

The Unique Relationship Between China and North Korea



The Ideology of North Korea

The mindset of North Korea is rooted in the ideology of “Juche,” or self-reliance. Due to the historical occupations and exploitations of China, Japan and the United States, North Korea has further drifted into isolationism in a globalizing world. **The severe levels of mistrust have led to the development of economic singularity and nuclear weapons**, perceived by the Kim regime as necessary for deterrence and protection.

How China Views North Korea

China and North Korea have similar beginnings as survivalist-states. **China, however, has moved to a developmental state and wants North Korea to transition as well.** China has assisted in the nuclear weapons buildup in North Korea, and has increasingly aligned itself with other U.S. historically adversarial states such as Russia, Iran, and Cuba.

On the other hand, **China differs from the perspective of the U.S. in that it does not want to see regime change in North Korea.** China shares with the U.S. a disdain for Kim Jong-Un, as China believes that the North Korean head has failed to properly acknowledge China’s essential contributions to the state’s survival. Regime change could result in various problems for China, including a refugee and humanitarian crisis at the Chinese border. The largest concern, however, is security. **Regime change could promote stronger American influence over the Korean peninsula, which China wants to avoid.** China appreciates having North Korea as a buffer between itself and the U.S.-aligned South Korea. Ultimately, it is likely that China would prefer the de-Americanization of the peninsula rather than its denuclearization.



The Unique Relationship Between China and North Korea

How North Korea Views China

North Korea is relatively dependent on China, as it accounts for 80% of North Korea's external trade. However, **North Korea views its relationship with China as something that is fundamentally distrustful.** While this distrust could overall be attributed to the Juche ideology, it can be linked to more specific events as well, such as the Minsaengdan Incident in the 1930s, the killing of 2.5 million Koreans during the Korean War, the Japanese occupation, etc.

On one hand, there is a chance that North Korea may be willing to denuclearize if it feels comfortable with China expanding its nuclear umbrella over North Korea. However, **any agreement in this realm would clash with the ideology of Juche, therefore making it unlikely.**



Points for Policy

It is important to note: **China is not going to solve the problem of North Korea.** China sees North Korea primarily through the lens of competition with the U.S.. Therefore, real practical cooperation between the U.S. and China on denuclearization is limited. **U.S. policy should focus on gradualism: opening up the North Korean economy to globalization while keeping the one-party system.** U.S. policymakers must be able to examine the China-North Korea relationship in times that are not direct crises to better understand the relationship and create more informed policy

Go Deeper! More Resources



Asia Program

[Nuclear Confidence and Strategic Uncertainty: Ally and Partner Reactions to China's Nuclear Modernization](#)



Wilson Center

[Wilson Center NOW: U.S.-China Relations Temperature Check](#)



Wilson Center

[Combined Deterrence Needed to Tackle NK Nuclear Threats](#)

