

## **'Comrades and Strangers: An Outsider's Perspective on China-DPRK Relations in a Dynamic Environment'**

### **Introduction**

Ladies and gentlemen:

As a foreign guest in China, it is a challenging - and highly presumptive – task: telling one Asian country about another Asian country, especially a close ally. Between 2004 and 2008, I was a regular visitor to Beijing and Pyongyang while working for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). Since leaving the UK diplomatic service and moving to Singapore, I have remained a slightly more distant observer of the Korean Peninsula. The perspective I wish to share with you therefore is a purely personal view on China-DPRK ties, based on my experience and reflecting my own biases. I make no claims for my analysis being definitive. I'm also here to learn, as an interested outsider, since this is a bilateral relationship on which much else depends.

Why have I chosen to portray the relationship as being between 'comrades and strangers'?<sup>i</sup> The comradeship part is relatively straightforward: DPRK and China fought together during the Korean War, and share common ideological roots. Yet there has always been an element of distance between the two states. Arguably they are on divergent trajectories, becoming strangers over time. Before getting to the essentials of the DPRK-China relationship, in the first part of my talk I would like to posit a more conceptual pairing, between DPRK and Israel, as a lateral comparison in alliance relations. In the second part, I will return to the theme of 'comrades and strangers', exploring divergence and convergence trends over the lifetime of DPRK-China state-to-state relations. I will then offer some brief conclusions and look forward to receiving your feedback.

#### I. DPRK and Israel: a Case Study as Autonomous Allies?

North Korea and Israel inhabit geographically distant regions. They draw from opposite ideological traditions and political models. In terms of development, they are also at opposite ends of the scale. Some might consider the comparison pointless, or even offensive. So why compare them at all? The former US Ambassador to China, Stapleton Roy, recently made a passing comparison with the US-Israel relationship in his reply to a recent commentary on China-DPRK relations from CSIS/Pacforum. The argument – no doubt familiar to this audience - is that Beijing needs fundamentally to reconsider its support for Pyongyang on a strategic cost-benefit analysis. Ambassador Roy, in response, argued that China's interests in the Korean Peninsula simply run too deep to expect Beijing to give up what influence it has in DPRK, limited though this may be. To underline the point he compared the US relationship with Israel, where Washington has influence -- but not control!<sup>ii</sup>

This passing reference reminded me of a former FCO colleague who once told me that Israel and North Korea produced a particularly toughened breed of diplomat, such are their defensive skills and thick skins. Although the DPRK-Israel comparison is unlikely and imperfect, I think it is a useful exercise, as a way to conceive the DPRK and its alliance relationship with China in a broader, systemic context. Sometimes, in China, there is a tendency to view the bilateral relationship with DPRK in isolation, or to focus on the DPRK-US dynamic as the key to progress on the nuclear issue.

Other experts have approached DPRK through the lens of North-South relations, while some see it as an exception – a living museum piece. As anyone who has visited knows, DPRK is an unusual and unique state in many ways. But attempts to understand the country aren't helped by branding it as a "pariah state", or "Hermit Kingdom", ruled by "irrational" or "evil" men.

As a corrective to some of these exceptionalist constructs, the comparison with Israel as a distant and culturally unconnected state offers up some intriguing parallels in alliance relations. On a basic level both countries are small, resource poor and to some extent ethnically defined. Both states were established around the same time, in tough neighbourhoods, seeking self-determination from foreign occupation. Both found their legitimacy immediately contested, including basic threats to their survival. While North Korea is slightly larger, neither state feels it possesses adequate 'strategic depth'. The two states share a history of struggle and conflict as the central, formative experience of their respective national narratives.

Integral to their survival strategies, DPRK and Israel have placed a premium on self reliance, which in DPRK's case has been expressed ideologically as *Juche*, and *Song'un* (military-first). At the same time, a pragmatic perception of their vulnerability as small states in a hostile environment has led them to augment their security through close ties to a larger ally – China (and the Soviet Union) for DPRK; the United States for Israel. These ties, while close, have also been characterised by high levels of strategic autonomy. Both Israel and DPRK have displayed a degree of latitude in their international behaviour which has imposed significant diplomatic and financial costs on their respective 'patrons'. Their 'strategic culture' includes a similar disposition to view and seek security in military terms. As small states surrounded by powerful neighbours, it could even be said that Israel and DPRK have a 'paranoid streak' in their security policy, shaped by constant perceptions of existential threat. The emphasis on self-reliance has led both states to pursue the (Gaullist) option of an independent nuclear deterrent, acquired at significant material cost, and in defiance of their main ally.

DPRK and Israel were founded in the same year: 1948, Israel in May, DPRK in September. Their fledgling identities were forged in conflicts fought over the survival and legitimacy of the state. Israel and North Korea have both initiated wars that were rationalised as strategically defensive in purpose, yet which had a pre-emptive and expansionary dimension. Israel's hard-nosed policies and occupation of territory beyond its mandated borders have complicated US foreign policy in the Arab and Muslim world. Equally, North Korea's provocative actions and proliferation policies have created problems for China. In China's case, this goes beyond the reputational costs of being unable or unwilling to restrain a smaller ally to include direct damage to its security interests.

First, the active participation of the US' Asian allies in Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD), as a direct response to North Korea's missile and nuclear programmes, potentially undermines the credibility of China's limited nuclear deterrent. Without North Korea, Japan and South Korea's extensive cooperation in BMD over the last decade might never have happened. For Japan in particular, North Korea has provided the main public justification for a raft of new security legislation, defence capabilities and operational freedoms introduced since the late 1990s.

Second, DPRK's pursuit of nuclear weapons is a potential trigger for regional proliferation, raising the prospect of a nuclear-armed Japan or South Korea – just as Israel's undeclared nuclear capability spurred Iran and Syria to pursue their own nuclear programmes. The limited nuclear arsenals of Israel and DPRK contribute nothing to the deterrence postures of the US or China. Yet the senior

allies have not been able to persuade Pyongyang or Tel Aviv to rein in their nuclear programmes, or to accept extended deterrence as an alternative: did Beijing ever consider this as an option for DPRK, as the US does for South Korea and Japan? Israel and DPRK are among the largest bilateral recipients of material assistance from the US and China. Military aid is the only plank remaining of US assistance to Israel, but still worth over US\$3 billion each year. China's assistance to DPRK is broader based, including for example 500,000 tons of food and 250,000 tons of fuel furnished shortly after the transition to Kim Jong Un's rule. A military component to this is also widely suspected and sometimes substantiated: missile launch vehicles on parade in Pyongyang this April are widely believed to have been made in China.

Victor Cha, the American Korean scholar and former National Security Council adviser on North Korea, has suggested that the North Koreans model their deterrence strategy on Israel. But in spite of the commonalities shared at a systemic level, bilateral relations between Israel and DPRK are hostile. DPRK has provided ballistic missile technology to some of Israel's most implacable enemies: first, to Saddam's Iraq then more recently to Iran. North Korea was very probably the source of the gas-graphite reactor design that was secretly under construction in Syria until the site was destroyed by the Israeli Air Force in September 2007, an action that has never officially been protested by Damascus. DPRK has also extended diplomatic recognition to Palestine for many years, while Tel Aviv's supportive position for the US on most global issues has ensured frosty bilateral relations.

The analogy has its limitations, of course. Israel is a strong state, economically and technologically advanced, while DPRK's economy is in perpetual crisis. DPRK also has the unresolved reunification issue as a basic question mark on its legitimacy – in my view, the fundamental block on economic reform. DPRK is something of an enigma in state capacity: economically prostrate, but still strong on organisation and coercion. In contrast with DPRK, Israel is a functioning democracy not democratic in name only. Israel is thus better equipped to manage alliance relations, through its broad-based and sophisticated linkages with the United States. DPRK has to rely on the elite and official relationship to handle ties with China – a shortcoming exposed since the death of Kim Jong Il. China, for its part, appears to be broadening the basis of its economic engagement with DPRK in ways that do not involve dealing directly with the Kim family and that also serve the developmental needs of China's border provinces. This gets to a very basic difference in the comparison, which is geographical: Israel affects US policy mainly in the Middle East, whereas China shares a long border with DPRK. Any instability therefore impacts directly on China's security, threatening large-scale cross-border population movements or, in the worst-case scenario, the intervention of combined US and Republic of Korea (RoK) forces from the South.

China has longstanding strategic interests in the Korean Peninsula, where so many wars have been fought in the past between Asia's dominant powers. These interests are well known to this audience so I won't elaborate on them here. Suffice it to say that I agree with Ambassador Roy that China simply has too much at stake to risk giving up its influence in Pyongyang. Moreover, proximity, and the strategic confluence of so many external interests in the Korean Peninsula give Pyongyang a peculiar kind of leverage in its relations with Beijing. In its dealings with the United States, DPRK's main leverage is threat based, especially its nuclear and missile capabilities, which are part deterrent, part bargaining chip. In its relations with China, however, Pyongyang's material weakness and propensity for collapse, paradoxically has become a source of strength. China would clearly prefer DPRK to be more economically self-supporting and strategically compliant. But the overriding

concern is the 'Pandora's box' of uncertainties that regime collapse and a vacuum of power would potentially unleash. It is better to keep feeding the "devil you know", as the English saying goes.

To a certain extent that also applies to South Korean calculations, since the costs of reunification will be borne mainly by Seoul. This goes some way to explain the *realpolitik* behind inter-Korean engagement. During President Lee Myung-bak's tenure, however, hopes for a 'soft landing' have faded, engagement has stalled, and perceptions have tilted back to the threats posed by the North's conventional military and 'asymmetric' capabilities. This has re-aligned South Korea with the threat perceptions of the US and Japan, focused on missiles and nuclear proliferation. All of the 'five parties' (US, China, South Korea, Japan and Russia) share overlapping security concerns in the Korean Peninsula, just not to the same degree.

## II. Comrades and Strangers: Divergence and Convergence Trends in DPRK-China Relations

First and foremost, DPRK and China can be considered as comrades in arms. Alliances forged in wartime have an emotional resonance, at least while there are people alive who remember common sacrifices. During the 1950-53 Korean War, much Chinese blood was spilled, including Chairman Mao's eldest son. While the war is now passing out of living memory, the comradeship element of China-DPRK relations is still tangible for the older generation. For the younger generation and new leaders in China, the war still matters for the political interpretation of history. In the UK, the Korean War is sometimes called the 'Forgotten War'. That doesn't apply in China. Nor in the DPRK, where one often has the impression that the war never ended.

At a more theoretical level, the realist school of international relations maintains that alliances are underpinned by common threat perceptions. Liberal institutionalist scholars contend, however, that over time common values can re-mould and sustain alliances beyond their original strategic purpose. Here the picture is a little more complicated. After the Korean War ended and for much of the Cold War, China and DPRK maintained a common front towards US containment policies in Asia (and in Asia the 'cold' war was often hot: the Korean Peninsula remained a violent flashpoint, while North Korean pilots fought and died in the skies above North Vietnam). The North Korean and Chinese leadership were also concerned at the prospect of Japanese re-armament and revisionism.

Yet there was a significant divergence of perceptions between Pyongyang and Beijing on attitudes towards the Soviet Union. From the early 1970s, Kim Il Sung moved closer to Moscow, as China pressed ahead with rapprochement with United States. This potentially placed DPRK on the wrong side of the Sino-Soviet split, introducing a period of sustained tension in DPRK-China relations, although Kim Il Sung was careful to avoid Vietnam's polarisation in the late 1970s. Then, as the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Russia abruptly cut off material aid to the DPRK plunging its already failing economy into deep crisis. For Pyongyang, China's decision to recognise the Republic of Korea in 1992 was interpreted as a betrayal in its hour of need.

South Korea's trade and investment with China now dwarfs China-DPRK economic engagement. Two-way China-RoK trade surpassed \$250 billion in 2011, compared with \$3.1 billion between DPRK and China, a ratio of 80:1. But in contemporary Asia, economic orientation and strategic orientation can follow different paths. China and DPRK both continue to harbour strategic distrust at some level

towards the United States and its Asian allies, including the 28,000 US troops that remain garrisoned in South Korea. So the basic 'glue' in the DPRK-China alliance is arguably still present and bonding.

During the Cold War, DPRK and China remained comrades in ideology, up to a point. The Party leadership had common Marxist-Leninist/Comintern roots, though state ideology diverged increasingly into national paradigms during the 1960s. North Korea adopted its *Juche* doctrine of self-reliance as the basis for loyalty centred increasingly around the Kim family. Under Kim Jong Il, 'military-first' witnessed the militarisation of DPRK's ruling structures, at the expense of Party orthodoxy. Since Kim Jong Il's death, in December 2011, a second dynastic succession has formally enshrined state ideology on the basis of DPRK as the 'Kim Il Sung Nation'. Marx and Lenin have finally been uprooted from their pedestals in Kim Il Sung Square. Whether this will take DPRK further away from China is not yet clear. That partly depends on the ability of the regime to forge a more collective form of leadership.

If socialism no longer constitutes an ideological bridge between DPRK and China, can they be considered comrades in culture? At a stem level, the North Korean and Chinese political cultures share a common Confucian heritage. Pre-colonial Korea-China relations existed stably within the tribute system for many centuries, and DPRK's family brand of leadership could be considered as a reversion to type. Some observers in China are more inclined to see DPRK and its dysfunction as a throwback to China's political turbulence in the 1960s and early 70s. I suspect that younger Chinese citizens, lacking these reference points, are more likely to view DPRK simply as alien, old-fashioned and a little ridiculous. Online sentiment in China during the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations in Pyongyang took on a condescending note, directed at the anachronistic military parades. If popular sentiment in China becomes further estranged from DPRK, it may become harder for China's leaders to justify continuing material support. Tribute, after all, is a two-way street. While Pyongyang's profligate expenditure on arms and unnecessary space rockets is alienating public opinion in China, it is worth remembering that there are still parallel benchmarks in state development. DPRK's pursuit of nuclear and satellite programmes, for example, follows a similar timeline to that of China in the 1960s and 1970s.

At a non-governmental level, populations on both sides of the border have crossed to seek food and shelter during hard times. They came from DPRK to China during the famine in the mid-1990s, but also (it is less well known) from China to DPRK in the late 1950s. Supporting these transnational links, is a substantial ethnic Korean population in north-eastern China. Here the cultural and linguistic bonds are strong and Chinese and North Koreans could be considered as comrades in adversity.

This raises the question: are they now becoming strangers in prosperity? With the effective collapse of state welfare and public distribution across much of the country, and the withdrawal of large-scale assistance from the South, DPRK is by necessity tied deeply into China's booming economy. The vast majority of consumer goods traded in North Korean markets come from China. Most North Koreans, especially those in the impoverished border provinces, are well aware of China's growing prosperity. When North Korean state media announced a 'happiness survey' last year, the interesting result - as an exercise in credible propaganda - was that DPRK ranked second, *behind* China. While ordinary North Koreans are increasingly aware of their own dependence on China, the rapid divergence in income levels inevitably creates friction and resentment. China has recently been expanding package tours to North Korea. According to Chinese sources, two-way visits between

DPRK and China totalled roughly 250,000 in 2010<sup>iii</sup>. The flipside of China's rapid rise is that North Koreans are now more inclined to resent this new wave of Chinese visitors, particularly Chinese entrepreneurs who are a highly visible presence in today's North Korea.

Once again, the contrast with the South is telling. In 2010-11, more than 12 million South Korean tourists visited China<sup>iv</sup>, while around 2 million Chinese visited South Korea, overtaking Japan as the most popular overseas destination for Chinese<sup>v</sup>. Although the value of China's trade with DPRK is insignificant compared with the RoK, North Korea is central to China's plans to further develop its north-eastern provinces. This is partly about upgrading infrastructure that will improve Chinese manufacturers' maritime access, including to North Korea's port and rail complex at Rajin, and hence better connectivity with China's eastern seaboard and beyond. Coal and other natural resources are already being shipped from Rajin south to Shanghai. A major copper ore mining joint venture, set up in 2007 at Hyesan, is now operational. In the west, China has developed extensively right up to the Yalu river front in recent years and a joint venture special zone has been earmarked on a North Korean island in the river. Progress on the DPRK side has been much slower.

From a commercial standpoint, the rising cost of labour in China has increased the appetite of some businesses to re-locate labour-intensive production to North Korean factories. China has recently exercised the more radical option of directly importing DPRK's workforce, with the decision to accept very large numbers (40,000 initially, increasing to as many as 120,000) of North Korean contract labourers: textile workers, technicians, mechanics, construction workers and miners. According to Barbara Demmick of the Los Angeles Times, they are already arriving in Dandong, Liaoning Province, and Hunchun and Tumen, in Jilin Province<sup>vi</sup>.

### **Conclusions:**

I opened with a deliberately provocative comparison between North Korea and Israel. My point was not to prove that Israel and North Korea are secret twins, for the differences ultimately outweigh the similarities. The real value of the comparison might be to suggest the benefits of a lateral over a linear approach. While this is an intellectual exercise, I believe the lateral approach could also be applied to China's DPRK policy. The evolving special relationship between China and DPRK needs to be placed in its regional context. To function healthily, the lips and teeth need to connect to the eyes, nose and ears of Northeast Asia, if not the broader body of Asia.

DPRK and China are still comrades, bound together by geography as much as history. But they have been also moving in different directions, becoming strangers over time. Despite the claims of DPRK propaganda to be establishing a "strong and prosperous country" in this most important of centenary years the reality is that Pyongyang's political clock is still set by anniversaries. In this fundamental sense DPRK is a backwards-facing nation. Its story is an unlikely and remarkable tale of survival in many ways. Its future cannot easily be written off. Yet one has to wonder how prepared it is, under new leadership, to negotiate the headwinds and complex challenges that lie ahead. Whichever way it goes, China does not have the luxury of distance.

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<sup>i</sup> "Comrades and Strangers: Behind the Closed Doors of North Korea" is the author Michael Harrold's account of his experiences as an English-language adviser in DPRK, during the late 1980s. I have taken the liberty of adapting his title as a metaphor for the China-DPRK relationship.

<sup>ii</sup> Ralph Cossa and Brad Glosserman, 'The Illogic of China's North Korea Policy', CSIS Pacforum Pacnet No. 32, 17 May 2012; and R. Stapleton Roy, 'Responses to PacNet #32R – The Illogic of China's North Korea Policy', CSIS Pacforum Pacnet No. 32R-A, 7 June 2012.

<sup>iii</sup> Scott Snyder and See-won Byun, 'China-Korea Relations: New Challenges in the Post Kim Jong Il Era', Comparative Connections Volume 13, Number 3, CSIS, 27 December 2011.

<sup>iv</sup> Global Times, 'Shrimp Between Whales', 20 June 2012. [www.globaltimes.cn/content/716201.shtml](http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/716201.shtml)

<sup>v</sup> Hangyoreh online, 'S.Korea to become No. 1 travel destination for Chinese tourists', 18 October 2011. [english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_national/501258.html](http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/501258.html)

<sup>vi</sup> Barbara Demick, Los Angeles Times, 'China hires tens of thousands of North Korea guest workers', 1 July 2012 ([www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-china-workers-20120701,0,7865597.story](http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-china-workers-20120701,0,7865597.story))