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Master' s Thesis of International Studies

A study on China' s foreign policies
towards the nuclear issue of DPRK

—focusing on Xi Jinping administration

북한의 핵문제에 대한 중국의 외교정책에 관한 연구—
시진핑 정부를 중심으로

August 2021

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August 2021

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Abstract

This paper is aimed at answering two questions, first, “What are the new characteristics of China’s foreign policy towards North Korea and Sino-DPRK relations?” and second, “What are the determinants of the new characteristics of Sino-DPRK relations and China’s policies towards North Korea under Xi Jinping’s administration?”

The main findings are, first, there are both continuity and transformation in China’s flexible strategy towards North Korea under Xi Jinping administration. On one hand, China has not changed its essence on fundamental policies towards the North Korea under Xi Jinping administration with regard to nuclear issue. On the other hand, China has adjusted its approach to North Korea in the wake of the nuclear tests. There were several important tactical adjustments of China since 2012. Furthermore, six factors from individual, state and international level were examined to explore the determinants of the new characteristics of China’s foreign policies towards North Korea under Xi Jinping administration and the causes of the dramatical change of Sino-DPRK relations since 2018, which reveal that international factors—China-the U.S. rivalry and the U.S.-R.O.K-DPRK triangle in East Asia function as the key determinants which had driven China to make tactical policy adjustments accordingly regarding North Korean nuclear issue.

Keyword : China’s foreign policies, nuclear tests, North Korea, Sino-DPRK relations

Student Number : 2018-20345

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I. Introduction

1. Background and research questions

In the 1990s, there had been uncertainty among the international community about the nuclear problem in North Korea. As North Korea speeded up its nuclear program, many international players have worked hard to tackle this problem, as it has not only threatened the security and peace of the Korean Peninsula but the world's security mechanism and stability. Since Kim Jung-un came to power and announced its completion of its nuclear weapons program by the end of 2017, North Korea had intensified its nuclear construction. Amidst of the tension, several rounds of Inter-Korea Summits and US-DPRK Summits have given the international community a new sign of a peaceful negotiation and communication since 2018. Though the Hanoi Summit ended up with no agreements, the negotiations are expected to be continued.

China, as the key actor in the region, has remarkably significant role in North Korean nuclear issue. China had contributed to the solution as a mediator during the Six-party talks and participated actively in international sanctions since Xi Jinping took the office since 2013. There are numerous discussions on the Sino-DPRK relations and China's policies towards North Korea in Xi Jinping's era. China's foreign policies towards North Korean nuclear issue and Sino-DPRK relations in Xi Jinping's era seem to show some new characteristics. Since 2013, relations between China and North Korea had undergone many ups and downs because of North Korea's frequent nuclear tests. After a notable cooling-period throughout 2016 and 2017, with nearly no high-level interactions, the two leaders resumed frequent meetings suddenly since 2018, which is surprising for the international community. The reasoning behind this needs to be investigated.

In terms of the Sino-DPRK relations, the relationship between China and North Korea presents always ambiguous, uncertain and a mixture of tension, relaxation, and silence. It is hard to tell whether they are true friends or potential enemies.”¹ Shen Zhihua, an expert in the history of the Cold War also commented that Sino-DPRK alliance is a historical myth that China-North Korea relations are volatile, capricious and erratic, without a stable alliance or a traditional friendship.² Nevertheless, even though the Sino-North Korea Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation and Mutual Assistance is indeed a historical legacy, it still remains as the cornerstone of Sino-North Korea friendship and relations. Both two sides remain vague and uncertain attitudes about the effectiveness of the treaty. While there are voices of seeing this treaty as a piece of “wastepaper”, the mainstream opinion of Chinese experts on the treaty’s necessity is positive. The treaty automatically renewed twice in 1981 and 2001, and, now in 2021, there seems no doubt that the treaty will be automatically renewed again.

For China, the continuation of the ambiguous alliance with North Korea is based on historical emotional ties and obligations under the treaty, as well as its own concerns and it also gives China a legal support to intervene with the complex Korean Peninsula issues. China appears reluctant to give Sino-DPRK relations a clear definition and clarification. Nowadays, the “Blood Alliance”, “Lips and teeth” are long gone, instead, many scholars seek to assess Sino-DPRK alliance as a “special relationship” or “evolving from traditional relationship to normal state-to-state relationship”.³ However, those unclear definition remains lots of confusion. Technically, the so-called “special relationship” is a virtualization of the focus of the problem because it is difficult to define it with a concept of a particular generalization. Therefore, the

¹ 杨希雨. “中美关系中的朝核问题”, *国际问题研究* 2015 年 3 期, P23

² 沈志华, “中朝关系惊天内幕”, 2014.10.21, <https://www.ssap.com.cn/c/2014-10-21/1013331.shtml>

³ 나영주. (2016). 중국 시진핑 정부의 대북정책과 북핵문제. *민족연구*, 제 65 호, 64-91.

interpretation of Sino-DPRK alliance under Xi Jinping administration needs to be further clarified.

In the light of above discussion, this research is aimed to study the new characteristics of China's foreign policy towards North Korea and Sino-DPRK relations under Xi Jinping's leadership and to explore the key determinants of China's policy adjustments to help explain such new characteristics.

2. Literature review

As North Korea nuclear issue is a controversial and significant subject to the security of Northeast Asia region and, China, as the main power and an ally of North Korea in this region, has a longtime influence on North Korea and the potential ability to resolve the nuclear issue, numerous scholars have done the research related to China's policies towards North Korean nuclear issues.

Sino-DPRK relations are usually seen as a "traditional friendship" or "brotherhood relationship" built by the old generations of two countries. However, according to the current research results, the relations between them are quite fragile in many ways. On one hand, the ideological differences have arisen between them since 1950s. Following China's path of reform and further establishment of diplomatic relationship with the United States and South Korea, the ideological divergences became more evidential and pronounced. The "Juche Idea" of Kim's regime which enshrines independence and self-reliance based on a highly power-centered autocratic system has further distanced the construction of China's socialist modernization

following Deng's reform and opening-up policy.⁴ On the other hand, in fact, North Korea's enduring nuclear tests has become an growing threat and burden to China. Due to China's involvement with the international sanctions in recent years, the accumulating distrust is also a frustration for China and the relations between them have experienced many ups and downs, which makes this alliance much more mysterious.

Recently, some people have argued that there is still a "special relationship" between North Korea and China that is shared historically and ideologically with the common values. However, North Korea's continued nuclear tests have turned China's perception of North Korea into a strategic burden which cannot be given up. There are some scholars saying that, China has pursued a pragmatic approach to manage the relations with North Korea based on the principle of maintaining security and stability and maintained a stable and balanced strategy regarding North Korean nuclear issue under the Xi's administration, which means that China places its own interests first and foremost on the agenda, thus, there is a new and dynamic relationship between two countries.⁵

Moreover, the divergences between two countries have been intensified due to multiple nuclear tests by North Korea which became a noticeable security threat. In the past years, China had implied a policy centered on the principle of maintaining the peace and stability and kept staying patient with North Korea, without active implementation of sanctions on North Korea. However, things have been more complex and intense since Xi Jinping took office. Just a couple of months later, North Korea carried out its third nuclear test in February 2013 which put China again in the dilemma to resolve North Korean issue. Following the third nuclear test, several

⁴ You Ji, "China and North Korea: A Fragile Relationship of Strategic Convenience," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 10, No. 28 (August 2001), pp. 387-98

⁵ 황태연. "시진핑 대북정책과 북중관계 변화." *평화학연구* 제 19 권 4 호 (2018): 185-212.

research findings indicate that the operation of Xi Jinping's leadership and the change in U.S.-China relations acted as major variables, leading China to take policy adjustments by pressuring North Korea more actively.

With respect to the determinants to explain the characteristics of current Sino-DPRK relations and China's policies towards North Korea under Xi Jinping's leadership, some recent research has highlighted that Xi Jinping's leadership, relations between the U.S. and China, and increasing public opinion on North Korea as the major variables that determine China's policy towards North Korea.⁶ In particular, many of the research findings focus on stressing the factor of the United States, arguing that China is likely to strengthen its friendly policies towards North Korea to counter the US-centered alliance power structure if there are more intense conflicts between the United States and China. North Korea therefore still means a lot to China as a strategic asset. At the moment, China is unlikely to employ a policy of pressuring North Korea, not to mention giving up the value of its strategic assets if the hegemonic competition in U.S.-China relations exists as a structural variable.⁷

Following a review of some previous research, many studies have focused on developing Sino-DPRK relations which can help clearly understand the formation of the current special relationship between China and North Korea and the evolving China's policies. However, as most of the current studies focused only on changes in U.S.-China relations as a factor for China's policymaking towards North Korea while some overlooked the specificity of domestic factors and failed to identify unique features of combination of internal and external factors.

⁶ 박형준 (2015) 중국의 대북정책 결정 요인 연구 : 북한 핵 실험을 중심으로, *평화학연구*, 16:4, 83-109

⁷ 나영주, & Young Ju Nah. (2016). 중국 시진핑 정부의 대북정책과 북핵문제, *민족연구*, 2016, vol. 65, p 64.

Moreover, most studies tended to emphasize only China's change in Sino-DPRK relations and to overlook the North Korean domestic factor. This study is an attempt to fill that gap. Therefore, the determinants of dynamics of China's policies require a supplementary analysis from thorough three levels—individual, state and international system. Furthermore, I will try to give my answer to how much influence does China exactly have on North Korea and to explain specifically how “special” their relations are, given the uniqueness of the alliance relations and “special relationship” between China and North Korea as defined by current research.

3. Analytical framework and Research Methodology

This research will be aimed to determine the new characteristics of China's foreign policies towards North Korea and Sino-DPRK relations under Xi Jinping administration in Chapter Two by using case study on China's policies towards North Korea and the responses of North Korea's denuclearization since 2012 since the method of case study can find thoughts, behaviors, and problems more easily and reflect greater details by collecting qualitative and descriptive data. This research will be mainly based on archival research and primary sources from China and North Korea as well as the international observers and scholars' opinions, to be able to provide credible evidence and to construct firm arguments. The main analytical tool will be “Level of Analysis” proposed by Kenneth Walt.

Firstly, based on Kenneth Waltz's research of “Level of Analysis”, the first level is the individual level, focusing on the properties and human nature as well as social identities. The second level is the state, the type of government and state's social identities could be the factors to explain behavior. At the international level, a property of the international system will be

investigated to explain the causality in state behavior to grasp wider ranging dynamics.⁸ As “Level of Analysis” help understand highly complex issue in world politics, the “Level of Analysis” will be the main tool to give a comprehensive analysis of several factors from three levels as independent variables to explore the determinants of the new characteristics of China’s foreign policies towards North Korea. Six factors will be examined in Chapter Three: Xi Jinping’s leadership, Kim Jong-un’s roadmap, China’s national interests in Xi’s era, The strategic value of North Korea, China-US rivalry in East Asia, DPRK-R.O.K.-U.S. triangle in East Asia.

In order to highlight my main arguments, I will further explore in detail the key factors with the analysis of the patterns and processes of leaders exchanges and dynamics in Korean Peninsula manipulated by main actors in the region before and after 2017, explaining how and why international factors function as the key determinants to shape China’s policy adjustments towards North Korean nuclear issue under Xi Jinping’s leadership.

⁸ Temby, O. (2013). What are levels of analysis and what do they contribute to international relations theory? *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 28(4), 721-742. doi:10.1080/09557571.2013.831032

II. China's policies towards North Korean nuclear issue and Sino-DPRK relations under Xi Jinping

In this chapter, I shall firstly give a brief historical overview of China's policies towards North Korean nuclear issue from Mao-Deng era to Hu Jintao era. To give an examination of the new characteristics of Sino-DPRK relations and China's policies towards North Korea since 2012, I will then discuss China's responses to each of North Korean nuclear tests since Xi Jinping came into power by examining the changing nature of Chinese official statements, China's implementation of UN sanctions and the flows of trade volumes between two countries.

1. Historical overview of China's policies towards DPRK nuclear issue

1-1. Mao Zedong-Deng Xiaoping era

In Mao's era, North Korea is one of the first countries to have diplomatic relations with China. On July 11, 1961, The two countries signed the "Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance" (<<中朝友好合作互助条约>>) between China and the DPRK, establishing their alliance legally on the ideological base of sharing communist ideology. Both of the two countries maintained a tight cooperative relationship in a variety of political, economic and military sectors. China and North Korea maintained a strategic and comprehensive alliance through frequent summit diplomacy in this era.⁹ The 'Lips and Teeth' relations had been placed on the center to express their extremely close relationship and China would be in danger if North Korea is gone. In 1950, Mao sent more than one million Chinese soldiers into the

⁹ 이금휘. (2018). 중국 학계의 북한 자주외교노선 수립에 대한 인식과 북·중 관계. 통일인문학, 76, 287-313.

Korean War to help the North Korea. However, in fact, there was enduring contradictions between Mao and Kim il-sung during the Korean War, according to Shen Zhihua's research.¹⁰

However, there was a transformative shift when comes to Deng Xiaoping's era in 1970s. Following the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee (十一届三中全会) in 1978, China's foreign policy experienced major changes—Reform and Opening-up and the establishment of diplomatic relations with the U.S. in 1979. Such a transformative shift in China's foreign policy (1978-1992) had also led to a shift in China's foreign policies towards North Korea. China wanted to escape from the framework of the Cold War mindset and abandoned ideological-oriented diplomacy. In this era, China underlined the stability and peace of the situation on the Korean Peninsula in order to stabilize the environment of economic development. Deng Xiaoping's perception had been the revision of ideological-oriented foreign policy and the focus of economic-oriented pragmatic diplomacy.¹¹ Deng proposed the basic principle of China's foreign strategy—"Hide brightness, nourish obscurity/ keeping a low profile" (韬光养晦) which means "Bide our time and build up our capabilities" and "making contributions" (有所作为).¹²

In Deng's era, promoting economic growth and modernization had been put on the focus of China's foreign policies which were designed to avoid any conflict and rivalry and to avoid being entrapped into any external affairs to maintain a peaceful and stable external environment.¹³ In 1992, as a good trade partner in the region, China's establishment of

¹⁰ 雷旋, "沈志华: 毛泽东把朝鲜惯坏了", 2015年11月3日, BBC News,

https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/world/2015/11/151103_north_korea_china_relations_mao_kim

¹¹ 이금휘. (2018). 중국 학계의 북한 자주외교노선 수립에 대한 인식과 북·중 관계. 통일인문학, 76, 287-313.

¹² Sun Bin. 2010. "Tao Guan Yang Hui -- what is the best translation." Accessed April 1, 2021. <http://sun-bin.blogspot.com/2010/06/tao-guan-yang-hui-what-is-best.html>

¹³ Avery Goldstein. 2005. *Rising to the Challenge: China's Grand Strategy and International Security*. Stanford

diplomatic relations with South Korea infuriated and isolated the North Korea, which demonstrated that Sino-DPRK relations has been revised to maintain a balance with the two Koreas. At the end of day, the friendly relationship was maintained due to China's consistent economic cooperation and aid to North Korea.

1-2. Jiang Zemin era

In Jiang's era, the Tiananmen Square incident and the collapse of the former Soviet Union were quite a shock to China, and there were widespread uncertainties about the future of China at home and abroad. To alleviate relations with other countries, Chinese leaders tried to improve Sino-American relations in 1993 with Jiang's visit to the U.S. and actively participated in multilateral cooperation organizations such as APEC, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). With the prior consideration of "stability first", the Chinese government had established a "cautious foreign policy" as its fundamental policy and focused on economic construction, aiming to make a leap toward becoming a regional power—from "Hide brightness, nourish obscurity (韬光养晦)" to "making contributions(有所作为)". In this period, China made its efforts to establish a responsible power status and to deepen external dependence through joining WTO in 2001. China also realized the importance on relations with major countries such as the United States and Russia, which makes it a priority to maintain good relations with neighboring countries.

Under this circumstance, China's foreign policies towards North Korea had become more inclined to deal with the North Korean nuclear issue in a multilateral framework rather than

bilateral relations. For instance, China participated in the four-party talks between China, the U.S., North Korea and South Korea, which were promoted from 1996 to 1999. In this period, Sino-DPRK relations had no longer been driven prominently by the ideology-oriented strategy. Since the China-South Korea diplomatic relations was established in 1992, China had slightly changed to establishing a new relationship between China and North Korea, even though it has stated that the existing treaties and agreements between the two countries will be maintained and that the traditional relationship between China and North Korea will not change.¹⁴

1-3. Hu Jintao era

In Hu's era, the foreign policies of improving relations with developing countries and stability-oriented Korean Peninsula policies had been settled further. Hu Jintao expressed his congratulations to Kim Jong-un for being appointed as top military commander to demonstrate that China had formally recognized his position as the top leader of North Korea and expectations to maintain a peaceful and stable Korean Peninsula.¹⁵ In this period, the Chinese leadership made national strategic which placed economic development as the country's top priority that foreign and security policies should serve and external destabilizing factors should be controlled, and unnecessary intervention which were against the national interest should be avoided.¹⁶

With regard to North Korean nuclear issue, China proposed a comprehensive solution which the problem should be solved through dialogue and negotiation in a reasonable and realistic

¹⁴ 이금희. (2018). 중국 학계의 북한 자주외교노선 수립에 대한 인식과 북·중 관계. 통일인문학, 76, 287-313.

¹⁵ CCTV. 2012. “胡锦涛电贺金正恩当选朝鲜劳动党第一书记”. <http://news.cntv.cn/20120413/122942.shtml>

¹⁶ 김홍규. (2015). 시진핑 시기 중국외교와 북중관계. *JPI 정책포럼*, 2015-04, 1-14.

way. When responding to North Korea's nuclear tests, China showed a more active and assertive diplomatic strategy in Hu's era. It is noticeable that North Korea conducted two nuclear tests in Hu's era. After the first nuclear test, in response, China issued a Foreign Ministry statement condemning North Korea by using the harsh word "flagrantly"(悍然) which expressed China's outrage and opposition and approved the UN Security Council resolution 1718. In September 2006, China suspended its oil exports to North Korea as a response to its launch of the Taepodong-2 to pressure North Korea to return to the negotiation table. Simultaneously, China continued its efforts to persuade and mediate North Korea and the U.S., and closely consulted with other countries in the region (South Korea, Japan and Russia) to host the six-party talks and finally, promoted the sign of September 19 Joint Statement (<9·19 공동성명>). In a word, following North Korea conducted the first nuclear test in 2006, China stepped up pressure on Pyongyang in close cooperation with the international community, strengthening its image as a "responsible power".¹⁷ Nevertheless, China remained a friendly stance toward North Korea, although it has criticized North Korea's first nuclear test with harsh word and joined the first UN Security Council sanctions resolution.¹⁸

After North Korea's second nuclear test in 2009, although China approved the UN Security Council Resolution 1874, China still emphasized that sanctions on North Korea's nuclear activities should be distinguished from humanitarian aid to the North Korea and normal economic and trade transactions with the North Korea which still showed a reluctant attitude towards sanctions.¹⁹ In the report on the implementation of sanctions against North Korea

¹⁷ 이영학. (2013). 북한의 세 차례 핵실험과 중국의 대북한 정책 변화 분석. 국제정치논총, 53(4), 191-223.

¹⁸ Daniel Wertz, 'China-North Korea Relations', The National Committee on North Korea, 2019, https://www.ncnk.org/sites/default/files/issue-briefs/Issue_Brief_China_NK_Nov2019.pdf.

¹⁹ "Report by China on implementation of Security Council resolution 1874 (2009)", Accessed April 25, 2021, https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/AC.49/2009/23

submitted by China at the request of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1874, China stated that the implementation of the resolution should not affect the development and construction of North Korea, normal exchanges with the outside world, normal life of the North Korean people, and should not harm normal relations between the North Korea and the other countries.²⁰

2. The new characteristics of Sino-DPRK relations and China's policies towards North Korea since 2012

2-1. China's response to nuclear tests of DPRK after 2013

2-1-1. The Third nuclear test in 2013

China was trying to increase pressure while remaining patient with North Korea after North Korea's first and second nuclear test. However, China remained somewhat unwilling to implement UN sanctions seriously, even though China adopted of UNSC sanction resolutions after the first two nuclear tests.²¹ However, North Korea has stepped up to a higher level to test China's patience since Kim Jong Un came into power. About a month before Xi Jinping took the office, despite the international community's dissuasion and warning, North Korea conducted its third underground nuclear test on February 2013, which further increased tension between Pyongyang and Beijing.²² Sino-DPRK relations experienced a lukewarm period due to the third nuclear test. Next day, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued the official statement that "It is a firm position of Chinese government to achieve denuclearization of the

²⁰ 이영학. (2013). 북한의 세 차례 핵실험과 중국의 대북한 정책 변화 분석. *국제정치논총*, 53(4), 191-223.

²¹ Wenxin Li & Ji Young Kim (2020) Not a blood alliance anymore: China's evolving policy toward UN sanctions on North Korea, *Contemporary Security Policy*, 41:4, 610-631, DOI: 10.1080/13523260.2020.1741143

²² 이성봉, "북한의 핵실험과 중국의 대응전략 제1, 2, 3차 핵실험 비교," [21세기정치학회보] 제25집 제1호 (2015), 81-98

Korean peninsula, prevent nuclear proliferation, and maintain peace and stability in Northeast Asia. We strongly urge the North Korea to honor its denuclearization pledge and refrain from taking actions that could worsen the situation,” and stressed the maintaining peace and stability on the peninsula and in Northeast Asia by responding calmly and resolving the issue through dialogue and negotiation.²³ Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi(杨洁篪) also met with North Korean ambassador and unprecedentedly expressed his strong opposition.²⁴

Except for the tough attitudes the official response, China also took measures to contain North Korea. It agreed to the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2094. After close consultations with the international community at the U.N. Security Council, China agreed to adopt UN Security Council Resolution 2094, which includes tougher sanctions on North Korea, and complied with relevant resolutions more strictly than before. Compared with before, China implemented harsher solution of UN sanctions towards North Korea which shown by measures conducted by China’s official bureaus. Ministry of Transport of the People’s Republic of China issued a notice on April 17 instructing each of its affiliated organizations to implement the UN Security Council Resolution 2094, which was reported in the headlines by the Chinese media.²⁵ Subsequently, China’s Ministry of Commerce along with the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, the General Administration of Customs, and the China Atomic Energy Authority announced a list of export bans to North Korea on September 23, including dozens of military-use technologies that can be used for military purposes such as nuclear weapons and chemical weapons.²⁶ Additionally, according to the Report of China on the implementation

²³ “外交部就朝鲜第三次实施核试验发表声明”, 2013.2.13, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2013/0213/c1001-20483000.html>

²⁴ “杨洁篪就朝鲜第三次核试向朝方提出严正交涉”, 2013.2.12, 中国外交部, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cgham/chn/gnxw/t1013370.htm>

²⁵ “关于执行联合国安理会第2094号决议的通知”, 2014.8.7, 中国交通运输部, <https://china.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnJForO>

²⁶ 이영학. (2013). 북한의 세 차례 핵실험과 중국의 대북한 정책 변화 분석. *국제정치논총*, 53(4), 191-

of Security Council resolution 2094 (2013), China not only agreed to the new UN sanctions on the North Korea but also enhanced monitoring on North Korea's financial activities which are potentially nuclear-related and then China also froze any financial or other assets or resources of North Korea in China.²⁷ It is a significant sign in China's policy towards North Korea which was that China started to take UN-imposed sanctions more seriously.²⁸

Considering that China maintained a respectively cooling relationship with North Korea while joining international sanctions and showing actively cooperating attitude in implementing sanctions instead of the reluctant attitude as before, China's response towards the third nuclear tests may be seen as a new signal of adjustment. However, there is one thing remained is that China still emphasized on resolving the issue of denuclearization of the peninsula within the framework of the six-party talks through dialogue and negotiation, and China held the point of view that sanctions are not the goal of Security Council actions, nor can they provide a fundamental solution to the problems of the Korean Peninsula. Also, China kept sending relieving message to North Korea, trying to maintain the traditional relationship. After the third nuclear test, throughout 2014 and most of 2015, during the lukewarm period of high-level exchanges between China and North Korea, there is no substantial deterioration in the Sino-DPRK relationship. Liu Yunshan's visit to North Korea's embassy in Beijing indicated that China attached importance to its relationship with North Korea at the end of 2014. On October 9, 2015, Liu Yushan visited Pyongyang again to attend a liminary parade with a letter from Xi Jinping which expressed China's official attitude to further enhance the traditional friendly and cooperative relations with North Korea consistently.²⁹ What is noticeable is that there were

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²⁷ “联合国安全理事会执行情况报告”. <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/zh/sanctions/1718/implementation-reports>

²⁸ Xiao, Ren. "Toward a Normal State-to-State Relationship? China and the DPRK in Changing Northeast Asia." *North Korean Review* Vol. 11, No. 2 (2015): pp. 63-78.

²⁹ “Senior CPC Leader Meets Kim Jong Un,” *Xinhua* .10 October 2015. <http://news>.

almost no high-level exchanges since North Korea's third nuclear test, therefore, Liu's visit can be interpreted as China's conciliatory message.³⁰

2-1-2. The Fourth nuclear test& the Fifth nuclear test in 2016

North Korea conducted the fourth nuclear test on January 6, 2016. In the afternoon of the same day, Chinese government expressed its strong opposition to North Korea's reckless actions through press conference of Ministry of Foreign Affairs: "The Chinese government strongly opposes the North's nuclear test today, which is being conducted again despite widespread international opposition. It is a firm position of the Chinese government to achieve denuclearization of the peninsula, prevent nuclear proliferation, and maintain peace and stability in Northeast Asia. We strongly urge the North Korea to honor its denuclearization pledge and refrain from taking actions that could worsen the situation. China will firmly pursue the goal of denuclearization of the peninsula within the framework of the six-party talks."³¹ A month later, on February 26, 2016, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi declared Korean Peninsula should be nuclear-free and opposed any wars or disorders on the Peninsula and China would firmly safeguard China's national security and interests.³² After North Korea's fourth nuclear test, China also showed its more active involvement in implementation of UN sanctions towards North Korea. China approved UN Security Council Resolution 2270 and submitted an implementation report to the United Nations on economic sanctions according to Resolution 2270. It has improved a lot compared to the report on Resolution 2094, when China handed it

xinhuanet.com/english/video/2015-10/10/c_134700930.htm

³⁰ Jane Perlez, "Message From China's Leader, Xi Jinping, to North Korea May Signal Thaw," The New York Times, October 10, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/11/world/asia/message-from-chinas-leader-xi-jinping-to-north-korea-may-signal-thaw.html>

³¹ "2016年1月6日外交部发言人华春莹主持例行记者会"2016.1.6, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/fyrbt_673021/t1329896.shtml

³² "Wang Yi Delivers Speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies of the US", 2016.2.26, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1344190.shtml

in after over seven months since the deadline.³³

It is not hard to notice that even after North Korea's fifth nuclear test in September 2016, Chinese leadership remained opposed to tough international sanctions towards North Korea, emphasizing that the international sanctions should only function as a means to draw North Korea back to the negotiations table and through the message sent by Xi Jinping to congratulate Kim Jong-Un for his new position as a chairman of the Workers' Party during 7th Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea, China insisted on emphasizing the traditional friendship between China and North Korea.³⁴ That reveals again China's bottom-line was to drive North Korea to the denuclearization table without causing collapse of North Korean regime. On the day when North Korea conducted the fifth nuclear test, Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman Hua Chunying stated on a press conference that "The Chinese government strongly urged all sides to concern the big picture and act cautiously to avoid further mutual stimulation and to make real efforts to promote the denuclearization of the peninsula and achieve peace and stability on the peninsula. The Chinese government will continue to insist on resolving issues related to the peninsula within the framework of the six-party talks through dialogue negotiations."³⁵ Afterwards, China approved the UN Sanction Resolution 2321 and Beijing announced the suspension a list of North Korean coal imports to the end of the year which is a major export item of North Korea to express its gesture to implement UNSC 2321 seriously.³⁶

2-1-3. The Sixth nuclear test in 2017

³³ 이지선, "중국, 대북 제재 이행보고서 안보리 제출했다," 경향신문. 2016.6.28.

http://news.khan.co.kr/kh_news/khan_art_view.html?art_id=201606282240005

³⁴ "习近平致电祝贺金正恩被推举为朝鲜劳动党委员长", 2016.5.10, <http://jhsjk.people.cn/article/28337015>

³⁵ "外交部发言人就朝鲜再次进行核试验答记者问", 2016.9.9, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0910/c64387-28705759.html>

³⁶ Simon Denyer, February 18, 2017, "China suspends North Korean coal imports, striking at regime's financial lifeline", https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/china-suspends-north-koreas-coal-imports-striking-at-regimes-financial-lifeline/2017/02/18/8390b0e6-f5df-11e6-a9b0-eccc7ce475fc_story.html

2017 can be regarded as a turning point of China's foreign policies towards North Korean nuclear issue because both the changed official attitudes and trade volumes of two countries demonstrate that it was not until 2017 has China sincerely enforced United Nations Security Council sanctions against North Korea. China showed its support for UNSC sanction resolutions in its own way to response to North Korea's continuous provocations. For instance, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi officially stated that "the combination of sanction and dialogue" can be the only way to unlock the Korean Peninsula nuclear issue after North Korea conducted the sixth nuclear test in September 2017.³⁷ What is noticeable is that it was the first time that China officially recognized the importance of sanctions as a means to pressure North Korea instead of only emphasizing dialogue and negotiations.³⁸ Afterwards, China also announced officially a suspension of import of North Korean crude coal and refined petroleum products and textile products in order to join in the international community sanctions.³⁹ Consequentially, similar to the previous nuclear tests, though China's official statement became harsher, China still stressed the importance of dialogue to prevent the possible collapse of North Korea due to unbearable financial resources cut-off. After China approved UNSC Resolution 2397, Hua Chunying emphasized when implementing sanctions towards North Korea, it should not affect North Korean civilians, normal economic and cooperative activities and humanitarian aid including food or affect the activities of diplomatic relations with North Korea which demonstrated that China's intention to prevent North Korea's collapse, even though China had implemented sanctions on North Korea more faithfully.⁴⁰

³⁷ "Wang Yi: Combination of Sanction and Dialogue Is the Key to Solving Korean Peninsula Nuclear Issue". 2017.9.7. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zzjg_663340/yzs_663350/xwlb_663352/t1491749.shtml

³⁸ Haggard, S., & Wu, X. "Is China changing its views of North Korea: Some evidence". 2017, October 26. PIIE. <https://www.piie.com/blogs/north-korea-witness/transformation/china-changing-its-views-north-korea-some-evidence>

³⁹ Kim, I. (2019). Trump power: Maximum pressure and China's sanctions enforcement against North Korea. *The Pacific Review*, 33(1), 96-124. doi:10.1080/09512748.2018.1549589

⁴⁰ "中方强调推进朝鲜半岛核问题和平解决"2017.12.24, <http://world.people.com.cn/n1/2017/1224/c1002-29725261.html>

Another signal which showed China had been serious about sanctions to North Korea since then is the deterioration of Sino-DPRK relations during this period. Especially since China's announcement of suspension of coal import from North Korea, not only China criticized strongly North Korea's access to nuke posed threats to China's interests on China's official media, such as the People's Daily and the Global Times, but North Korea also criticized with harsh word in articles published on Korean Central News Agency. Without directly naming China, while North Korea stated that "a neighboring country, which often claims itself to be a 'friendly neighbor'", which is to criticize China being pretentious friendly and also to blame China for announcing it would suspend coal products import to contain its nuclear program.⁴¹ North Korea also claimed that it will never "beg for friendship" and stated that its nuclear program is as precious as its own life so that North Korea will never risk it.⁴² Also, North Korea also warned China not to test the limit of the North's patience and emphasized that the dignity and vital rights of the DPRK should not be sacrificed for the interests of China by criticizing China as "ego-driven theory based on big-power chauvinism" in a commentary published on May 3, 2017.⁴³ To defuse Korean Peninsula crisis, China then proposed a "double suspension" and a "dual track approach", announced by the Foreign Minister Wang Yi, hoping that it would help the parties to break out the security dilemma and return to the negotiation table.⁴⁴ However, the tension between China and North Korea continued through 2017, along with North Korea's sixth nuclear test and multiple missile tests including Hwasong-14 intercontinental ballistic missile.

⁴¹ Jonathan Cheng and Chun Han Wong "North Korea Mocks China for 'Dancing to U.S. Tune'", 2017.2.23, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/north-korea-mocks-china-for-dancing-to-u-s-tune-1487852124>

⁴² "North Korea will never beg for China's friendship: KCNA". 연합뉴스. 2017.5.3. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20170503005600315>

⁴³ KCNA, "Commentary on DPRK-China relations", 2017.5.3, <http://lps3.kcnawatch.net.libproxy.snu.ac.kr/newstream/1493850746-343187325/Commentary-on-DPRK-China-Relations/>

⁴⁴ "China proposes 'double suspension' to Defuse Korean Peninsula Crisis" Xinhua News Agency. 2017.3.8. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-03/08/c_136112435.htm

What's more, the tension between China and North Korea in 2017 and the fact that China did not sincerely implemented UN sanctions until 2017 can also be demonstrated through the pattern of Sino-North Korea trade volume, as shown by the table and figures below. According to the statistics, it can be clearly seen that 2017 is a year that UN economic sanctions affected greatly on North Korea's export to China. As the Table 1 below illustrates, the five leading commodities exported by North Korea to China had experienced a significant decreasing trend. In particular, the values of coal in North Korea's exports to China decreased about 67% in 2017.

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Table 1. Five leading commodities exported by North Korea to China (unit: US\$ million)

2010		2013		2016		2017	
Product	Values	Product	Values	Product	Values	Product	Values
Coal	390	Coal	1380	Coal	1181	Coal	402
Iron ore	194	Iron ore	299	Men's jacket	158	Men's coat	139
Iron cast	64	Men's coat	127	Men's coat	152	Mollusca	136
Mollusca	53	Men's jacket	122	Mollusca	141	Ladies' coat	129
Zinc ingot	48	Ladies' coat	117	Ladies' coat	136	Men's jacket	104

Source: Choi (2018). Statistical database for the trend of the North Korean Economy, KDI North Korean Economy Review, 97–

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The Sino-North Korea trade volume maintained declining trend by 2019. There was a slight increase after Hanoi Summit, however, according to the latest statistics from Korea International Trade Association, as the Figure 1 and Figure 2 shows below, North Korea's exports to China decreased substantially since 2017 (from US\$2.6 billion to US\$1.7 billion).⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Lee, J.-K. (2017). Changes in trade practices in Sino-North Korea borders as a result of economic sanctions, KDI North Korean Economic Review 83–112.

⁴⁶ Lee, S.-K. (2018). Industries of North Korea in 2017. KDI North Korean Economy Review, 31–39.

The Sino-North Korea trade volume had experienced a sharp decline as much as 51.6% in 2018 due to international economic sanctions and North Korea's imports from China dropped about 80% in 2020, while its exports volume totaled \$48 million, also decreased 77.7% from a year earlier. The border shutdown to control the outbreak and spread of Coronavirus explains well the sharp decline.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, after the Hanoi Summit on February 28, 2019, the trade of products which are not on the sanctions lists between China and North Korea, such as food, watches and wig, shows an increasing trend (increased 15.3% compared with the previous year) according to the statistics from Seoul in 2019. North Korea's imports products from China (apples, flour, cigarette, etc.) also remained a consistently increasing trend since 2018.⁴⁸

Figure 1. The trend of North Korea's exports and imports from China



Figure 2. The trend of Sino-North Korea trade volume



Source: Korea International Trade Association, 한국무역협회

⁴⁷ “북한통계 해설자료” 2019.12. 통계청.

https://kosis.kr/bukhan/nkAnals/selectNkAnalsDetail.do?menuId=M_02_01&pageIndex=1&boardIdx=2&searchCondition=00&searchKeyword=

⁴⁸ “통계로 분석한 북한무역 특징과 추이”, 2019.12. 통계청 북한통계포털

3. Conclusion

To conclude the new characteristics of China's foreign policies towards North Korea in Xi's era, China has maintained a flexible strategy as usual, which can be interpreted as both continuity and transformation.

3-1. Continuity: Unchanged fundamental principles

Despite the turbulence, the Xi Jinping administration inherited most of China's existing policies on the Korean Peninsula and China appears not to have changed its essence on basic policies towards the North Korea under Xi Jinping administration regarding North Korean nuclear issue, which has been consistently maintained since the cessation of the Korean War.⁴⁹ The three principles of China's policy on the Korean Peninsula officially announced by Foreign Minister Wang Yi remained consistent until today, including realizing denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, insisting on settling all relevant issues through dialogues and negotiations, and adhering to the consistent and firm position of maintaining peace and stability in the Korean Peninsula and the whole region".⁵⁰ To put it simply, no war, no instability and no nuclear weapon (不战、不乱、无核) has always been China's principles in making foreign policies towards North Korea.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Park, Jong Chol. "Will Xi Jinping Give up the Sino-North Korea Alliance?: The Enhancement of Status Quo of Kim Jong-Un's Parallel Development Policy." *JOURNAL OF ASIAN PUBLIC POLICY*, VOL.9, NO. 1 (2016): 19-31.

⁵⁰ "Wang Yi Talks about China's 'Three Objections' and 'Three Persistence' on Korean Peninsula Issue," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 13 April 2013, Accessed April 20, 2021, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/wjbz_663308/activities_663312/t1391999.shtml.

⁵¹ "新华国际时评：在朝鲜半岛问题上的“中国坚持”." 2018.3.15. 新华社, http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2018-03/15/c_1122543844.htm

Even if China may seem had implemented harsher sanctions towards North Korea, in the early period of Xi Jinping's leadership, China had remained the punishing sanctions that prevent the collapse of North Korea and any war-like danger, or even worse, a refugee crisis on its border.⁵² The attitudes towards North Korea after the inauguration of the Xi Jinping administration can be summed up as giving a warning through sanctions if North Korea makes provocations that violate China's national interests, and ensuring that the sanctions are not implemented strongly enough to pose a threat to the North Korean regime. Therefore, in the early days of Xi Jinping administration, there is no big difference from the traditional China's foreign policies towards North Korea. As long as it is in favor of the peace and stability of Korean Peninsula, no matter in what way the peace talks are being promoted, China is willing to provide its support, including joining the international sanctions.

Second, regarding Sino-DPRK relations, China has attempted to reduce the color of its alliance based on ideological and historical ties. China's policy towards North Korea is aimed at maintaining the status quo and maintained an alliance strategy with North Korea within the spectrum of "traditional friendship and normal state-to-state relations, which is also a main tactic been utilized by Chinese leaders for years.⁵³ China has applied a flexible strategy which it has attempted to maintain Sino-DPRK relations into a very beneficial strategy with the nature of minimizing the burden from North Korea and maximizing the national interest of China, which China can choose under certain circumstances.⁵⁴ Such a strategy has been fully displayed by China's harsh implementation of international sanctions and tough official rhetoric, as well as further revitalized exchanges between two leaders throughout 2017 and 2018 (to be

⁵² Jane Perlez. "North Korea's Nuclear Arsenal Threatens China's Path to Power". 2017.9.5, The New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/05/world/asia/north-korea-nuclear-weapons-china.html>

⁵³ 나영주. (2016). 중국 시진핑 정부의 대북정책과 북핵문제. 민족연구, 제 65 호, 64-91.

⁵⁴ 문홍호. (2014). 시진핑 집권 이후 중국의 대북정책 : 동맹관계와 정상관계의 선택적 균형. 중소연구, 38 권 3 호, pp.15-37.

discussed in details in further chapters) with China emphasizing its “normal” relationship with North Korea when China’s national interests are being violated by North Korea’s nuclear tests, while turning to stressing their “traditional friendship” when North Korea’s strategic value as a leverage is highlighted.

To sum up, despite the ups and downs of the relationship between China and North Korea, the relationship between two countries may seem like a myth but has never been deteriorated substantially. The reason lies on the consistent China’s fundamental policies toward North Korea and the Korean Peninsula. Furthermore, a fundamental change of China’s strategic stance on the North Korean nuclear issue is rather unforeseeable in the near future.⁵⁵ China will change its fundamental policies towards North Korea only when China’s pursuit of stable and peaceful Korean Peninsula is further violated by North Korea, for instance, if North Korea continually makes more irrational behaviors which further threaten China’s core national interests, then China might make a substantial decision to give up North Korea’s advantages.

3-2. Transformation: dynamic tactical adjustments

However, considering China’s tactical adjustments and more serious implementation of UN sanctions, especially throughout 2016 and 2017, even if it is probably too soon to say that China’s fundamental policies towards North Korea in wake of nuclear issue has changed, it seems that Chinese leadership and the public are gradually losing patience and tolerance on Kim Jong-un’s regime and started to rethink to adjust its policies when dealing with North Korea. That being said, China has adjusted its approach to North Korean nuclear issue when

⁵⁵ Wang, F.-L. (2018). “China and the Prospects of Denuclearization of North Korea.” *Asian Journal of Pwacebuilding*, Vol.6 No. 2, 267-288.

responding the nuclear tests. Chinese leadership has transformed to match more sticks than carrots, though still within the bottom line to prevent collapse of the regime. China's several important tactical adjustments since 2012 are summarized as follows:

Firstly, as the escalation of North Korea's nuclear tests, the official attitude of China towards North Korea had been gradually shifting from mild and cautious to tougher and less tolerant. Before North Korea's sixth nuclear test in 2017, China kept emphasizing that sanctions should function as a means to draw North Korea to the negotiations table, while for the first time, China acknowledged that "the combination of sanction and dialogue" can help unlock the Korean Peninsula issue, which reveals that China had gradually lost its patience towards North Korea. It was the first time that China admitted the significance of sanctions. It announced its stern position against North Korea's nuclear test by agreeing to the adaptation of the UN Security Council Resolutions and implemented it genuinely, especially during 2016 and 2017. Since Kim Jong-un came into power, the acceleration of North Korean nuclear tests had exceeded China's calculations, therefore, as a temporary tactic adjustment, China had to strengthen its pressure on North Korea to secure its own national interests in Korean Peninsula.

Furthermore, in terms of China's harsher implementation of UN sanctions, China also joined the community to put more pressure on North Korea to achieve the final objective—stabilization and denuclearization of Korean Peninsula. The scale of China's sanctions on North Korea have gradually evolved wider under Xi Jinping's leadership, from weapon embargoes to financial sanctions followed by restrictions on the major import products of North Korea, such as coal which can be seen as the lifeline export product of North Korea. Though Chinese active implementation of sanctions towards North Korea and deterioration of Sino-DPRK relations may seem like only a transient and superficial phenomenon, as China kept emphasizing that

affect North Korean civilians, normal economic activities and cooperation, food aid and humanitarian aid, which illustrate that China's attempt to secure its bottom line—the survival of North Korean regime, however, it is confirmed that China nowadays will explicitly express its opposition with less patience to North Korea if it conducts significantly threats to the peace and stability in favor of China's national interests. China will no longer spoil North Korea if it creates more trouble on the Peninsula.⁵⁶

Third, China has made full use of its strategy which labels Sino-DPRK relationship within a spectrum from “traditional friendships” to “normal state-to-state relations” and make several rounds of twists, from one extreme to another extreme and vice versa. Sino-DPRK relations experienced a period of ups and downs due to the continuous North Korean nuclear tests and provoked a heated debate regarding whether China should abandon North Korea throughout 2016 and 2017, however, China shifted its attitude towards North Korea dramatically again since 2018, as showed by frequent meeting between Kim Jong-un and Xi Jinping (will be discussed with details in the further Chapter). During this period, China put the emphasis on traditional friendships sometimes, and China occasionally stressed that “Sino-North Korean relations are just like those of other normal countries”, though it may seem contradictory, it is exactly China's tactics towards North Korea. As Liang Yunxiang, professor from Beijing University concluded, at present, the China's policy towards North Korea is vague. On one hand, it does not support North Korea, for instance, firmly opposing its possession of nuclear weapons and supporting the sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council, however, on the other hand, China's stance is obviously different from the positions of the United States, Japan and South Korea, opposing severe sanctions against North Korea, especially against changing

⁵⁶ Liu Ming, W. C.-z., Cui Rong-wei. (2013). Chinese Perspectives on the East Asian Security Environment and the Korean Peninsula. *KINU Unification Forum*, 63-88.

the regime of North Korea.⁵⁷ Such an ambiguous and uncertain policy with tactical adjustments is highly related to the intangibility of China-the U.S. relations in the region, which will be explored in the later chapters.

Lastly, since Xi Jinping came into power, ideology was no longer a factor, at least, not a primary factor of policy formation, and China weighed “interests” much more than “friendship” in economic transactions. Instead, China’s core national interests which serves the economic development which requires a peaceful environment have been put more into priority. Though China had kept placing the peaceful environment in favor of its own economic development as the top priority, such tendency had been distinctly reinforced under Xi Jinping’s leadership. Compared with the past leadership, Chinese leaders nowadays are more willing to weigh the sticks than carrots to show its steadfast position by using a coercive approach to contain North Korea to secure its own core interests. Now Chinese leaders have gradually lost its patience to spoil or indulge the wrong behaviors which may cause threat to China.

⁵⁷ 李志涵, “梁云祥: 中国对朝鲜“战略缓冲区”的矛盾与困境。”2020.9.21, 环球报, <http://www.02b8.com/yjdyw/19057.html>

III. Determinants of the new characteristics

In this chapter, I will examine six factors -Xi Jinping's leadership and Kim Jong-un's roadmap in the individual level, China's national interests in Xi's era and the strategic value of North Korea in the state level, and China-US rivalry in East Asia and DPRK-R.O.K.-U.S. triangle in East Asia in the international level to explore the answer to the question of "What are the determinants of the new characteristics of China's foreign policies towards North Korea".

1. Individual level

1-1. Xi Jinping's leadership

To illustrate well how Xi Jinping's leadership play an important role in shaping the new characteristics of China's foreign policies towards North Korea in Xi's era, it is important to know what kind of policies has been promoted by Xi Jinping since Xi Jinping administration came into office. That being said, Xi Jinping's leadership, will be the first actor to be examined at individual level.

In terms of domestic development, as a new leader of Communist Party, Xi Jinping, who was appointed as general secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in November 2012, ambitiously suggested a series of national development strategies and goals immediately which opened a new chapter of China's rise. First of all, Xi Jinping suggested "China's dream (中国梦)" as an important concept of assembly, which is to realize the "great

revival of the Chinese nation” (中华民族伟大复兴).⁵⁸ Recently, Xi Jinping had quoted more the principle of “strive for achievement” (奋发有为) instead of “keeping a low profile(韬光养晦)”, which has been China’s main principle when dealing with diplomatic relations for years before Xi Jinping’s leadership.⁵⁹ On top of that, National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CCP), as the top authority of Chinese leadership, where Xi Jinping plays an essential role of the pivotal of decision-making. China has held 18th and 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China since 2012, from which China’s main domestic and foreign policies can be learned. During 18th CCP National Congress held in November 2012, a new central leadership headed by General Secretary Xi Jinping was settled and China confirmed the strategy of maintaining the “peaceful development (和平发展)” strategy as well as securing its justifiable “core interests.” To achieve the goal of further reform, open-up, and attaining moderate prosperity throughout the country in all aspects by 2020.

In addition, at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in October 2017, Xi Jinping presented a new guiding ideology and development roadmap called “New China’s distinctive socialist ideology (新时代中国特色社会主义)” and presented China’s development direction and goals by 2050. Besides, at the 19th National Congress, Xi Jinping also emphasized the significance of China’s “core interests” by stressing that “We should more conscientiously safeguard the interests of the people and resolutely oppose all harms to them”.⁶⁰ The 18th and 19th CCP National Congress demonstrate the strategic readjustment of Xi Jinping’s

⁵⁸ “五年来，习近平这样多次阐述中国梦”，2017.11.29，人民网，

<http://cpc.people.com.cn/xuexi/n1/2017/1129/c385474-29673705.html>

⁵⁹ “中国外交主基调：奋发有为”，2014.5.25，新京报，http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2014-05/25/c_1110843987.htm

⁶⁰ “习近平：决胜全面建成小康社会 夺取新时代中国特色社会主义伟大胜利——在中国共产党第十九次全国代表大会上的报告”，2017年10月27日，新华社，http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/19cpcnc/2017-10/27/c_1121867529.htm

administration that emphasizes an assurance of a peaceful development and more importantly, core interests of China aiming at expanding China's status and influence in the region. Besides, In March 2015, Premier Li Keqiang proposed a ten-year action plan—"Made in China 2025" policy as a new strategy to foster manufacturing at the National People's Congress. China's State Council formalized the "Made in China 2025" as a major strategy to become a manufacturing powerhouse, which is part of the 13th Five-Year Plan (2016-2020).⁶¹ As such, Xi Jinping's leadership pursued an ambitious strategy for national development.

In terms of foreign policy, especially in response to U.S. "Pivot to Asia" and "Rebalancing" strategies for protecting vested interests in the Asia-Pacific region since Xi Jinping took office, Xi Jinping presented "A New Type of Great Power Relations" (新型大国关系) which are "no conflict or confrontation (不冲突不对抗)", "mutual respect (相互尊重)", and "mutually beneficial cooperation through win-win (合作共赢)" during the U.S.-China summit in 2013. The focus was placed on the mutual respect of each other's political systems and ways of development based on not violating each other's core interests—sovereignty and territorial rights.⁶² Though the U.S. is the main target of "A New Type of Great Power Relations", but it is also applied to other strong power relations. And, Xi Jinping presented the "A New International Relations (新型国际关系)" and "Community of shared future for mankind (人类命运共同体)" of co-prosperity cooperation as key principles while maintaining the tenet of "peaceful development" through the 19th party congress in 2017, demonstrating China's awareness of managing both the relations with big powers such as the U.S. and the harmonious

⁶¹ "Premier Li on 'Made in China 2025'", August 2017,

http://english.www.gov.cn/premier/news/2017/08/10/content_281475781726536.htm

⁶² Wang Yi, "Toward a New Model of Major-Country Relations Between China and the United States," speech at the Brookings Institution, September 2013, <https://www.brookings.edu/wpcontent/uploads/2013/09/wang-yi-english-prepared-remarks.pdf>.

relations with the neighbor countries for expanding international influence as a great power.

The basic diplomatic stance in Xi's era can be seen as two parts: neighboring diplomacy and great power diplomacy. It is to create an external environment favorable to the realization of China's dream through readjustment of U.S. relations with China as well as peaceful maintenance of neighboring countries through active diplomatic activities—neighbors of harmony(睦邻), neighbors of stability(安邻), neighbors of wealth(富邻), which was a specific focus on maintaining a harmonious community with a shared destiny on China's periphery. Xi's leadership proposed a further diplomatic principle of 亲·诚·惠·容 in an active way, including “harmonious and friendly relations with neighbors (亲)”, “treating neighbors with sincerity and honesty (诚)”, “mutual benefits and prosperity (惠)” and “cooperation with an open and inclusive mind (容)”.⁶³

It is noticeable that there is seemingly a transformation of China's identity as a great power in Xi Jinping's era. China's mainstream strategic thinking is largely influenced by China's shift from being “the world's largest developing country” to being a “Developing Great Power (发展中大国)” and “Great Maritime Power (海洋强国)”. The most noticeable transformation of China's foreign policies in Xi Jinping administration is that China's national identity as a “Great Power” has been strengthened under Xi Jinping's leadership. China began to shape its identity as a great power in a transformative manner as the emergence of slogans like “Developing Great Power” and “major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics (中国特色大国外

⁶³ “党报：习近平所倡“亲诚惠容”周边外交凸显中国传统文化智慧”，2016.5.5，人民日报，https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1464944_1

交) ” during the early period of the Xi Jinping administration.⁶⁴ Xi Jinping’s leadership has set a goal which to make China grow as a great power not only economically, but also in realm of culture and science, etc. As Professor Graham Allison evaluated in his book “Destined for War” , stating that “Xi Jinping wants to ‘make China great again’ while making China great again is not only making China rich again.”

To illustrate the effectiveness and implementation of Xi Jinping’s leadership more specifically, not only has China established a renewed grand economic strategy implemented through China’s new Silk Road strategies which is One Belt One Road, the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank (NDB), but also promoted development in the realm of political consolidation, cultural rejuvenation and strengthening national security under the Xi Jinping’s leadership.

First, to promote national development politically, Xi Jinping has put numerous efforts on consolidating the Chinese Communist Party as the pivotal of China’s governance. A far-reaching anti-corruption campaign carried out under Xi Jinping’s leadership in China, following the conclusion of the 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2012. Additionally, Xi Jinping also devoted to strengthening his position as the center of CCP. In October 2020, a communiqué issued after a meeting of the Communist Party honored Xi Jinping as the party’s helmsman (中共舵手), affirming his leadership in leading China through difficulties during COVID-19 and in the future. “He is trying to convince the CCP that only he has the political resources, experience and determination to get China through this difficult situation,” commented by Willy Wo-Lap, an experienced associate professor of

⁶⁴ Shin, J. (2018). China's Great Power Identity and Its Policy on the Korean Peninsula in the Xi Jinping Era. *Pacific Focus*, 33(2), 284-307. doi:10.1111/pafo.12119

Chinese politics at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.⁶⁵

In terms of cultural development, domestically, Xi Jinping has launched a revival of ancient Chinese traditions. The period before the fall of the Qing Dynasty is taken as the source of contemporary Chinese pride for promoting patriotism. Internationally, Xi Jinping also advocated dialogue between civilizations, stating that to meet common challenges and move toward a better future requires both economic, scientific, and cultural forces. He emphasized developing a culture full of equality, mutual appreciation, dialogue and inclusiveness by expanding humanities exchanges between countries both inside and outside the region in order to achieve coexistence and mutual prosperity transcends superiority, conflict, barrier and consolidation of civilization.⁶⁶

Furthermore, in terms of national security, Xi Jinping has repeatedly stressed the dream of building a powerful military (强军梦).⁶⁷ On November 28, 2015, Xi Jinping addressed that “Deepening defense and military reform is an inevitable requirement for achieving the great Chinese dream of rejuvenation at the conference of the Central Military Commission.”⁶⁸ Furthermore, Xi Jinping has also kept emphasizing the construction of “Great Maritime Power”. Speaking at a naval parade in the South China Sea on April 12, 2018, Xi Jinping stressed that the task of building a strong navy has never been more urgent than today to achieve the great rejuvenation of China. It has also been emphasized many times that it is important to build

⁶⁵ 储百亮, STEVEN LEE MYERS, “习近平巩固“掌舵”地位, 五中全会定调未来五年”2020.10.30, <https://cn.nytimes.com/china/20201030/china-xi-communist-party-meeting/>

⁶⁶ 田国秀, “文明对话与人类命运共同体伦理建构”, 2017.7.22, 光明日报, http://www.qstheory.cn/llwx/2019-07/22/c_1124781979.htm

⁶⁷ 黄明&吴开胜&辛江, “为实现中国梦强军梦凝聚强大力量——党的十八大以来双拥工作综述”, 新华网, 2020.10.19, http://www.xinhuanet.com/2020-10/19/c_1126630589.htm

⁶⁸ “党政军民齐心协力 努力实现强军梦中国梦——习近平主席在中央军委改革工作会议上的重要讲话引起强烈反响”2015.11.28, 新华网, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-11/28/c_1117292070.htm

China's navy into World top greatest navy. The development of the ocean economy and scientific research are important aspects to promote China's grand strategy as a great power.⁶⁹

Xi Jinping has also proposed a new thought of General National Security Concept (总体国家安全观) which has four main elements: first, 内外兼顾, 以内保外 (neiwaijiangu, yineibaowai), which means that the internal security mechanism is more essential than that of external. It is clear that Xi Jinping's strategic thinking of seeing domestic security and stability as top priority as well as and maintaining mutual security stability both domestically and internationally. Only when the periphery of world is peaceful can the country achieve the prerequisites of development. Second, 包容共赢, 命运共同 (baoronggongying, mingyungongtong). Chinese leaders state that only by being open, inclusive, sharing and respecting the aspirations and choices of all regions and peoples can the China gain real respect, and can China establish its global influence and leadership and can China achieve China's Dream. Third, 经济优先, 核心不让 (jingjiyouxian, hexinburang), which reveals that focusing on economic development is the key to rejuvenating the country, while development remains the key to solving all problems and emphasizes China's determination to defense its core interests including sovereignty, security and development interests. Fourth, 义利并举, 有所作为 (yilibingju, yousuozuowei), Xi Jinping's national security strategy has borrowed from the Confucian tradition, which emphasizes the importance of righteousness and mortality over its own interests, as well as the Western tradition which emphasizes the importance of national interests to form a Chinese value of both insisting mortality and stressing national interest.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ “习近平谈建设海洋强国”, 2018.8.13, 环球网, <https://china.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnKbjH8>

⁷⁰ “新国家安全观四大内核”, 2014.6.6, 人民网, <http://world.people.com.cn/n/2014/0606/c1002-25114045.html>

1-2. Kim Jong-un's roadmap

If Xi Jinping is one of the most ambitious leaders of China since Chinese economic reform, then Kim Jong-un would be an unpredictable neighbor with its own ambitions. Since Kim Jong Un has studied in the West, his style is more openminded and he is more willing to engage with the international community. It is noticeable that Kim Jong-un has been trying to bring a brand-new face of DPRK to the world since he took the office. Kim Jong-un showed a considerable different style of governance from his father, Kim Jong Il through Kim Jong-un's "New Strategic Roadmap".

First of all, after taking office, the young leader emphasized on economic development and social well-being, which have been hot topics in Kim's speech and DPRK media since 2012. Kim Jong Un had formulated the "Five-Year National Economic Development Strategy 2016-2020," which aims to make North Korea an economic powerhouse, a political power, a military power, a science and technology powerhouse, and a civilized powerhouse at the 3rd Plenary Session of the 7th Congress of Workers' Party of Korea and shifted emphasis from "military first(선군노선)" to "military and economy at the same time (경제건설과 핵무력건설 병진노선)" in 2013 at a plenary session of the party's central committee and shifted to "concentration on socialist economic construction (경제건설 총력집중노선)" in 2018 after announcing the victory of completing nuclear weapons construction.⁷¹ The Five-Year Economic Development Plan announcement reveals North Korea's ambitious economic goal of Kim Jong-un's regime which was to extend international economic relationships. To achieve

⁷¹ 김창희. "북한 병진노선의 경제건설 총력집중노선으로 전환." *정치정보연구*, 22, no. 2 (2019): 1-28.

the goal, Kim Jong-un launched policy measures which emphasized improvement of creditworthiness and diversity in international trade to avoid heavy reliance on any specific country (though not directly named, but highly possible to be China) as well as the enhancement of the share of export.⁷² Kim Jong-un also mentioned in his 2018 New Year Speech, that North Korea will focus on consolidating the independence and self-reliance by developing the national economy based on its “Juche Idea”.⁷³ And, Kim Jong-un further proposed an ambitious economic construction goal in his 2019 New Year Speech, expressing North Korea’s strong will and ability to revive the national economy and reach to the advanced international level.⁷⁴

Kim Jong-un has also stressed the importance of education. He emphasized the development of education based on science and technology as the foundation of establishing North Korea as a science and technology great power (과학기술강국) and socialist education great power (사회주의 교육강국) while promoting the education reform to a 12-year compulsory educational system.⁷⁵ In 2019, Kim Jong-un emphasized the linkage between the importance of education and science technology at the 14th National Conference of Teachers held in Pyongyang, which reveals that a science technology-centered education policy has been settled at the center to adapt to the flow of new globalized and informatization era to achieve the development of national economy and stability of North Korean regime by placing science technology as “a driving force” and education as “mother of science technology”.⁷⁶ Kim Jong-

⁷² Lee, J.-K. (2017). “Changes in trade practices in Sino-North Korea borders as a result of economic sanctions.” *KDI North Korean Economic Review*, 83–112.

⁷³ “Kim Jong Un’s 2018 New Year’s Address”, 2018.1.1, <https://www.ncnk.org/node/1427>

⁷⁴ “Kim Jong Un’s 2019 New Year Address”, 2019.1.1, https://www.ncnk.org/resources/publications/kimjongun_2019_newyearaddress.pdf/file_view

⁷⁵ 변학문. (2018). “북한의 과학기술 강국 구상과 남북 과학기술 교류협력.” *통일과 평화* 10 집 2 호: 82-113.

⁷⁶ Cho, Jeong-ah. (2019) “North Korea’s Education Policy and Its Prospects Based on Analysis of National Conference of Teachers.” *Korea Institute for National Unification* Online series CO 19-20.

un's strategy of concentration on economic development has remarkably contributed to the growth of North Korean economy with an average GDP growth rate of 1% from 2012 to 2014 and 3.9% in 2016.⁷⁷

Second, this young leader also shows his charisma through consolidation of Kim Jong-un's Regime soon after he came into power, which shows his political leadership. Kim Jong-un implemented his own consolidation plans through leadership reshuffle to consolidate his position as "supreme representative of all the Korean people."⁷⁸ To restructure the military and strengthen his own power, he enhanced the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK)'s guidance over the military and weaken the right of military to make the power concentrated to the cabinet. Then Kim Jong-un took measures to strengthen the basic organizations to establish a "monolithic leadership regime". The execution of Jang Song Taek, who was widely seen as the No. 2 in the country's leadership after Kim Jong Un, is another example of Kim Jong-un's leadership in consolidating political regime. Jang Song Thaek, who was arguably the closest to China, was executed for the reason of commitment of anti-party and counter-revolutionary factional acts, undermining the unity of the party and hindering the task of building up the party's monolithic leadership regime under Kim Jong Un. Kim Jong-un stated with pride and confidence that "the Workers' Party of Korea and the revolutionary rank and file are now further solidified, and our single-minded unity is 100 times strengthened." in his 2014 New Year's address.⁷⁹ As such, Kim Jong-un further determined the unshakable and undoubtful leading position of WPK and himself in North Korea's political regime.

⁷⁷ "North Korea GDP Annual Growth Rate", Trading Economics, <https://tradingeconomics.com/north-korea/gdp-annual-growth-rate>

⁷⁸ Joyce Lee, Josh Smith. "Kim Jong Un consolidates power as North Korea shuffles leadership", 2019.4.12, Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-appointments-idUSKCN1RN2YO>

⁷⁹ Chang-hyun Jung. "The Execution of Jang Song Thaek: Consolidating Power Pyongyang-Style", March 2014 (Vol.9 No.1), Global Asia, https://www.globalasia.org/v9no1/cover/the-execution-of-jang-song-thaek-consolidating-power-pyongyang-style_chang-hyun-jung

Third, in terms of national security, Kim Jong-un's nuclear policy further strengthened the role of nuclear weapons in perpetuating North Korea's regime survival. Since Kim Jong-un came into power, he greatly accelerated the speed of nuclear development. Under Kim Jong-un's leadership, North Korea had conducted more nuclear tests than previous regime, including four of its six underground nuclear tests and flight-tested three ICBMs. At the end of 2017, Kim Jong-un announced officially the completion of North Korea's nuclear program, stating that North Korea was now capable of targeting the continental United States with nuclear missiles. Due to frequent nuclear tests and international sanctions, a series of Inter-Korea summits, NK-U.S. summits also showed Kim's desire to achieve peace and stability of the Korean Peninsula through continuing negotiations throughout 2018 and 2019. However, during the 8th Congress of Workers' Party of Korea held in January 2021, he vowed to "further strengthen our nuclear deterrence."⁸⁰ Given Kim's statement, it can be interpreted as a provocation as well as a threat to U.S. because his three meetings with Trump failed to produce an agreement and North Korea's economy has been exhausted by international sanctions and COVID-19. However, Kim Jong-un still shows his willingness to keep negotiating with American leaders, while Kim Jong-un also suggested that North Korea's nuclear capabilities will further grow if there is no breakthrough in negotiations with the Biden administration."⁸¹

To conclude, from China's perspective, China, which has self-identity as a great power with such an ambitious Xi Jinping's leadership had to form a new strategy when dealing with North Korea nuclear issue. As a determined and goal-oriented great power, China had to make a few

⁸⁰ "Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un Makes Opening Speech at 8th WPK Congress." *KCNA Watch*. 6 January 2021. <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1609914831-848334469/Supreme-Leader-Kim-Jong-Un-Makes-Opening-Speech-at-8th-WPK-Congress/>

⁸¹ "Kim Jong-un uses party congress to double down the nuclear program.", *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/13/world/asia/north-korea-kim-jong-un-nuclear.html>

adjustments with regard to North Korea's frequent multiple nuclear tests since Kim Jong-un came into power. First, it had to show a more responsible attitude in resolving the problem as a "great power", therefore, under the pressure from the U.S. and the international community, China had to put forward harsher and more serious implementation of UN sanctions towards North Korea. Second, with a strengthened emphasis on "core interests", China's tactics towards North Korea was in favor of its own national interest in order to achieve its ambitious objectives. Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, China took one step forward to expand its economic and diplomatic influence. With the huge and bold tasks China has been faced with, China had to shift its attitude towards North Korea's continuous nuclear tests by acting less tolerantly and more aggressively to benefit its own national interests which is to maintain the peace and stability of Korean Peninsula in favor of its economic development and modernization. Third, China formed a less ideology-oriented mindset of Sino-North Korea relations, with a far-reaching and expansive vision under Xi Jinping's leadership. Instead of treating North Korea as a pure traditional alliance, it seems that China has moved forward towards inclination to deal with North Korea with much flexibility and dynamics. From Pyongyang's perspective, North Korea's interest with regard to relations with China are, first, to avoid economic dependence on China, and second, to find a way to neutralize external threats and reduce the effects of asymmetry in its relations with China.⁸² Obviously, Xi Jinping had to make tactic adjustments accordingly to deal with such a young and ambitious leader.

2. State level

2-1. China's national interests in Xi's era

⁸² Li, P. J., & Li, L. Y. (2020). "The China-DPRK Relations: from Perceived Marginalization to a Spirited Comeback." *East Asia*, 37(3), 203-221. doi:10.1007/s12140-020-09339-6

The national interests of China are generally categorized into three types, including core (vital) interests (核心利益), important interests (重要利益), and general interests (一般利益). China's national interests contain economic development, national sovereignty, and security assurance, and so forth. Since the advent of the Xi Jinping administration's great power identity, China has stressed more on securing the national interests and put core interests on the top priority. According to the white paper titled as "China's Peaceful Development" published by the State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China in 2011, the core interests of China can be classified as state sovereignty, state security, territorial integrity, and national unity, as well as the stability of political system established by the Constitution of the People's Republic of China and society stability, and the basic guarantee for sustainable economic and social development.⁸³

According to the latest defense white paper— "China's National Defense in the New Era" published by Chinese government in 2019, China's core interests can be summarized more specifically. First of all, it is the emphasis on containment of separatist threats from the region of Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang to safeguard China's sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity and security. Chinese government states in the White paper that "Taiwan issue and achieving complete national reunification is in the fundamental interests of the Chinese nation and an inevitable requirement for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. China adheres to the principles of "peaceful reunification" and "one country, two systems", to promote the peaceful development of Cross-Strait relations and to advance the process of China's peaceful reunification, and China firmly opposes any attempt or activities to separate China and any

⁸³ “《中国的和平发展》白皮书”，2011.9.6，中华人民共和国国务院新闻办公室，http://www.scio.gov.cn/zxbd/nd/2011/Document/1006416/1006416_2.htm

foreign interference. Furthermore, China firmly safeguards its national sovereignty and territorial integrity, including South China Sea and Diaoyu Island (Senkaku Island).⁸⁴

China's foreign policies towards North Korean nuclear issue is highly and mainly related to China's security interests. Therefore, based on the concept of security proposed by David Baldwin⁸⁵, the focuses of China's "security for which values" and "how much security" and "security from what threats" will be examined specifically based on the China's Defense White Paper.

Firstly, there are four main elements in China's security values. The first and the foremost one is "resolutely safeguard national sovereignty, security and development interests (坚决捍卫国家主权、安全、发展利益)", which is defined as the fundamental goal of China's national defense in the new era. The second principle is that China states it will "never seek hegemony, expansion or spheres of influence (坚持永不称霸、永不扩张、永不谋求势力范围)" which is the distinctive feature of China's national defense in the new era. China emphasizes this principle by applying an ancient saying: "though a country is now strong, bellicosity will lead to its ruin. (国虽大，好战必亡)", stating that China will never threaten others or seek to establish spheres of influence with forces. Third, China emphasizes continuing to "strengthen the military in the Chinese Way (坚持走中国特色强军之路)" which aims at generally achieving mechanization by the year 2020 and the modernization of national defense and the military by 2035 and fully transforming the people's armed forces into world-class forces by the mid-21st century. The last principle is "in the service of building of a community with a

⁸⁴ "China's National Defense in the New Era", The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, July, 2019, <http://www.scio.gov.cn/ztk/dtzt/39912/41132/41134/Document/1660337/1660337.htm>

⁸⁵ David Baldwin, "The Concept of Security," *Review of International Studies*, January 1997, pp. 5-26

shared future for mankind (服务构建人类命运共同体)”, stating that China’s armed forces will fulfill their international responsibilities and obligations, and provide more public security goods to the international community based on the principle of win-win cooperation.

Furthermore, as for “how much Security” does China want, the most visible characteristic principle China emphasizes is its “defense capability”. The Chinese tradition of “Harmony is most precious (和为贵)” and Mao’s motto—“an eye for an eye (人不犯我、我不犯人, 人若犯我、我必犯人)” are taken as the determinants of China’s defensive strategy and China’s self-defense nuclear strategy. Lastly, regarding China’s security interests—“From What Threats”, it can be summarized as three parts. The first is the separatist threats, including “Taiwan independence”, “Tibet independence” and “East Turkistan”. The second is the territorial dispute, including national territorial sovereignty and land and maritime territorial disputes. The last one is international and regional turmoil, terrorism and piracy as well as the non-traditional security threats such as, space and cyber security threats, natural disasters and epidemics.

2-2. The strategic value of North Korea

Another factor needed to be taken into considered at state level is the strategic value of North Korea for China. North Korea’s accelerated nuclear tests repeatedly generated a heated policy debate in China. In research community, policy analysts have been discussing whether China should reevaluate the strategic value of North Korea. During Xi Jinping administration, especially during the period of 2016 and 2017 after North Korea’s fifth nuclear test, debate among Chinese scholars over China’s relations with North Korea had been noticeably intensified. It leads to the questions: Is North Korea an asset or a liability for China? Is China-DPRK traditional friendship alliance still effective? How much is North Korea’s geostrategic

value left for China in East Asian region?⁸⁶ Though the policymaking process of China is not as transparent as many expect, public discussion can still reflect the policymakers' consideration to some degree.

The first point of view is that even if China and North Korea are not "Lip and Teeth" anymore, North Korea is still a strategic asset which cannot be abandoned for China. There are several reasons proposed regarding "why North Korea will not be abandoned by China". For China, the North Korea's strategic value is multifold.

First, the historical ties of China and the Korean Peninsula and geographical proximity cannot be ignored. Such a view considers the importance of North Korea's asset as a geopolitical buffer zone. Beijing is just few hundred kilometers away from the Sino-North Korean border and the northeastern region of China is also full of important economic and industrial cities with millions of populations living there.⁸⁷ China would get in trouble such as social instability caused by refugees flooded through the boarder.

Second, those who emphasize North Korea as a strategic asset state that in an international situation where the confrontation between the U.S. and China is fierce, North Korea is a good strategic leverage against U.S. pressure. In the case of unification, North Korea plays a role of preventing the dominance of America-led unification of Korean Peninsula which would strengthen the strategic position of the U.S. in East Asia.⁸⁸ More importantly, the existence of a nuclear-armed North Korea provides a useful bargaining chip amidst of the U.S.-China rivalry

⁸⁶ 王鹏. "美朝直接会晤, 中朝行将反目?" 2018.3.12, <http://www.charhar.org.cn/newsinfo.aspx?newsid=12794>.

⁸⁷ Yu-Hua, C. (2018). "China and North Korea-Still 'Lips and Teeth'." *The Diplomat; Tokyo*. Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/docview/2072688315?accountid=6802>

⁸⁸ Li, P. J., & Li, L. Y. (2020). "The China-DPRK Relations: from Perceived Marginalization to a Spirited Comeback." *East Asia*, 37(3), 203-221. doi:10.1007/s12140-020-09339-6

because when South Korea shows inclination to the U.S. more, China needs North Korea as an ally to maintain the balance. Pyongyang works as a strategic leverage on US-ROK alliance and diverts the alliance's pressure on Beijing. On the other hand, given the isolated position of North Korea, Beijing functions as a hub to have liaison with other countries when managing North Korea security affairs. With regard to North Korean nuclear issue, China has kept playing a role of neutral mediator as the host for peace in order to manipulate the situation in favor of its own national interests, and North Korea is exactly a useful strategic card to use.⁸⁹ As long as the hegemony competition between the U.S. and China exists in East Asia, it can be said that China's "North Korea card" is still recognized as a strategically valid asset, not an easy card to throw away.⁹⁰

Yet, North Korea's strategic asset view may seem plausible, contrary to this point of view, another groups of scholars as well as observers see North Korea as a liability is more and more visible due to the negative consequences caused by the frequent nuclear tests of North Korea. From a liberalist point of view, those who believed North Korea was a strategic burden usually argue that China should act as a responsible power by put more efforts on the denuclearization of North Korea and the protection of the international nonproliferation regime. On the contrary, those who hold a realist view still insist that North Korea's function as a valuable buffer or leverage against the United States is still applicable. Nowadays, Xi Jinping's leadership seemingly still inclines to see North Korean nuclear issue through a realist lens.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Wang, F.-L. (2018). "China and the Prospects of Denuclearization of North Korea." *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding*, Vol.6 No. 2, 267-288.

⁹⁰ 나영주. (2016). 중국 시진핑 정부의 대북정책과 북핵문제. 민족연구, 제 65 호, 64-91.

⁹¹ Wang, F.-L. (2018). "China and the Prospects of Denuclearization of North Korea." *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding*, Vol.6 No. 2, 267-288.

The debate among Chinese scholars continues today, as Professor Wang Yi Zhou, a famous Chinese expert on international affairs points out that “In fact, we can see that the ‘strategic burden’ view is now becoming a mainstream opinion in the private, academic and diplomatic circles in China.” Thus, he suggests that the relationship between China and North Korea needs to move from a “blood alliance” to normalization.⁹² Zhu Feng, dean of the School of International Studies at China’s Nanjing University pointed out in an article in Foreign Affairs in 2017 that “China’s capital—Beijing is also within the range of Pyongyang’s Scud missiles...It is time for China to largely change its policy toward North Korea. He said more and more Chinese people begin to realize that North Korea has gradually become a “negative asset” and a threat to China’s security. “A nuclear-armed North Korea would further destabilize the Korean Peninsula, potentially leading to a military conflict that would directly affect China. Furthermore, North Korea’s nuclear facilities, if there is a nuclear leak, are a huge threat to China. Lastly, the North Korean regime today is so isolated and repressive that nobody has any ideas that what it is going to do. The unpredictability of the North Korean regime, coupled with the possession of nuclear weapons, would pose a great threat to the entire Chinese region.”⁹³

North Korea’s strategic liability view can be summarized generally as follows. First, some argue that maintaining the alliance is a Cold War mentality that is detrimental to China’s national interest and more likely to stimulate its competitors. At the present stage, “China’s desire for normal relations between countries is greater than that of alliances.”⁹⁴ Maintaining an “alliance” with North Korea would tie China to its potentially dangerous obligations in the future and would undoubtedly be a trouble to future relations between South Korea and China.

⁹² 王逸舟. “中朝关系需要从“血盟”走向正常化”, <http://www.amcorg.org.cn/zjtdshow.php?id=1283>

⁹³ “六国演义(2)：朝鲜是中国的“缓冲区”还是“负资产”？”, 美国之声 (VOA), <https://www.voachinese.com/a/north-korea-china-calculus-20170803/3971315.html>

⁹⁴ 张鸿石 (2014) 《联盟及联盟之后——中国中止联盟的国际政治逻辑及替代战略研究》, 北京：时事出版社, 第206页。

Moreover, as an ally, North Korea has already made considerable trouble for China and has no capacity to contribute more for China. There is also the view that “North Korea has seized on China’s weakness that it will not abandon it completely. North Korea has cleverly plunged China into a situation where “dumplings can’t speak their minds.” (哑巴吃黄连，有苦说不出)⁹⁵ Additionally, the negative consequences brought by the North Korean nuclear tests to China’s security started to affect the China’s calculation.⁹⁶ As a result, China has struggled more on maintaining a balance between safeguarding China’s own core interest and preventing collapse of North Korea.⁹⁷ Furthermore, China has become assertive to revive its position as the center great power in Asia, while North Korea’s nuclear programs continue to make troubles which is an unexpected obstacle for achievement of China’s ambitious goals. North Korea’s nuclear provocations have created reasons for the United States to interfere with Korean Peninsula affairs more deeply and encouraged other countries in the region, such as South Korea and Japan to go nuclear in the future.⁹⁸

Beyond the debate over whether North Korea is an asset or liability, there are the third point of view emerging and burgeoning, which is that China should stay patient with North Korea and simultaneously, make policy adjustments when needed. According to the examination of the new characteristics of China’s foreign policies towards North Korean nuclear issue under Xi Jinping, nowadays Chinese officials or experts seemingly agree with a patient strategy since they believe that North Korea will eventually go for economic reform and opening-up in the way China did in the 1980s. To answer the question of how much strategic value of North Korea

⁹⁵ 金根植. “金正恩时代的对华战略和对韩战略”, 《中国观察》, 2016 年第 1 期, 第 40 页。

⁹⁶ Wang, F.-L. (2018). “China and the Prospects of Denuclearization of North Korea.” *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding*, Vol.6 No. 2, 267-288.

⁹⁷ Ji, Y. (2013). “Kim Jong-un’s Power Consolidation and Worsening China- DPRK Relations.” *East Asian Policy*, Vol. 05, No.01.

⁹⁸ Kim, I. (2019). “Trump power: Maximum pressure and China’s sanctions enforcement against North Korea.” *The Pacific Review*, 33(1), 96-124. doi:10.1080/09512748.2018.1549589

has for China is to answer the question of “What does exactly China want from North Korea?”

First of all, China’s policy on the Korean Peninsula is determined by its two main goals by examinations of China’s security interests above, which is first, creating a peaceful and stable international environment and second, expanding China’s international influence to concentrate on developing its domestic economy. Therefore, rather than seeing North Korea as a “buffer zone” from a geopolitical perspective, China has to maintain an entangled, dynamic and flexible strategic relations with North Korea, which means China can utilize North Korea as a strategic leverage in favor of its own national interests, while China can also make its tactic adjustments anytime when North Korea becomes a liability. To achieve these two goals, China has no other choices but to continue to maintain the Sino-North Korea alliance and continue political and economic assistance to the North Korea because North Korea is a powerful strategic leverage utilized by China to confront with the US in East Asia. From this point of view, the geopolitical strategic advantage North Korea has is of great value for China and that explains why China’s foreign policies towards North Korea made a tactical change but meanwhile maintained its fundamental principles in Xi’s era.

Furthermore, China’s such a tactical thinking can be illustrated well by the sudden transformation from deterioration of relations between two countries before 2017 to friendly exchanges since 2018. It is noticeable the fact that Xi Jinping’s visit to Pyongyang in 2019 was the first Chinese leaders visit to North Korea over a decade. It also comes just after Hanoi Summit by Trump and Kim Jong-un without any agreements and a week before Xi Jinping’s meeting with the US president at the G20 summit in Japan.⁹⁹ Therefore, Xi’s visit to

⁹⁹ “Xi Jinping visits N Korea to boost China’s ties with Kim”, 2019.6.20, BBC News, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48672306>

Pyongyang seems to show the others, especially the U.S. that if U.S. wants to play Taiwan or South Korea card, we still have North Korea card in hands. As a result, North Korea is an indispensable bargain chip for China. Though it is against China's will, it is the price that has to be paid.¹⁰⁰ Therefore, maintaining a kind of ambiguous but good relations with North Korea is in favor of China's aspiration to keep conflicts in East Asia in control in order to expand its influence and have the strategic leverage when dealing with U.S.

To conclude the findings through examining China's national interests and North Korea's strategic values, from China's perspective, China has made it clear that the determination to safeguard its core interests and showed a more pragmatic approach when calculating the strategic value of North Korea.

First, China's primary interest in Korean Peninsula is the consistent three principles: denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, emphasizing the importance of dialogues and negotiations as the means to settle all issues, and maintaining peace and stability in the Korean Peninsula. That being said, for now, in the realm of Korean Peninsula, China wants a "cold peace" on the Korean peninsula and between North Korea and the United States and maintaining a status quo is the best China can do for now. That means, rather than a strategic asset, the problem for China is to try harder to prevent North Korea become a severe liability.¹⁰¹

Second, even though the effectiveness of North Korea as a buffer zone is declining, China still cannot give North Korea away. China maintained an entangled, dynamic and flexible strategic relations with North Korea, which means China can utilize North Korea as a strategic leverage

¹⁰⁰ You Ji, "China and North Korea: A Fragile Relationship of Strategic Convenience," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 10, No. 28 (August 2001), pp. 387-398

¹⁰¹ Yinhong, S. (2009). "China and the North Korean nuclear issue: competing interests and persistent policy dilemmas." *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, Vol.21 No. 1, 33-47.

in favor of its own national interests, while China can also make its tactic adjustments anytime when North Korea becomes a liability. Just as the emerging frequent exchanges between Xi Jinping and Kim Jong Un during Inter-Korean summits and Kim-Trump meetings since 2018, even if the perception of seeing North Korea as a “strategic buffer zone” is less prominent, the role of North Korea as a political leverage is still valid. From the perspective of security and economic interests, there is a huge divergence between China and North Korea and North Korea’s value as a negative asset for China is confirmed, however, if considered politically, China still needs North Korea’s presence as a socialist ally, and if the macro strategy of confrontation between China and the United States is taken into consideration, then North Korea’s presence is even more necessary for China to contain the expanded influence of United States.

3. International Level

Understanding precisely of changing international and domestic circumstances have been put on a significant level in China’s calculation. In Xi Jinping’s era, the uncertainties and conflicts of China-U.S. relations and the dynamics in Korean Peninsula have developed further to profoundly affect and reshape China’s strategic calculation regarding North Korean nuclear issue. Therefore, the most highly related factors to China’s calculations in Korean Peninsula—China-U.S. rivalry in East Asia and DPRK-R.O.K.-U.S. triangle in East Asia will be examined in this section.

3-1. The Sino-America rivalry in East Asia

The Korean Peninsula retains its position as an area of conflict amidst the power balancing of

China and the U.S. Both China and United States see North Korean nuclear issue as a part of their competitive game. The enduring rivalry between China and the United States in East Asia has undoubtedly affected and will continually affect China's calculation in Korean Peninsula policymaking.¹⁰²

From the realist perspective, the Sino-U.S. strategic competition relation is the unavoidable result of the international system's redistribution of power and the resulting security dilemma.¹⁰³ And, the changes of those two major powers' policies towards neighboring states in the region are invariably driven by the changes in relations between them.¹⁰⁴ During early period of Xi's administration, in November 2012, Obama advocated rebalancing the Asia-Pacific region based on the 'Pivot to Asia' foreign policy initiative, followed by the meeting of Xi Jinping and Obama. As discussed before, to manage the relations with major big power, Xi Jinping also proposed of a 'New Type of Great Power Relations' as a wish of hope for a stable relationship with the United States and expansion of influence by maintaining the tone of "Peaceful development".

When it comes to Trump administration, the confrontation between Trump's "America First" and the Xi Jinping administration, which is attempting to emerge as a great power through the realization of "China's Dream," provided dynamically uncertain elements to China's foreign policies towards North Korea. The Trump administration opposed the expansion of multilateral trade agreements and liberalization and emphasized the expansion of domestic employment and industrial protection through protectionism. The U.S.-China trade dispute triggered by this

¹⁰² Shin, J. (2018). "China's Great Power Identity and Its Policy on the Korean Peninsula in the Xi Jinping Era." *Pacific Focus*, 33(2), 284-307. doi:10.1111/pafo.12119

¹⁰³ Thomas J. Christensen, "Posing Problems without Catching up: China's Rise and Challenges for U.S. Security Policy," *International Security* 25 no. 4 (2001): 1-23.

¹⁰⁴ Cha, Victor D. "Allied Decoupling in an Era of Us-China Strategic Competition." *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* Volume 13, no. Issue 4 (2020): 509-51.

was not limited to economic issues related to trade and investment between the two countries, but also to a combination of international and political issues such as the North Korean nuclear issue and territorial issues.¹⁰⁵

As an example of Trump's protectionism, the abolition of the TPP means that Japan, South Korea, and other countries facing China's strong challenges must rely on the U.S. and continue to be a solid ally of the U.S.¹⁰⁶ Variations in US-China relations directly impact China's behavior. For instance, China had to implement harsher sanctions towards North Korea under the pressure of UN Security Council led by the U.S. since the fifth nuclear test of North Korea. China's North Korea policy had to be adjusted when a confrontation with the United States is strongly formed in the East Asian region, giving it an incentive to seek a balance of power. That means a greater significance of North Korea's strategic value to China as a card to balance U.S., if U.S. tends to balance China by intensification of its allies in East Asian region. When a situation occurs in which the U.S. presses China or significantly harms its core interests, China tends to find a balance of power and is likely to move toward strengthening traditional friendly relations with North Korea. It also reveals that the Sino-U.S. relations is deeply rooted in the China's foreign policies towards North Korea.¹⁰⁷ As long as the strategic rivalry between China and the U.S. continues or intensifies in the future, the "North Korea issue" can be also substantially seen as a "US-China issue".¹⁰⁸

Currently, the new Biden administration is largely further inheriting Trump administration's foreign policies towards China and has recognized China as a long-term strategic competitor.

¹⁰⁵ 황태연 (2018) 시진핑의 대북정책과 북중관계 변화, 평화학연구, 19:4, 185-212

¹⁰⁶ 杨其静, “特朗普当选, 中国面临巨大挑战” 2016. 12. 人大国发院政策简报

¹⁰⁷ 나영주, & Young Ju Nah. (2016). 중국 시진핑 정부의 대북정책과 북핵문제. 민족연구, 2016, vol. 65, p 64.

¹⁰⁸ Zhu Zhiqun, 'Comrade in Broken Arms: Shifting Chinese Policies Toward North Korea', Asian Politics and Policy, Vol. 8, No. 4 (2016), pp. 575-92.

There are three type of issue areas of the future relations between China and the U.S.: confrontation, competition and cooperation. The only potentially cooperative area is climate, with Xi Jinping as one of the heads of state who participated in Biden's virtual climate summit on April 22. In the realm of economy and technology, the two great powers in the region seem to maintain a competitive theme in the future. When it comes to security, the enduring demonization of the Chinese Communist Party, such as the continuing debate about the origin of Corona virus, and the U.S. enhanced engagement with Taiwan make it clear that the confrontation between two sides is inevitable in the future Biden administration.¹⁰⁹ Under such a circumstance, for North Korea, China is the only country that can benefit North Korea's security and economy. The US-China relations also variably affect North Korea's calculus. When there is a greater competition, North Korea's leverage value would be strengthened as shown in the 2018–2019 Inter-Korea Summits and Trump-Kim Summits.¹¹⁰ For China, Sino-America rivalry makes China must tighten close relations with North Korea.

3-2. DPRK-R.O.K.-the U.S. triangle in East Asia

In the region of East Asia, the relations among the United States and two Koreas are evermore entangled and complicated, which is an inevitable factor in China's calculations in North Korean issue. In Xi Jinping's era, following the escalation of North Korean nuclear tests and the tension between China and North Korea, the Inter-Summits and the Trump-Kim summits since 2018 can be regarded the turning points of China's tactical adjustments.

¹⁰⁹ "What does Biden's first 100 days tell us about his approach to China", April 26, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2021/04/26/what-does-bidens-first-100-days-tell-us-about-his-approach-to-china/>

¹¹⁰ Cha, Victor D. "Allied Decoupling in an Era of Us-China Strategic Competition." *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Volume 13, no. Issue 4 (2020): 509-551.

China had maintained a balanced strategy with two Koreas since the establishment of diplomatic relations with North Korea. China has retained the largest trade partner for South Korea in East Asia and simultaneously, China also maintained its influence on North Korea within Sino-DPRK alliance relationship. However, with the presence of U.S.-R.O.K alliance, China has been making its tactic adjustments towards North Korea. How China's calculations are affected by the DPRK-R.O.K.-U.S. triangle is fully displayed throughout 2018 and 2019. After the cooling period of Korean Peninsula in 2017 due to North Korean Sixth nuclear test which was claimed to be a hydrogen bomb test, the third Inter-Korea summits held in April 2018, agreed by South Korea's President, Moon Jae In, and North Korea's Supreme Leader, Kim Jong Un, following the PyeongChang Olympic game in 2018 winter. The Inter-Korea summits and Trump-Kim summits had raised the anticipation of a peaceful settlement of the North Korean nuclear issue. Throughout 2018 and 2019, Kim Jong Un met with Moon Jae-in for three times to discuss the denuclearization and building peace treaty in Korean Peninsula. In conjunction with Inter-Korea summits, North Korea seems to show its willingness to talk with U.S. to release the tensions created by North Korea's multiple nuclear tests and Trump administration's hostility towards North Korea. After the first meet between Kim Jong-un and Moon Jae-in, Panmunjom Declaration aimed at establishing a permanent and peaceful Korean peninsula peace regime was signed and adopted by the leaders of North, South Korea. A few months later, at the third meeting between Kim Jong-un and Moon Jae-in, two sides agreed to a series of establishing a peaceful Korean Peninsula. To remove the hostilities and risk of war, they explored substantial measures to improve exchanges and cooperation.¹¹¹

Furthermore, the suspension of the military exercise of U.S. and South Korea and the removal

¹¹¹ "Pyongyang Joint Declaration of September 2018", 2018.9.19, <https://english1.president.go.kr/BriefingSpeeches/Briefings/322>

of military facilities of DMZ seem to show a signal of both sides living up to their commitments. To put the peace talks to an advanced level, the leaders of two adversarial states for the first time sit together with each other to establish a peaceful Korean peninsula. Singapore witnessed history on June 12, 2018, where both sides achieved an agreement of cooperating to end Korean War and to begin a new era of peacebuilding in Korean Peninsula. However, as many experts had expected, although both sides agreed to cease the hostile acts towards each other, the Hanoi Summit did not end up with the expected results due to the divergence between North Korea's demand to release international sanctions and U.S.'s requirement of realizing denuclearization of North Korea first. The negotiation among North Korea, South Korea and the U.S. has been ended in deadlock again.

As illustrated in the above section, China's main interest in Korean Peninsula has been creating a peaceful and stable international environment and expanding China's international influence to concentrate on developing its domestic economy. Therefore, China also has its own strategic thinking and tactic movements during Inter-Korea summits and Trump-Kim Summits since 2018. The sudden change in Korean Peninsula forced China had to take steps to join in this new game, which China did not want to on the outside in order to watch out the whole process. Therefore, despite a long cooling relations with North Korea, China had to again tighten its ties with North Korea to maintain the balance demonstrated by the frequent meetings including Kim Jong-un's four unofficial visits and Xi Jinping's state visit to Pyongyang, which will be specifically explored in the next chapter.

4. Conclusion

As a determined and goal-oriented great power, China's harsher and more serious

implementation of UN sanctions towards North Korea is well explained by exploring Xi Jinping's leadership. Furthermore, China's tactics towards North Korea was in favor of its own national interest in order to achieve its ambitious objectives proposed since 2012 under the leadership of Xi Jinping. Lastly, China has moved forward towards inclination to deal with North Korea with much flexibility and dynamics, which is the result of China's less ideology-oriented mindset of Sino-North Korea relations, with a far-reaching and expansionary vision under Xi Jinping's leadership. While from North Korea's perspective, Kim Jong Un, the new and young leader also had his own bold and ambitious development roadmap of North Korea. Therefore, Xi Jinping had to make tactic adjustments accordingly in his policymaking.

In addition, it is not hard to conclude that China has made it clear that the determination to safeguard its core interests and showed a more pragmatic approach when calculating the strategic value of North Korea through examining the factors of China's national interests and the strategic value of North Korea. The dramatic change in China's attitude and Sino-North Korea relations from 2017 to 2018 explains well China's calculus based on these two factors in Xi Jinping administration. Firstly, China's primary interest in Korean Peninsula is the consistent three principles as discussed in the Chapter two remained. The most important interest for China in Korean Peninsula is to prevent a potentially very dangerous chain-reaction of nuclear proliferation. China has been trying to avoid North Korea become a severe headache for China even as China could not utilize North Korea as a strategic asset. Furthermore, the emerging frequent interactions between Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-un during Inter-Korean summits and Kim-Trump meetings since 2018 also reveals that the North Korea's presence is even more necessary for China to contain the expanded influence of United States, therefore, China will not abandon North Korea even though the effectiveness of North Korea as a buffer zone is declining.

IV. The key determinants of China's strategic thinking

In the last chapter, six factors from three levels have been examined to explore the determinants of the new characteristics of China's foreign policies towards North Korea under Xi Jinping administration. In this chapter, I argue that China's calculus has been driven by the combination of factors from individual, state, and international level, nevertheless, the international actors have been undoubtedly playing the decisive role in China's policy adjustments. By exploring China-U.S. rivalry and the triangle relations among the United States and two Koreas, it can be concluded that China had flexibly responded to changes in the security environment both at home and abroad and pursued pragmatic and balanced strategies based on stability in Northeast Asia to continue to pursue national interests and national development goals under Xi Jinping. In this chapter, I will further examine how international actors function as the key determinants which force China made its tactical policy adjustments towards North Korea since 2018 to firmly support my argument.

1. The evolving China's foreign policies towards North Korea: the dramatic change from 2017 to 2018

To give a summary of China's evolving foreign policies towards North Korea under Xi Jinping's leadership, it is easy to see that 2017 and 2018 are two important turning points regarding China's attitudes and actions towards North Korea. The transformation of official attitudes, harsher implementation of UN sanctions of China and the deterioration of Sino-DPRK relations shown by criticism of each other through official media demonstrate that we cannot see China's responses to North Korean provocations at the same level as before,

especially after North Korea's sixth nuclear test in 2017. However, after the cooling period in 2017, Sino-DPRK relations appeared to have dramatically gone back to what it used to be since 2018. Xi Jinping seemed to suddenly become interested again to sit together with Kim Jong-un as if nothing had happened to deteriorate the relations between China and North Korea, followed by Kim Jong-un's four unofficial visits to China within one year and Xi Jinping's unprecedented state visit to Pyongyang.

Indeed, China has begun to regain its relationship with North Korea as soon as Kim Jong-un inclined to have meetings with Trump in 2018. According to the statistics of China's exports to North Korea from China customs, the amount of China's food and fertilizer exported to North Korea showed a gradually increasing trend since the early of 2018 and a sharp rise since 2019. China would have mended relations with North Korea if it was not because of the outbreak of COVID-19. According to the latest report, after a year of shutdown, China and North Korea have shown signs of easing restrictions on their border, a year after the country was shut down by the coronavirus.¹¹² China and North Korea are drawing closer to each other again. At The 8th WPK Congress in January 2021, Kim Jong-un acknowledged the state failure of implementing the Five-Year Strategy for the National Economic Development.¹¹³ Because of the cut-off of resources from China since the COVID-19, North Korea's imports and exports from China reduced to almost zero since 2020 which caused huge damage to North Korea's economy. North Korea government has insisted there is not any cases of COVID-19, however, the fragile medical system in North Korea is a great concern and fear for China. Even during the COVID-19, Xi Jinping also expressed that China would provide assistance to help North

¹¹² "N.Korea's coronavirus lockdown shows signs of easing as China trade soars", April 19, 2021, Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/chinas-march-exports-north-korea-spike-six-month-high-2021-04-19/>

¹¹³ "Kim Jong-un acknowledges N. Korea's failure to achieve economic target in WPK Congress speech", Jan 7, 2021, Hankyoreh, http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_northkorea/977814.html

Korea to fight the pandemic through a verbal message delivered to Kim Jong-un.¹¹⁴

Figure 3. China's fertilizer exports to North Korea (in 1000\$)

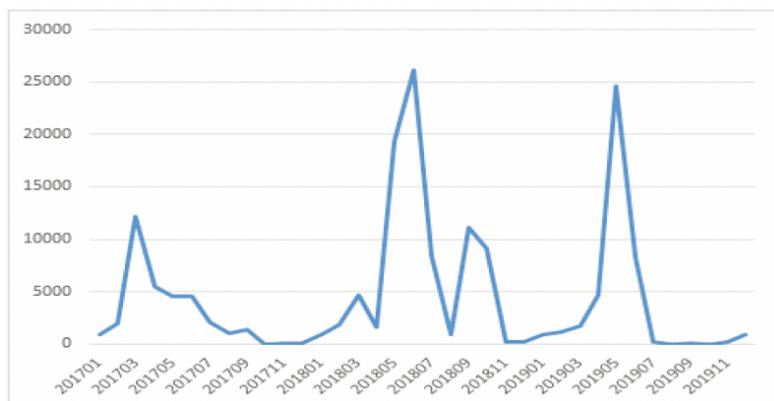
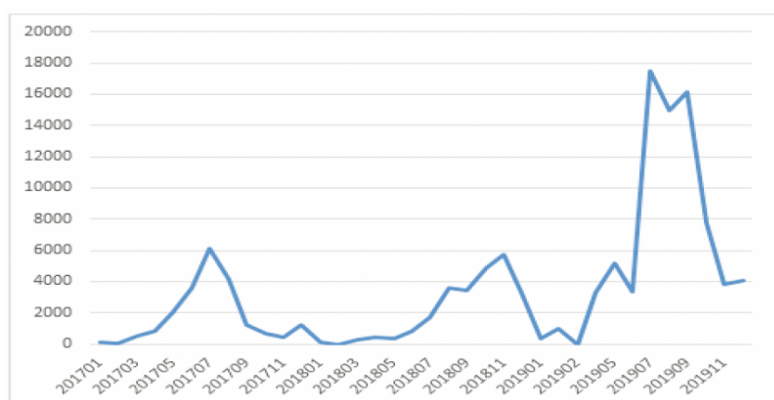


Figure 4. China's rice exports to North Korea (in 1000\$)



Source: China Customs, <http://english.customs.gov.cn>

2. The major determinants of China's policies adjustments

Through the discussion in previous chapters, it is not hard to notice that there was a dramatic shift in Sino-DPRK relations throughout 2017 and 2018. China's reactions to North Korea's nuclear tests evolved from mild to less tolerant and as the statistics of trade volume illustrates,

¹¹⁴ "Coronavirus: China offers to help North Korea fight pandemic", May 9, 2020, BBC News, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-52597749>

relations between the two countries had dropped to the bottom in years. The reasons of why this shift occurred in 2017 are the results of a combination of both internal and external factors, while international factors act as the key determinants to explain the logic.

Domestically, with the impending 19th National Congress in October 2017, China had to display its image as a responsible power by joining the international community to support nuclear nonproliferation by putting pressure on North Korea. Also, Xi Jinping further highlighted China's development strategy in new era which demonstrated his desire to strengthen China's identity as a great power and to secure its core interests. Therefore, China's transformation of official attitudes and harsher implementation of international sanctions towards North Korea are well explained by the ambitious tasks Xi Jinping presented centered on "China's Dream". As an ally, China would no longer let North Korea to slow it down.

In addition, the international environment China faced with was considerably complicated. Since March in 2017, the U.S.-R.O.K alliance started to promote the deployment of the anti-missile defense system THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) in South Korea, a security concern for China which has become the containment strategy targeted to China employed by the U.S. in the region. The bigger concern for China was that the ties between the military alliance of America would be further strengthened in the region. In case the ballistic missile defense system employed in East Asia would further stimulate nuclear arms races in the region, China had to make sure the situation is under control by punishing the trouble created by North Korea's nuclear tests, which can be seen as one of the motivation China suddenly took the international sanctions towards North Korea seriously. However, with the closer connection of America's in the region, China had to quickly started to recover the relationship with North Korea to maintain the balance in the region.

Lastly, China's calculation when managing the North Korea nuclear issue was also affected by the trade dispute triggered by the Trump administration. Beginning in early of 2018, the U.S. imposed global safeguard tariffs on imports of solar panels and washing machines with China as the main manufacturer on January 22. Then the trade dispute began to heat up following the accuse of China's unfair intellectual property rights in trade and the America's threats to raise tariffs on China's exports. Amidst of the exacerbating trade dispute between China and the U.S., China appeared to seek the path to cooperation at the outset to control the potential outbreak of a trade war. On February 27, 2018, Liu He was sent to visit Washington as negotiator to avoid an genuine trade war with the U.S.¹¹⁵ While Trump administration had implied they will no longer accept the trade deficit with China in a meeting with Xi Jinping since the early of 2017. Trump's interview with the Wall Street Journal revealed that Trump once told Xi Jinping that China would have to solve the problem in North Korea if China wanted a deal.¹¹⁶ Therefore, China had to do something to make the U.S. believe that there are still room for them to cooperate, at least they can maintain a cooperative relationship to work together regarding North Korean nuclear issue under the pressure from the United States and under the tension that a trade war would break out at any moment.

Moreover, in terms of the sudden change since 2018, the factors of the leadership of the two leaders and China's calculation of its own national interests and the strategic value of North Korea may contribute to China's policy adjustments to some extent, however, when considering the pattern of the exchanges among leaders of China, the U.S. and North Korea, it is confirmed

¹¹⁵ “中美贸易战时间轴：一场逐渐升温的持久战”，2019.10.9, <https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/world-49986037>

¹¹⁶ Gerard Baker, Carol E. Lee and Michael C. Bender, “Trump Says He Offered China Better Trade Terms in Exchange for Help on North Korea”, April 12, 2017, The Wall Street Journal, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-says-he-offered-china-better-trade-terms-in-exchange-for-help-on-north-korea-1492027556>

that such a transformation of China's foreign policies towards North Korea was also mainly driven by international factors. The reasons for this are the process and results of negotiations and peace talks since 2018 as well as the interplay of the leaders of United States, South Korea, North Korea, and China. In 2018, there were four unofficial visits between Xi Jinping and Kim Jong Un. What's more, another milestone event happened in 2019, which is Xi Jinping's first state visit to North Korea in 14 years after several rounds of Inter-Korea summits and U.S.-North Korea summits in 2018. In this section, the context of such meetings and the causes of the dramatic changes in the pattern of the bilateral visits will be examined.

By examining the pattern of the meetings held between Xi Jinping and Kim Jong Un since 2018, it is not difficult to notice that China has maintained a strategy to keep an eye on the negotiation process to ensure that it does not lose control over the North Korean issue and not be isolated within the DPRK-R.O.K.-U.S. triangle. Xi Jinping has kept updated with Kim Jong-un after each of meeting with the U.S. and South Korea to keep communication and share recent developments. The meetings between Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-un happened right after or before Kim Jong-un talked with Trump and Moon Jae-in, which illustrated that Kim Jong-un was trying to gain China's support and showed his reliance and loyalty on China.

Table 2. Pattern of Sino-DPRK leaders meetings during peace talks in 2018 and 2019

Date	Meetings
2018.3.25~28	Invited by Xi Jinping, Kim Jong-un made first unofficial visit to Beijing.
2018.4.27	Moon Jae-in met with Kim Jong-un in the Joint Security Area in South Korea, with the result of Panmunjom Declaration.
2018.5.7~8	Kim met with Xi Jinping in Dalian (大连).
2018.5.26	The second Moon-Kim meeting in the Joint Security Area.
2018.6.12	2018 North Korea–United States Singapore Summit
2018.6.19~20	Kim's third visit to Beijing within three months.
2018.9.18~20	Moon Jae-in met with Kim Jong-un at Pyongyang.
2019.1.7~10	Kim's fourth visit to Beijing
2019.2.27 ~ 28	2019 North Korea–United States Hanoi Summit
2019.6.20~21	Xi's state visit to North Korea
2019.6.30	2019 Koreas–United States DMZ Summit

Table 3: PRC-DPRK leaders' meetings throughout 2018 and 2019

Kim-Xi meetings	Timing	Main contents
Kim's first visit to China	March 25–28, 2018, a month before Kim Jong-un met with Moon Jae-in at Panmunjom	Emphasis on the importance of Sino-DPRK “Traditional friendship”.
Kim's second visit to China	May 7–8, 2018, two weeks before the second meeting between Kim Jong-un and Moon Jae-in at Panmunjom	Consensus on principles of developing cooperative relations and maintaining frequent meetings.
Kim's third visit to China	June 19–20, 2018, a week after U.S.-North Korea Singapore Summit	Proposal of “Three Never Changes” to strengthen the firm stance of consolidating Sino-DPRK friendship and China's support to North Korea.
Kim's fourth visit to China	January 7–10, 2019, a month before Hanoi Summit	Emphasis again on the strong Sino-DPRK friendship and the willingness to promote the long-term healthy and stable development of Sino-DPRK relations.
Xi's state visit to North Korea, (a response visit to Kim Jong-un's four visits to China)	June 20–21, 2019	Article entitled “Heritage of China-DPRK friendship and reaffirm a new chapter in the new era” (《传承中朝友谊，续写时代新篇章》); Emphasis on the development of Sino-DPRK relations in the future.

The reasons why there was such a dramatic shift in pattern of China-DPRK leaders' meetings can be interpreted as follows: first, the changed situation in Korean Peninsula exceeded China's expectation, therefore Xi Jinping had to move forward quickly to avoid being left out in this game during the inter-Korean summit and the US–DPRK summit in case it would lose its discourse and influence in the North Korean nuclear issue. And second, in the midst of accelerating China-U.S. competition, China might intend to give a signal to U.S. that China still has influence on North Korean issue. Third, the situation on the Korean Peninsula is at a

critical juncture, China was both capable and willing to participate in the negotiation. Fourth, North Korea needs China's support in its nuclear security affairs and still relies heavily on China. And lastly, though not greatly possible, China actively engaged with North Korea in case North Korea would incline to the U.S. and would reach any agreements which is not in favor of China's interests.

While Xi Jinping's visit to Pyongyang can be simply interpreted as a diplomatic ritual—a response visit to Kim's four visits. However, considering the context of the visit— hegemonic competition between the U.S. and China, it was never a coincidence. China was proving to the U.S. that China still had the unquestionable influence on North Korea and North Korea's value as a leverage is still valid, even if they experienced some ups and downs before. Hence, one can see that the international factors—the U.S.-China rivalry and dynamics in the Korean Peninsula played great role in China's attitudes towards North Korea.

More importantly, as one of the major variables, almost every significant shift in US–China relations creates which both uncertainties and incentives, thereby offer momentum for China to adjust its policy concerning North Korean nuclear issue. As an ally, China's security needs for North Korea as a strategic leverage and North Korea's security needs for China are conspicuous and the fact that common threat—the United States ties China and North Korea together is evident, however, the nature and dynamic of this dependence are much more complex and fragile than it appears. Historically, Sino-DPRK alliance was never as close as it might seem. In other words, what truly drives China's policies towards North Korea is the fear of losing leverage to balance the U.S., but not so-called friendship. Nowadays, even if the alliance treaty between China and North Korea is still valid and both China and North Korea will seem to keep maintain the historical ties, it is still dubious that it is a reliable alliance.

There are several dilemmas in this alliance proving the Sino-DPRK alliance to be only some sort of ostensible friendship. First, there is the deficiency of China's security protection. Clearly, China is not a qualified military ally in comparison to the U.S. China not only does not have sufficient structural power to dismantle the US alliance system, but also no intention to confront with the U.S. directly. North Korea is also aware of China's limited security guarantee, which is one of the reasons why China could not contain North Korea's nuclear development. Furthermore, this alliance is also unique in comparison to regular alliance, such as the U.S.-R.O.K alliance due to its insubordinate and freewheeling nature of North Korean regime. Although China does have some unique impact on North Korea compared with other parties, however, Chinese influence on DPRK is not as strong as some have expected. North Korea is not a persuasible ally. Especially under Kim Jong-un's leadership, it is a country full of strong self-reliance and lack of trust that has been trying to reduce economic dependence on China.

Nevertheless, China has better reasons to maintain its influence on North Korea rather than giving it up in the context of competition with the U.S., which explains well why China has maintained flexible policies and a strategy that ranges from one end of "traditional friendship" to another end of "normal state-to-state relationship" when dealing with North Korea, as demonstrated by the dramatic attitude shift since 2018. Chinese leaders have been put in an awkward predicament as long as there is still antagonistic competition with the U.S. When there is less competition in US-China relations, the function of North Korea as a leverage will be weakened. China may contain North Korea purely out of its own national interests and treat it as a "normal state-to-state relationship. However, when the antagonistic competition of US-China relations is intensified, just as the deterioration of relations between China and the U.S. has been triggered by the trade dispute since 2018, it creates opportunities for North Korea to

strengthen its leverage and secure China's attentiveness. North Korea has taken the advantages of China's vulnerability to utilize it into its bargaining leverage. There is not second option for China but has only to remain close relationship with North Korea although China's interests had been immensely damaged by North Korea's nuclear tests. In view of the context China has been in, China must remain a treacherous, but to some extent a valuable ally in the region. At least, as long as China holds influence on North Korea, China has the preventive ability to make sure North Korean nuclear issue is under its control to secure its own national interests.

Given how much China can contribute to the solution of North Korean nuclear issue, it is not hard to conclude that China has limited power to resolve this problem. The more external disturbing factors there are, the more complex the situation becomes, the stronger desire China has to pursue stability and maintain the status quo. Nowadays, Beijing has focused on stability over denuclearization and to some extent, although China officially insists denuclearization. China cannot provide a better solution for now but only to tolerate a nuclear-armed North Korea.

To conclude, the evolving U.S.-China relations and the presence of the triangle relations among U.S.-South Korea and North Korea eventually had an important impact directly or indirectly on the China's policy towards North Korea under Xi Jinping administration, as revealed by the new characteristics of China's foreign policies towards North Korea. To make policy adjustments accordingly, China's North Korea policy and the Korean Peninsula policy had to flexibly respond to changes in the security environment at home and abroad and pursue pragmatic and balanced strategies based on stability in Northeast Asia to continue to pursue national interests and national development goals, especially when a confrontation with the United States is strongly formed in the East Asian region. Therefore, China has to make sure it is involved in this issue to maintain the balance between R.O.K.-U.S. alliance and its security

interests and influence in the region in case that when South Korea shows a serious inclination toward the U.S. or recklessly tries to ride on the U.S., China can utilize North Korea as a leverage to make sure to not lose control of the situation in favor of China's interests.¹¹⁷ Consequently, although the deterioration of Sino-DPRK relations due to China's implementation sanctions towards North Korea in 2017, the variable situation on the Korean Peninsula made China does not want to be excluded. China wanted to keep its voice and influence on the Korean Peninsula, thus, China resumed active communication and revitalized friendly relations with North Korea since 2018.

¹¹⁷ 나영주.(2016). "중국 시진핑 정부의 대북정책과 북핵문제." *민족연구*, 제 65호, 64-91.

V. Conclusion and Future Prospect

Sino-DPRK relationship had experienced several ups and downs under Xi Jinping's leadership and China's foreign policies towards North Korean nuclear issue has evolved further accordingly based on the changes of international situation in East Asia. This paper addresses firstly, "What are the new characteristics of China's foreign policy towards North Korea and Sino-DPRK relations under Xi Jinping?" and secondly, "what are the key factors determining the new characteristics of Sino-DPRK relations and China's policies towards North Korea under Xi Jinping's administration?". I first examined the characteristics of China's foreign policies towards North Korean nuclear issue by exploring China's responses to each of nuclear tests conducted by North Korea since 2013, after Xi Jinping took power. Then I discussed six factors, including internal and external factors, to figure out the determinants of China's policy adjustments. Finally, I have analyzed in great details the turning points of China's policies towards North Korea and the main reasons behind it.

In terms of the first research question, an exhaustive examination of the change in nature of Chinese official statements and the flows of trade volumes between two countries and China's implementation of UN sanctions, as well as the pattern of high-level exchanges between two sides throughout 2013 to 2019 demonstrates that there are both continuity and transformation regarding the new characteristics of China's foreign policies towards North Korea in Xi's era.

First, China seems to have not changed its essence on the fundamental policies towards the North Korea under Xi Jinping administration regarding nuclear issue. The three principles of China's policy on the Korean Peninsula remained unchanged until today, including realizing denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, insisting on settling all relevant issues through

dialogues and negotiations and adhering to the consistent and firm position of maintaining peace and stability in the Korean Peninsula and the whole region. With regard to China-North Korea relations, China maintained an alliance strategy with North Korea within the spectrum of “traditional friendship” and “normal state-to-state relations” with regard to Sino-DPRK relationship, which remain unchanged. China has applied a flexible strategy which it has attempted to maintain Sino-DPRK relations into a very beneficial strategy with the nature of minimizing the burden from North Korea and maximizing the national interest of China, which China can choose under certain circumstances.

Nevertheless, China’s foreign policies towards North Korea under Xi Jinping administration is also undergoing a transformation. In other words, China has adjusted its approach to North Korea in the wake of the nuclear tests. Since 2012, China has made several important tactical adjustments. Firstly, China began to not refuse to put pressure on North Korea in order to achieve the ultimate goal—stabilization and denuclearization of Korean Peninsula. The official attitude of China towards North Korea had been gradually shifting from mild and cautious to tougher and less tolerant, illustrated by the more serious and harsher implementation of UN sanctions towards North Korea. Secondly, China made full use of its strategy which labels Sino-DPRK relationship within a spectrum from “traditional friendships” to “normal state-to-state relations”. Such an ambiguous and uncertain policy explains well the dramatic shift of Sino-DPRK relations from deterioration before 2017 to friendship since 2018. Lastly, instead of ideology-oriented strategy, China’s core national interests which serves the economic development as a primary calculus of China’s policy formation towards North Korean nuclear issue.

As to the second research question, six factors from individual, state and international level

were examined to explore the determinants of the new characteristics of China's foreign policies towards North Korea under Xi Jinping administration which reveal that all factors contribute to China's policymaking regarding North Korea while international factors functioning as the key determinants. On the individual level, under the far-reaching and expansive leadership of Xi Jinping and a new and young leader who also has his own audacious and ambitious development roadmap of North Korea, China's tactics towards North Korea was in favor of its own national interest in order to achieve its ambitious objectives to reinforce its Great Power identity proposed since 2012 and China had to make tactic adjustments accordingly in his policymaking. On the state level, China has made it clear that the determination to safeguard its core interests and showed a more pragmatic approach when calculating the strategic value of North Korea. On the international level, the factors of China-U.S. rivalry and the triangle relations among the United States and two Koreas reveal that China had to flexibly respond to changes in the security environment at home and abroad and China has pursued practical and balanced strategies based on stability in Northeast Asia to continue to secure national interests and national development goals under Xi Jinping administration.

It is safe to conclude that the Sino-America rivalry and the triangle among the U.S.-R.O.K.-DPRK function as the key determinants in China's policy calculations when dealing with North Korean nuclear issue. The two main twists in 2017 and 2018 as well as the flexible strategy with both continuity and transformation under Xi Jinping's leadership are well explained by the changing situation in Korean Peninsula and the exacerbating competition between two great powers in the region. China has therefore taken account of these factors in managing the relations with North Korea, which demonstrates China's malleable and flexible strategy towards North Korea.

In the foreseeable future, it is very likely that China's policy will continue struggle with supporting denuclearization of Korean Peninsula while China has to reluctantly accept the fact of North Korea as a nuclear-armed neighbor. There is no other alternative for China but to secure the survival of North Korea. The best scenario for China on the Korean Peninsula is as follows: through peaceful dialogue, North Korea will give up its nuclear program and receive security assurances at the same time; North Korea will strengthen relations and establish normal diplomatic ties with ROK, Japan, and the U.S.; then on that basis, the armistice mechanism on the Korean Peninsula will be replaced by a peace mechanism; North Korea will, in light of its own national conditions and other countries' experiences, reform and open up to develop its economy and improve its people's living and truly move out of isolation; the North and South will ultimately achieve independent and peaceful reunification after a fairly long period of sound interaction. However, given the factors discussed above, it is unlikely that such a scenario will be achieved in the foreseeable future. The possible breakthrough could lie on the cooperation of both China and the United States which is also seemingly tricky. This issue cannot be solved without the cooperation of China and the United States which requires strategic mutual trust between the two major powers.

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국문초록

이 논문은 “중국의 대북 외교정책의 새로운 특성이 무엇인가?”를 비롯해 “시진핑 정부 들어 북중관계의 새로운 특성과 중국의 대북 정책의 결정요인이 무엇이며” 이 두 가지 연구 질문으로 한 연구다.

연구결과는 첫째, 시진핑 시대의 중국의 대북 외교정책의 새로운 특징에 대한 지속한 점과 전환한 면이 동시에 존재한다는 점이다. 한편, 중국은 북핵 문제와 관련해 시진핑 정부 들어 대북 정책에 대한 기본 원칙을 유지한 반면 중국은 북한 여러 차례 핵실험 이후 대북 접근 방식을 조정한 것으로 보인다. 특히, 2012 년 이후 중국은 몇 가지 중요한 전술적 조정이 있었듯이 아주 탄력적인 전략을 유지해왔다. 또한, 시진핑 시대 중국 외교정책의 새로운 특징의 결정요인과 2018 년 이후 북중관계의 급격히 변화한 원인을 규명하기 위해 개인§국가§국제적 세가지 차원의 6 가지 요소를 점검한 결과, 중국은 변화된 국제환경과 한반도 국세에 따라 전술적 조정을 해야 했던 것으로 나타났고 국제적 요인인 미중경쟁과 한국-미국-북한 삼각관계가 중국의 대북 정책 조정에 있어 결정적인 역할을 했다고 본다.

키워드: 중국 대북정책, 핵실험, 북한, 북중관계

학번: 2018-20345