Four factors in the “special relationship” between China and North Korea: a framework for analyzing the China–North Korea Relationship under Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-un

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ABSTRACT

Background: Analyzing North Korea is essential for examining international relations in East Asia as a whole, but North Korea’s tight control over information makes this difficult. Another factor complicating analysis of North Korea is its “special relationship” with China.

Purpose: The aim of this paper is to examine four factors contributing to the “special relationship” between China and North Korea, how that relationship came about, and how it functions within the context of international politics today.

Main Argument: This paper is a structural analysis of China–North Korea relations that describes four factors behind their “special relationship.” It continues by analyzing China–North Korea relations under Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-un up to the deployment of THAAD in South Korea.

Conclusion: The “special relationship” between China and North Korea is based on four factors. What is distinctive about these factors is that they can bring the two sides together but also push them apart. In terms of national security issues, the force bringing them together has ultimately prevailed. Socialist ideology issues have surfaced much less frequently now and have lost their capacity to both bring the two together and push them apart. In the area of traditional ties, the two leaders are attempting to use their personal relationship to have closer relations, but this is not having much lasting effect. Where economic relations are concerned, Beijing and Pyongyang have become even more dependent on each other and this is a strong force pushing them closer together.

KEYWORDS

China-North Korea relations; traditional ties between China and North Korea; North Korea’s nuclear tests and missile launches; Xi Jinping; Kim Jong-un; deployment of THAAD in South Korea

1. Introduction

In 2013, Chairman of the Workers’ Party of Korea Kim Jong-un declared that he would pursue economic development and at the same time turn North Korea into a nuclear power. Aiming to adopt a unique approach to economic reform different than that of China, he drew the ire of the international community with repeated nuclear weapons and missile testing, which succeeded in raising North Korea’s profile in international politics.
Analyzing North Korea is essential for examining international relations in East Asia as a whole, but this is difficult to accomplish, given North Korea’s tight control over information, which makes its political decision-making process opaque to outsiders. An additional factor is North Korea’s “special relationship” with China. Any analysis of North Korea presupposes an analysis of its relations with China.

In geographical terms, China and North Korea share a border, and politically speaking, China, a fellow socialist country, has relatively strong influence on North Korea compared to other countries. Through various channels, for example, the two leaders’ personal relationship, relations between the Chinese Communist Party and the Workers Party of Korea, or between the two on an entity-to-entity basis, China is likely to have important political information about North Korea. However, trying to obtain information about North Korea through China may not necessarily yield core information, given that since the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, China has consistently been cautious about releasing information about its relationship with North Korea. This is, in one word, because of the “special relationship” between the two.

In this light, the aim of this paper is to analyze how the “special relationship” between China and North Korea came about and how it functions in international politics. To explore how this “special relationship” originated and establish a framework for analyzing it, this paper begins by looking back on the modern history of ties between China and North Korea and identifies four factors responsible for creating the “special relationship.” Next, keeping this analytical framework in mind, this paper examines the China–North Korea relationship under Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-un, in particular up to the time of the deployment of THAAD to the U.S. military in South Korea, in order to analyze how the four factors responsible for the “special relationship” function in the context of international politics.

2. Four factors creating the “special relationship”

A look at the modern history of China–North Korea relations shows that four factors bring the two sides together: national security issues, socialist ideology, traditional ties, and economic relations. These factors are responsible for the “special relationship” between China and North Korea, which differs from their relationships with other friendly socialist countries. But those same factors can also push the two apart. This section will discuss the four factors from the perspective of what brings the two together and what pushes them apart, in order to understand the nature of their “special relationship.”

Four factors behind the forces that draw China and North Korea closer to each other and/or drive them apart are as follows: Table 1.

2.1. National security issues

China and North Korea are both divided states: for China, the issue is unification with Taiwan, and for North Korea, unification with South Korea. These two issues have been

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1The four factors are the analytical framework extracted by the inductive method from studies of the political history of China–North Korea ties from the Kim Il-Sung to the Kim Jong-il era. The main resources the authors used for learning about the political history of the relationship between China and North Korea were Liu Jinzhi, ed. Zhongguo Dui Chaoxian he Hanguo Zhengce Wenjian Huibian and Liu Jinzhi, ed. Zhongguo yu Chaoxianbandao Guojia Guanxi Wenjian Ziliao Huibian. For prior research and source details, see Hiraiwa, Chosen Minshushugi Jinmin Kyowakoku to Chuka Jinmin Kyowakoku, 285–288.
closely connected since the end of the Korean War, and national security issues vis-à-vis the U.S. have tightly bound the two neighbors.²

For example, when the May 1961 military coup d'état in South Korea installed a military government, North Korea realized that the ties between South Korea and the United States would become stronger. If the United States joined forces with South Korea's military government, North Korea would be unable to take on both countries on its own, and for this reason, in July 1961 North Korea signed friendship and cooperation mutual aid treaties with both the Soviet Union and China. When the contents of the two pacts are compared, the treaty with China contained provisions favorable to North Korea, since China pledged unconditional support for North Korea. When China and the Soviet Union grew increasingly at odds with each other, North Korea maintained relations with the Soviet Union but became much closer to China.³ China and North Korea’s views concerning national security vis-à-vis the U.S. and their feelings toward the Soviet Union strengthened their bonds.

However, the interests of China and North Korea did not always align. In the Korean War, the focus tends to be on China’s entry into the war, but to learn the true nature of the China–North Korea relationship, attention should be directed to the withdrawal of Chinese forces, which occurred at the same time as the Taiwan Strait crisis pitting China against the U.S. China threw its support behind North Korea to protect its own national security interests.⁴ In addition, the rapprochement between the U.S. and China in 1971 and normalization of relations between China and South Korea in 1992, which meant closer ties with North Korea adversaries the U.S. and South Korea, struck North Korea as an unforgivable betrayal.

Nevertheless, there was no definitive break between China and North Korea. The strong complementarity between Beijing and Pyongyang on national security issues vis-à-vis the U.S. brought them together much more closely than it drove them apart.

### 2.2. Socialist ideology

China and North Korea both follow socialist ideology, and this naturally drew them together. More important, however, is the fact that socialist ideology also pushed them apart.

When a rift developed between China and the Soviet Union, China needed to maintain good relations with North Korea in order to show up the Soviet Union. Similarly, North

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² Hiraiwa, op.cit., 4.
³ Ibid., 57–63.
⁴ Ibid., 11–38.
Korea needed to stay on good terms with China to use the split between the Soviet Union and China to maximize its own advantage. China hoped that North Korea would distance itself from the Soviet Union and maintain close relations only with itself, but North Korea kept some ties with the Soviet Union. As a result, although China and North Korea shared Communist ideology, China felt unable to completely trust North Korea. When North Korea declared autonomy in 1955, saying that it would carry out reform from the perspective of its internal socialist ideology theory and according to neither the Soviet Union’s nor China’s method, it was inconceivable that it would follow exactly the same policies as China. In addition, China’s economic reforms and its adoption of an independent diplomatic stance in the 1980s created a gap between the brands of socialism that China and North Korea aimed to achieve. Socialist ideology, therefore, helped drive them apart.

2.3. Traditional ties

China and North Korea have traditionally had very close ties, which grew out of solidarity when they joined forces to resist Japanese aggression on the Asian continent. These traditional ties existed at the levels of leader to leader as well as party-to-party and entity-to-entity and have served to draw China and North Korea closer. But their ties have also pushed them apart.

China has exerted strong influence on the Korean peninsula from antiquity to modern times, a historical relationship that North Korea has not viewed in a favorable light. The traditional ties between China and North Korea were born from their fight against the Japanese, and North Korea saw this collaboration as an opportunity to establish itself as an equal in its relationship with China. Modern North Korea’s history has been a process of establishing “self-reliance” and moving away from China and the Soviet Union. China viewed North Korea’s action as an attempt to depart from the traditional Chinese sphere of influence, and thus differences between Beijing and Pyongyang in their respective interpretations of the history of their traditional relationship pushed them apart.

The relationship between the earlier leaders of China and North Korea, who had lived through the fight against the Japanese, helped keep their ties firm, but the new, younger leaders who lacked a shared experience of the conflict have not been as strongly invested in preventing deterioration of the relationship. However, the traditional ties between China and North Korea do serve as a valuable tool for broadcasting their close relationship to the outside world, and although today the leaders feel fewer incentives to prevent the relationship from worsening, those traditional ties are still a factor in their relations.

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5 See Kim Il Sung, “Shisojigyo niote Kyojoshugi.”
6 For a comparison of the economic reform policies of China and North Korea, see Hiraiwa, op.cit., 172–182.
7 Literally, “a relationship like that of lips and mouth,” a metaphor for the idea that any threat affecting one would also affect the other.
8 During Japan’s occupation of the Korean peninsula, many Korean Commnunist s moved to China and joined with the Chinese Communist Party in a resistance movement to the Japanese. For details on this, see Suzuki, “Wasureretara Kyosangushigatachi,” and Suzuki Masayuki “Manshukyosanshugi Undo.”
9 See Okonogi Masao, “Kita Chosen niokeru Tai So Jishusei no Hoga,” and Okonogi ed., Kita Chosen Handobukku, 222–225. Additionally, when the rift between China and the Soviet Union came out into the open in the early 1960s, North Korea indirectly criticized China by finding fault with the entry on North Korea in Zen Sekoishi (A History of the World), edited by the Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union. For background details, see Hiraiwa, op. cit., 81–84.
2.4. Economic relations

North Korea shares a border with China, and China plays an essential role in North Korea’s economic growth. Especially since the collapse of the Soviet Union, North Korea has had to rely on China for economic aid, as otherwise it would be impossible for North Korea to maintain its political system. But it is not a one-way relationship. China needs a calm environment in East Asia to enable it to pursue its domestic and international policies. Economic aid to North Korea is, therefore, an economic cost that China shoulders in order to develop its own economy and ensure its security vis-à-vis the U.S. Accordingly, economic aid from China to North Korea is a force that brings the two closer because it is an advantage to China.

As for socialist ideology, North Korea has taken a negative view of China’s economic reform policies. Nevertheless, China continues to provide economic aid to North Korea because of their mutually dependent relationship in the areas of national security and economic ties is more important to China than whether they share socialist ideology.

3. China–North Korea relations under Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-un up to the deployment of THAAD in South Korea

3.1. Emergence of new leaders and impact on China–North Korea relations

Xi Jinping assumed the post of general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party at the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in November 2012. He was elected president of the People’s Republic of China at the National People’s Congress in March 2013. In North Korea, Kim Jong-un became chairman of the Workers’ Party of Korea in April 2012. China and North Korea thus installed new leaders at roughly the same time, but relations between the two were by no means cordial at the time.

North Korea had tested a ballistic missile on December 12 2012, and United Nations Security Council Resolution 2087, adopted unanimously on January 22 2013, placed new sanctions on and strengthened existing sanctions against North Korea. After a third nuclear test on February 12 2013, following tests in 2006 and 2009, the United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2094, on March 7 2013. “Unanimously” signifies that China voted in favor of the resolution.

China’s stance vis-à-vis North Korea’s nuclear missiles is clear. It does not accept the possession of nuclear weapons by North Korea and is committed to actively participating in international efforts to persuade North Korea to abandon them. China believes that aggression on the Korean peninsula is completely unacceptable, and since it views the nuclear missile problem as basically an issue between North Korea and the U.S., its position is that North Korea and the U.S. should negotiate directly to resolve the issue.10

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10 China has adopted the same stance toward the issue of THAAD deployment in South Korea, a topic that is not the focus of this paper. For example, China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs proposed on March 8 2017 that North Korea and the U.S. put a “double freeze” in place, with North Korea halting nuclear weapon and missile development and the U.S. curtail joint military exercises with Korea. PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Wang Yi Tan Ruhe Yingdui BandaoWeiji,” Foreign Minister Wang expressed similar views on August 6 2017. “Kaku Misairu Kaibatsu wo Soshi – Chugoku no Oki Gaisho ga Anpori Seisai no Mokuteki Kyoho” [China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi Stresses that the Aim of Security Council Sanctions Is to Prevent North Korea’s Nuclear and Missile Development], Sankei Shim bun, August 6 2017. Accessed January 8 2020. https://www.sankei.com/world/news/170806/wor1708060025-n1.html.
The most important development in the China–North Korea relationship since the start of Kim Jong-un’s rule was China’s stance toward missile tests by North Korea in April and December 2012. These tests were a declaration by North Korea that it had the same right as members of the international community to conduct outer space development and that this was a right related to its sovereignty.\textsuperscript{11} China responded by acknowledging that although North Korea had the right to the peaceful use of outer space, that right was limited by United Nations Security Council resolutions and other decisions.\textsuperscript{12} North Korea took the position that the right to outer space development should not be limited by United Nations Security Council resolutions, and a few years earlier, when it had used the same reasoning to justify launching a missile in April 2009, China had objected to a Security Council resolution and pressed for a Security Council President’s statement instead. This time, however, when North Korea tested a missile and used the same argument as it had when it had launched a satellite, China, for the first time, supported a Security Council resolution. In the eyes of North Korea, China’s action was a betrayal of their traditional ties.\textsuperscript{13}

Following these developments, the forces pushing the two apart grew even stronger. On May 7 2013, the Bank of China announced that it would stop dealing with the Foreign Trade Bank of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea and close its account.\textsuperscript{14} In July 2014, Xi Jinping traveled to South Korea on an official visit, the first time a Chinese leader had visited South Korea before going to North Korea and a clear departure from the traditional China–North Korea relationship. Meanwhile, in North Korea, Jang Song-thaek, an official who had established a close relationship with China during the days of Kim Jong-il, was executed in December 2013, as Kim Jong-un tried to end the previously existing relationship between China and North Korea.\textsuperscript{15} Thus, relations between Beijing and Pyongyang under Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-un began with the two leaders each trying to move away from their traditional relationship.

### 3.2. China and North Korea move farther apart

The distinguishing feature of Xi Jinping’s policy approach toward the Korean peninsula was to link China–North Korea and China–South Korea relations and draw up diplomatic policies for the Korean peninsula as a whole in order to advance its national security interests vis-à-vis the United States.

\textsuperscript{11}\textit{Statement by a spokesman for North Korea Ministry of Foreign Affairs on March 24 2009. Radiopress, Kita Chosen Seisaku Doko [North Korea Policy Trends], No. 427, Vol. 5, 2009,30–31. For the self-reliance concept enunciated by North Korea, see Fujii, Kita Chosen no Ho Chitsujo,8–11.}

\textsuperscript{12}\textit{Radiopress, Junkan Chugoku Naigai Doko [Tri-monthly Domestic and Foreign Trends in China], No. 1175, 53.}

\textsuperscript{13}\textit{On two previous occasions, China had supported Security Council resolutions against North Korea, but for different reasons. The first time was after the firing of a missile in 2006; the second was in 2009, after North Korea had carried out a nuclear test. From North Korea’s perspective, the 2006 missile test was purely military in nature, so North Korea viewed China’s support for the resolution as unavoidable. Regarding the nuclear testing, North Korea also felt that China’s support for the resolution could not be helped, but it did not view this action on China’s part as a challenge to the traditional ties between them.}

\textsuperscript{14}\textit{Radiopress, Junkan Chugoku Naigai Doko [Tri-monthly Domestic and Foreign Trends in China] No. 1189, 38.}

\textsuperscript{15}\textit{Jang Song-thaek had a particularly strong relationship with China in economic matters, and his execution had been expected to have negative repercussions on economic relations with China. However, China consistently maintained that Jang’s execution was an internal North Korea matter, and it had no substantial impact on their economic relations. Radiopress, Junkan Chugoku Naigai Doko [Tri-monthly Domestic and Foreign Trends in China], No. 1208, 52–54.}
In South Korea, Park Geun-hye won the December 2012 presidential election. Her administration began in February 2013, around the same time that Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-un took power themselves. Park actively courted China from the start. On her visit to China from June 27 to 30, 2013, she highlighted the strategic cooperation partnership between South Korea and China. What attracted particular attention during her visit was her signaling the possibility that South Korea and China would discuss unification of the Korean peninsula.\textsuperscript{16} To North Korea, this was another betrayal on the part of China.

Xi and Park continued to meet, and in July 2014 Xi made an official visit to South Korea. A little over a year later, on September 3 2015, Park attended a military parade in Beijing to commemorate the 70th anniversary of victory over Japan. The next day, she visited the building formerly occupied by the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea in Shanghai. The building had been refurbished, a job that took two years, with China footing the entire bill of close to 77 million yen for the work.\textsuperscript{17} Inside was an exhibit describing how the Provisional Government and the Chinese Communist Party had fought together against the Japanese.\textsuperscript{18} The Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea was a government-in-exile founded in Shanghai in 1919 by Kim Gu and other activists for Korean independence, and modern-day South Korea uses the Provisional Government to claim the legitimacy of its authority.\textsuperscript{19} For this reason, North Korea viewed the Chinese Communist Party’s favorable treatment of the Provisional Government as a major departure from the traditional relationship between China and North Korea.

Why were relations between China and North Korea so strained at this time? One reason was that North Korea saw the U.S. as less of a threat because U.S. President Barack Obama, who had threatened to bomb Syria after it used chemical weapons, declared in September 2013 that it was not his country’s job to act as the world’s policeman.\textsuperscript{20} To North Korea, U.S. policy toward the Middle East also had important implications for its policy toward North Korea. Obama’s remark that the U.S. was not the world’s policeman probably led Pyongyang to conclude that the threat of U.S. military action against it had faded. Less interest in North Korea on the part of the U.S. would make it easier for North Korea to act independently of China, and as a result, the relationship between Beijing and Pyongyang cooled.

The second reason was that North Korea had made further progress in nuclear and ballistic missile development. This made it less dependent on China for warding off threats from the U.S., so this also distanced Beijing and Pyongyang.

\textsuperscript{16} "Leaders at South Korea-China Summit Talks Had “Deep Discussions” on North-South Reunification," Dong-A Ilbo, July 12 2013.

\textsuperscript{17} "Chugoku ga Daikanminkoku Shanhai Rinji Seifu Chyosha wo Kaizen Hoshyu Zengaku Futan" [China paid for the full cost of repairing site of the Korean Provisional Government in Shanghai], JoongAng Ilbo (Japanese version), August 16 2015. Accessed January 8 2020. https://japanese.joins.com/JArticle/204481.

\textsuperscript{18} "Sai Kaikan Hikaeta Shanhai Rinji Seifu Cyosha – Kan Chu Kyodo no Konichi Toso wo Ukibori ni" [Reopening of the Building of the Korean Provisional Government in Shanghai Highlights the Joint Fight of the Provisional Government and the Chinese Communist Party Against the Japanese], JoongAng Ilbo (Japanese version), September 2 2015. Accessed January 8 2020. https://japanese.joins.com/JArticle/205155.

\textsuperscript{19} The source of the government’s assertion that there is continuity between the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea and today’s Korea derives from the preamble to the Republic of Korea’s Constitution, which uses the wording “the laws of the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea, established with the March 1st Movement.” Accessed January 8 2020. http://www.law.go.kr/lsEfInfop.do?isSeq=61603#.

\textsuperscript{20} Watanabe Tsuneo, “Shiriya Kubaku Kaishi to Ajia Reikho Chushi.”
The third reason was that the mutually dependent economic relationship between the China and North Korea had become even stronger. As noted earlier, China continued to aid North Korea because it needed a stable environment for itself. North Korea had become more economically dependent on China, with China actively investing in developing North Korea’s underground resources and other projects. As a result, China was acquiring more interests in North Korea, thus increasing economic interdependence. In addition, China’s three northernmost provinces actively invested in and traded with North Korea, leading to regional interdependence that sometimes spun out of the central government’s control.\(^{21}\) Even though North Korea was more economically dependent on China, the ever stronger economic interdependence between the two meant that China could not use this to exert political pressure on North Korea.

### 3.3. Moving closer together

At the same time that China was deepening relations with South Korea, it was signaling to North Korea its desire to improve relations. For example, at a regularly scheduled press conference on December 16 2014 three years after the death of Kim Jong-il, the chief spokesperson for China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs lauded Kim Jong-il for his important contributions to the traditional friendly and cooperative relations between China and North Korea.\(^{22}\) On December 17, the anniversary of Kim’s death, Liu Yunshan, a member of the Politburo Standing Committee, paid a condolence call to North Korea’s embassy in Beijing to express China’s desire to maintain and expand the traditional friendship between them.\(^{23}\) This was an attempt by China to repair relations with North Korea, making use of the traditional ties that had existed between China and North Korea in the days of Kim Jong-il. As later developments showed, China’s attempt at rapprochement did not yield immediate results. But it is important to note that even when China–North Korea relations appeared cool to outsiders at certain times, the ties between the two were never completely severed.

In December 2015, the Moranbong Band, whose members are personally selected by Kim Jong-un, abruptly canceled a performance that had been scheduled to take place in Beijing. The band’s repertoire contains many songs with lyrics referring to satellite and ballistic missile launches or that glorified Kim Jong-un. China had apparently expressed discomfort with the lyrics and how the songs were staged, which angered North Korea and led to the performance being canceled.\(^{24}\) Then, on January 6 2016, North Korea conducted its fourth nuclear test, the first time it had not given China prior notice. This was followed on February 7 by North Korea firing a ballistic missile, which is called a satellite launch. These incidents pointed to the seriousness of the rift in their relationship, but actually the nuclear test and the missile launch brought the two closer and helped them repair their relationship.

On March 2 2016, the United Nations Security Council unanimously passed Resolution 2270 against North Korea, with the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations emphasizing the

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\(^{21}\) Mimura, Gendai Chosen Keizai, 154–6.

\(^{22}\) Radiopress, Kita Chosen Seisaku Doko [North Korea Policy Trends], No. 507, 79.

\(^{23}\) Liu also attended the 70th anniversary ceremony of the Workers’ Party of Korea on October 10 2015. Radiopress, Junkan Chugoku Naigai Doko [Tri-monthly Domestic and Foreign Trends in China], No. 1242, 62.

\(^{24}\) Fukuda, “Moranbongakudan, Pekin Koen Dotakyan no Wake.”
validity of the resolution as the strongest sanctions against North Korea in 20 years. North Korea lodged a strong protest against the Security Council resolution. In May 2016, at the first congress of the Workers’ Party of Korea in 36 years, Kim Jong-un proclaimed that North Korea would aim to become a nuclear giant in East Asia. The stance of China, with its strong economic ties to North Korea, would determine the effectiveness of the Security Council’s sanctions against North Korea. But although China had been in favor of the resolution, to avoid pushing North Korea too far into a corner it advocated talks to reach a solution. After the Workers’ Party of Korea congress, North Korea dispatched a high-ranking official to Beijing and conveyed its intention of further expanding and strengthening the traditional friendly relations between them. Upon hearing this, Xi Jinping called for restraint and dialogue in the international community and expressed the desire to maintain peace and stability in the region.

Despite North Korea’s nuclear testing and missile launches around this time, relations between China and North Korea were on the mend because South Korea had begun preparations to deploy THAAD at the request of the U.S. For both China and North Korea, this presaged a major change in the national security environment vis-à-vis the U.S.

Out of consideration for China, South Korea had been cautious about deploying THAAD. But after North Korea’s nuclear tests and missile launches in 2016, South Korea became more receptive to THAAD and worked in closer cooperation with the U.S. This was because China had failed to take the steps that Korea had expected: despite the tense situation, instead of applying maximum pressure on North Korea, China was urging the international community to engage in dialogue. South Korea, by cooperating with the U.S. over THAAD, was sending a signal that China should increase pressure on North Korea, but instead, pulling Russia over to its side, China expressed wariness of U.S.-South Korea cooperation in the context of security of the Northeast Asia region as a whole.

Contrary to South Korea’s expectations, China had not taken any measures against North Korea, and in the midst of that Pyongyang successfully launched the Musudan (Hwasong-10) missile on June 22. Little more than a week later, on July 8, South Korea announced that THAAD would be deployed to U.S. forces in Korea.

China voiced strong objections, since it viewed deployment of THAAD in South Korea as a U.S.-led security regional missile defense system targeting not only the Korean peninsula but China itself. North Korea’s nuclear tests and missile launches thus clearly highlighted China’s and South Korea’s differences and as a result drew China and North Korea closer.

4. Conclusion

The “special relationship” between China and North Korea is based on four factors: national security, socialist ideology, traditional ties, and economic relations. What is

25 “Kokuren Anpori ni Kita Chosen Seisai An Teishutsu – ‘Kako 20 Nenkan de Mottomo Kyoryoku’ to Bei Taishi” [US Ambassador to the UN Says Security Council Sanctions Bill Against the DPRK “Strongest in 20 Years”], Sankei Shimbun, February 26 2016. Accessed January 8 2020. https://www.sankei.com/world/news/160226/wor1602260007-n1.html.

26 Radiopress, Kita Chosen Seisaku Doko [North Korea Policy Trends], No. 526, 12.

27 Radiopress, Kita Chosen Seisaku Doko [North Korea Policy Trends], No. 528, 11.

28 On March 11 2016 and April 29 2016, the foreign ministers of China and Russia expressed their respective countries’ opposition to the deployment of THAAD. “Misairu Boei ni Chu Ro Hantai” [China and Russia Opposition to THAAD], Tokyo Shimbun, March 12 2016, “Zaikan Beigun Haibi ni Chu Ro Gaisho ga Hantai – THAAD –” [Foreign Ministers of China and Russia Oppose THAAD Deployment by US Forces in Korea], Asahi Shimbun, April 30 2016.
distinctive about the relationship is that each of these factors can both bring the two closer together or push them apart. National security concerns vis-à-vis the U.S. bring Beijing and Pyongyang closer, while changes in the international environment push them apart. Where socialist ideology is concerned, wariness of the Soviet Union brought China and North Korea closer, but they drew apart over North Korea taking a self-reliant approach to reform. Traditional ties were forged between Beijing and Pyongyang through resistance to Japanese occupation, whereas they distanced themselves over differences in historical interpretation. In the area of economic relations, mutual benefit pulls China and North Korea closer, whereas differences in their approaches to economic reform push them apart.

This analysis covers the relationship between China and North Korea in the era of Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-un up to the deployment of THAAD in South Korea. In terms of national security issues, the forces bringing Beijing and Pyongyang together on the one hand and pushing them apart on the other were evenly matched, but the forces bringing them together ultimately prevailed. Socialist ideology issues have surfaced much less frequently now and have lost their capacity to both bring the two sides together or push them apart. In the area of traditional ties, the two leaders are trying to use their personal relationship to bring Beijing and Pyongyang closer, but this is not have much sustainable effect. Where economic relations are concerned, China and North Korea have become even more dependent on each other and this is bringing them closer together.

In March 2017, China proposed a “double freeze”: that North Korea provisionally halt development of nuclear weapon and missile development and the U.S. provisionally curtail joint military exercises with Korea, and that North Korea and the U.S. hold talks. This paper does not go into relations between China and North Korea during the Trump administration, but this example shows that China’s stance toward North Korea remains unchanged.

North Korea cannot easily maintain its political regime on its own, and it is difficult to imagine any countries other than China stepping up to support it. Given that China, starting with the question of Taiwan, also faces many difficult economic, political, and national security issues in its relations with the U.S., having North Korea on its side is strategically important, and thus China cannot move away completely from North Korea. As far as future relations between China and North Korea are concerned, the force of national security concerns, while more or less evenly matched between push and pull, will likely push them closer together, and the same can be said for economic relations, which will draw Beijing and Pyongyang closer as they continue to maintain their traditional ties in a symbolic way.

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