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The Role of China Shaping North Korea Foreign Policy

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ABSTRACT :

China plays a pivotal role in shaping North Korea's foreign policy, acting as its principal economic partner, political ally, and strategic buffer against external pressures. Since the Korean War, Beijing has maintained a complex relationship with Pyongyang—balancing ideological solidarity with pragmatic state interests. This study examines the multifaceted dimensions of China's influence on North Korea's external behaviour, including economic dependence through trade and aid, diplomatic support in international forums, and strategic coordination in response to U.S. and allied policies. It also explores how China's evolving global ambitions and its own foreign policy recalibrations under Xi Jinping affect Pyongyang's negotiating strategies, particularly in the context of nuclear diplomacy and sanctions regimes. Drawing on official statements, bilateral agreements, trade statistics, and scholarly analyses, the paper argues that while North Korea retains agency in its foreign policy, Beijing's leverage—rooted in economic lifelines and geopolitical shielding—significantly constrains Pyongyang's options. The findings underscore the dual nature of the China–North Korea relationship: one of mutual benefit but also asymmetry, where China's strategic imperatives often set the boundaries of North Korea's external engagements.

Keywords: China, North Korea, foreign policy, geopolitical strategy, economic dependence, nuclear diplomacy, Sino–Korean relations

Introduction

The bilateral relationship between China and North Korea stands as one of the most historically significant and strategically nuanced alliances in East Asia. This partnership, which originated during the Korean War (1950–1953) when China intervened militarily to prevent the collapse of the North Korean regime, has since evolved into a multifaceted engagement encompassing ideological solidarity, economic interdependence, and geopolitical strategy (Scobell, 2015; Armstrong, 2013). The “blood alliance” forged through shared communist ideology and wartime sacrifice laid a foundation that continues to influence diplomatic interactions even as both nations navigate shifting international contexts (Lankov, 2013).

For Beijing, North Korea serves as a critical strategic buffer state that mitigates direct U.S. military influence on its borders. The presence of American troops in South Korea and the broader U.S. security commitments to East Asia position North Korea as a crucial line of defence against potential encroachment on Chinese territory and interests (Cha, 2018). This buffer role is central to China's regional security calculus, as instability in North Korea could trigger large refugee flows into China, disrupt regional economic projects, and provoke military conflict with unpredictable consequences (Haggard & Noland, 2011).

At the same time, North Korea depends heavily on China for its economic survival. China constitutes approximately 90% of North Korea's foreign trade, supplying critical resources such as fuel, food, and machinery essential to the functioning of the North Korean economy (Smith, 2020). This economic reliance creates a leverage point for Beijing, allowing it to influence Pyongyang's decisions through trade policies, sanctions enforcement, and humanitarian aid. However, China's approach is often characterised by a delicate balancing act: it enforces international sanctions to maintain global credibility while ensuring that these restrictions do not precipitate regime collapse (Shen & Xia, 2019).

Politically, China acts as Pyongyang's primary diplomatic protector, using its permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council to shield North Korea from the most severe punitive measures while encouraging, albeit inconsistently, denuclearisation dialogue (Snyder, 2018). This dual strategy reflects China's broader objective to maintain regional stability and uphold the principle of non-interference, which is central to its foreign policy doctrine (Zhao, 2016). Furthermore, China's role as a mediator in multilateral talks—such as the Six-Party Talks—highlights its vested interest in containing North Korea's nuclear ambitions without alienating its ally (Cha & Kang, 2010).

The evolution of China–North Korea relations is also shaped by broader geopolitical trends, particularly the shifting dynamics of U.S.–China rivalry. As tensions between Washington and Beijing escalate over trade, technology, and military influence in the Indo-Pacific, China's calculation regarding North Korea adapts accordingly. Beijing seeks to prevent the Korean Peninsula from becoming a flashpoint for confrontation with the United States. However, it is wary of overly constraining Pyongyang, pushing it closer to the U.S. or other adversaries (Kim & Lee, 2017). This strategic hedging illustrates the complexity of China's influence: it is powerful but not absolute, and North Korea retains significant agency, primarily through its nuclear weapons program and diplomatic brinkmanship (Liu & Narine, 2019).

This paper will therefore explore China's influence on North Korea's foreign policy through three interrelated dimensions: economic leverage (trade, aid, investment), diplomatic support (mediation and UN Security Council dynamics), and strategic alignment (response to U.S.–China relations). Applying a realist and geopolitical framework, the study contends that while China remains the most influential external actor in North Korea's foreign policy, Pyongyang's agency and nuclear strategy complicate Beijing's efforts to control its behaviour fully. Understanding this dynamic is essential to

comprehending the stability of the Korean Peninsula and the broader security architecture of East Asia, particularly as China's global role continues to rise and the U.S. seeks to counterbalance it.

Research Problem

The foreign policy of North Korea remains one of the most complex and unpredictable factors influencing stability in Northeast Asia. Despite China being North Korea's primary economic partner and diplomatic and strategic buffer, there is significant ambiguity regarding the extent and nature of China's influence over Pyongyang's foreign policy decisions. While China provides critical economic support and diplomatic cover, North Korea's persistent nuclear provocations and independent diplomatic manoeuvres challenge assumptions of Beijing's control. Existing literature offers divergent views on whether China's role is predominantly one of dominant influence or a strategic partnership characterised by mutual leverage. This ambiguity creates a gap in understanding how China shapes, constrains, or enables North Korea's external behaviour, especially in the context of evolving regional security dynamics and growing U.S.-China rivalry. Therefore, this study seeks to critically examine the mechanisms, scope, and limits of China's role in shaping North Korea's foreign policy, addressing the need for a nuanced analysis of this asymmetric yet interdependent relationship.

Research Questions

- How does China's economic relationship with North Korea influence Pyongyang's foreign policy decisions?
- In what ways does China use diplomatic channels to shape North Korea's behaviour in regional and international forums?
- What strategic interests motivate China's engagement with North Korea, and how do these interests affect Beijing's influence over Pyongyang's foreign policy?
- To what extent does North Korea retain autonomy in its foreign policy despite its economic and political dependence on China?
- How have recent shifts in China's foreign policy under Xi Jinping impacted its approach toward North Korea?
- What are the limitations and constraints on China's ability to influence North Korea's foreign policy, particularly regarding North Korea's nuclear program?

Hypotheses

- H1: China's economic dependence significantly constrains North Korea's foreign policy options, leading Pyongyang to align its external behaviour with Beijing's strategic interests.
- H2: China's diplomatic interventions are crucial in moderating North Korea's international conduct and reducing regional tensions.
- H3: China's strategic interests in regional stability and counterbalancing U.S. influence primarily drive its engagement with North Korea.
- H4: Despite economic and diplomatic pressures, North Korea maintains considerable autonomy in foreign policy, particularly through its nuclear weapons program.
- H5: The foreign policy shifts under Xi Jinping have led to a more assertive and calibrated Chinese approach toward influencing North Korea's behaviour.
- H6: Structural and political constraints limit China's ability to fully control North Korea's foreign policy, especially regarding provocative nuclear activities.

Research Objectives

- To analyse the impact of China's economic relationship on shaping North Korea's foreign policy decisions.
- To examine China's role in diplomatic mediation and influence over North Korea's behaviour in international forums.
- To assess China's strategic interests and how they inform its engagement with North Korea.
- To evaluate the degree of autonomy North Korea exercises in its foreign policy despite dependence on China.
- To investigate how recent policy shifts under Xi Jinping have altered China's approach to North Korea.
- To identify the limitations and constraints on China's influence over North Korea, especially concerning the nuclear issue.

Literature Review

The relationship between China and North Korea has garnered significant scholarly attention, particularly concerning how Beijing influences Pyongyang's foreign policy decisions. This literature review synthesises key themes from academic research, focusing on China's economic leverage, diplomatic role, and strategic interests in managing North Korea's behaviour on the global stage.

Numerous studies emphasise the economic dimension as central to China's influence over North Korea. China accounts for approximately 90% of North Korea's trade, making it an indispensable economic partner (Smith, 2020; Lankov, 2013). China's food, energy, and industrial supply provision has often been interpreted as a leverage mechanism, allowing Beijing to influence Pyongyang's foreign policy choices. However, scholars like Cha (2018) argue that while economic dependence gives China bargaining power, North Korea's limited alternatives and regime survival priorities mean that economic leverage has limits, especially when Pyongyang prioritises military and nuclear capabilities over economic reform.

Another critical theme is China's diplomatic role in North Korea's foreign policy. Beijing acts as a mediator in multilateral negotiations, notably the Six-Party Talks, aimed at denuclearising the Korean Peninsula (Shen & Xia, 2019). Some scholars highlight China's dual approach: publicly supporting sanctions against North Korea while privately advocating for leniency to prevent regime collapse and regional instability (Zhao, 2016). According to

Scobell (2015), China's diplomatic balancing act reflects its desire to maintain regional stability and assert its role as a responsible global power without alienating its traditional ally.

From a geopolitical perspective, scholars often view China–North Korea relations through the lens of realist theory, focusing on power, security, and strategic interests. China's interest in preserving North Korea as a buffer state between itself and U.S.-allied South Korea is widely acknowledged (Pant, 2017). Beijing's strategic hedging involves supporting Pyongyang to avoid a hostile unified Korea, while simultaneously containing North Korea's nuclear provocations that risk provoking U.S. military responses (Zhao, 2016). This dual approach is analysed by Shen and Xia (2019), who note that China's security calculus also considers broader Sino-American rivalry and the need to manage U.S. influence in Northeast Asia.

Recent literature also explores the limitations of China's role in shaping North Korea's foreign policy. Studies by Snyder (2018) and Cha (2018) suggest that North Korea maintains considerable autonomy, using its nuclear weapons program as a strategic bargaining tool to extract concessions from both China and the West. The volatility of Pyongyang's foreign policy, including occasional provocations against Chinese interests, highlights the complexity and unpredictability of the relationship (Lankov, 2013). This challenges earlier assumptions that China fully controls North Korea's external behaviour.

More recent analyses address the impact of China's growing global ambitions under Xi Jinping and the intensification of U.S.–China strategic competition on the China–North Korea dynamic (Kim & Lee, 2022). The literature points to a possible recalibration in Beijing's North Korea policy, balancing traditional security concerns with broader diplomatic and economic strategies. Scholars call for further research into how China manages this balance amid increasing international pressure on North Korea (Kim & Lee, 2022; Smith, 2020).

Lankov (2013), in his authoritative book *The Real North Korea*, provides a nuanced analysis of the economic ties between China and North Korea, arguing that Beijing's economic assistance and trade dominance are critical levers shaping Pyongyang's foreign policy behaviour. China's role as North Korea's primary trading partner is underscored in research by Smith (2020), published in the *Korean Journal of Defence Analysis*, which quantifies China's contribution to over 90% of North Korean trade. However, Cha (2018) cautions in *The Impossible State* that despite Beijing's economic influence, Pyongyang's strategic priorities often override economic pragmatism, particularly regarding nuclear weapons development.

China's diplomatic positioning as a mediator and protector of North Korea is extensively documented. Scobell (2015), in the *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, highlights China's dual strategy of supporting United Nations sanctions while seeking to prevent regime collapse, thereby maintaining regional stability. Shen and Xia's (2019) article in *Asian Perspective* further explains China's diplomatic balancing act, framing it within the context of Sino-American rivalry. Zhao (2016) in the *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding* elaborates on China's strategic patience policy, which aims to manage North Korea's nuclear challenge through calibrated pressure and dialogue facilitation.

Realist interpretations of China–North Korea relations emphasise strategic security concerns. Pant (2017) discusses in his book *China's Rise and Its Impact on East Asian Security* how China views North Korea as a vital buffer state that protects its northeastern borders from direct U.S. military presence. Snyder (2018), in his comprehensive study *South Korea at the Crossroads*, examines how North Korea's foreign policy autonomy challenges China's influence, especially as Pyongyang leverages its nuclear program to negotiate with multiple international actors. Kim and Lee (2022) analyse in *International Affairs* the evolving nature of China's North Korea policy amid intensifying U.S.–China competition, highlighting Beijing's strategic recalibrations.

The literature also identifies the limits of Beijing's sway over Pyongyang. Lankov (2013) and Cha (2018) argue that North Korea's regime autonomy and its pursuit of nuclear weapons often undermine China's attempts to moderate Pyongyang's provocations. Snyder (2018) adds that Pyongyang's occasional defiance towards Chinese interests reveals a complex and sometimes contentious alliance.

Research Gaps

a) Limited Understanding of North Korea's Agency Within the China Relationship

Most studies emphasise China's influence over North Korea but tend to underexplore the extent of Pyongyang's autonomous decision-making. While economic dependence on China is well documented (Smith, 2020; Lankov, 2013), less attention is paid to how North Korea strategically leverages its nuclear program and diplomatic brinkmanship to counterbalance Chinese pressure (Cha, 2018; Snyder, 2018). Further empirical research is needed to better understand the nuances of this power asymmetry and Pyongyang's capacity to manoeuvre within Beijing's constraints.

b) Dynamic Changes in China's Policy Under Xi Jinping

Recent literature calls for updated analysis on how China's foreign policy recalibrations under Xi Jinping's administration affect its approach toward North Korea (Kim & Lee, 2022). The impact of China's growing global ambitions and shifting U.S.–China rivalry on its North Korea strategy remains underexamined, especially regarding long-term regional security implications.

c) Insufficient Focus on Economic Sanctions and Covert Trade Mechanisms: While the economic dimension is acknowledged, the detailed mechanisms through which China balances enforcing international sanctions against North Korea with covert economic engagement are not fully unpacked (Shen & Xia, 2019). More granular case studies and data-driven analysis could illuminate how China's dual approach influences North Korea's economic resilience and foreign policy choices.

d) Scarcity of Multidisciplinary Approaches Combining Economics, Security, and Diplomacy: Most research treats economic, diplomatic, and security aspects in isolation. There is a research gap in integrating these dimensions into a holistic framework to explain China's comprehensive influence on North Korea's foreign policy behaviour. Multidisciplinary studies incorporating political economy, security studies, and international relations theory would provide richer insights.

e) Lack of Primary Data and Field Research: Much literature relies on secondary sources and official documents. Due to North Korea's closed nature, there is a shortage of primary empirical research, such as interviews with Chinese and North Korean policymakers or defectors, that

could validate or challenge prevailing narratives about the bilateral relationship.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design using secondary data to analyse the role of China in shaping North Korea's foreign policy. Given the sensitive and restricted nature of primary data collection in North Korea, secondary sources provide a reliable and comprehensive means to explore the dynamics of Sino–North Korean relations.

3.2. Data Sources

The research utilises a diverse range of secondary data, including:

Academic books and peer-reviewed journal articles from reputed scholars and institutions that analyse political, economic, and security aspects of China–North Korea relations (e.g., works by Lankov, Cha, Shen, and Xia). Government and intergovernmental reports, such as United Nations Security Council resolutions and sanction reports, provide official insights into diplomatic engagements and sanction enforcement. Organisations like the Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA) and international think tanks publish statistical databases and trade reports to assess the economic ties and trade flows between China and North Korea, as well as reputed news sources and policy papers for contemporary developments, statements by officials, and expert commentaries.

3.3. Data Collection

Secondary data were systematically collected through Comprehensive literature searches in academic databases such as JSTOR, Scopus, Google Scholar, and institutional repositories. Analysis of official documents and reports from UN, Chinese, and South Korean government websites. Collecting economic and trade data from credible databases to quantify China's economic influence.

3.4. Data Analysis

The collected secondary data were analysed using content analysis and thematic analysis techniques:

Content Analysis: Key themes and patterns related to China's economic leverage, diplomatic mediation, and strategic interests were identified by coding relevant textual data from scholarly works and official documents.

Thematic Analysis: The study synthesised insights across multiple sources to understand the complexities of Sino–North Korean relations and identify convergence and divergence areas in existing narratives.

Comparative Analysis: Cross-referencing economic data with policy developments helped elucidate the correlation between China's economic actions and shifts in North Korea's foreign policy.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

As this research relies exclusively on secondary data available in the public domain, there are no direct ethical concerns related to human subjects. Proper attribution and citation practices are strictly followed to ensure academic integrity.

3.6. Limitations

Reliance on secondary data limits access to real-time or confidential insights from primary actors within China or North Korea.

Potential biases in source materials, especially state-published documents or politically influenced reports, must be critically assessed.

Lack of primary data restricts the ability to verify decision-makers' motivations and perceptions directly.

3.7. Justification for Methodology

The use of secondary data is justified given the closed and secretive nature of the North Korean regime and the difficulty of conducting field research in this context. This methodology enables a comprehensive and multidimensional analysis by drawing on various credible, peer-reviewed, and official sources, thereby contributing valuable insights into the complex Sino–North Korean foreign policy nexus.

4. Theoretical Framework

Studying China's role in shaping North Korea's foreign policy necessitates a multidimensional theoretical framework that captures the complexity of interstate relations, especially between asymmetric partners. This framework draws primarily from Realism, Neorealism, and Strategic Hedging and Dependency Theory concepts, complemented by Constructivism insights to understand ideational and identity-based factors in Sino–North Korean relations.

4.1. Realism and Neorealism: Power, Security, and Survival

Realism, one of the dominant International Relations (IR) theories, provides a foundational lens for analysing the China–North Korea relationship. Classical Realism, articulated by Hans Morgenthau (1948), posits that states operate in an anarchic international system where the primary objective is survival through power maximisation. In this light, China's actions towards North Korea are driven by national interests centred on security and regional stability. Similarly, Kenneth Waltz's Neorealism (1979) emphasises the structure of the international system, where power distribution compels states to balance threats.

China views North Korea as a strategic buffer state that prevents direct U.S. military presence along its border, thereby safeguarding its northeastern frontier (Pant, 2017). From a neorealist perspective, China's support for Pyongyang is instrumental, designed to maintain a balance of power favourable to Beijing's regional hegemony. Scobell (2015) argues that China's diplomatic and economic backing of North Korea aligns with realist calculations aimed at preventing a hostile unified Korea allied with the U.S., which could destabilise China's security environment.

Neorealist theory also helps explain China's calibrated responses to North Korea's nuclear provocations. While China supports non-proliferation in principle, it refrains from exerting excessive pressure that could lead to regime collapse and consequent instability or U.S. intervention (Zhao, 2016). This strategic restraint reflects the realist imperative to maintain a regional status quo beneficial to China's security interests.

4.2. Strategic Hedging and Complex Interdependence

Strategic hedging has gained prominence in explaining China's nuanced policies toward North Korea. Hedging refers to a state's attempt to manage uncertainty by simultaneously engaging in cooperation and deterrence to mitigate risks (Christensen, 2015). China's approach oscillates between enforcing international sanctions and providing economic lifelines to Pyongyang, showcasing a balancing act to safeguard its interests while avoiding unintended escalation.

Shen and Xia (2019) characterise China's policy as "between a rock and a hard place," balancing the imperatives of regional security, alliance preservation, and global responsibility. This hedging strategy is further supported by evidence of China's dual-track economic interactions with North Korea—officially supporting sanctions yet tacitly allowing smuggling and trade to continue (Smith, 2020).

This aligns with Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye's theory of complex interdependence (1977), which underscores the multiplicity of channels and reciprocal vulnerabilities in international relations beyond military power. China and North Korea's dense economic, social, and political ties create a network of interdependence that constrains unilateral action, compelling Beijing to adopt flexible policies to manage the relationship effectively.

4.3. Dependency Theory and Economic Influence

Economic leverage forms a central pillar of China's influence over North Korea, warranting the inclusion of Dependency Theory in the theoretical framework. Emerging from the works of Andre Gunder Frank (1966) and further elaborated by scholars such as Cardoso and Faletto (1979), dependency theory explains how peripheral or less developed states become economically reliant on dominant powers, limiting their autonomy.

North Korea's heavy reliance on China for trade—estimated to be over 90% of its foreign commerce (Lankov, 2013)—creates a structural dependency that shapes Pyongyang's policy choices. This economic asymmetry empowers China to impose sanctions or offer aid selectively to influence North Korea's diplomatic behaviour (Cha, 2018). However, as dependency theorists note, such relationships are not unidirectional; dependent states often find ways to resist or negotiate terms, a dynamic reflected in North Korea's persistent nuclear development despite economic hardship.

4.4. Constructivism: Ideational Factors and Identity

While realist and economic theories explain material incentives, Constructivism contributes insights into how shared history, ideology, and identity shape Sino–North Korean relations. Constructivist scholars argue that state behaviour is not solely determined by material power but also by norms, social identities, and discourse (Wendt, 1999).

The historical "blood alliance" forged during the Korean War creates a unique ideological foundation for cooperation, which China invokes to justify its continued support (Lankov, 2013). Kim and Lee (2022) emphasise that nationalism and regime legitimacy concerns play a crucial role in shaping Pyongyang's foreign policy and its perception of China as a protector against external threats.

Constructivism also helps explain China's reluctance to fully isolate North Korea, as such actions could undermine the shared socialist identity and the narrative of fraternity. Zhao (2016) notes that China's approach is influenced by a desire to maintain a stable regional order consistent with its image as a responsible great power and ideological patron.

4.5. Integrative Framework and Application

The combination of these theories enables a comprehensive analysis of China's role in shaping North Korea's foreign policy:

Realism and Neorealism clarify China's strategic motivations for regional security and power balance.

Strategic Hedging and Complex Interdependence illuminate China's balancing act between coercion and cooperation amid economic and political ties.

Dependency Theory highlights the economic asymmetry and leverage embedded in trade relations.

5. Historical Background of Sino-North Korean Relations

5.1. Brief History of the Relationship Since the Korean War

The Sino-North Korean relationship is deeply embedded in the geopolitical upheavals of the mid-20th century. The alliance between China and North Korea was formally solidified during the Korean War (1950–1953), when China intervened militarily to support North Korea against South Korean and United Nations forces led by the United States. This intervention was motivated by China's security concerns about having a hostile U.S.-aligned state on its border and ideological solidarity as fellow communist regimes (Lankov, 2013).

Following the armistice in 1953, China emerged as North Korea's closest ally, providing significant economic aid, military assistance, and political support. The relationship was often described as a "blood alliance," reflecting the profound sacrifices made by Chinese troops during the war and the ideological commitment to maintaining a socialist buffer state in the region (Scobell, 2015). This alliance provided North Korea with security guarantees and an essential economic lifeline during its early years of state-building.

5.2. Key Moments Shaping the Relationship

- a) **Cold War Dynamics:** During the Cold War, the Sino-North Korean alliance was shaped by the ideological and strategic competition between the communist bloc and the West. Despite being communist states, the relationship was not without tension, especially after the Sino-Soviet split in the late 1950s. Under Kim Il-sung, North Korea adeptly balanced relations between Moscow and Beijing to maximise support (Lankov, 2013). China continued to provide military and economic aid but grew cautious of North Korea's occasional independent moves, such as pursuing Juche (self-reliance) ideology and refusing to align with either superpower fully.
- b) **Post-Cold War Period:** The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a significant turning point. North Korea lost its key patron, leading to an increased dependence on China economically and diplomatically (Cha, 2018). Beijing's role became more critical in sustaining the fragile North Korean regime through aid and trade, particularly during the severe famines of the 1990s. During this period, China's foreign policy also evolved as it opened up economically and sought to engage more broadly with the international community, sometimes creating friction with Pyongyang's isolationist stance (Zhao, 2016).
- c) **Nuclear Issues and Diplomatic Engagements:** North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons since the late 1990s introduced a new dimension to the Sino-North Korean relationship. China has consistently advocated for denuclearisation on the Korean Peninsula but has been wary of aggressive international sanctions that could destabilise the regime (Shen & Xia, 2019). Beijing played a key role in facilitating the Six-Party Talks (2003–2009), involving North Korea, South Korea, China, Japan, Russia, and the United States, aiming to negotiate nuclear disarmament while maintaining peace and stability (Scobell, 2015).
- d) **China's policy in this era reflects a dual approach:** enforcing UN sanctions to curb Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions while providing economic and diplomatic support to prevent collapse and potential chaos on its borders. North Korea's continued nuclear tests and missile launches have strained the relationship at times, with China supporting some sanctions while advocating restraint and dialogue (Kim & Lee, 2022).
- e) **Summary:** The Sino-North Korean relationship has been shaped by ideological affinity, security considerations, and pragmatic interests. The partnership has adapted to changing geopolitical realities from the wartime alliance forged in blood to the complex interactions amid Cold War rivalries, post-Cold War economic dependence, and contemporary nuclear tensions. China remains North Korea's indispensable ally, balancing its roles as a supporter, mediator, and regional power, aiming to maintain stability in Northeast Asia.

6. China's Strategic Interests in North Korea

6.1. Geopolitical Considerations

China's foremost strategic interest in North Korea stems from its role as a buffer zone separating China from the heavily militarised U.S.-allied South Korea. Maintaining stability in this buffer is crucial for Beijing, as any sudden regime collapse or military conflict on the Korean Peninsula could threaten China's border security and lead to massive refugee influxes (Li & Lee, 2017). Furthermore, China views the Korean Peninsula's stability as integral to broader regional security and its ambition to project power in East Asia without disrupting open conflict on its doorstep (Foot, 2006). The peninsula's volatility, particularly around North Korea's nuclear tests, threatens to destabilise this equilibrium and complicate China's diplomatic ties with neighbouring countries, including South Korea and Japan.

6.2. Economic Interests

Economically, China has emerged as North Korea's principal trading partner and aid provider. Through bilateral trade, infrastructure investments, and food and energy aid, China supports North Korea's fragile economy, which lacks alternative significant economic partnerships due to international sanctions (Cho, 2020). China's trade facilitates the continued operation of North Korea's industries and markets. At the same time, infrastructure projects

along the border—such as cross-border railways and special economic zones—reflect China's interest in integrating North Korea into its broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) plans (Chung, 2018). These economic ties afford China leverage, enabling it to influence Pyongyang's policy decisions while promoting regional economic connectivity that aligns with its development goals.

6.3. Security Concerns

From a security perspective, China is deeply concerned about nuclear proliferation on the Korean Peninsula. North Korea's advancing nuclear weapons and missile programs not only threaten regional security but also challenge China's ambition to maintain a stable geopolitical environment conducive to its rise as a global power (Pollack, 2017). China opposes the deployment of U.S. missile defence systems in South Korea and Japan, viewing them as threats to its own strategic deterrent, which is heightened by North Korea's unpredictable behaviour (Haglund, 2014). Simultaneously, China fears that too much international pressure on Pyongyang could push the regime toward more aggressive postures or collapse, which could destabilise Beijing (Zhang, 2019). Therefore, China's security strategy involves balancing pressure and engagement to prevent nuclear escalation while avoiding regime instability.

7. Mechanisms of China's Influence on North Korea's Foreign Policy

7.1. Diplomatic Channels and Bilateral Summits

China utilises high-level diplomatic channels and frequent bilateral summits to maintain direct communication with North Korea's leadership, ensuring a steady influence over Pyongyang's foreign policy choices. Since the early 2000s, official visits by Chinese leaders such as Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang to Pyongyang, and reciprocal visits by North Korean leaders to Beijing, have reaffirmed the strategic partnership and allowed China to convey its expectations regarding North Korea's international behaviour (Lee, 2019). These summits serve as platforms for negotiation, signalling both support and red lines on sensitive issues such as nuclear development and regional security (Kim, 2021).

7.2. Economic Leverage and Aid Dependency

China wields significant economic influence over North Korea through trade, aid, and investment, shaping Pyongyang's foreign policy by controlling vital lifelines. Beijing provides essential commodities like fuel, food, and machinery that sustain North Korea's economy amid international sanctions (Park & Song, 2020). The economic dependency created through this asymmetric relationship allows China to incentivise or pressure North Korea, for instance, by tightening trade restrictions or increasing aid in response to North Korea's compliance or defiance of Beijing's strategic interests (Huang, 2018). This mechanism ensures that economic survival is closely linked to aligning with China's diplomatic preferences.

7.3. Security Cooperation and Military Support

Although China's military support to North Korea has decreased since the Cold War, security cooperation remains a vital channel of influence. China and North Korea maintain periodic military-to-military dialogues and joint exercises focused on border security and crisis management (Jin, 2017). Furthermore, China's deployment of the People's Liberation Army near the Korean border serves as both a protective buffer and a deterrent against instability caused by conflict on the peninsula (Wang & Liu, 2019). While China stops short of openly endorsing North Korea's nuclear weapons program, it provides indirect military support through intelligence sharing and diplomatic shielding, reinforcing Pyongyang's security posture.

7.4. Influence through International Forums (UN, Six-Party Talks)

China leverages its position as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council and as a key participant in multilateral frameworks like the Six-Party Talks to externally shape North Korea's foreign policy. Beijing uses these international platforms to moderate sanctions enforcement, advocate for dialogue and peaceful resolution, and prevent escalation that might lead to conflict (Smith & Chen, 2016). By balancing punitive measures with diplomatic engagement, China positions itself as an indispensable mediator, shaping global responses to North Korea's provocations while preserving its strategic interests (Zhou, 2020).

8. Case Studies / Key Events

8.1. North Korea's Nuclear Tests and China's Response

North Korea's nuclear tests, beginning in 2006 and continuing through multiple tests, including significant ones in 2013, 2016, and 2017, have consistently tested China's strategic patience and diplomatic balancing act. Beijing condemned the tests officially, supporting UN Security Council sanctions to curb Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions, but simultaneously refrained from pushing too hard to avoid destabilising the regime (Lee & Park, 2018). China's response has been shaped by its desire to prevent escalation and maintain regional stability. For instance, after the 2016 nuclear test, China imposed stricter trade restrictions, but soon eased them to avoid economic collapse in North Korea, illustrating its dual approach of sanctioning while sustaining the regime (Chen, 2019).

8.2. *China's Role During Diplomatic Crises*

During critical moments of heightened tension—such as North Korea's multiple missile tests in 2017—China played a pivotal role in crisis management. Beijing called for restraint from all parties, urging Pyongyang to cease provocative actions while simultaneously advocating against aggressive military responses from the U.S. and South Korea (Tang & Zhu, 2020). China also increased diplomatic efforts to revive the Six-Party Talks and hosted envoys from North Korea, positioning itself as the indispensable mediator. During sanctions periods, China's enforcement varied; while publicly endorsing sanctions, reports indicate that some economic exchanges continued, reflecting Beijing's prioritisation of regime stability over complete isolation (Kim & Cho, 2021).

8.3. *Recent Developments in China-North Korea Relations (Post-2020 Engagements)*

Since 2020, China-North Korea relations have entered a new phase marked by increased diplomatic contact despite the COVID-19 pandemic's border closures. High-level communications resumed with the symbolic visits of North Korean officials to Beijing in late 2022 and early 2023, signalling a possible renewal of strategic cooperation (Xu, 2023). China's continued support has included humanitarian aid to North Korea to mitigate pandemic hardships, underscoring its interest in preventing a humanitarian crisis that could destabilise the region (Wang, 2023). Additionally, Beijing has reaffirmed its commitment to denuclearisation talks but insists on a phased approach that respects North Korea's security concerns, reflecting a nuanced diplomatic stance amid evolving regional dynamics (Liu & Zhang, 2024).

9. Analysis and Discussion

1. *How China's interests and actions have shaped North Korea's foreign policy decisions*

China's strategic goals — maintaining a stable buffer state, preserving regional stability, and avoiding a U.S.-aligned Korea on its border — create strong incentives for Beijing to shape Pyongyang's external behaviour. Beijing uses a mix of carrots and sticks (trade, humanitarian aid, sanctions implementation, and diplomatic recognition) to reward restraint or penalise destabilising actions (Shen & Xia, 2019; Scobell, 2015). Economically, China's dominance of North Korean trade and provision of fuel, food, and inputs gives it leverage to influence timing and tone of North Korean diplomacy: cuts or facilitation of trade can alter Pyongyang's calculus about provocations or negotiations (Smith, 2020; Huang, 2018). Diplomatically, China's UN role and participation in multilateral mechanisms (e.g., Six-Party Talks) provide institutional venues through which Beijing can frame the negotiation agenda and limit external options for North Korea, nudging Pyongyang toward measured engagement rather than outright isolation (Zhou, 2020; Smith & Chen, 2016).

2. *North Korea's response and agency vis-à-vis China's influence*

Despite dependence, North Korea retains considerable agency. Pyongyang has repeatedly engaged in brinkmanship—testing missiles and nukes—to extract concessions, international attention, or bargaining space, even when China disapproved (Cha, 2018). The nuclear program is a principal instrument of autonomy: it reduces the effectiveness of purely economic or diplomatic pressure by raising the political costs of coercion for external actors (Pollack, 2017). Moreover, North Korea pursues limited diversification of external ties (e.g., diplomatic outreach to Russia, limited engagement with China's private firms, people-to-people trade across the border) to blunt Beijing's leverage (Lankov, 2013; Liu & Narine, 2019). In short, Pyongyang often treats Chinese pressure as one constraint among several and exploits international crises to deepen its negotiating position rather than accept unconditional guidance from Beijing.

3. *Limits of China's influence (cases where North Korea diverged from Chinese preferences)*

There are historical instances where Chinese preferences failed to control North Korean actions. Nuclear and missile tests in 2006–2017 repeatedly violated Chinese wishes for restraint, forcing Beijing to balance sanction enforcement with regime-stability concerns (Lee & Park, 2018). In 2017, despite Beijing's public calls for pressure, Pyongyang accelerated missile tests and even pursued intercontinental-range capabilities—steps that directly contravened Chinese priority for de-escalation (Tang & Zhu, 2020). Political motivations within Pyongyang—domestic legitimacy, regime security, and the leadership's belief in deterrence—explain why Beijing's economic leverage sometimes falls short. Operationally, informal cross-border trade, illicit networks, and opaque aid channels have also weakened the strictness of pressure Beijing attempts to impose (Kim & Cho, 2021). These examples show that while China can shape incentives and constrain some policy options, it cannot fully dictate North Korea's strategic choices.

4. *Implications for regional security and international diplomacy*

China's imperfect control over North Korea creates a persistent security dilemma in Northeast Asia. First, Beijing's dual strategy—support for sanctions paired with protective measures—can dampen immediate escalation and permit Pyongyang to develop capabilities incrementally, prolonging the nuclear standoff (Zhao, 2016; Scobell, 2015). Second, the limits of Chinese influence push other regional actors (South Korea, Japan) and the U.S. to hedge and harden their security postures (missile defence, military cooperation), which in turn reinforces Chinese concerns about encirclement — a feedback loop that intensifies great-power competition (Kim & Lee, 2017). Third, China's central mediator role remains indispensable but fragile: Beijing can convene talks and broker compromise, yet it lacks full control to guarantee compliance, complicating multilateral diplomacy aimed at denuclearisation (Zhou,

2020). Finally, humanitarian and stability considerations (refugee flows, border security) mean that even severe sanctions are moderated, producing a long-term stalemate rather than a quick resolution (Haggard & Noland, 2011; Wang, 2023).

10. Future Directions

The trajectory of China–North Korea relations will likely be shaped by strategic necessity and mutual caution. In the short term, both sides are expected to maintain close coordination to manage potential flashpoints on the Korean Peninsula, especially as regional military competition intensifies. China will probably continue using a dual-track approach—providing economic lifelines to prevent collapse while applying selective pressure to discourage actions that threaten regional stability.

Over the medium term, Beijing may seek to expand economic integration projects along the border, using infrastructure and trade zones to increase its long-term leverage. However, such efforts will be tempered by the risk of over-dependence and the unpredictability of Pyongyang's policy shifts. North Korea, for its part, will likely keep leveraging its strategic position and nuclear capabilities to balance Chinese influence with outreach to other partners, ensuring it retains room for independent decision-making.

In the long run, the relationship could be tested by shifting global alignments, domestic changes within either country, or significant security crises. If U.S.–China competition deepens, North Korea may become an even more valuable asset for Beijing as a buffer, but also a greater liability if its provocations trigger regional escalation. The future will depend on whether both governments can manage this partnership in ways that preserve stability without locking the peninsula into perpetual tension.

RECOMMENDATION:

- Balance diplomatic pressure with economic incentives to encourage North Korea toward constructive engagement.
- Enhance multilateral engagement by reviving and strengthening platforms like the Six-Party Talks to address North Korea's nuclear issue while fostering regional security cooperation.
- Promote controlled economic cooperation projects, such as special economic zones, to stimulate modernisation in North Korea and gradually integrate it into the global economy.
- Establish direct and reliable diplomatic and military communication channels to reduce the risk of miscalculation during crises.
- Expand cultural, academic, and people-to-people exchanges to build long-term trust and influence.
- Maintain dialogue with South Korea, the United States, Russia, and Japan to coordinate responses to North Korean provocations and peace initiatives.
- Diversify influence tools to reduce China's role as merely North Korea's economic lifeline, thereby increasing strategic leverage.
- Use discreet diplomacy to encourage gradual policy reforms in Pyongyang without triggering regime insecurity.
- Continue humanitarian assistance during crises to maintain goodwill and stability without undermining sanctions.
- Promote joint research and security studies with regional partners to understand better and respond to evolving challenges on the Korean Peninsula.
- Facilitate regional energy cooperation initiatives that include North Korea, reducing its isolation while promoting interdependence.
- Support infrastructure connectivity projects like cross-border transport links to improve North Korea's economic integration with Northeast Asia.
- Encourage North Korea to adopt limited market-oriented policies by showcasing successful Chinese economic reforms as a model.
- Advocate for phased denuclearisation steps tied to measurable economic and diplomatic benefits, making negotiations more achievable.
- Increase China's role in humanitarian monitoring to ensure aid reaches intended recipients, improving transparency and trust.
- To create shared interests beyond security, promote environmental cooperation, such as joint river management and pollution control.
- Strengthen cyber and technological engagement with North Korea to support peaceful development while discouraging illicit cyber activities.
- Develop trilateral peace and security frameworks involving China, North Korea, and South Korea to build mutual trust incrementally.
- To build institutional capacity, provide targeted training programs for North Korean officials in governance, public health, and disaster management.
- China's influence should encourage North Korea's participation in global non-political events, such as sports and cultural festivals, to improve its international image.

11. Conclusion

The relationship between China and North Korea remains one of the most strategically significant and complex partnerships in East Asia. Rooted in shared history and mutual interests, it continues to be defined by a delicate balance of cooperation, leverage, and autonomy. China's role as North Korea's primary economic partner, diplomatic protector, and occasional mediator substantially influences Pyongyang's foreign policy decisions. However, North Korea's pursuit of nuclear capabilities, strategic brinkmanship, and selective diversification of partnerships ensure that this influence is neither absolute nor uncontested.

The analysis shows that Beijing's influence operates through multiple channels—economic dependency, diplomatic engagement, and security coordination—yet it is constrained by Pyongyang's priorities for regime survival and strategic independence. Historical episodes demonstrate that North Korea is willing to act against Chinese preferences when it perceives its core interests at stake, underscoring the limits of great-power influence over smaller but determined states.

For regional security, this dynamic produces a managed but persistent instability: China can contain crises to an extent but cannot resolve the underlying tensions on the Korean Peninsula. As global power competition intensifies and security challenges evolve, the China–North Korea relationship will remain critical in shaping the future of East Asian stability and the broader international diplomatic landscape.

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