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## 9 Xi's Belt: Chinese-North Korean Relations

*Adam Cathcart and Christopher Green*

Symbols are an important facet of political life and diplomatic strategy for any modern state. Performing the role of leader of the People's Republic of China, Xi Jinping clearly recognizes the power of symbolic acts, as well as the need for rhetorically updated frameworks, in Chinese diplomacy.<sup>1</sup> Xi's characterizations of Chinese foreign policy under his leadership are numerous, and each one, if implemented with the necessary vigour, could bring about a shift in relations with Pyongyang. This chapter will consider Xi's most significant foreign policy framework, the "One Belt, One Road", and apply it to an examination of empirical developments in Sino-North Korean relations.

It is clear that linkages with Pyongyang, both symbolic and practical, have grown frayed under Xi's rule.<sup>2</sup> Summit meetings, or their absence, are a common means of measuring this phenomenon. Xi has not met North Korean leader Kim Jong-un once during more than four years of Kim's rule, yet he has seen South Korean President Park Geun-hye with some frequency and apparent enthusiasm. We should not overplay this; Kim Jong-un's father and predecessor, Kim Jong-il only made his first official visit to China as North Korean leader in 2000, six years after taking power following his own father, Kim Il-sung's death in July 1994. Nevertheless, it is significant that Xi's highest-ranking interlocutors from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) thus far have been Choe Ryong-hae and Ri Su-yong, and not the leader himself. Both Choe and Ri are trusted confidants of the leader and important officials in their own right, certainly, but they are by no means heads of state or in possession of independent authority.<sup>3</sup>

In the commercial realm, Chinese trade with the DPRK on Xi's watch has been robust by North Korean standards but paltry by Chinese metrics.<sup>4</sup> Once again looking toward South Korea more frequently than the North, Xi has gone out of the way to meet with large groups of powerful South Korean CEOs in Beijing, and took a delegation of more than one hundred Chinese business leaders to Seoul in 2014.<sup>5</sup> This focus is hardly surprising when we consider that, in 2012, US\$ 942 million of Chinese FDI flowed into the Republic of Korea, while US\$ 5.4 billion of Korean money flowed the other way.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, Xi has left officials in the provinces of Liaoning and Jilin to bear the disappointment of disquieting silence from their cross-border North Korean counterparts. And bear it they have: Liaoning suffered a considerable downturn in the first quarter of 2016, with the gross domestic product of the province falling 1.3 percent in the period amidst a noteworthy fall in FAI, or fixed asset investment (a 48.7 percent year-on-year decline over the same three months). This makes Liaoning an outlier in the Chinese context; all other provinces recorded FAI growth. North Korea is of course not the only reason for this drastic decline in Liaoning Province's economic fortunes, but it does highlight the way in which stilted relations between the two ostensibly friendly states indubitably acts as a negative drag on China's strategic plan to develop its northeast.<sup>7</sup>

Simultaneously, China has been maneuvered into the position of voting in favor of placing sanctions against North Korea at the United Nations and, as a result, has incurred international criticism for its lax enforcement of restrictions along the mountainous shared border that divides the two states.<sup>8</sup> North Korea's nuclear programme has similarly been an area of great contention. Xi warned obliquely about North Korea “throwing the region into chaos for selfish gains”, and a number of Chinese generals have published open speculation about North Korean collapse, the plausibility of Western attacks on the DPRK, and the possibility of ecological contamination due to nuclear incidents or accidents.<sup>9</sup>

China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi's formulation of China-DPRK relations as being “a normal state-to-state relationship with a deep tradition of friendship” encapsulates what China wishes to promote as the ‘new normal’ with North Korea under the leadership of Xi Jinping. The relationship between China and North Korea had previously rested on unique Party-to-Party foundations, but this is no longer so, as seen in the elevation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs vis-à-vis the CCP International Liaison Department (ILD). The ILD has not been completely sidelined in Beijing's ties with the Workers' Party of Korea—China's ambassadors to Pyongyang are all of ILD lineage, and the institution remains an important if intermittent interlocutor—but it no longer holds an institutional monopoly on cross-border relations.<sup>10</sup>

Given the prevailing circumstances previously outlined, it behooves us to return to the question of Xi Jinping's signature foreign policy framework, “One Belt, One Road”, or OBOR. Specifically, it is crucial to examine the extent to which OBOR coheres with practical actions toward North Korea on the ground.<sup>11</sup> As we shall see, the findings of this chapter show genuine discord between the rhetorical strategy and the responses of North Korea to that framework. That there is a gap between rhetoric and reality can easily be seen from travel to the frontier between the two states. It may not be immediately apparent, but it could be that China's position in world politics as a global stakeholder is, in the end, entirely incompatible with its traditional relationship with Pyongyang.

The first part of this essay employs the OBOR concept in its most conventional understanding—infrastructure, inter-cultural relations, and trade beyond national frontiers—to assess developments in China-North Korea relations in the era of Xi Jinping and, in Pyongyang, Kim Jong-un. The second part examines OBOR in terms of linkages between the two ruling parties.

### ***Belt one: infrastructure, economics and inter-cultural relations***

At the moment of its unveiling in the autumn of 2013, China and Xi Jinping's signature OBOR initiative brought renewed vitality to the analytical table. *Inter alia*, it constituted an opportunity for the practical re-imagining of relations along the Yalu and Tumen rivers that form the shared border between North Korea and China. At the same time, it provided outside observers with a lever by which to peek under the hood at what Sino-North Korea ties are really like behind the standard hum of low-intensity propaganda. The resulting view was multifaceted:

moments of focus, pragmatic with moments of dogma, and primarily forward looking but occasionally tangled up in historical wrongs both perceived and real.

Needless to say, economic plans had been on the agenda long before 2013—indeed, they have been on Beijing's global agenda for four decades. In the context of economic relations with the DPRK, a number of bilateral economic developments were launched after a landmark visit to Pyongyang by then-Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao in October 2009, most of which were due to come to fruition in the period surrounding Kim Jong-un's ascent to power in North Korea.<sup>12</sup> In particular, Chinese capital and engineering know-how combined with North Korean labor on the construction of a huge, and hugely symbolic, bridge across the Yalu River to the west of the old downtown core of Dandong and Sinuiju, now clearly visible from many places in the North Korean border city. North Korea also set about constructing a paved road all the way from Sinuiju south to where it was originally intended to culminate, the juncture of the Pyongyang-Huichon Highway and existing National Road No. 1 meet north of Anju. A second agreement was reportedly signed that would (in theory, at least) result in the construction of a high-speed rail link between Beijing and Kaesong via Pyongyang, although this appears somewhat closer to speculation than reality.<sup>13</sup>

With English- and (South) Korean-language media attention diverted in the direction of Kim Jong-un's absence from the public eye in September and October 2014, China and North Korea remained as open for business as they had ever been.<sup>14</sup> Provincial officials in Liaoning expressed excitement over a new tourist route to the DPRK's Tongnim County, and a handful of small new tourist ventures opened in the Tumen River valley. The Third Annual Sino-North Korean Trade Fair also went ahead as planned from 16-20 October 2014 in Dandong.<sup>15</sup> As one of the authors noted at the time:

Last year's fair can be counted as a success [...] a big opening gala in Dandong included a performance by the Mansudae Arts Troupe, which was a sure signal (if an indirect one), that Kim Jong-un approved of the bilateral fair and attached importance to it. This year, the Samjiyeon Ensemble of the Mansudae Arts Troupe seems the most likely group to represent North Korea's large performing arts sector. Speaking from the standpoint of Party culture in both DPRK and PRC, Kim Jong-un could make a strong statement about his desire to improve relations with China by attending a test concert of the Arts Troupe ensemble before it goes to Dandong (as he did before the Unhasu Orchestra went to France), but given recent events, this seems highly unlikely. A small arts troupe from Dalian travelled to North Korea earlier this year, but cultural exchanges between the two countries are down significantly from their 2010-2011 high. Apart from getting a large North Korean ensemble onto Chinese soil, the main achievement of the fair in culture will probably be to sell yet more North Korean landscape and nature paintings to Chinese collectors.<sup>16</sup>

China was seemingly not keen to be deterred by stuttering relations in the lee of the execution of a senior North Korean official, Jang Song-taek, shortly after the revealing of the OBOR framework in December 2013. A few months after the trade fair, in May 2015 Ambassador Li Jinjun set about explaining OBOR to a

delegation of North Korean officials led by Vice-Foreign Minister Ri Gil-song.<sup>1</sup> Few specifics of the discussion subsequently emerged into the public domain.

One of the problems with describing the CCP approach to provincial leadership and the role of the provinces in bilateral ties is that North Korean partners are both opaque and not entirely reliable. Nevertheless, the clues are out there, and all the evidence suggests that by this point bilateral problems had already begun to emerge. The trade fair in Dandong, in particular, can only be termed a failure. The North Korean side sent a small and low-powered delegation; no individual or musical ensemble associated with Kim Jong-un made the trip at all, and the ranking of those Sinuiju city and North Pyongan provincial officials in attendance was not high.<sup>1</sup> Nor did the North Korean delegation get a warm welcome; everything they brought into China was put through a security scanner at the train station.<sup>1</sup>

Buttressing this assessment is the fact that in spite of the signing of a number of statements on investment interest in Dandong, immediately upon the completion of the trade fair, China began to complain openly about North Korea not having held up its side of the bargain on the all-important signature piece of infrastructure between Dandong and Sinuiju. The bridge on the outskirts of Dandong-Sinuiju is now firmly established as a symbol of bilateral relations under Xi Jinping—and not (yet, at least) in a positive sense. It is still not in use as of early 2016; in fact, satellite imagery clearly shows that on the North Korean side, the complete bridge is not even connected to the national road network, and a field visit by the authors in April 2016 revealed a lone guard overseeing access to the bridge on the Chinese side, where the bottom four floors of a twenty-floor building are intended to house Chinese customs authorities.

In one *Huanqiu Shibao* (Global Times) article on the subject, a Chinese real estate investor reports feeling “hopeless” after betting that the North Koreans would follow through on work on their side of the bridge. Without this connection to the Korean peninsula, the article implies, Dandong’s Xinchengqu (“New City District”), which lies at the terminus of the bridge, is doomed to remain economically flat, its modern high-rise apartments gathering dust.<sup>17</sup> A Chinese construction boss perhaps referring to the slowdown brought about by the purge of Jang Song-taek in December 2013, noted that “due to all sorts of reasons, the original plan for construction was delayed by a year’s time”.<sup>18</sup>

North Korea’s apparent disinterest in fulfilling this highly symbolic obligation contrasts unfavourably with work in the leisure construction sector in Pyongyang.<sup>19</sup> It is easy to see this as a kind of implicit insult to China. North Korea is evidently capable of the construction work required; it has the necessary resources when it wishes to use them. Chinese officials can speak at length about the benefits to the North Korean consumer economy that would stem from a new bridge, and the largesse that would flow into and from a thriving Special Economic Zone at Hwanggeumbyeong, but that doesn’t by any means necessarily lead to action.<sup>20</sup>

However, it would be wrong to be lulled into thinking relations are at a standstill. Business in Dandong utilizing North Korean labour continues; according to South Korean scholar Kim Byong-yon, approximately 30 percent of all China-North Korea trade is done in Dandong, more than in the entirety of the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture put together, where approximately 20 percent takes place. In 2011, a total of 188,306 North Korean citizens legally visited Dandong. Employment visa applications are granted readily, at least for people in the textiles, food and drink, and IT sectors, as long as the number of North Korean employees in a given firm is no greater than 20 percent of the whole.<sup>21</sup>

Kang Ju-won, a South Korean anthropologist who spent 15 months in Dandong in the mid-2000s, characterizes the city as a second Kaesong Industrial Complex, a liminal borderland territory where the May 24th Measures, the punitive sanctions brought in by the South Korean government following the sinking of a ROK Navy vessel by a North Korean torpedo in March 2010, have “no effect.” There are an estimated 20,000 North Koreans in the city, he believes, mostly labouring in Chinese-run enterprises manufacturing “high-end suits” and other goods for export.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, as the bridge shows, supplying human resources may be one thing, but grand projects requiring investments of political as well as financial capital are a completely different matter.

North Korean politics is the primary stumbling block toward regional integration. However, it is worth noting that like Jilin, its neighbor to northeast, Liaoning province acquired a whole new batch of provincial officials in the second half of 2015. These kinds of changes tend also to restrict productive interactions because links have traditionally been maintained along network lines. One of the more senior new officials is Bing Zhigang, China’s most senior member of the “Management Committee for the Hwanggumpyeong Island Economic Zone with DPRK” and the man with oversight over import and export inspections across the province, including the port of Dandong.<sup>23</sup>

Bing has a rather unique background, in part because he has been anchored in the northeast continuously within a Party structure that usually promotes staff through cross-regional movement. He is a Liaoning native, born in 1957 near Yingkou. Like Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang, he came of age during the Cultural Revolution. From 1975-78, he worked in the Liaohe oilfields in the director’s office, then he worked his way up in the Liaoning province taxation bureau, adding a few Party organizations to his credenza, and has been the vice-governor of Liaoning since 2010. It is unique to carve out an entire career in a single province and avoid accusations of corruption in the process.

Bing used to make a habit of meeting with Chinese members of the Hwanggumpyeong Island SEZ, another joint project between China and the DPRK that remains to this day little more than farmland on the outskirts of Dandong’s new city district. However, these meetings were rarely if ever attended by North Korean counterparts. Whilst waiting for North Korea to reinvigorate the zombie Six-Party Talks, we can now also await their return to this committee overseeing the (non-)development of the Hwanggeumpyeong zone.

In summary, whilst some of the core infrastructural manifestations of China's "One Belt, One Road" strategy along the North Korean frontier verge on the collapsed, China's resolve to push for them seems to remain, if only to help push development in and around Dandong. Seemingly unfazed by the desolation that one feels when visiting the Hwanggeumpyeong area, a zone official claimed that spring 2016 would bring more action on the ground as additional businesses received licenses to trade there. In much the same way, North Korean state employees remain publicly bullish about the prospects for Sinuiju and the surrounding area.<sup>24</sup> Only time will tell whether there is truth in either claim, but as of May-June 2016, direct observation suggests few reasons for hope.

If anything, the Dandong-Sinuiju area has regressed somewhat since Xi came to the helm in Beijing, with cracks in the old colonial bridge over the Yalu acting as a potent symbol of faltering attempts to drive economic interactions forward.<sup>25</sup> Amid all the new mock-ups, architectural plans and hype over a trade zone whose tax-free rules apply only to Chinese living within 20 km of Dandong, the New Yalu River Bridge, arguably the one piece of infrastructure that probably would put trade cooperation onto a new level of, as Xi himself would put it, "healthy relations", lies determinedly idle.

This sense of stasis—moving neither forward nor back, building a bridge but not opening it, opening a trade fair but barely attending it—does not actually go down well in China, where there is an understandable desire to feel as if the relationship has changed or that the way it is discussed (the parameters of discourse) have changed fundamentally. The same can be said of local North Korean officials, who have plans of their own but lack the capital to implement them. However, the security services on both sides of the border probably see continuity as the order of the day, and are prepared to continue in the present situation indefinitely, even though it hurts Liaoning (and likely Jilin) provinces directly. We are witnessing a balancing act, wherein Chinese CCP scholars like Zhang Liangui can rage about North Korea's refusal to return to Six-Party Talks or desire to be a nuclear state, but the CCP itself does not impose further sanctions and the objection appears to be largely rhetorical, if steadfastly so. This equilibrium is carefully managed by China, and even in the lee of the January 2016 nuclear test, there is little chance of Beijing strangling Pyongyang.<sup>26</sup>

### ***Belt two: party to party linkages and friendship***

Symbols matter more than normal when a bilateral relationship is in transition, as it has been for China and North Korea for the last four years. There is the need to update relations, to put a new face on an old problem, but also to show the outside world that things continue on and that the new ruler on either side is in full control of events (even if/when he is not). Where a close reading of the economy indicates a fractious form of stasis, politically it is important to signal unity.

The two nominally communist parties of China and North Korea attach great significance to the symbolism of Sino-DPRK relations. Analysts and netizens tend to loudly wring their hands over KWP First Secretary Kim Jong-un's failure to travel to Beijing for an earnest bilateral meeting with CCP General Secretary

Xi Jinping, but a great deal of symbolic currency is still being simultaneously spent—in particular by the Chinese side—to embody how stable the bilateral relationship continues to be, irrespective of the lack of direct meetings between Kim and Xi.<sup>27</sup> Zhou Yongkang's appearance next to Kim Jong-un at the young leader's debut on the dais in Pyongyang in October 2010 was a case in point of such symbolic unity, as was propaganda chief Liu Yunshan's appearance in the same location in October 2015.

Partly as a consequence of its importance, the symbolic rhythm of China's relations with North Korea is bound to feature moments of flux and negativity; in truth, far too much ink is spilt and column inches devoted to problematizing trivial bilateral quibbles. Nevertheless, even on those occasions when practical explanations may lie close at hand, one cannot always avoid the sense that something has gone missing since the passing of Kim Jong-il in 2011. Choe Ryong-hae's placement vis-à-vis Xi Jinping on the dais at Tiananmen Square on September 3, 2015 showed the Chinese leader appearing to bestow greater favour on South Korean leader Park Geun-hye than China's traditional northern ally, for instance.<sup>28</sup> The public humiliation of Jang Song-taek and his abrupt execution—in part for selling minerals too cheaply to China, or so argued the court judgment against him—in December 2013 was another moment of symbolic distance between the two regimes, for Jang had been a close and regular interlocutor with more sympathetic ears in Beijing.<sup>29</sup>

Whereas United States politicians and officials are constantly calling on China to be more explicit in its public rebuffs of North Korea, the Chinese news media has taken a diametrically oppositional style.<sup>30</sup> Trips taken by Wu Dawei, China's special representative for Korean Peninsula Affairs, like those of other Chinese diplomats, are rarely used by China to declare the efficacy of the PRC's line of diplomacy with North Korea. Diplomats go to Pyongyang to 'confer' or 'consult' with the North Koreans, with whom they 'exchange views' and that is the end of it. Silence thereafter predominates; angry, triumphant, or mildly cautionary opinion-editorials in the People's Daily rarely accompany visits below the Politburo level, and the status quo is concisely maintained.

High-level diplomacy, on the other hand, is played up heavily, and needs to be watched rather more carefully for small gestures and verbal cues. The sit-down bilateral headed by Kim Jong-un and Liu Yunshan in October 2015 was a case in point. At least in the biased reporting of North Korean television, the meeting was dominated by the DPRK Supreme Leader, who held forth extemporaneously about, it is alleged, traditional friendship.

At the time, Kim received a letter from Xi Jinping in a burgundy folder embossed with the universal Communist Party symbol. Given that the letter was handed over without it having been checked first, it can be assumed that the document was pre-approved. While North Korean media tends to be quite forthcoming about strong ties to the DPRK where other nations are concerned, a letter from Xi Jinping is interpreted within a careful framework of equality or respect.

On 9 October 2015, Choe Ryong-hae led a bilateral meeting with Liu Yunshan and the delegation from Beijing shortly after the latter's arrival in the North



Korean capital, prior to Kim Jong-un doing the same, and then played host at a reception for the visitors. Choe has been representing the Kim government in its diplomatic dealings with China and Russia since at least May 2013.<sup>31</sup> He apparently received what one report called “red carpet treatment” in Beijing in early September too, including face time with an unnamed but prominent Chinese official during a brief stopover in Shenyang en route.<sup>32</sup> Analytic focus on the false dichotomy of Park Geun-hye’s comparative prominence on the Beijing podium allowed Choe’s practical accomplishments to pass by totally unnoticed, but he does seem to have executed his responsibilities to the satisfaction of the North Korean side.<sup>33</sup>

The only marked difference in Pyongyang this time was the clothing; Choe no longer has a formal military affiliation, and appeared in the sober business suit of a party secretary. This sartorial detail has no impact on his symbolic authority in this instance, however.<sup>34</sup> His position seated at Kim Jong-un’s left hand for the 70th anniversary torchlight parade in Pyongyang on the evening of October 10, 2015 provided a clear demonstration of the status his family line generates, especially in dealings with China, of whom Choe’s father was a “de facto member of the Chinese Communist Party”.<sup>35</sup> DPRK news covered the Choe bilateral meeting with Liu with around five seconds of footage, but the North Korean viewing public was not meant to be the audience (it is China).

The Chinese official readout on the bilateral meeting identified Choe as a member of the Korean Workers’ Party Central Committee Politburo, and the Central Secretary of the Party.<sup>36</sup> Liu Yunshan conveyed to him a certain satisfaction that “the Korean Workers’ Party and people have seen the domain of their economy and people’s livelihood obtain new heights under the leadership of First Secretary Kim Jong-un”.<sup>37</sup> After Liu summarized the content of Xi Jinping’s letter to Kim Jong-un and received a response, Choe Ryong-hae noted his impressions of China as a result of having been invited to the 70th anniversary of victory in the War of Anti-Japanese Resistance and the Global Anti-Fascist War. The Chinese release quoted him as saying that “I saw and felt for myself the vigorous momentum of China’s development” while in Beijing for the September 3 event. Choe then “sincerely wished that China will achieve new successes in constructing a moderately prosperous society”. Choe proceeded to agree with Liu’s statements about the need for calm in relations with South Korea, which would benefit “world and regional stability,” noting that “there are no problems we [Koreans] cannot solve” and that peace would aid in a more prosperous environment for economic development.

There was no explicit mention at all of economic cooperation or cross-border security discussions between the two sides, but Choe’s meeting with Liu notably consisted of “both sides informing the other of the current internal situation” in their respective countries, which would presumably include economic matters. If there was a moment during which recent cross-border violence was addressed (and there was a People’s Liberation Army representative in the room, to be sure), this would have been it.<sup>38</sup>

A day later on October 11, Liu travelled north to Anju in order to lay a wreath at the Chinese Peoples Volunteers cemetery, a traditional site of pilgrimage for CCP

leaders visiting North Korea (not least as it houses the tomb of Mao Anying, Chairman Mao Zedong's son who was killed in the Korean War) but which is, like the bust of Zhou Enlai in Hamhung, resolutely downplayed by the North Korean side. Liu's trip to the cemetery had been prepped by a visit a month prior by the PRC Embassy in Pyongyang, and his remarks there, as he said, "represented Chairman Xi Jinping" in their gratitude for the work done by North Korean colleagues to keep up the site, as well as a similar monument in Kaesong. About 200 Chinese were in attendance, ranging from diplomats and Chinese investors to overseas students; no North Korean counterparts were listed as attending. Not content to recall the Korean War only as a symbol of Sino-North Korean comradeship, Liu Yunshan insisted that the sacrifices made by Chinese soldiers in Korea should enjoin the living today to "actively promote economic development, improving the people's livelihood, and work together to promote the peaceful development of Asia and the world". The Chinese official summary about this section of the trip further mentioned that Liu had at some point earlier in his trip made a stop at the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun, the mausoleum of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il in Pyongyang, to similarly pay his respects.

Liu Yunshan's itinerary for the final day of his journey was not clear, but open sources suggest that he had at least one more public meeting with a ranking North Korean official, that being Kim Yong-nam. According to the Chinese summary of the meeting, Liu told the elderly Korean statesman that "it has been a long time between my visits to North Korea, and this time I've seen so many friendly people and changes, realizing that the successes of North Korean socialist construction have been not few, and this makes us truly happy".<sup>39</sup> Liu then added that the CCP wanted to see North Korea's people and government "deepen a path of development suitable to this country's national spirit" under Kim Jong-un's steady leadership. Some discussion of "win-win" development also ensued, along with the usual reminders of the need to maintain regular channels of high-level communication, push economic and trade cooperation, and strengthen cultural and people-to-people ties.

## ***Conclusion***

To Chinese officials at all levels, the period from 2009, when Wen Jiabao visited Pyongyang, to the summer of 2013 must seem like a long-lost halcyon age. Having watched Marshal Ri Yong-ho purged and the door to a reformist breeze fall ajar in Pyongyang, they will recall that Jang Song-taek, an undisputed North Korean heavyweight, was in China in August 2012, giving assurances and signing documents to the effect that North Korea was genuinely interested in Chinese advice and, more importantly, in reforming its economy at places like Hwanggeumbyeong. Indeed, Jang himself almost certainly was interested in such things. He is remembered as one of the primary advocates of keeping the Kaesong Industrial Complex, a symbol of economic cooperation between the two Koreas. It seems no exaggeration to say that what Jang saw in the elevation of Kim Jong-un was his chance to decisively impact North Korea's economy.<sup>40</sup>

Fast forward to the end of August 2013, though, and the two sides lived through the bumpiest year in Sino-North Korean relations since 1992, the year China normalized relations with South Korea to Pyongyang's great chagrin. Choe Ryong-hae's visit to Beijing in May 2013 did see the "special envoy" express Kim Jong-un's "support for China's efforts to restart Six-Party-type talks," and in late July 2013, China sent Li Yuanchao from the CCP Politburo (though not a member of the all-powerful Standing Committee) to speak plainly to Kim Jong-un at the long negotiating table, but the young North Korean leader decided it was best merely to bring an interpreter and Kim Kye-gwan while the negotiating aspect of the visit was downplayed in the local press. Moreover, on 25 August 2013, Pyongyang undertook a propaganda push to further solidify the "Songun (military-first) policy" by declaring the "Day of Songun," which became an occasion for Kim Jong-un to offer a long discursive lecture on the great importance of his father's legacy, while noting the justice of the "parallel line" of developing nukes and economy simultaneously. This was not music to Chinese ears.

Though the two sides reprised a display of unity in Pyongyang in October 2015, this hardly served to disguise bilateral problems that are cast into sharp relief when looking at events from the economic angle. Where possible the two sides willingly work in tandem, as in the case of North Korean labour employed by Chinese businesses in Dandong and other border towns and cities, but this has become increasingly rare since 2013.

In such a bilateral environment, it is impractical to imagine the OBOR foreign policy initiative taking off in this particular corner of Northeast Asia. The idyllic bilateral positivity of the Kim-Wen meeting in Pyongyang in October 2009 came long before the OBOR initiative was announced, but in truth it may represent the 21<sup>st</sup> century high-water mark for bilateral relations between the PRC and DPRK. North Korea and China are, for now, travelling on different tracks.

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<sup>1</sup> Weixing Hu, "Xi Jinping's 'Big Power Diplomacy' and China's Central National Security Commission (CNSC)," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 25, Issue 98 (2016), 163-177.

<sup>2</sup> Ohn Daewon & Mason Richey, China's Evolving Policy towards the Democratic People's Republic of Korea under Xi Jinping, *Asian Studies Review*, 39:3 (2015), 483-502.

<sup>3</sup> Ankit Panda, "Where do China and North Korea Stand in 2015?", *The Diplomat* (2015) <http://thediplomat.com/2015/09/where-do-china-and-north-korea-stand-in-2015/>; see also Adam Cathcart, "Assessing North Korea's Ground Game with China", *The Diplomat* (2015) <http://thediplomat.com/2015/08/assessing-north-koreas-ground-game-with-china/>.

<sup>4</sup> James Reilly, "China's Economic Engagement in North Korea," *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 220 (2015), 915-935.

<sup>5</sup> "Xi Jinping arrives in Seoul with huge business delegation as Beijing aims to boost trade ties," *South China Morning Post*, July 3, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> United Nations Conference on Trade and Development bilateral FDI statistics, downloadable at <http://unctad.org/en/Pages/DIAE/FDI%20Statistics/FDI-Statistics-Bilateral.aspx>. Accessed August 9, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> "Plunge in Liaoning's FAI an individual case: report," *Xinhua*, August 1, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Dingli Shen, "Can Sanctions Stop Proliferation?" *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (Summer 2008) 89-100; Jane Perlez and Yufan Huang, "A Hole in North Korean Sanctions Big Enough for Coal, Oil and Used Pianos," *New York Times*, 1 April 2016.

<sup>9</sup> North Korea's subterranean nuclear test site at Kilju County lies a few tens of kilometres from the shared border with China, and the country's most recent test in January 2016 yielded reports of broad cracks appearing in a school playground in Yanji, the capital of the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture that borders the DPRK to the east of Mt. Paektu. See Adam Cathcart,

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“Understanding China’s Response to North Korean Missile, Nuclear Tests”, *China Brief*, Vol. 16, Issue 5 (2016), 11-14.

<sup>10</sup> Liu Zhen, “Former minister appointed as key point man in China’s diplomacy with North Korea,” *South China Morning Post*, 26 November, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Cheng Xiaohe, “China’s Northeast Asia Policy in the Xi Jinping Era,” *SERI Quarterly*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Apr 2013): 22-29.

<sup>12</sup> For the purpose of economic and political analysis of the DPRK, we consider the “Kim Jong-un era” in North Korean politics to have started in January 2009, when Kim was decisively selected to succeed his father Kim Jong-il. For more on Wen’s visit to Pyongyang, see: “Chinese premier visits North Korea,” *Associated Press*, October 4, 2009. An extremely detailed compendium review of Korean Central News Agency articles pertaining to the visit and the bilateral agreement(s) that it yielded is available via Sino-NK. See: SINO-NK.COM, KOREAN CENTRAL NEWS AGENCY FILE NO. 3, 4 October – 10 October 2009. <http://sinonk.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/kcna-file-no-3-octr-4-10-2009.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Christopher Green, “Hong, Jang and the Mysterious Railroad Deal,” Sino-NK, December 12, 2013. <http://sinonk.com/2013/12/12/hong-jang-and-the-mysterious-railroad-deal/>. Retrieved February 23, 2016. The information on the deal came from Hong Ik-pyo, an opposition lawmaker in South Korea’s National Assembly.

<sup>14</sup> This attention was misguided, because ample evidence existed to suggest that the Kim regime had not, contrary to frothy speculation elsewhere, fallen victim to a coup. See: Christopher Green, “Kim Jong-un: Has the dynasty fallen?” *The Guardian*, October 8, 2014.

<sup>15</sup> Adam Cathcart, “Boondoggle on the Yalu: China’s Useless New Bridge to North Korea,” Sino-NK, November 3, 2014. <http://sinonk.com/2014/11/03/boondoggle-on-the-yalu-chinas-useless-new-bridge-to-north-korea/>.

<sup>16</sup> “Opening Day for New China-North Korea Yalu River Bridge is Neglected, Postponing the Project for an Unlimited Time], *Huanqiu Shibao*, October 31, 2014. <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2014-10-31/021131072130.shtml>. Adam Cathcart, “Assessing China-DPRK Trade and SEZ Potential: The Dandong Trade Fair,” *KEI The Peninsula*, October 14, 2014. <http://blog.keia.org/2014/10/assessing-china-dprk-trade-and-sez-potential-the-dandong-trade-fair/>.

<sup>17</sup> Leo Lewis, “China’s new bridge to North Korea left with nowhere to go,” *The Times*, October 27, 2014. <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/business/markets/china/article4248500.ece>. Retrieved February 23, 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Lauler, “New Yalu river bridge opening postponed,” *NK News*, October 31, 2014. <https://www.nknews.org/2014/10/new-yalu-river-bridge-opening-postponed/>. Retrieved February 23, 2016.

<sup>19</sup> Ask a state employee on the North Korean side of the border, as one of us did in April 2016, and you will hear that the bridge will certainly open in due course, but that “as you know, there are a few political problems between my country and China” and it is these that are delaying the opening. There is much riding on this, including the success or failure of a resort hotel located an hour south of Sinuiju in Ryongcheon, built with Chinese capital, as well as a range of other facilities currently being established in Sinuiju itself.

<sup>20</sup> While the Chinese release of the bad news about the lack of North Korean action is notable, what would be even more notable would be if the CCP decided to close the old Dandong-Sinuiju bridge down for a few days of “repairs and maintenance.” There are plenty of local businesspeople and party cadres in Dandong who might object to such a move, but there would be no faster or surer way to get North Korea’s attention.

<sup>21</sup> Byeong-yeon Kim, *China’s Trade and Investment with North Korea: Firm Surveys in Dandong* (Seoul: Seoul National University Press, 2015), 39.

<sup>22</sup> Ju-won Kang, “‘Made in China’? Actually, a North Korean...” [Kang Ju-won’s ‘Reading the Borderland’] Dandong, another Kaesong Industrial Complex,” *Pressian*, October 19, 2015. <http://www.pressian.com/news/article.html?no=130503>. In Kang’s 2013 book, he says the number of North Korean laborers in Dandong is “more than 10,000.” The difference can be explained by rising numbers over time, but also highlights the difficulty of establishing precise figures. For more see: Ju-won Kang, *Today, I am making and breaking borders: a cultural anthropological guide to reading the border city of Dandong* (Seoul: Munhakdongnae Publishing Group), 28.

<sup>23</sup> Other officials nominally involved in management of the zone include, from the DPRK side: Vice-Chair of North Pyongan People’s Committee Hong Gil-nam, Chair of Sinuiju City People’s Committee Ri Jong-yol, the Consul of the DPRK at Shenyang Kim Kwang-hun, the Head of the DPRK Foreign Investment Bureau Park Ong-sik, and Vice-Consul of the DPRK in Shenyang Kim

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Yong-nam, highlighting that the DPRK Consulate-General in Shenyang is the responsible authority for North Korean trade activities in China's three northeastern provinces. Shenyang merited a stop-over by Choe Ryong-hae en route for Beijing in early September. Chairing the Chinese side was China Council for the Promotion of Foreign Trade Chairman Jiang Zengwei, PRC Ambassador to North Korea Li Jinjun, Liaoning Province People's Government vice-chair Bing Zhigang, as well as leading cadre from the International Tourism Bureau, Provincial Trade Association, Provincial Foreign Investment office, Province Foreign Affairs Office, Province Development and Reform Committee, etc., and many [Chinese] reporters.

<sup>24</sup> Theo Clement, "One More for the Road? New Masterplan for the Sinuiju Special Economic Zone," *Sino-NK*, February 11, 2016, <http://sinonk.com/2016/02/11/one-more-for-the-road-new-masterplan-for-the-sinuiju-special-economic-zone/>

<sup>25</sup> Being on the border, stories about the antique bridge connecting Dandong and Sinuiju are very easy to research and almost write themselves. For example, see: Seol Song-ah, "More repairs on aging Sino-NK bridge," *Daily NK*, August 3, 2016.

<sup>26</sup> Even incidents along North Korea's frontier with China indicate a shifting situation in need of close observation or are a result of less fundamental pressures from elsewhere. When media groups allocate or receive funding for trips to the border region, those dispatched tend to file multiple reports to justify the expense. This results in abundance for a spell, but the flow stops just as abruptly as it began whilst the situation on the ground may not have changed at all. Such patterns of reportage do not always aid onlookers in establishing whether border incidents are isolated events or indicative of seismic change.

One sensational report from the DPRK-PRC border region was published in the *Donga Ilbo*, a South Korean daily, on September 18, 2015. According to the article, "It has emerged that in March a North Korean overseas assassination and kidnapping team under the GBR, or General Bureau of Reconnaissance, attempted to kidnap a South Korean citizen in the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture and drag [him] off to North Korea, but were arrested by the Chinese authorities." The report claims, imprecisely, that somewhere between five and eight arrested North Koreans are being held somewhere in Jilin Province and have admitted to being GBR agents.

No sooner had this report been picked up by Chinese state media than, on September 19, a second tale of borderland intrigue was reported by MBC, one of South Korea's big two broadcasters. Coming from further southwest in Ryanggang Province, the report alleges that a North Korean soldier recently crossed the river border near Hyesan and shot at the driver of a civilian vehicle on a nearby road, severely injuring him.

<sup>27</sup> The fact that Kim Jong-un has not traveled to Beijing since assuming power in December 2011 is not to be taken lightly within the symbolic context dealt with in this chapter. However, it remains the case that it took Kim Jong-il six years, until May 29-31, 2000, to visit China after assuming power from his father in July 1994. The absence of a visit from Kim Jong-un should thus not be overstated.

<sup>28</sup> John Delury, "Irony on Parade: Sino-Korean Friendship, 1945/2015," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Volume 74, No. 4, November 2015) 798-802.

<sup>29</sup> Korean Central News Agency, Traitor Jang Song Thaek Executed, KCNA, December 13, 2013, <<http://www.northkoreatech.org/2013/12/13/full-text-of-kcna-announcement-on-execution-of-jang/>>. See also "Parsing North Korea's Report on the Execution of Kim Jong Un's Uncle," *The Atlantic*, December 13, 2013. <<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/12/thrice-cursed-acts-of-treachery-parsing-north-koreas-report-on-the-execution-of-kim-jong-uns-uncle/282339/>>

<sup>30</sup> Wu makes a habit of this. Following the fourth North Korean nuclear test in January 2016, he appeared in Pyongyang on February 2, just days before the North Korean rocket launch of February 7. See: Jack Kim, "China's nuclear envoy in North Korea amid sanctions push: KCNA," Reuters, February 2, 2016. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-nuclear-china-idUSKCN0VB0TU>.

<sup>31</sup> "Putin backs deeper ties with North Korea after meeting Kim envoy," *The Asahi Shimbun*, November 20, 2014. [http://ajw.asahi.com/article/asia/korean\\_peninsula/AJ201411200017](http://ajw.asahi.com/article/asia/korean_peninsula/AJ201411200017).

<sup>32</sup> Katsuji Nakazawa, "Beijing looks to Pyongyang again amid diplomatic impasse," *Nikkei Asian Review*, October 16, 2015. <http://asia.nikkei.com/Features/China-up-close/Beijing-looks-to-Pyongyang-again-amid-diplomatic-impasse?page=2>.

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<sup>33</sup> Julian Ryall, "China snubs North Korea in favour of South at Beijing event," *The Telegraph*, September 4, 2015.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/northkorea/11845130/China-snubs-North-Korea-in-favour-of-South-at-Beijing-event.html>.

<sup>34</sup> KCTV (Torchlight Procession of Young Vanguard Held), *You Tube*, October 11, 2015.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V\\_y5WYBH7gs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V_y5WYBH7gs).

<sup>35</sup> Nakazawa, "Beijing looks to Pyongyang," *Nikkei Asian Review*.

<sup>36</sup> <http://kp.china-embassy.org/chn/zxxx/t1305823.htm>

<sup>37</sup> <http://kp.china-embassy.org/chn/zxxx/t1305823.htm>

<sup>38</sup> Green, "From the Border to Beijing," Sino-NK.

<sup>39</sup> <http://kp.china-embassy.org/chn/zxxx/t1305824.htm>

<sup>40</sup> Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, "Show Me the Money: Evaluating Jang Song-thaek's Search for Economic Cooperation in Beijing," Sino-NK, August 19,

2012. <http://sinonk.com/2012/08/19/show-me-the-money-evaluating-jang-song-thaeks-search-for-economic-cooperation-in-beijing/>. Accessed November 15, 2016.