

Pawn and King: Xi Jinping's visit to Pyongyang

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The systematic, ruthless and carefully calculated process by which Pyongyang has sought to emancipate itself from Beijing has been the central feature of relations between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the People's Republic of China (PRC) since Kim Jong Un came to power. Xi Jinping's visit to the DPRK capital on 8–9 June brought to an end a prolonged period during which the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had been coming to terms with the Kim family's growing independence, its nuclear ambitions and the reality that it would rule North Korea for the foreseeable future. Kim Jong Un has succeeded in significantly curtailing Beijing's political influence in Pyongyang, but he has been unable to reduce China's importance to the DPRK economy without risking open conflict with Beijing.

Xi arrived in Pyongyang on a state visit with full diplomatic honours, ostensibly to mark the forthcoming 65th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance. Both sides also ensured that the visit received extensive media coverage. As is customary, however, official sources in Beijing and Pyongyang disclosed few details of the talks beyond the standard formula that the two leaders had "sincerely exchanged experiences gained in party- and state-building while advancing the socialist cause, and discussed important issues aimed at placing traditional, friendly and cooperative DPRK–China relations on a firmer footing". What was absent from the official messaging, particularly in statements issued by the Chinese side, is arguably more significant. Unlike during Xi's 2019 visit to Pyongyang, the available Chinese and North Korean readouts made no mention of the denuclearisation of Korea. Instead, there was only a general reference to the "Korean Peninsula issue" in remarks by a spokesperson for China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, accompanied by highly generic language concerning peace, stability, sovereignty and security.

In the agreements that have been made public, the two sides pledged to "align their development strategies" and expand cooperation in trade, agriculture, construction, science and technology, and healthcare. From the perspective of bilateral relations, the most significant announcement was that both sides would "leverage the full reopening of border crossings and the resumption of civil flights and international passenger rail services" to increase the movement of people and goods. The composition of the delegations also offers insight into the priorities of the talks. China's delegation included Defence Minister Dong Jun, while the DPRK was represented by Defence Minister No Kwang Chol. North Korea's KCNA news agency identified both ministers as participants in the talks. Their presence does not necessarily indicate that military agreements were concluded, but it lends additional weight to the language used in the official readouts concerning "strategic

cooperative relations” between the parties and states, as well as the defence of sovereignty and security. Beyond that, the announcements contained few substantive details. The participation of the defence ministers may also have been linked to discussions on the “preservation and management of memorial sites dedicated to martyrs of the Chinese People’s Volunteers in North Korea”, a topic specifically mentioned in Beijing’s readout. Given the Chinese minister’s position within the party-military hierarchy, this interpretation appears entirely plausible.

Kim Jong Un’s emancipation

After assuming power in December 2011, Kim Jong Un began restructuring party and state institutions while consolidating his own political base, a process accompanied by a purge of senior officers in the Korean People’s Army (KPA) and cadres within the Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK). Although it is impossible to prove that reducing China’s political leverage was the primary motive behind this purge, a significant weakening of Chinese influence in the DPRK was both an inevitable consequence of Kim’s actions and a prerequisite for their success. In implementing these changes, Kim drew on the Chinese model of party dominance over the military, making it more difficult for Beijing to criticise his approach. He also acted decisively at moments when China’s ability to respond was constrained by domestic factors, such as CCP congresses, or international developments, including tensions with the United States. In 2013, Jang Song Thaek, one of North Korea’s most prominent and influential political and military figures, was executed. He had been married to Kim Jong Il’s sister. Jang advocated for Chinese-style economic reforms and was widely regarded as having close ties to China’s leadership. In 2017, Kim Jong Nam, Kim Jong Un’s half-brother, who had publicly criticised the North Korean regime and resided permanently in Macau under the protection of the Chinese authorities, was assassinated while travelling in Malaysia. Through these actions, Kim Jong Un demonstrated that he would not operate under Beijing’s influence and that there was no alternative to his rule in North Korea.

At the same time, Kim gradually strengthened the party-state centre at the expense of the autonomy of state-owned enterprises, trade brokers and channels for the exchange of goods operating at the intersection of the formal and informal economies. He further consolidated his power during the COVID-19 pandemic, when, despite the considerable social and economic costs, he isolated the DPRK from the outside world and effectively sealed the border with China. According to estimates by the Seoul-based Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA), the DPRK’s foreign trade contracted by more than 73% during that period. Under Kim Jong Un, the DPRK has also consolidated its status as a de facto nuclear-armed state. He appears to regard weapons of mass destruction as the most effective safeguard against pressure from both Washington and Beijing. Just days before Xi Jinping’s arrival in Pyongyang, Kim publicly called for an ‘exponential’ expansion of the country’s nuclear arsenal.

Kim Jong Un also effectively counterbalanced Chinese influence through diplomatic engagement with the United States and the Republic of Korea in 2018–19, demonstrating to Beijing that he could engage directly with Washington and had an alternative to the DPRK’s alliance with China. This compelled Xi Jinping to resume relations with Kim Jong Un on the latter’s terms. North Korea’s turn towards Russia after 2023 has added a new dimension to

this strategy. Consequently, although China remains economically indispensable to the DPRK – accounting for 98% of its trade in 2024 following the reopening of the border, according to KOTRA – Beijing has lost the ability to influence the domestic policies and strategic choices of the Kim family.

China's priority: managing instability

The fundamental constraints on China's policy towards the DPRK stem from concern that destabilisation of the regime in Pyongyang could trigger conflict on the Korean Peninsula. As a result, the Chinese leadership seeks to avoid actions that could lead to one of several outcomes detrimental to China's interests, including war, the collapse of the DPRK or the reunification of Korea under the leadership of a US-aligned South Korea. At the same time, Beijing has sought to expand its influence in Pyongyang in an effort to encourage Chinese-style economic reforms. From the perspective of the CCP leadership, such reforms would strengthen the DPRK's internal stability, reinforce the economic and bureaucratic networks operating in the border regions, and expand the role of private intermediaries dependent on trade with China, thereby weakening the political monopoly of Pyongyang and the Kim family.

For precisely these reasons, Kim Jong Un has opted for the opposite approach. He continues to tolerate certain market mechanisms, but only to a limited extent, preventing them from evolving into a durable and dominant economic system linked to an external actor, namely China. In this sense, economic recentralisation has also served as a tool for reducing foreign influence. Beijing has been unable to devise an effective response to Kim Jong Un's policies without risking the emergence of one of these adverse scenarios.

China supported successive rounds of tougher UN sanctions following the DPRK's nuclear and missile tests in 2013, 2016 and 2017, apparently calculating that a weakened Pyongyang would be compelled to return to closer Chinese tutelage. China's leaders were well aware that, alongside economic dependence, the nuclear umbrella they extended over the DPRK was the principal source of Beijing's leverage in Pyongyang. They therefore sought to restrain North Korea's nuclear programme, but these efforts were constrained by concerns about destabilising the regime. Consequently, China swiftly returned to intensive diplomacy whenever the risk of uncontrolled escalation increased and the DPRK demonstrated its willingness to absorb the costs of sanctions.

However, it is important to bear in mind that Beijing views Pyongyang not only as a source of risk but also as a crucial strategic asset. North Korea serves as a security buffer between China and South Korea and ties down substantial US forces on the Korean Peninsula. To some extent, it also acts as a counterweight to Japan's ambitions to expand its defence capabilities, while providing tangible support to Russia's war against Ukraine. This helps to explain why Xi Jinping stated during the visit that "both sides should adopt a long-term perspective and build on past achievements in drawing lessons from the development of bilateral relations".

The scale of the DPRK's economic dependence on China remains so vast that Beijing is not particularly concerned about Russia's rising influence in North Korea. At the same time, both countries are, in practice, becoming increasingly integrated into China's sphere of influence.

For this reason, China has tolerated the deepening ties between Russia and North Korea. Admittedly, Russia has become not only a source of military and political benefits for Kim Jong Un but also an instrument for increasing his autonomy vis-à-vis Beijing. However, it would be mistaken to interpret Xi Jinping's visit to the DPRK as an attempt to preserve Chinese influence in the face of Pyongyang's growing cooperation with Moscow. The visit also did not have any negative impact on Sino-Russian relations (see: '[Acceptance regardless of the costs: China's stance on the Russia–North Korea alliance](#)'). China's overriding priority is to manage instability. Beijing does not view Russia as a genuine competitor for global influence, but rather as a crucial 'junior partner' in its strategic competition with the United States and its allies in East Asia.

The priorities of the Kim family

For Kim Jong Un and the ruling family, the priority is to ensure the survival of the regime and to preserve power within the family. The nuclear programme serves this objective by enabling the family to maintain leverage over both Beijing and Washington, secure external resources and retain maximum latitude in strategic decision-making. The same logic also applies to the question of succession after Kim Jong Un, with his daughter, Kim Ju Ae, reportedly being groomed to assume power. From this perspective, China is indispensable as a trading partner and a source of oil, gas, food and technology, while also providing a measure of diplomatic protection. At the same time, it is a potentially dangerous regional hegemon with a propensity to interfere in the DPRK's domestic affairs and in matters relating to succession within the Kim family.

Consequently, Kim Jong Un's policy towards China rests on two fundamental principles. The first is to accept Chinese assistance and expand trade, allowing Beijing to retain a limited degree of influence in Pyongyang. It is therefore unsurprising that Xi Jinping exerted pressure on Kim Jong Un, asserting that "both sides should leverage the full reopening of border crossings". The second is to ensure that neither the legitimacy of Kim's rule nor the security of the DPRK becomes dependent on China.

China continues officially to affirm the validity of the 1961 Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance. However, both sides have refrained from institutionalising military cooperation. This suggests that the treaty serves primarily as a political anchor for the bilateral relationship rather than as an active framework for military and strategic cooperation. This interpretation is reinforced by Kim Jong Un's remarks, in which he expressed a "firm determination to safeguard the common interests of both sides and a favourable strategic environment, regardless of how the international situation evolves".

Xi Jinping's visit to the DPRK therefore brought to an end a prolonged period during which the CCP leadership had been coming to terms with the growing independence of the Kim's family. As North Korea's weapons of mass destruction programme remained the principal source of Pyongyang's autonomy, it also remained the main point of contention in bilateral relations until a turning point was reached in 2018–19. That period saw intensive diplomatic engagement, with Kim Jong Un making his first visit to China and Xi Jinping subsequently travelling to Pyongyang. Since then, the two countries have maintained broadly amicable relations despite further advances in North Korea's nuclear programme. China has ultimately come to accept that the DPRK is a nuclear-armed state and that the Kim family

will continue to rule North Korea on its own terms for the foreseeable future. Kim Jong Un has reciprocated by affirming that “regardless of how the situation may change, our party and government will fully support the policy and position of the Chinese party” on the Taiwan issue.