

US-China relations

North Korea looks across the border for its biggest threat

Kim Jong Un's regime is more worried about infiltration from China than war with the US



China disapproves of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's nuclear weapons programme © Jung Yeon-Je/AFP via Getty Images

Christian Davies in Seoul DECEMBER 11 2021

North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un has exploited the coronavirus pandemic and intensifying competition between Beijing and Washington to tighten his regime's control over the economy and seal the once porous border with China.

Kim, who will mark 10 years in power this month, has used an extreme lockdown imposed in the wake of the virus to expel foreign diplomats and aid workers and stiffen societal controls.

His country's near-total isolation is made possible by Beijing's determination to preserve the Kim government and the [division of the Korean peninsula](#), even as it disapproves of Pyongyang's nuclear and ballistic missile programmes.

But analysts argue that Pyongyang's dependence on Beijing is deeply uncomfortable for North Korean officials who have long seen China — not the US — as the principal threat to the regime's long-term survival.

“The common belief about an ideological solidarity between North Korea and China is completely unfounded,” said Andrei Lankov, a North Korea expert at Kookmin University in Seoul.

“Any North Korean counter-intelligence officer would tell you that China is their biggest domestic security threat because of its potential to disrupt from the inside.”

Analysts said that North Korea's refusal to acknowledge its debt still rankled in Beijing. North Korean history glosses over founder Kim Il Sung's past as a member of the Chinese Communist party, while the regime's 70-page official account of the Korean war of 1950-3 makes just three references to Chinese involvement.

After the war, Kim Il Sung purged anyone with close ties to China, a process that culminated with the departure of all remaining Chinese troops towards the end of the 1950s.



The bridge over the Yalu river, which China funded, has not been used since it was completed in 2013 © Tingshu Wang/Reuters
“The North Koreans have a saying: Japan is the 100-year enemy, but China is the 1000-year enemy,” said Yun Sun, director of the China programme at the Stimson Center think-tank in Washington.

Relations remained tense over the course of the cold war, as North Korea exploited differences between China and the Soviet Union. Beijing, in turn, offered sanctuary to senior North Korean defectors as potential leaders of a more pliant regime in Pyongyang.

For Pyongyang, the great betrayal came in 1992 when China normalised relations with South Korea without seeking reciprocal US recognition for the North.

an iron-ore mining facility built by the Chinese Xiyang Group in North Korea's south-west, deporting the company's Chinese workers.

A suspension bridge over the Yalu river joining the Chinese city of Dandong with the North Korean city of Sinuiju remains disconnected from North Korea's road network. It has stood unused since it was completed in 2013 — at China's expense.

“For the North Koreans, opening up your economy to Beijing means handing over the keys to the kingdom,” said Delury. He noted that when Pyongyang decided to install a rudimentary mobile phone network, it chose an Egyptian company to do so.

“If you are worried about a war, you worry about the US, but if you worry about subversion or a coup, you worry about China much more.”

In 2013, Kim Jong Un executed his uncle Jang Song Thaek, a leading official who was thought to have had close ties with Chinese officials. That was followed by the spectacular assassination in 2017 of Kim's half-brother, Kim Jong Nam, who had been living under Chinese protection.

When in 2017 Kim tested an intercontinental ballistic missile capable of striking the US mainland and threatening American retaliation, China took the unprecedented step of acquiescing with the imposition of [severe UN sanctions](#) on Pyongyang.

Those sanctions remain in place, while Kim's lockdown has precipitated the [virtual collapse of North Korea's economy](#), leaving the regime even more dependent than before on supplies from China.

Analysts said that Beijing's overriding desire to maintain North Korea as a buffer between itself and tens of thousands of US troops stationed in South Korea meant that it would continue to offer Kim a lifeline — but nothing more.

That goal intensified during a period of [theatrical diplomacy between Kim and then US president Donald Trump](#), which raised fears in Beijing that Kim could strike a grand bargain with Washington and throw off China's protection altogether.

bids for companies to upgrade customs facilities on the Chinese side of the bridge to Sinuiju.

“China has three main priorities on the Korean peninsula: stability, division and denuclearisation,” said Lankov. “But stability and division will always come first.”

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