

RESEARCH ARTICLE

When Beijing Chose Seoul over Pyongyang: China–South Korea Diplomatic Normalization Revisited

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Abstract

On 24 August 1992, China finally normalized its diplomatic relations with South Korea, notwithstanding North Korea's protestations. What made Beijing jettison its traditional friendship with Pyongyang and recognize Seoul? What did China want from Sino-South Korea normalization? By extensively unearthing hitherto unknown archival evidence, this paper argues that it was China's security concern about being besieged by pro-Soviet powers, rather than an ideological affinity with North Korea, that delayed Sino-South Korea rapprochement. In the same vein, the study posits that it was the gradual Sino-Soviet reconciliation from 1985 onwards that enabled Beijing to reconcile with Seoul. Furthermore, it argues that in the face of the sudden dissolution of the Eastern bloc and the collapse of the Soviet Union, Beijing hastily sought to secure a *cordon sanitaire* and foreclose the possibility of the formation of a US–Japan–South Korea anti-China united front by normalizing relations with Seoul.

摘要

1992年8月24日，中国不顾朝鲜的反对，与韩国实现外交关系正常化。中国为何背弃与朝鲜的传统友好关系而承认韩国？中国希望通过中韩建交得到什么？本研究以之前不为人知的档案资料为基础指出，中韩建交之所以被推迟，不是因为中朝之间的意识形态上的亲密感，而是因为中国对安全的担忧：被亲苏势力包围的忧虑。本研究认为，正是因为从1985年起中苏关系逐渐缓和，中国才得以发展与韩国的关系。最后，面对东欧国家的解体和苏联的崩溃，中国试图通过与韩国的建交来建立“防疫线”，阻止美日韩三国形成反华统一战线。

Keywords: Sino-South Korea diplomatic normalization; Sino-North Korea alliance; peaceful evolution; China and the Korean Peninsula; *cordon sanitaire*

关键词: 中韩建交; 中朝同盟; 和平演变; 中国与朝鲜半岛; 防疫线

On 24 August 1992, the People's Republic of China (PRC or China hereafter) and the Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea hereafter) finally ended more than four decades of mutual hostility by normalizing their relations. This historic breakthrough paved the way for China to gain access to South Korea's advanced technologies and significant investment, which vastly contributed to its economic modernization, and also effectively terminated Seoul's diplomatic recognition of Taipei. At the same time, China's relations with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea) deteriorated precipitously, resulting in an eight-year (1991–1999) cessation of high-level exchanges between the two countries, the longest hiatus since their establishment.

Seoul had desired diplomatic relations with Beijing since as early as the 1970s – such recognition would help South Korea gain access to the extensive Chinese market and reshape inter-Korean relations in Seoul's favour by greatly reducing Pyongyang's strategic space. Nevertheless, China's normalization decision was a long time coming. Why did China remain lukewarm towards South Korea's repeated calls for rapprochement? What made Beijing jettison its traditional friendship

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with Pyongyang and recognize Seoul, despite the DPRK's protestations? What did China hope to gain from Sino-South Korea normalization? A plethora of studies have pointed to five factors behind Beijing's strategic recalibration: 1) Deng Xiaoping's 邓小平 diluted orthodox socialist ideology and pursuit of the "four modernizations" (*si ge xiandaihua* 四个现代化), which accentuated the putative benefits of Sino-ROK economic cooperation, especially after the Tiananmen 天安门 incident-led international sanctions in 1989; 2) Moscow's pre-emptive diplomatic recognition of Seoul in September 1990, which greatly abated Beijing's compunction about forsaking its ally by following suit; 3) North Korea's renunciation of the "one-Korea policy" and acceptance of the two Koreas' separate entries into the United Nations in August 1991, which allowed China to continuously and easily adhere to the "one-China policy" after its diplomatic recognition of South Korea; 4) Beijing's manoeuvres to drive a wedge between Taipei and Seoul, which could have further exacerbated Taiwan's diplomatic isolation; and 5) Deng's triumph in the internal power struggle with the Chen Yun 陈云 faction that favoured more cautious policies.¹

Admittedly, all of these elements may have affected China's normalization decision. A country's foreign policy is an outcome of multifaceted considerations, and China is certainly no exception. However, the aforementioned factors seem insufficient to completely elucidate Beijing's strategic calculations. Deng Xiaoping's economic aspirations and Beijing's endeavours to isolate Taipei were a constant and thus present an inadequate explanation of why Beijing adjusted its peninsula policy as late as 1992. Moreover, as discussed below, even after the Tiananmen Square incident, Soviet-ROK normalization and the two Koreas' separate admissions to the United Nations, Beijing was still opposed to Sino-ROK normalization until at least October 1991, thereby negating the primary impact of these three events. The internal struggle thesis can also be invalidated by the fact that China decided to normalize before Deng's "southern tour" (*nansun* 南巡), which decisively shifted the tide of domestic infighting in Deng's favour. Most importantly, previous studies have failed to grasp the full picture of the changes in China's security environment and their implications for the normalization decision.² Such a proclivity has resulted in an overemphasis on either the *sui generis* affinity between China and North Korea or Deng Xiaoping's economic ambitions, both of which belie the complexity of international security behind the scenes.

Based on a trove of hitherto undiscovered archival evidence from China, Japan, Russia and the two Koreas, this study attempts to address such a lacuna by bringing back the influence of China's international security situation into the understanding of Beijing's diplomatic normalization with Seoul. Specifically, it argues that it was China's security concerns about the Soviet encirclement policy, rather than an ideological affinity with North Korea, that delayed Sino-ROK rapprochement. In the same vein, the study posits that it was the gradual Sino-Soviet reconciliation from 1985 onwards that enabled Beijing to reconcile with Seoul. Furthermore, this article makes the case that the sudden dissolution of the Eastern bloc and the collapse of the Soviet Union expedited China's diplomatic recognition of South Korea. Out of trepidation that Washington might scheme with its allies to subvert the Chinese regime (the so-called "peaceful evolution," or *heping yanbian* 和平演变), Beijing

1 Of these five factors, the existing literature has tended to arbitrarily select a few, instead of pointing to just one salient factor. See Liu, Hong 1993; Chang 1993; Kim 2001; Masuo 2002; Chung 2006, Chs. 3–4; An 2007; Hiraiwa 2010, Ch. 7; Shen, Zhihua 2018a; 2018b; Lee, Dong-ryl 2018; Dong 2019.

2 This is presumably because the existing literature has relied primarily on Chinese diplomats' memoirs. These memoirs, although not fabricated, are heavily edited and compiled to serve the interests of Beijing and, therefore, may mislead readers. For instance, information about North Korea's indignation at China's approach to South Korea appears in Zhang Tingyan's essay written for a journal but was expurgated in his memoirs (see Fn. 32 of this paper). Consequently, many previous studies have inadvertently replicated Chinese officials' accounts of the normalization decision. For these memoirs, see Qian 2003, Ch. 5; Yan, Jing 2004, Ch. 1; 2007, Ch. 2; Zhang, Ruijie 2010. Qian Qichen is a former Chinese foreign minister, while Zhang Ruijie is a former deputy director-general of the Asia department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Yan Jing is a pseudonym used by Zhang Tingyan, the first Chinese ambassador to South Korea.

hastily sought to secure a *cordon sanitaire* and foreclose the possibility of the formation of a US–Japan–South Korea anti-China united front by normalizing its relations with Seoul.

China's Security Environment in the Early 1980s and its Policy Regarding the Two Koreas *China encircled*

In order to fully grasp Beijing's reluctance to seek rapprochement with South Korea, it is necessary first to understand the security environment of the early 1980s, when Beijing was greatly concerned by the Soviet threat.

In the north, China was confronted with a strengthening Soviet military presence along its porous border. Following the conclusion of the Soviet–Mongolian friendship treaty in 1966, the Soviet Union deployed military divisions along the Sino–Mongolian border.³ In the aftermath of the Sino–Soviet clashes at Zhenbao Island 珍宝岛 in 1969, Moscow further brandished its military capabilities to pressure Beijing by doubling the number of its troops on the Sino–Soviet and Sino–Mongolian borders from 21 divisions to 45 between 1969 and 1972.⁴ Moscow also installed SS-20 intermediate-range ballistic missiles with a maximum range of 5,000 kilometres and the Backfire bomber with a combat radius of 5,500 kilometres in its far east, giving it the capability to strike virtually all Chinese territory with its strategic weapons.⁵ In April 1978, the general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Leonid Brezhnev, and the Soviet defence minister, Dmitriy Ustinov, visited Khabarovsk and Vladivostok in the Soviet far east to observe military exercises, which allegedly were staged in preparation for a Sino–Soviet war.⁶ Infuriated by the visit, China's defence minister, Xu Xiangqian 徐向前, published an article entitled “Be alert and be ready for war” in *People's Daily*, vehemently criticizing Moscow's assertive military posturing and the “one million Soviet soldiers” deployed along China's northern borders.⁷

In the south, China viewed Vietnam as increasingly moving into the Soviet Union's orbit. In November 1978, Moscow and Hanoi formally signed an alliance treaty.⁸ The following month, “at the instigation of the Soviet Union,” Hanoi launched a full-scale invasion of Cambodia and ousted the Khmer Rouge, the Maoist government supported by Beijing. When China's manoeuvre to teach Vietnam “an appropriate limited lesson” in February 1979 backfired, Hanoi aligned itself completely with the Soviet Union.⁹ In May 1979, Hanoi granted Moscow access to Cam Ranh Bay, a former US military base on the south-eastern coast of South Vietnam, with a 25-year lease.¹⁰ This was of enormous strategic value to Moscow as it enabled the Soviets to forward-deploy their Pacific Fleet at Vladivostok to the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean and monitor China's naval activities.¹¹ An article in *People's Daily* stressed that “[the Soviet] deployment of warships into Cam Ranh Bay ... and avidity to control South-East Asia and dominate Asia inevitably arouse the

3 Robinson 1991, 257.

4 Ross 1995, 24.

5 Gelman 1982, 77–78; Martin 1986, 62–64.

6 “Prebyvanie tovarishcha L. I. Brezhneva v Chite” (Comrade Leonid Brezhnev's stay in Chita). *Pravda*, 4 April 1978, 1; “Obshchevoiskovoe takticheskoe uchenie v Dalnevostochnom okruge” (Joint tactical military exercise in far east military region). *Pravda*, 6 April 1978, 1; “Poseshchenie L. I. Brezhnevym Tikhookeanskogo flota” (Leonid Brezhnev's visit to the Pacific Fleet). *Pravda*, 8 April 1978, 1.

7 Xu 1978, 1.

8 “Dogovor o druzhbe i sotrudnichestve mezhdu Soiuzom Sovetskikh Sotcialisticheskikh Respublik i Sotcialisticheskoi Respublikoi Vetnam” (Treaty of friendship and cooperation between the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam). *Pravda*, 4 November 1978, 1.

9 Brezinski 1983, 409; Jencks 1979; Zhang, Xiaoming 2005.

10 Pike 1987, 126; Wilson 1979.

11 Storey and Thayer 2001, 455.

concern and firm opposition of Asian countries.”¹² In Beijing’s eyes, Hanoi was “willing to serve as an accomplice” to Moscow’s expansionism.¹³

On its western border, China had deep concerns about the latest developments in Afghanistan. In April 1978, a pro-Soviet group led by Nur Muhammad Taraki staged a bloody coup in Kabul, relinquishing Afghanistan’s longstanding neutrality in the relationship between Moscow and Beijing. Moscow immediately recognized the newly established pro-Soviet regime,¹⁴ and in December 1978, it signed a 20-year friendship treaty with Kabul.¹⁵ More importantly, a few months after the assassination of Taraki, the Soviet troops directly intervened in Afghan’s internal affairs to establish another pro-Soviet regime in December 1979, signalling the onset of the Soviet–Afghan War. China was exceedingly alarmed by the Soviet expansion into Afghanistan. On 30 December, Beijing issued a statement condemning Moscow’s “flagrant and large-scale military invasion of Afghanistan” and its “hegemonic ambition.”¹⁶ In addition to verbal warnings, Beijing covertly supported anti-Soviet guerrilla warfare led by local insurgents such as the Mujahideen rebels and Maoist groups.¹⁷

In summary, China was encircled by pro-Soviet powers to the north, south and west in the early 1980s. An article in *People’s Daily* stated that Moscow’s expansion in East Asia was a “significant wing of the Soviet’s global strategy” designed “to encircle China.”¹⁸ In a meeting with US delegations in August 1983, Deng Xiaoping candidly opined that “[the Soviet Union] invaded Afghanistan, supported Vietnam’s incursion into Cambodia, deployed one million troops and one-third of its missiles on the Sino-Soviet border, and stationed troops in Mongolia, all of which posed a serious threat to China.”¹⁹ In July 1982, China internally established the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Mongolia and Afghanistan and the retreat of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia as prerequisites for Sino-Soviet reconciliation.²⁰ Thereafter, Beijing repeatedly demanded that Moscow remove these “three obstacles.”²¹

A closed yet unlocked door

Contrary to assumptions prevalent in the existing research, it was not ideological fraternity but the aforementioned security environment that hindered China’s rapprochement with South Korea in the early 1980s. Considering Pyongyang’s ambivalent position and following the equidistant diplomacy between Beijing and Moscow in the 1960s and 1970s, China’s ideological fraternity with North Korea was all but negligible – if not non-existent – by 1980. In January 1980, China’s foreign minister, Huang Hua 黄华, succinctly summed up the situation at an internal meeting: “In the Korean Peninsula ... one country [South Korea] used to be our enemy but is now a friend of our friend [the US], while the other country [North Korea] used to be our comrade but is now a

12 “Laoshahuang yu Jinlanwan” (Old Czar and Cam Ranh Bay). *Renmin ribao*, 3 June 1979, 6.

13 Ibid.

14 “Serdechnye pozdravleniia” (Heartfelt congratulations). *Pravda*, 4 May 1978, 1.

15 “Dogovor o druzhbe, dobrososedstve i sotrudnichestve mezhdu Soiuzom Sovetskikh Sotcialisticheskikh Respublik i Demokraticeskoi Respublikoi Afghanistan” (Treaty of friendship, good-neighbourliness and cooperation between the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan). *Pravda*, 6 December 1978.

16 “Wo zhengfu fabiao shengming qianglie qianze Sulian baquanzhuyi xingjing” (Chinese government issued a statement strongly condemning the hegemonic behaviour of the Soviet Union). *Renmin ribao*, 31 December 1979, 1. The following day, China’s vice-foreign minister, Zhang Haifeng, directed an accusation of expansionism at a Soviet ambassador to China with reference to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. See Wang, Taiping 1999, 946.

17 For a detailed account of China’s covert support of the Mujahideen rebels, see Nicholas 1994, 100–02; Hilali 2000.

18 “Lun Sulian de dongya zhanlüe” (On the Soviet Union’s East Asia strategy). *Renmin ribao*, 12 February 1981, 7.

19 PDRO 2004, 926.

20 Ibid., 835.

21 Qian 2003, 10–16.

friend of our enemy [the Soviet Union].²² In the absence of ideological affinity, Beijing's primary consideration was its security interests. With the Soviet sabre-rattling in the north, west and south, China was concerned that any conciliatory move towards South Korea might compel North Korea to join the Soviets' encirclement policy, thus rendering China fully besieged from all sides. Huang Hua further expounded, "We ... don't want to see a second Vietnam appearing in north-east China, let alone ... the Soviet Union opening the gate of the Korea Strait and entering the Asia-Pacific ... We have to vigilantly watch the expansion of Soviet influence in North Korea and the possibility of the [Soviet] use of North Korean ports."²³

In this context, Beijing had no choice but to strengthen its ties with the DPRK and provide Pyongyang with extensive economic and military assistance to "neutralize Soviet influence" and "win sympathy and understanding for the Chinese position," which would "enhance the status of the pro-China elements" and "weaken the temerarious tendency of pro-Soviet elements within North Korea."²⁴ For Beijing, therefore, any Sino-ROK rapprochement that would run counter to these goals was a non-starter. Deng Xiaoping informed Jimmy Carter in January 1979 that China "cannot have direct contact with the South Koreans"²⁵ and reaffirmed this position when meeting Japanese delegations on 29 March 1980.²⁶

Nevertheless, Beijing was not against non-political exchanges with South Korea, which had the potential to not only invigorate China's economy but also to drive a wedge between Seoul and Taipei.²⁷ Above all, such relations could check North Korea's possible alignment with the Soviet Union by planting seeds of doubt about Beijing's unqualified endorsement in Pyongyang's consciousness – that is, Pyongyang could be jettisoned if its fidelity came into question. Huang Hua emphatically stated, "Whereas North Korea has a 'Soviet card' in its hand ... we also have a 'South Korea card.' If North Korea were to lean to the Soviet side, we would cut off all kinds of assistance and turn our back and support South Korea."²⁸ Thus, Beijing cautiously sought to increase non-political Sino-ROK contact. In July 1982, Deng Xiaoping authorized the mutual participation of Chinese and South Korean personnel in multilateral activities held in the opposite countries.²⁹ In discussing the repatriation of the crew members and passengers of a hijacked Chinese civilian airliner that was forced to land on Chuncheon Air Force base in South Korea in May 1983, Beijing made its first official contact with Seoul and referred to South Korea as the "Republic of Korea" for the first time.³⁰ In July 1983, Beijing further adjusted its policy regarding South Korea to permit unofficial exchanges in the economic, cultural and technological realms.³¹ Pyongyang was, of course, disgruntled by this development: the North Korean ambassador to China complained that "There is no reason for socialist countries to have relations with South Korea."³² However, with concerns about possible abandonment instilled in Pyongyang's

22 Huang 1980.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 US Department of State 2013, 762.

26 "Tōshōhei fuku shushō to no kaiken naiyō" (Interview with vice-premier Deng Xiaoping). *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 3 March 1980, 3.

27 Qian 2003, 151.

28 Huang 1980.

29 Zhang, Tingyan 2013.

30 For a detailed account of this event, see Shen, Tu 1993, 186–225. Shen Tu, a former director of the Civil Aviation Administration of China, was a representative of the Chinese delegation negotiating with Seoul at that time.

31 Compilation Group of Li Xiannian Biography and Editorial Department of Revolutionary History of Hubei-Henan Region 2011, 201; Compilation Group of Li Xiannian Biography 2009, 1238.

32 Yan, Jing 2008, 69. This information was removed from the official memoirs of Zhang Tingyan (Yan Jing).

consciousness, Beijing continued to gradually widen its contacts with Seoul.³³ The volume of Sino-ROK indirect trade also soared.³⁴

In brief, Beijing, besieged on three sides by the Soviet threat, could not accept South Korea's overture for rapprochement in the early 1980s. Instead, to check Pyongyang's alignment with Moscow, Beijing played the "South Korea card" through piecemeal non-political exchanges with Seoul. This was a subtle balance to strike. Huang Hua metaphorically described China's South Korean policy as "a door, closed, yet unlocked" (*guanmen bu shang suo* 关门不上锁). The purpose was "not to push North Korea to the Soviet side, while forcing it not to dare to lean on the Soviet Union."³⁵

Interplay between China, the Soviet Union and North Korea

Pyongyang's strategic value shrinks

Beijing's policy recalibration concerning both the Soviet Union and the Korean Peninsula came in 1985. On 11 March, Moscow announced the death of the general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Konstantin Chernenko, and the inauguration of Mikhail Gorbachev as its new leader. On the same day, Gorbachev gave a speech at the plenary session of the Central Committee, expressing his willingness to "greatly improve relations with the People's Republic of China."³⁶ Beijing promptly grasped the Soviet olive branch and dispatched a delegation, led by vice-premier Li Peng 李鹏, to Chernenko's funeral.³⁷ In retrospect, this was a watershed moment in the Sino-Soviet rapprochement. In June 1985, Deng Xiaoping made a momentous adjustment to China's grand strategy. At the enlarged meeting of the Central Military Commission (CMC), Deng declared that he had discarded Beijing's long-held tenet that a war was imminent, and that China would renounce its anti-Soviet strategy.³⁸ In October, Deng sent a tantalizing verbal message to Gorbachev through the Romanian president, Nicolae Ceaușescu, stating that he was willing to hold a summit with Gorbachev if Vietnamese troops were withdrawn from Cambodia. After receiving the message on 22 October and after a month of "serious consideration," Gorbachev finally replied in the affirmative on 23 November.³⁹

As illustrated above, it was Beijing's apprehension of the Soviet encirclement policy that buttressed Pyongyang's strategic value for China. Now, with Gorbachev's favourable reply, its strategic value shrank greatly. At that time, Beijing had already been irritated by Pyongyang's extensive demands for aid. On 13 December 1985, only 20 days after Gorbachev's reply, Deng made an internal announcement that: "We should not let North Korea have the wrong understanding that we will give whatever [they] want ... We have put a lot of effort into helping Vietnam, Albania and North Korea. We have fallen out with Vietnam and Albania. [We] have to prepare to fall out with the third one, although [we should] try not to."⁴⁰

At a speech in Vladivostok on 28 July 1986, Gorbachev made a clearer conciliatory gesture: he pledged a partial withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, Mongolia and the Sino-Soviet

33 For instance, China welcomed the South Korean tennis team in February 1984 and dispatched a basketball team to South Korea in April 1984. Soon after, it also confirmed its intention to participate in the 1986 Seoul Asian Games and the 1988 Seoul Olympics.

34 According to one study, the volume of Sino-ROK indirect trade increased from US\$188 million in 1980 to US\$462 million in 1984 (see Chung 2006, 36).

35 Huang 1980.

36 "Rech Generalnogo sekretaria TCK KPSS tovarishcha M. S. Gorbacheva" (Speech by the general secretary of the CPSU Central Committee, Comrade Mikhail Gorbachev). *Pravda*, 12 March 1985, 3.

37 Li 2008, 9–11.

38 PDRO 2004, 1050–52.

39 Ibid, 1085–86; Qian 2003, 23.

40 GOILD 2004, 100–01.

border.⁴¹ Although the problem of the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia remained unaddressed, his speech signalled an explicit indication of a profound change in Moscow's policy towards Beijing. Deng evaluated the speech to contain "positive elements" and reiterated his proposal: "If Gorbachev takes a solid step in removing the three major obstacles ... I would like to meet him personally."⁴² In a meeting with Bulgarian leader Todor Zhivkov en route to Moscow in May 1987, Zhao Ziyang 赵紫阳 again stressed the significance of resolving the Vietnam–Cambodia problem.⁴³ Upon receiving this message, Moscow promptly published a statement: "The Soviet Union ... is ready to help solve the situation in Cambodia as much as possible and ready to discuss this regional issue with other countries including China."⁴⁴ Finally, all three obstacles were brought to the negotiating table.

As the Beijing–Moscow reconciliation progressed, Pyongyang's leverage rapidly decreased. During a meeting with Kim Il-sung in May 1987, Deng Xiaoping stressed that "Every single country and every single party can only deal with the problem based on its own situation ... Comrades in other countries must understand this point."⁴⁵ Although Soviet–DPRK cooperation was strengthened by Kim Il-sung's visit to Moscow in October 1986, Deng seemed less vexed this time, informing a Japanese delegation in June 1987 that "the improvement of Soviet–DPRK relations is not a bad thing." Evidently, the Soviet Union was no longer a serious threat to Beijing; Deng openly stated, "Even if North Korea invades the South, [China] would not support it."⁴⁶

Beijing's low politics approach to Seoul

With the Sino-Soviet reconciliation looming, Pyongyang was now of little strategic value to Beijing. This change allowed Beijing the latitude to engage in economic cooperation with South Korea. During the Beidaihe 北戴河 conference on 22 July 1987, Deng Xiaoping issued a significant instruction: "[We] should seriously consider the issue of developing economic relations with South Korea." Following this, the Sino-ROK Economic Coordination Group 中韩经济协调小组 was established and led by vice-premier of the State Council, Tian Jiyun 田纪云.⁴⁷ Deng was already envisioning the gradual escalation of economic exchange into political rapprochement, adding, "Normalization of relations with South Korea cannot be put off any longer."⁴⁸ However, this does not mean that Beijing did not consider the Sino-DPRK fraternity whatsoever. For instance, on 14 November 1987, the Party's Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group stated that, "In view of our relations with North Korea and North Korea's capability to accept [the situation], the adjustment of our relations with South Korea should not be too hasty. [It] should be carried out step by step. At present [we] should only conduct indirect trade with South Korea without making a breakthrough."⁴⁹ Nevertheless, this fraternity, if any, paled in the face of national interest. In March 1988, soon after Moscow announced that it had already withdrawn large numbers of troops from the Sino-Soviet border and would complete the total withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan within

41 "Rech tovarisca Gorbachva M. S." (Speech by Comrade Mikhail Gorbachev). *Pravda*, 29 July 1986, 1–3.

42 Deng 1994, 167–175.

43 See "Transcript of conversation between Todor Zhivkov, chairman of the State Council of the People's Republic of Bulgaria and acting secretary general of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party Zhao Ziyang in Beijing, 6 May 1987." 2003/2004. Available at *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 14/15, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/110018>. Accessed 28 September 2021.

44 "Luogaoshou shuo Su dui ZhongSu guanxi de fazhan gandao manyi" (Rogachev said that the Soviet Union is satisfied with the development of Sino-Soviet relations). *Cankao ziliao*, 14 May 1987, 15–17.

45 PDRO 2004, 1190.

46 "Tō taikai de shidōbu wakagaeri, kaihō kaikaku o kenji tō shōhei shunin kataru" (Leadership rejuvenation and reform and opening up to be continued, Deng Xiaoping said at the Party Congress). *Asahi Shimbun* (Morning edition), 5 June 1987, 7.

47 Tian 2009, 474.

48 Tian 2004, 3.

49 GOILD 2004, 105–06.

ten months,⁵⁰ Beijing made a “breakthrough” by authorizing direct trade with South Korea.⁵¹ Four months later, Deng issued a further instruction: “Now it seems that the time has come to develop the economic and cultural relations with South Korea. The pace can be faster and wider than originally planned.”⁵² In line with this instruction, Beijing went on to expand its relations with Seoul, despite Pyongyang’s indignation.⁵³

Following the authorization of direct transactions between the two countries, it became necessary to establish Sino-ROK trade representative offices to administrate the two countries’ trade. In early September 1988, South Korea sent a message to the Beijing authorities through Colonel Liu Yazhou 刘亚洲, a core figure affiliated with the Sino-ROK Economic Coordination Group and the general political department of the CMC, stating that it hoped to establish a trade representative office. In reporting this message to Premier Li Peng, Liu added his personal view that China should not be too indulgent of North Korea and that the improvement in Sino-ROK relations would make Pyongyang further value its ties with Beijing. Li Peng ratified and championed Liu’s view.⁵⁴ Accordingly, the following month, Beijing informed Pyongyang that China would exchange trade representative offices with South Korea. Pyongyang complained vociferously, only to hear that in the light of the expansion of the Sino-ROK trade volume, the mutual establishment of trade representative offices was inevitable.⁵⁵ With the evaporation of its “Soviet card,” Pyongyang was left with no substantial leverage to obstruct Beijing’s approach to Seoul. In January 1989, China suggested to South Korea that the two countries mutually establish these offices.⁵⁶

The following month, China and the Soviet Union held a joint press conference, announcing that “substantial progress” had been made in eliminating the three obstacles.⁵⁷ By this time, Moscow had already begun its withdrawal of troops from the Sino-Soviet border and Afghanistan. The two countries also affirmed that Vietnam would withdraw all of its troops from Cambodia by the end of September 1989 and that Gorbachev would visit China in May.⁵⁸ Beijing now appeared to have no reason to hesitate in improving Sino-ROK relations. In April 1989, Deng finally instructed Zhao Ziyang to deliver a verbal message to Kim Il-sung, informing the latter of Beijing’s resolve to further improve its relations with Seoul: “It is better for us to develop economic relations with South Korea than with the Soviet Union. Now it seems that [we] can no longer do what [we] used to do in the economic realm.” However, this development was not without due caution: “Tell [Kim Il-sung] first that we are only considering economic relations with South Korea, not political relations,” Deng stated. “If he asks whether China would really stop there ... then you can tell him that in the case that China considers any political action in the future, it would surely discuss it with you.”⁵⁹

Sino-ROK Diplomatic Normalization

Normalization postponed

Shortly after Zhao Ziyang delivered this verbal message to Kim Il-sung, Gorbachev paid a state visit to China and held a historic summit with Deng Xiaoping, proclaiming full normalization of the

50 “Zaiavlenie Generalnogo sekretaria CK KPSS M.S. Gorbacheva po Afganistanu” (Statement by the general secretary of the CPSU Central Committee Mikhail Gorbachev on Afghanistan). *Pravda*, 9 February 1988, 1; “Na zascite zavoevani revoliucii” (Defending revolutionary achievements). *Pravda*, 23 February 1988, 1–2.

51 GOILD 2004, 106.

52 Ibid.

53 Yan, Jing 2008, 70.

54 Liu, Yazhou 2004, 281–294.

55 Yan, Jing 2008, 70.

56 Lee, Sang-ok 2003, 121. Lee was foreign minister of South Korea at that time.

57 PDRO 2004, 1264.

58 “Zhongguo Sulian liangguo waizhang guanyu jieue jianpuzhai wenti de shengming” (Statement of the foreign ministers of China and the Soviet Union on resolving the Cambodian issue). *Renmin ribao*, 6 February 1989, 1.

59 GOILD 2004, 106–07.

relations between China and the Soviet Union in May 1989.⁶⁰ However, this monumental diplomatic event was soon overshadowed by a subsequent tragedy: Beijing's draconian crackdown of the Tiananmen Square protests in June. The US and other Western countries promptly imposed sanctions on China. Amid these external pressures and internal turmoil, Beijing temporarily stalled Sino-ROK rapprochement; when meeting with Kim Il-sung in November 1989, Jiang Zemin 江泽民 reversed Beijing's position and stated that the "Sino-DPRK friendship was forged with blood ... We have no official relationship with South Korea, only a non-governmental trade relationship. With regard to the issue of establishing trade offices between China and South Korea ... we would like to postpone it."⁶¹

Behind Beijing's about-face was a newly perceived security environment. From the perspective of Beijing's leadership, the Tiananmen incident was provoked by a malignant scheme by Western countries to topple the communist regime. At the meeting that decided upon the forceful crackdown of the protest on 2 June, Deng claimed that "The cause of this incident ... came from the international climate. The Western world, especially the United States, has turned on all the propaganda machines to incite and encourage the so-called democrats and the so-called opposition in China ... thus causing the current chaotic situation." The meeting concluded that Western countries were waging "a world war without smoke" (*meiyou xiaoyan de shijie dazhan* 没有硝烟的世界大战) with the aim of "overthrowing the communist party and the socialist system."⁶² Thereafter, Chinese leaders repeatedly stressed the need to be alert to the Western powers' scheme to change regimes, dubbed as "peaceful evolution."⁶³ Deng shared his analysis in a meeting in Beijing with Kim Il-sung in November 1989: "The period of US-Soviet confrontation and of the global domination of two superpowers is already over. It has been replaced by a new thing, which is that the Western world topples the socialist countries through peaceful evolution." Political instability in Eastern Europe further added to Beijing's trepidation, with Deng commenting, "Having started in Hungary and Poland relatively smoothly, [Western countries are] itching for China as well."⁶⁴

After Kim Il-sung returned to Pyongyang, the dissolution of the Socialist Bloc was further accelerated, with the fall of the Berlin Wall in November and the Romanian revolution in December. The convulsions in Eastern Europe cast a long shadow on the outlook of North Korea, which was extremely anxious about ideological contagion amid serious food shortages and the decline in economic assistance from the Socialist Bloc.⁶⁵ From Beijing's perspective, the subversion of North Korea, which it had long considered as a strategic buffer, was another stepping stone in the Western powers' peaceful evolution strategy against China.⁶⁶ In reporting his analysis of North Korea's prospects to other leaders in January 1990, Liu Yazhou wrote, "The West and the United States never give up trying to change China. They always want to conquer this bastion. If [they] want to conquer China, [they] have to conquer North Korea first." It seemed that Pyongyang would be little able to withstand the peaceful evolution: "North Korea is still calm, but it is only an ostensible state on the surface. In fact, it is in crisis ... There may be a palace coup or a military

60 "ZhongSu lianhe gongbao" (Sino-Soviet joint communiqué). *Renmin ribao*, 19 May 1989, 1.

61 GOILD 2004, 187.

62 Zhang, Liang 2001, 886–87.

63 Deng 1994, 324–26, 344–46.

64 GOILD 2004, 182.

65 Pyongyang hastily withdrew students from Eastern Europe and quarantined them to prevent ideological contagion. The number of North Korean residents in Japan who received a request from their relatives in the North to send daily necessities and cash also skyrocketed (MFARK 1991c, 178).

66 Beijing's perception of North Korea as a strategic buffer is based on the historical experience of China's exchanges with external powers. For instance, upon entering the Korean War, Zhou Enlai stated that the "US imperialists ... inherited the legacy of Japanese militarism and followed the history that unfolded since the Sino-Japanese War; that is, in order to annex China, [one] must occupy north-east China first, and in order to occupy north-east China, [one] must occupy North Korea" (Document Editing Committee of the CCP Central Committee 2004, 52–53).

coup.⁶⁷ By April, Liu's tone had become yet more assertive. He wrote to the vice-premier, Tian Jiyun, "The United States and Japan will certainly step up their infiltration and subversion of the North ... That a change will take place in North Korea is absolute ... It is just a matter of time and the degree of change."⁶⁸

Deng Xiaoping also shared the same apprehension. At an internal discussion immediately before meeting Kim Il-sung in September 1990, he contended that "If the North collapses or is eaten up by the South, China will be on the front line of South Korea–Japan–the United States and will be directly besieged by them, with no intermediate buffer zone ... If the North collapses, it will be very detrimental to us." Deng further advised, "The unification [of the Korean Peninsula] is not necessarily good ... It is good to maintain the status quo."⁶⁹ Beijing was indeed sensing Seoul's increasingly belligerent posture towards the North.⁷⁰ Given the changes in China's security environment, Deng believed that the establishment of diplomatic relations with South Korea would be "a generous gift" (*houli* 厚礼) to South Korea, Japan and the US. Eventually, Deng decided to "put it off for two, three, or even five years."⁷¹ Sino-ROK diplomatic normalization was, therefore, temporarily postponed.

Establishing a cordon sanitaire

In the face of domestic instability and external threats, China sought to establish a *cordon sanitaire* to secure a buffer to fend off ideological contagion spreading towards the Sino-DPRK border. Beijing immediately provided North Korea with extensive economic and military aid, including the renewal of a five-year economic and military aid package, despite the economic hardship inflicted by Tiananmen-triggered sanctions.⁷² Simultaneously, it sought to bolster economic exchange with Seoul "to strengthen its weight over South Korea and to weaken the relationship between South Korea and the United States."⁷³ In April 1990, Tian Jiyun proposed to Seoul that the two sides resume their discussions regarding establishing trade representative offices.⁷⁴ Jiang Zemin explained to Kim Il-sung in September 1990 that the exchange of trade offices was "out of consideration of the current international situation, not just from China's own interests; it is conducive to maintaining and strengthening our special voice on the Korean Peninsula issue." Kim

67 Liu, Yazhou 2004, 296–98. Liu Yazhou's view was similar to that of a Japanese diplomat who cautiously anticipated that as Kim Jong-il had not at that time consolidated power, a military or palace coup was likely in the North (MFARK 1991c, 179). Indeed, many observers of North Korea began to forecast a possible upset in the Pyongyang regime at that time. See Eberstadt 1990; Jackson 1990; Mashin 1990.

68 Liu, Yazhou 2004, 206.

69 GOILD 2004, 213.

70 For example, after meeting key figures affiliated with the South Korean government, Liu Yazhou reported that "Although South Korea has been exaggerating the danger of an 'invasion from the North' for 40 years, in fact it has never given up its desire to unify the Korean Peninsula ... This desire has never been as strong and explicit as it is now ... Now is the best time [for South Korea] to unify the Korean Peninsula. It will be hard to get a better chance than now." He observed that the South Korean military had "begun to make contingency preparations" (Liu, Yazhou 2004, 297–98).

71 GOILD 2004, 212–13.

72 According to one document of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of South Korea, China provided North Korea with emergency aid of US\$15 billion in 1990. Chinese internal documents also note that Beijing supplied Pyongyang with 150,000 tons of jet fuel. Given that China's economic and military aid to North Korea in the previous year amounted to approximately US\$5.5 billion, the increase in Chinese aid manifestly indicated China's sense of emergency. See MFARK 1991a, 195; GOILD 2004, 99, 213; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 1991, 39.

73 GOILD 2004, 106.

74 Liu, Yazhou 2004, 318–326; Lee, Sang-ok 2003, 122. A month earlier, Jiang Zemin had informed Kim Il-sung that "It is understandable that you object to our setting up trade offices with South Korea, but this matter cannot be stopped." See Liu, Yazhou 2004, 313; Zhong 2006, 5–6.

Il-sung acknowledged this stance.⁷⁵ Thereafter, Seoul and Beijing signed an agreement to exchange trade representative offices in October 1990, which were formally opened in January 1991.⁷⁶

Beijing's next step was to compel Pyongyang to accept separate entries for the two Koreas into the United Nations. China's fears of North Korea being "eaten up" by the South were further heightened after witnessing the German reunification.⁷⁷ To forestall such an event, China sought Pyongyang's admission to the United Nations. Pyongyang's preservation was more likely if it were recognized as an independent political entity by the international community; the ideological contagion would also be contained. However, unlike Seoul, which was supportive of both Koreas being admitted to the United Nations, Pyongyang adamantly insisted that they should be admitted as one confederation, arguing that separate entries would only perpetuate the division of the peninsula.⁷⁸ To ease the deadlock, Beijing dispatched Li Peng to Pyongyang in early May to inform Kim Il-sung that "If South Korea raises the issue of joining the United Nations again during this year's UN General Assembly, it will be difficult for China to oppose it."⁷⁹ At that time, Moscow, having already recognized South Korea in September 1990, was unlikely to oppose Seoul's bid. Thus, without China's veto, South Korea would be admitted to the United Nations as the sole Korean nation and North Korea would be further isolated. Kim Il-sung had no choice but to relinquish the idea of building a confederation of two Koreas.⁸⁰ Eventually, 20 days after Li Peng's visit, North Korea announced that it would accept the separate entries of two Koreas into the United Nations; it could not "stand idly by" amid a "temporary predicament."⁸¹ Thus, with the two Koreas being admitted into the United Nations in September 1991, Beijing had come one step closer to securing its buffer state and establishing the *cordon sanitaire*.

Nevertheless, the conditions for Sino-ROK normalization were not yet ripe. In September 1990, when Kim demanded that Beijing should not establish diplomatic relations with Seoul until the US recognized North Korea, Jiang Zemin answered: "We will not establish diplomatic relations with South Korea."⁸² Deng Xiaoping further promised Kim that Sino-ROK normalization would be delayed for three years.⁸³ Both Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin reaffirmed in October 1991 that only after Washington recognized Pyongyang would Beijing establish relations with Seoul.⁸⁴ This was not out of any ideological affinity between the two countries; even as he promised Kim Il-sung that Beijing would not hastily seek Sino-ROK diplomatic normalization, Deng Xiaoping manifestly repudiated the Sino-DPRK alliance and redefined the nature of their relations: "We [should] adhere to the five principles of peaceful coexistence. It is good for each other. [We] are brothers but not allies."⁸⁵ Three days later, Jiang Zemin also told a Japanese Komeito Party

75 GOILD 2004, 194–95.

76 Lee, Sang-ok 2003, 121.

77 GOILD 2004, 213.

78 "Kyö-le-üi pul-haeng-kwa chae-nan-ül ka-chung-si-k'i-ko min-chok-üi chang-lae-lül wi-t'ae-lop-ke ha-nün pan-min-chok-chök pöm-choe-haeng-wi" (Anti-national crime that worsens nation's misfortune and calamity and that jeopardizes nation's future). *Rodong Sinmun*, 8 April 1991, 5.

79 Qian 2003, 153.

80 Li 2008, 338, 347, 426.

81 "Cho-sön-min-chu-chu-üi in-min-kong-hwa-kuk oe-kyo-pu söng-myöng" (Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea). *Rodong Sinmun*, 29 May 1991, 3. Beijing promptly issued a statement welcoming Pyongyang's decision: "Chaoxian minzhu zhuyi renmin gongheguo jueding shenqing jiaru Lianheguo juyou jiji yiyi" (DPRK's decision to apply for membership in the United Nations is of great significance). *Renmin ribao*, 29 May 1991, 1.

82 GOILD, 2004, 194–95.

83 MFARK 1992a, 148.

84 GOILD 2004, 210; MFARK 1992a, 257.

85 GOILD 2004, 207. This conversation was reaffirmed by Wu Jianmin, spokesman for the Chinese Foreign Ministry at that time, who attended the Deng–Kim meeting. According to Wu, Deng also stated that "Historically, alliance is not reliable. Where is such a thing as an unbreakably solid alliance? ... Only the five principles of peaceful coexistence are reliable." See "Zhuanfang Wu Jianmin" (An exclusive interview with Wu Jianmin). *Phoenix Net*, 8 May 2013, <https://>

delegation that “As comrades who fought together in the past, [China and North Korea] have strong ties. Nevertheless, China and North Korea are not allies.”⁸⁶ Thus, it is more reasonable to think that Beijing still had some room to wait and observe how developments in the peninsula unfolded, given that the high-level US–DPRK talks were being resumed and negotiations for Japan–DPRK diplomatic normalization were also being conducted at the time. Upon meeting the South Korean president Roh Tae-woo, who requested diplomatic normalization in November 1991, Qian Qichen 钱其琛 stated that “Sino-ROK relations will be readily improved if only North Korea establishes diplomatic relations with Japan and the United States.”⁸⁷ It appeared that the normalization of Sino-ROK diplomatic ties was still remote.

Sino-ROK diplomatic normalization

In early January 1992, Li Peng issued an internal instruction to find a way to establish diplomatic relations with South Korea while helping North Korea save face.⁸⁸ On 23 January, Tian Jiyun informed Seoul that China had already decided to normalize relations with South Korea.⁸⁹ This was only three months after Deng and Jiang had assured Kim that Beijing would not establish diplomatic relations with Seoul until Washington recognized Pyongyang, and only 16 months since Deng had decided to delay the normalization for “two, three, and even five years.” At that time, Beijing was well aware that Washington was not ready to recognize Pyongyang: Qian Qichen’s cross-recognition proposal, in which the US would recognize North Korea while China would recognize South Korea, had been flatly rejected just two months prior by the-then US secretary of state James Baker.⁹⁰ So what made Beijing suddenly expedite the Sino-ROK normalization?

The abrupt collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991 was behind China’s volte-face. Fearing the threat of Western countries’ “peaceful evolution” against socialist countries, Beijing “originally hoped that the Soviet Union would stand firm and share the pressure” with China.⁹¹ The existence of the Soviet Union could serve to bind the US to Europe, thereby preventing it from concentrating all its energy on East Asian countries. At an internal meeting in September 1990, Deng stated, “As for the Soviet Union, we should not pressure it ... There are many problems in the Soviet Union, but it can still hold the United States back.”⁹² Based on this analysis, Deng advised Kim Il-sung that “We should see that the Soviet Union still has a role to play ... We need to make use of the Soviet Union’s role.” Believing that “the imperialists [were] looking for a target,” Deng stressed that “it [was] important not to draw their attention.”⁹³ He repeated this advice when the two leaders met for the final time in October 1991.⁹⁴

Nevertheless, the situation changed drastically in December 1991: a cascade of events that began with the Ukrainian independence referendum on 1 December eventually culminated with the total

web.archive.org/web/20130509175949/http://news.ifeng.com/world/special/chaoxianzhazhengzhuangtai/content-2/detail_2013_05/08/25079058_1.shtml. Accessed 21 April 2021; and “Tōng-sya-o-p’ing, tong-maeng-ün mit-ül su öps-ta, han-chung-su-kyo 1 nyōn chōn kim-il-sōng-e hun-su” (A year before South Korea–China diplomatic normalization, Deng Xiaoping advised Kim Il-sung, alliance is not reliable). *JoongAng Daily*, 21 October 2013, 10.

86 MFARK 1991b, 7–10; “Chū chō wa dōmeikokudenai’ hōchū no ishida kōmei iinchō ni kō sō shoki ga hyōmei” (“China and North Korea are not allies” general secretary Jiang announced to chairman Kōshirō Ishida during his visit to China). *Asahi Shimbun* (Evening edition), 8 October 1991, 17.

87 MFARK 1992a, 155.

88 MFARK 1992b, 103.

89 Jang 2014, 163. In February, Qian Qichen instructed the Foreign Ministry that “the conditions for us to establish diplomatic relations with South Korea are basically ripe. [We] can consider gradually moving forward.” Yan, Jing 2007, 46.

90 Lee, Sang-ok 2003, 149–151.

91 Liu, Yazhou 2004, 128.

92 GOILD 2004, 213.

93 Ibid., 198, 200.

94 Ibid., 206.

collapse of the Soviet Union on 26 December. Suddenly, Moscow was not in a position to play its “role” and China was brought to the fore of the “peaceful evolution” sought by the West.⁹⁵ While the “spearhead and focus of peaceful evolution” was anticipated to be directed towards China,⁹⁶ its buffer state, despite assistance, seemed unable to withstand the internal and external pressure for long. At that time, North Korea’s foreign trade was completely disrupted by the dissolution of the Socialist Bloc and its economy spiralled downwards.⁹⁷ To exacerbate matters, Moscow, amid its own upheaval, not only stopped its preferential economic policies concerning the North but also demanded that Pyongyang pay back its debt.⁹⁸ Further, there were already other signals that Pyongyang was on the verge of political turmoil, such as defections, sabotage, civil protests and an alleged military coup.⁹⁹ Under these circumstances, Beijing hastily sought to foreclose the possibility of Washington scheming with its allies to subvert the Chinese regime and moved towards establishing diplomatic relations with South Korea. Seoul, unlike Washington and Tokyo, was unsupportive of the Tiananmen-triggered sanctions and continued to strengthen its ties with Beijing. As such, it appeared to be the weakest link in the US alliance network.¹⁰⁰ Further, it was expected that normalization between the two states could give Beijing enough leverage to soften Seoul’s aggressive stance against Pyongyang. With its buffer strengthened, China could better resist pressures for a regime change and “peaceful evolution.”

On 15 April 1992, Beijing officially suggested that Seoul establish a formal channel through which to discuss Sino-ROK relations.¹⁰¹ Two days earlier, Beijing had dispatched Yang Shangkun 杨尚昆 to Pyongyang to inform Kim Il-sung of the upcoming Sino-ROK normalization. Upon hearing of Beijing’s decision on his 80th birthday on 15 April, Kim Il-sung beseeched Yang to delay the normalization by one more year, given that “changes [were] now taking place in US–DRPK relations and inter-Korean relations and a new situation might emerge.”¹⁰² However, Beijing rejected Pyongyang’s plea and began negotiations with Seoul in May, revealing a sense of urgency. The negotiations proceeded extraordinarily fast: within two months, the two sides had finalized all procedures and had reached an agreement. Approximately one month before the formal conclusion of the Sino-ROK joint communiqué for diplomatic normalization, Beijing dispatched Qian Qichen to appease Pyongyang. Qian conveyed to Kim Il-sung that “China will, as always, devote itself to developing friendly relations between China and North Korea, and ... will use our influence to relax the situation on the Korean Peninsula.” Feeling betrayed, Kim responded bitterly: “If there are any difficulties, we will overcome them ourselves.”¹⁰³ On 24 August, China and South Korea formally established diplomatic relations. As the two countries’ bilateral relations

95 Liu, Yazhou 2004, 128.

96 For instance, at the National Conference of Propaganda Ministers in January 1992, shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Chinese propaganda minister Wang Renzhi stated that “China is now the only big power that adheres to socialism ... The hostile Western forces will gradually turn the primary spearhead and focus of peaceful evolution towards China. It is a trend that is not at our disposal.” General Office of the Central Propaganda Department 1994, 1006. A similar prediction was also reported in a Chinese internal periodical: “Sugong wanle, Zhonggong you zenyang?” (The Soviet Communist Party is over, what about the Chinese Communist Party?). *Xinxi xuanbian* 6(1991), 1–15.

97 Li, Peng 2008, 348–350.

98 Shen, Zhihua 2017, 4651–52.

99 Zhang, Ying, and Cao 1993, 78–79. This book, which was an internal document “to provide reference for relevant Central Committee comrades,” anticipated that the North Korean regime would not last long. South Korean president Roh Tae-woo also predicted that “North Korea [would] not last for four to five years.” See “Puk-han chông-kwôn wi-ki 2-3 nyön ko-pi” (Crisis of North Korean regime, critical moment in 2 to 3 years). *Chosun Ilbo*, 25 June 1991, 1.

100 Instead of following Washington and Tokyo in imposing sanctions against China, South Korea strongly supported an exchange with China and even provided US\$15 million to endorse the 1990 Beijing Asian Games. Kim 2001, 378.

101 Qian 2003, 155; Lee, Sang-ok 2003, 167.

102 Yan, Jing 2008, 74; Qian 2003, 157.

103 Yan, Jing 2004, 6–7.

entered “a new stage,” Beijing successfully secured its strategic buffer and survived the alleged “peaceful evolution” orchestrated by the West.¹⁰⁴

Conclusion

This study has explored the changes in Chinese calculations about China’s diplomatic normalization with South Korea. Its findings have a direct bearing on understanding contemporary China’s foreign policy regarding the Korean Peninsula. First, the Sino-DPRK ideological affinity has a negligible impact on Beijing’s foreign policy. Throughout the entire process of Sino-ROK rapprochement – Beijing’s initial reluctance and then gradual approach towards Seoul, the temporary suspension of Sino-ROK rapprochement moves and finally the normalization decision – Beijing’s national interest has invariably overridden the two countries’ fraternity. Although China regularly dresses up its North Korean policies with lofty rhetoric, the oft-extolled “blood brother” comradeship pales into insignificance next to its national interests.

Second, China normalized its relations not only with South Korea but also with North Korea in the early 1990s. As discussed, Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin clarified the nature of Sino-DPRK relations in October 1991: the two countries “are brothers but not allies.”¹⁰⁵ Five years after Sino-ROK normalization, Tang Jiaxuan 唐家璇, China’s vice-minister of foreign affairs, again repudiated Sino-DPRK alliance relations, stating that “the Sino-DPRK treaty is just titular and only carries a spirit of goodwill.”¹⁰⁶ When in 2000 Kim Jong-il received the US secretary of state, Madeleine Albright, he also mentioned that the Sino-DPRK alliance treaty had disappeared ten years previously.¹⁰⁷ China officially maintains that it only has “normal relations” with North Korea.¹⁰⁸ Considering all these remarks, the treaty, particularly its security obligation, appears outdated and dysfunctional.

Third, the fact that the Sino-DPRK treaty is obsolete does not necessarily mean that Beijing will remain detached from events on the peninsula. This study has illustrated that North Korea’s value from China’s perspective is subject to change depending on China’s geopolitical relations with other great powers. North Korea’s strategic value increased when China was besieged by pro-Soviet powers; its strategic value was less when Beijing reconciled with Moscow. Also, when Beijing was apprehensive of peaceful evolution, North Korea’s existential value became salient again. Geopolitically speaking, Pyongyang’s value to Beijing remains significant today. Hence, while pursuing a denuclearized Korean Peninsula, Beijing, should it deem it necessary, is highly likely to continue to supply Pyongyang with a lifeline to avert its implosion. In a similar vein, China will almost certainly intervene when North Korea’s stability is in jeopardy. However, its intervention will not be in order to rescue the recalcitrant Kim regime but rather to secure its buffer, prevent an influx of North Korean refugees and halt a proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. A North Korean contingency plan internally formulated by the People’s Liberation Army in 2013 indeed confirms this observation.¹⁰⁹ In this sense, Washington and other relevant parties have much leeway to coordinate their contingency measures with Beijing in advance. Another unacceptable scenario

104 “Zhuhe Zhongguo yu Hanguo jianjiao” (Congratulations on the establishment of Sino-ROK diplomatic relations). *Renmin ribao*, 25 August 1992, 1.

105 GOILD 2004, 207; MFARK 1991b, 7–10.

106 “Han-pan-to chǒn-chaeng-si chung cha-tong-kae-ip myǒng-si chung-cho u-ho-cho-yak sa-mun-hwa si-sa” (It was implied that Sino-DPRK friendly treaty that stipulated automatic intervention in the Korean contingency has already been nullified). *Dong-A Daily*, 21 March 1997, 1; “Chū Chō jōyaku de tō kokumu iin, gunji dōmei bubun wa ‘jijitsujo tanaage’” (State Council member Tang, military alliance part of the China–DPRK treaty is “virtually put on hold”). *Asahi Shimbun* (Evening edition), 27 September 2003, 2.

107 Albright 2003, 591.

108 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2013.

109 Qiao, Wang and Zhou 2013, 189–196.

for Beijing is the emergence of a pro-US North Korea. Just as it could not allow Pyongyang to align with Moscow, Beijing cannot permit Pyongyang – particularly a nuclear-armed Pyongyang – to become another US strategic outpost that can be used to pressure China, especially in the light of the ever-intensifying Sino-US strategic competition.¹¹⁰ China's hasty modulation of its North Korea policy in order to invite Kim Jong-un to Beijing immediately ahead of the Kim–Trump summit in 2018 attests to this.¹¹¹

Fourth, while North Korea serves as a direct buffer between China and Western powers, South Korea also operates as an indirect buffer, forestalling the US-led united front against China in Beijing's post-Cold War security architecture. Behind China's normalization decision lay Beijing's perception that Seoul was the weakest link in the US alliance network.¹¹² The exponential growth of Sino-ROK economic exchange thereafter further substantiated Beijing's leverage to hinder Seoul's participation in the US-led anti-China campaign, effectively weakening the international united front against China. An internal publication of the People's Liberation Army noted that "The US ... has strong forces in South Korea. Its military deployment has the strategic consideration of containing China ... Therefore, China should maintain a certain strategic influence on the Korean Peninsula to safeguard its national security interests."¹¹³ China's economic retaliation over South Korea's deployment of the US missile defence system manifestly demonstrated that Beijing is always ready to use its economic influence as a political weapon should Seoul join Washington's efforts to contain China.

In summary, China can tolerate neither North Korea's instability nor the emergence of a pro-US North Korea, nor can China condone South Korea's full participation in the international anti-China campaign. On balance, the only acceptable reconfiguration of the two Koreas' relations, from Beijing's perspective, is the creation of a unified and neutralized Korea, which could diffuse tensions on the Korean Peninsula and stabilize China's external environment. Other than this scenario, the status quo is what best serves China's interests, as Deng Xiaoping advised.¹¹⁴

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110 Yang 2018; Yan, Xuetong 2017.

111 Zheng Yongnian, an influential Chinese scholar who purportedly has the ear of China's leadership, once implied such a rationale. See Zheng 2018.

112 Such a view is still shared by some China observers. See Zhao, Xing and Xu 2021.

113 Wang, Xiaodong, Wang and Li 2010, 52.

114 GOILD 2004, 213.

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