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Why Xi Jinping Is Courting Kim Jong-un

It's not about nuclear weapons, leverage with President Trump or the trade war.

By John Delury

Mr. Delury teaches Chinese Studies at Yonsei University in Seoul.

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A picture of Mao Zedong and Kim Il-sung on a remaining section of the Hekou Broken Bridge, which connected China and North Korea before it was bombed by the United States Army during the Korean War. European Pressphoto Agency

SEOUL, South Korea — As President Xi Jinping of China left North Korea on Friday afternoon, much attention was focused on whether he had obtained any concession on denuclearization from Kim Jong-un, North Korea's leader — and how he might leverage that when he meets President Trump this week on the margins of the G-20 summit. But this focus on nuclear weapons and China's trade war with the United States obscures the real significance of Mr. Xi's trip, and it mistakes his weakness for strength.

As notable as the pomp and ceremony of the rare meeting — the first visit to Pyongyang by a Chinese head of state in 14 years — was the lack of specifics about policy to emerge from it. Mr. Kim had nothing more concrete to say on the stalled nuclear talks than that he was patiently waiting for the “relevant party” (read, the United States) to be more “accommodating.” Mr. Xi talked only about the need for a “political solution” to the nuclear issue.

Such vagueness should come as no surprise since obtaining a compromise from Mr. Kim never was the purpose of Mr. Xi's trip. China's president did not travel to North Korea to prove to Mr. Trump that only the Chinese government can broker a deal with Mr. Kim or to gain bargaining power in the trade dispute. In keeping with the long, tangled history of Chinese-North Korean relations, Mr. Xi traveled to Pyongyang to lure back into China's fold what he sees as a difficult and wayward subordinate.

China may be North Korea's largest trade partner and a formal defense-treaty ally, but tension and distrust have characterized relations between the two countries for decades. Strains reappeared in recent years after Mr. Kim tested nuclear weapons and seemed to pull back from China while repositioning North Korea closer to the United States and South Korea. China, for its part, has gone along with the latest punishing international sanctions against North Korea.

It's against this backdrop that Mr. Xi's visit last week must be understood — as reflecting the Chinese government's anxiety that Mr. Kim might be tempted to defect, as it were, to the other side.

The foundations of the China-North Korea alliance dates back to the 1950-3 Korean War, when Mao Zedong sent off legions of young Chinese men to drive United States-led troops away from China's border. Hundreds of thousands of Chinese soldiers were wounded or killed, including one of Mao's sons. But Mao himself

never made the brief journey to Pyongyang, even long after the fighting stopped. For all his rhetoric about socialist revolution and brotherhood, he looked upon Kim Il-sung, North Korea's first leader (and Mr. Kim's grandfather), as something of a little brother, and like Chinese emperors of yore, expected the Korean leader to come to him.

Kim Il-sung resented the asymmetry and as a hedge maintained ties to the Soviet Union after the Sino-Soviet split in the late 1950s: He needed Mao, but didn't think Mao could be trusted. Sure enough, come 1972, China welcomed President Richard Nixon in Beijing and began rapprochement with the United States, while North Korea remained violently opposed to the presence of the several tens of thousands of American forces stationed in South Korea.

After Mao's death in 1976, the patterns of Chinese-North Korean diplomacy, like so much to do with China, changed. Mao's successors were more interested in developing China's economy than in big-power politics. In 1978, the leaders Hua Guofeng and then Deng Xiaoping made North Korea their first overseas destination. But this flurry of diplomacy belied the emergence of new tensions in the alliance: The two countries' political systems and approaches to economics and foreign affairs began to diverge.

By the mid-1980s, China was barreling down the path of "reform and opening-up," as the official line went, and it wanted a stable international order, thinking that this would be more conducive to its own growth. But Kim Il-sung saw China's burgeoning links to capitalist economies as a betrayal of the socialist trading bloc, and his government is suspected of having ordered assassination attempts and terrorist attacks abroad.

Then came what the North Korean government considered to be an unforgivable act of treachery: In 1992, as Communist regimes were collapsing across Eurasia, the Chinese government normalized relations with South Korea, leaving Kim Il-sung diplomatically isolated and economically in the dust.

After Kim Il-sung's death in 1994, his son and successor Kim Jong-il asserted some measure of independence from China by not visiting for six years. He finally made a trip in 2000, soon before hosting the South Korean president for an unprecedented meeting and while preparing to bring President Bill Clinton to Pyongyang — or, only once it seemed like détente with South Korea and the United States was within grasp.

Several Chinese leaders, in turn, visited Pyongyang in the early 2000s, trying to project the image of a special relationship. Yet something was resolutely changing: The North Korean government was now doggedly pursuing a nuclear weapons capability, not only to defend itself against the threat of regime change suddenly posed by a hostile Bush administration, but also to emancipate itself from its unreliable and bossy ally.

After Kim Jong-il suffered a stroke in 2008, raising questions about his succession, he traveled to China repeatedly, hoping to win its leaders' support for his plan to pass power to his son, Mr. Kim. But then Mr. Kim did not visit Beijing for more than six years after taking over. It was only in March 2018, as he prepared for meetings with President Moon Jae-in of South Korea and then, he hoped, with Mr. Trump, that he went to China. With the prospect of better relations with South Korea and America in the air again, Mr. Kim could finally visit Mr. Xi from a position of strength, and all the more so because by then North Korea had acquired a nuclear and ballistic deterrent. He visited China four times in little more than a year — and now has hosted its president in Pyongyang.

The sight of tens of thousands of North Koreans lining the streets and wildly cheering the motorcade ferrying Mr. Kim and Mr. Xi should not deceive us. Even as these formal comrades smile for the cameras, they eye each other warily, as their predecessors did for many years. China is losing its grip over North Korea, its partner who would not be a vassal.

John Delury is associate professor of Chinese Studies at Yonsei University Graduate School of International Studies in Seoul.

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