korean Peninsula.

Chinese commentary on the two Trump–Kim summits reiterate well-established themes in China’s approach to the North Korean nuclear issue. In Chinese discussions of North Korea denuclearization, foreign-policy experts regularly portray the PRC as a responsible state that promotes an international rule-based order that favors nuclear non-proliferation, regional prosperity, and dialogue-based solutions to the gradual dismantlement of North Korea’s nuclear-weapon program. Beijing’s rejection of a military resolution to tensions between the United States and North Korea also fits with its long-declared respect for the inviolability of state sovereignty.

Xin Jinping reiterated China’s support for this set of policies when he visited Pyongyang in late June 2019—the first top Chinese leader to go to North Korea since 2005—to

Zhigang’s articles frequently appear in the Chinese press and offer commentary on recent events in Northeast Asia and provide policy suggestions to the Chinese government.  


89 “Jinte hui tang beng le?”


celebrate the seventieth anniversary of the establishment of China-DPRK relations. During talks with Kim Jong Un, Xi expressed his approval that, “In the past year, there has reemerged on the [Korean] peninsula a bright future” for resolving problems through “dialogue which has won the recognition … of the international community.”

Xi also repeated the CPP’s position that China is willing to assist the DPRK in solving its own reasonable security and development concerns and that China is willing to strengthen coordination and cooperation with the DPRK and relevant parties to play a positive and constructive role in achieving the denuclearization of the peninsula and the long-term stability of the region.

Following Xi Jinping’s trip to North Korea, the Foreign Ministry reaffirmed China’s commitment to helping North Korea developing economically, stating that “China-DPRK economic and trade cooperation has a solid foundation and a promising future,” and that “Both sides have a positive attitude toward further strengthening cooperation.” The Foreign Ministry also reasserted that, when it comes to the North Korean issue, it is Beijing’s hope “that all parties concerned … can continue to advance dialogue, talk about results and talk about peace based on … a phased and synchronized approach that gives reasonable consideration to each other’s concerns.”

In all likelihood, China will continue to back similar policy positions for the foreseeable future. It has long been Beijing’s hope that the Pyongyang regime will sire a leader who will tamp down pugnacious rhetoric toward the United States, halt nuclear tests, and throw the weight of the North Korean party-state behind economic advancement. All signals in Beijing point to Kim Jong Un playing the part of the relatively benevolent economic reformer, and so Chinese leaders will in all probability do what they can to make sure that North Korea continues to act as a good neighbor that does not produce security incidents in China’s home region.

China will especially want to keep North Korea moving in its current, more amiable direction, since North Korea is not China’s top policy priority. As Chinese-DPRK tensions in 2017 showed, Beijing is inclined to view the North Korean nuclear issue as a diplomatic nuisance that pulls Chinese attention away from the CCP’s primary international objective — increasing Chinese influence abroad — and principal domestic priority — further economic development. Therefore, as long as North Korea does not cause any further major international incidents through nuclear testing or other military provocations, Beijing will probably be unwilling to back American initiatives to apply further economic or military pressure on Pyongyang.

**Policy implications**

Although this analysis may seem to illustrate little room for Sino-American cooperation in advancing North Korean denuclearization, this is not necessarily the case. Sometime in the

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93 Ibid.

future, US-DPRK relations could worsen to the point that it appears Washington might undertake military action against Pyongyang. While China prefers not to engage in contingency planning with the United States—both a violation of its long-held principle of non-interference in other countries’ affairs and a potentially destabilizing move for the region—China would probably be willing to discuss with the United States how to secure North Korean nuclear assets and prevent North Korea from turning into a failed state, if it appears that US-DPRK animosity will come to blows. A situation of this sort occurred in 2017, when Chinese foreign-policy experts advocated increasing war preparedness along the border and engaging in contingency planning with the United States and Russia, and Beijing and Washington even reportedly partook in developing plans for how they would respond to the outbreak of war on the Korean Peninsula.95 As long as China continues to view the preservation of the North Korean regime as secondary to regional stability, it is probable that the Chinese foreign-policy community will endorse a similar set of security policies in the future.

As for further UN sanctions against North Korea, China is not likely to support them as long as North Korea does not engage in any military behavior that the CCP leadership deems excessive. Pyongyang’s short-range missile tests in May 2019 did not cross this threshold; Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman Geng Shuang promptly urged Washington and Pyongyang to “continue to … engage in dialogue to solve problems and … actively make efforts to realize the denuclearization of the [Korean] peninsula.”96 Despite Beijing’s benign response to North Korea’s missile testing in this particular case, CCP leaders would probably endorse additional UN sanctions if North Korea carried out more long-range missile tests, nuclear explosions, or initiated a military conflict with regional actors. One other context in which China would probably be more inclined to get on board with another round of sanctions against North Korea is if Beijing perceived endorsing sanctions as a way to draw down US–North-Korean military tensions and redirect handling of the North Korean nuclear issue toward dialogue and peace in East Asia.

Finally, let us assume that North Korea takes concrete steps toward denuclearization. In this case, China and North Korea could cooperate on a number of issues. China will surely want to be involved in any formal peace agreement. It is a signatory of the Korean Armistice Agreement, and it would not accept being sidelined in a peace-building process in which its own security interests were at stake. Chinese foreign-policy experts have also suggested that China could take part in helping to roll back North Korea’s nuclear program. Given the closer relationship that North Korea has with China than with the United States, Chinese participation in the disassembly of nuclear warheads or the shutting down of nuclear facilities would strengthen North Korean confidence that denuclearization activities were not just an American front for strengthening its position and weakening the Kim regime.

The United States could also work with China in providing economic rewards to North Korea for every step that it takes toward denuclearization. Chinese involvement would help


firm up North Korean trust in the denuclearization process, again because of closer China-DPRK ties. If efforts to denuclearize North Korea actually reach the point that economic carrots are being handed to Pyongyang in exchange for good behavior, China will surely attempt to bring North Korea even more firmly into its sphere of influence, most probably through the Belt and Road Initiative. Although American policy makers might view a stronger Chinese position in Northeast Asia to be contrary to US national interests, a North Korea focused on economic development instead of a nuclear arsenal would stand as a major achievement in the history of nuclear nonproliferation.

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