

The limits of China's influence over North Korea

Friends in the 1950s: A picture of Mao Zedong and North Korea's leader Kim Il-sung on the Hekou Bridge which links the two countries. AP/Eugene Hoshiko

North Korea and China share a long, porous border, several millennia of history and deep ideological roots. Tens, and possibly hundreds, of thousands of Chinese soldiers, including Mao Zedong's son, died to save North Korea from obliteration during the Korean War, and China is essentially Pyongyang's economic lifeline, responsible for most of its trade and oil.

However, their relationship is less about friendship or political bonds than a deep and mutually uneasy dependency. Nominally allies, the neighbours operate in a near constant state of tension, a mix of ancient distrust and dislike and the grating knowledge that they are inextricably tangled up with each other, however much they might chafe against it.

This matters because if China is not the solution to the nuclear crisis, then outsiders long sold on the idea must recalibrate their efforts as the North approaches a viable arsenal of nuclear-tipped missiles capable of reaching the U.S. mainland, something the CIA chief this week estimated as only a matter of months away.

China's disdain

One clue about how Chinese see the North can be seen in two widespread nicknames for Kim Jong-un — Kim Fatty The Third and Kim Fat Fat Fat.

A growing disdain among the public is reflected in China's willingness to permit criticism of the North in the press, and to allow tougher sanctions at the UN Beijing has suspended coal, iron ore, seafood and textiles from the North.

Still, nothing China has done offsets its underlying fear that too much external pressure could collapse the government in Pyongyang. The nightmare scenario for Beijing is North Korean refugees flooding into its northeast after Seoul takes power in Pyongyang and U.S. and South Korean troops occupy lands that were once considered a buffer zone.

One way to gauge Pyongyang's feelings for Beijing is to consider that Kim Jong-un has yet to visit his only major ally, a country that accounts for 90% of North Korean trade, since taking power in December 2011.

Since communication at the highest levels has now virtually disappeared, Mr. Kim feels little need to pay attention when Beijing calls on him to stop testing nukes and missiles.

In fact, North Korea has seemingly sought to humiliate Beijing by timing some of its missile tests for major global summits in China.

It can be argued that the North Korea-China relationship never really recovered from Beijing's decision in 1992 to establish formal diplomatic relations with Seoul.

But a big part of North Korea's "profound sense of mistrust" and "long-term effort to resist China's influence" stems from the 1950-53 Korean War, according to James Person, a Korea expert at the Wilson Center think tank in Washington. The war is often seen as the backbone of the countries' alliance, he said, but the North blamed the failure to conquer the South on Beijing, which had seized control of field operations after the near-annihilation of North Korean forces.

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