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**The DPRK-
PRC Alliance:
Changes and
Continuities**

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Summary (ITA)

L'elaborato propone un'analisi in merito all'evoluzione delle relazioni tra la Repubblica Popolare Cinese e la Repubblica Popolare Democratica di Corea, prestando particolare attenzione alle conseguenze provocate dai test nucleari realizzati da quest'ultima. Sebbene la letteratura sulle alleanze abbia tradizionalmente interpretato i rapporti tra “great power” e “small state” come relazioni asimmetriche fondate sulla distribuzione diseguale delle risorse e delle capacità, il caso sino-nordcoreano evidenzia la necessità di integrare tale prospettiva con elementi di natura identitaria, ideologica e sociale.

Secondo l'approccio realista, le alleanze tra Stati sono principalmente strumenti funzionali alla sopravvivenza in un sistema internazionale anarchico. Gli Stati, non potendo fare affidamento su un'autorità superiore in grado di garantire la propria sicurezza, cercano di massimizzare le proprie possibilità di sopravvivenza attraverso il bilanciamento delle minacce e la cooperazione con altri attori. In questo quadro teorico, che considera tutti gli Stati come unità che tendono a funzionare allo stesso modo, quelli più piccoli sono portati a fare affidamento ai più forti per compensare la propria vulnerabilità e proteggersi da potenziali minacce esterne.

La relazione tra Cina e Corea del Nord sembra inizialmente conformarsi a questo modello. La Corea del Nord, caratterizzata da limitate risorse economiche e da una posizione internazionale estremamente isolata, ha storicamente fatto affidamento sul sostegno politico, economico e diplomatico cinese per garantire la sopravvivenza del proprio regime. Allo stesso tempo, la Cina ha individuato nella Corea del Nord un importante “buffer state” tra il proprio territorio e l'area di influenza statunitense rappresentata dalla presenza militare americana in Corea del Sud e in Giappone. Da questa prospettiva, la cooperazione tra i due Paesi appare il risultato di una convergenza di interessi strategici.

Per Pechino, la sopravvivenza del regime nordcoreano continua a rappresentare un elemento fondamentale per la stabilità della penisola coreana. Un eventuale collasso della dinastia Kim potrebbe infatti produrre conseguenze particolarmente problematiche per la Cina, tra cui una grave crisi umanitaria ai propri confini, massicci flussi migratori e, soprattutto, la possibilità di una riunificazione della penisola sotto Seoul, alleata degli Stati Uniti. Per Pyongyang, invece, il sostegno cinese costituisce una risorsa indispensabile per garantire la stabilità economica interna e limitare gli effetti dell'isolamento internazionale.

Tuttavia, la sola dimensione strategica non è sufficiente a spiegare le oscillazioni che hanno caratterizzato il rapporto sino-nordcoreano negli ultimi decenni. Se i fattori materiali fossero

realmente determinanti, ci si aspetterebbe infatti una cooperazione relativamente stabile e costante. Al contrario, l'analisi empirica ha evidenziato come il rapporto tra i due Paesi abbia conosciuto fasi di significativo deterioramento, in particolare in occasione dei programmi nucleari nordcoreani e dei test atomici condotti da Pyongyang.

In questo senso, la prospettiva costruttivista offre strumenti interpretativi particolarmente utili. Tale approccio sottolinea come il comportamento degli Stati non sia determinato esclusivamente da interessi materiali oggettivi, ma anche dalle identità che essi costruiscono e attribuiscono a sé stessi e agli altri attori internazionali. Le identità influenzano il modo in cui gli Stati definiscono i propri interessi, interpretano le minacce e stabiliscono le modalità di interazione con il resto della comunità internazionale. Nel caso di Cina e Corea del Nord, la condivisione originaria di un'identità comunista ha reso possibile la costruzione di una narrazione comune fondata sulla lotta contro l'imperialismo occidentale e sulla solidarietà socialista. Per diversi decenni, tale identità condivisa rafforzò la legittimità reciproca dei due regimi e contribuì a consolidare l'alleanza.

La situazione iniziò però a modificarsi con la morte di Mao Zedong e l'ascesa di Deng Xiaoping. Le riforme definite “quattro modernizzazioni” avviate segnarono una trasformazione profonda dell'identità internazionale della Cina. Pur mantenendo la guida del Partito Comunista, Pechino iniziò progressivamente a privilegiare lo sviluppo economico, l'integrazione nei mercati globali e una crescente partecipazione alle istituzioni internazionali.

La Corea del Nord interpretò tale evoluzione come una significativa deviazione rispetto ai principi originari che avevano caratterizzato il rapporto tra i due Paesi. Per Kim Il-sung, la centralità dell'identità socialista e anti-imperialista rimase infatti un elemento imprescindibile della legittimazione politica del regime. La nascita stessa della Corea del Nord era strettamente legata alla divisione ideologica della Guerra Fredda e alla contrapposizione tra blocco comunista e blocco capitalista. Di conseguenza, il progressivo avvicinamento della Cina all'economia di mercato e al sistema internazionale venne percepito come un allontanamento dalla comunità ideologica originaria.

Questa divergenza identitaria divenne ancora più evidente durante gli anni Novanta. La fine della Guerra Fredda, il collasso dell'Unione Sovietica e la crescente integrazione della Cina nell'ordine internazionale contribuirono ad accentuare il senso di isolamento della Corea del Nord. In risposta a queste trasformazioni, il regime nordcoreano rafforzò ulteriormente la dottrina della *Juche*, basata sul principio dell'autosufficienza nazionale, successivamente integrata con la politica del *Songun Chongchi* (military-first policy), che attribuiva alle forze armate un ruolo centrale nella sopravvivenza dello Stato.

L'emergere della questione nucleare mise progressivamente in evidenza le divergenze tra gli interessi e le identità dei due Paesi. Già durante la prima crisi nucleare del 1993-1994, la Cina si trovò in una posizione delicata. Da un lato, desiderava preservare la stabilità del regime nordcoreano; dall'altro, rischiava di compromettere la propria immagine internazionale associandosi a uno Stato accusato di violare gli accordi di non proliferazione da essa stessa sostenuti.

Durante la seconda crisi nucleare, Pechino assunse un ruolo ancora più attivo promuovendo i Six-Party Talks, avviati nel 2003. Attraverso questa iniziativa, la Cina cercò di dimostrare la propria capacità di contribuire alla stabilità regionale e alla gestione delle crisi internazionali. Il coinvolgimento nei negoziati rifletteva ormai una nuova concezione del ruolo cinese nel sistema internazionale: non più soltanto alleato ideologico della Corea del Nord, ma attore responsabile interessato alla governance regionale. Nonostante alcuni momenti di cooperazione economica e la ripresa degli aiuti umanitari all'inizio degli anni Duemila, il progressivo avanzamento del programma nucleare nordcoreano contribuì ad amplificare le tensioni. Il secondo test nucleare del 2009 portò alla sospensione definitiva dei Six-Party Talks e rese evidente l'incapacità della Cina di influenzare pienamente le decisioni di Pyongyang.

Le divergenze raggiunsero un livello particolarmente significativo in occasione del terzo, quarto e quinto test nucleare. In questi casi, la risposta cinese risultò sensibilmente più severa rispetto al passato. Pechino sostenne infatti diverse risoluzioni del Consiglio di Sicurezza delle Nazioni Unite volte a condannare il comportamento nordcoreano e a imporre nuove sanzioni. Tale scelta appare particolarmente significativa se osservata da una prospettiva costruttivista. La Cina non agiva esclusivamente in qualità di alleato storico della Corea del Nord, ma anche come membro influente della comunità internazionale e del Consiglio di Sicurezza dell'ONU. Attraverso il sostegno alle risoluzioni, Pechino riaffermava la propria appartenenza a un sistema internazionale fondato su regole condivise e sulla non proliferazione nucleare. La Corea del Nord, al contrario, continuava a percepire molte istituzioni internazionali come strumenti ostili alla sopravvivenza del regime. Mentre la Cina mostrava un crescente livello di socializzazione internazionale, Pyongyang rafforzava la propria identità di attore autonomo e resistente alle pressioni esterne. I test nucleari possono quindi essere interpretati non soltanto come decisioni strategiche, ma anche come manifestazioni simboliche di tale identità.

In questo contesto, il programma nucleare assunse una funzione che andava oltre la semplice deterrenza militare. Per la leadership nordcoreana, il possesso dell'arma nucleare divenne progressivamente un simbolo di autonomia politica, indipendenza nazionale e prestigio internazionale. La bomba atomica rappresentava non soltanto uno strumento di sicurezza contro

possibili minacce esterne, ma anche una conferma dello status della Corea del Nord come attore sovrano capace di resistere alle pressioni delle grandi potenze.

L'arrivo al potere di Xi Jinping e Kim Jong-un contribuì ulteriormente a evidenziare queste differenze. La leadership cinese iniziò a promuovere una visione regionale fondata sulla stabilità, sull'interdipendenza economica e sulla cooperazione reciprocamente vantaggiosa. La Corea del Nord, invece, individuò nel completamento del proprio arsenale nucleare uno strumento per consolidare il prestigio internazionale del regime e rafforzarne la legittimità interna. Questa strategia si rivelò problematica per la Cina sotto molteplici aspetti. Da un punto di vista strategico, i continui test nucleari nordcoreani favorivano un rafforzamento della cooperazione tra Stati Uniti, Corea del Sud e Giappone, aumentando la presenza militare americana nella regione. Da un punto di vista identitario, essi ostacolavano inoltre il tentativo cinese di presentarsi come potenza responsabile e promotrice della stabilità internazionale.

In conclusione, il caso della relazione sino-nordcoreana dimostra l'utilità di un approccio teorico integrato che combini elementi realistici e costruttivisti. I fattori materiali rimangono essenziali per comprendere la persistenza dell'alleanza: la Cina continua ad avere interesse a preservare la stabilità della Corea del Nord, mentre Pyongyang continua a dipendere dal sostegno cinese per la propria sopravvivenza economica e politica. Tuttavia, tali elementi non sono sufficienti a spiegare le variazioni qualitative che hanno caratterizzato il rapporto tra i due Paesi.

L'evoluzione delle rispettive identità, il diverso grado di socializzazione all'interno del sistema internazionale, la ricerca di status e prestigio e le differenti interpretazioni del ruolo dello Stato nel contesto globale hanno contribuito in modo significativo a plasmare le dinamiche dell'alleanza. La progressiva divergenza tra una Cina sempre più inserita nell'ordine internazionale e una Corea del Nord che continua a mantenere una posizione opposta rappresenta uno dei principali fattori alla base delle tensioni emerse negli ultimi decenni.

Pertanto, la relazione tra Cina e Corea del Nord non può essere interpretata come una semplice alleanza fondata su interessi strategici immutabili. Essa appare piuttosto come un rapporto complesso e dinamico, nel quale interessi materiali, identità politiche e percezioni reciproche interagiscono costantemente e portano a momenti di cooperazione e di conflitto. È proprio dall'intreccio tra queste dimensioni che emerge una comprensione più completa delle trasformazioni che hanno caratterizzato il rapporto sino-nordcoreano nell'era nucleare.

Abstract

States exist in an anarchical structure, and their main priority is to survive. Alliances are useful tools for “small states” to ensure security, given their reduced capabilities. However, contemporary international studies have argued that small states gain more importance in the international structure by taking advantage of different forms of power. Indeed, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea has been able to use its geographical proximity to the People's Republic of China's border at its favor.

Several elements have shaped the Sino-North Korean alliance. This thesis aims to highlight the non-material elements that have shaped the bilateral relations. As argued by Linus Hagström e Magnus Lundström on their article "Overcoming US-North Korean Enmity: Lessons from an Eclectic IR Approach" (2019), states are not only concerned with security calculations.

States' identities shape their interests and their behavior in the international structure. Status-seeking strategies, as well as security considerations, are crucial part of the international relations system. This approach allows a multifaced analysis of the Sino-North Korean relations.

This thesis aims at drawing a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between China and North Korea after Xi Jinping and Kim Jong Un took office between the years 2011-2013. Through public speeches delivered by President Xi Jinping, as well as articles published in Chinese media outlets, this thesis focuses on the shift of North Korea and China's identity.

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Introduction

Between 2011 and 2013, the advent of Kim Jong Un's and Xi Jinping's leadership marked a new phase in the Sino-North Korean alliance, which was formalized in 1961 with the Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance. Since the end of the Korean War, the relationship has gone through ebbs and flows and, at times, its durability has been questioned. Arguably, the primary goal of the DPRK-PRC "blood forged friendship" has been that of balancing against the United States and Washington's alliance with the Republic of Korea. The US military presence on South Korean soil continues to pose a threat to the security interests of both China and North Korea. However, in recent years, North Korea's goal of further developing its nuclear program towards achieving a credible nuclear deterrent has caused frictions in its relations with Beijing.

While the presence of United States troops in South Korea continues to pose a threat to their national security, non-material factors have shaped the bilateral ties. This thesis employs the concept of identity as developed by constructivist scholar Alexander Wendt. From a constructivist perspective, the international system is a social structure in which states are socially constructed units and their identities as well as interests are socially constructed through interactions (Wendt, 1999). In this sense, state identity is not fixed, but rather it is context dependent.

This study also considers the concept of international identity, understood as how states perceive themselves and how they interact with one another (Legro, 2009). This concept is particularly relevant to the present research, as it helps explain other perspectives on the nature of Sino-North Korea relations.

In light of this, the thesis will move beyond the conventional interpretation of the Sino-North Korean relationship as an "asymmetric alliance". The relationship is indeed characterized by an unbalanced distribution of material capabilities; however, this perspective alone does not fully capture its complexity. Employing the neorealist assumptions about the inherently dangerous and unstable nature of the international system, both countries have been urged to establish a mutual-aid relationship to enhance each other's security against external threat. However, such structuralist explanations are insufficient. In fact, it will be argued that the alignment between the two countries has been challenged by specific characteristics, identity construction and status-seeking strategies that have been adopted by the two regimes.

This study relies on primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include official documents, speeches and statements made by the Chinese and North Korean leaders, and also major Chinese media outlets, such as *Xinhua*, *People's Daily*, *Global Times*, and *China Daily*. These

sources are essential to examine the official narrative about policy priorities and representations of national identity.

To investigate how identity and strategic considerations have shaped the Sino-North Korean relations, the thesis is organised into three chapters. The first chapter will provide an overview of the International Relations literature on small states and great powers and discuss the strategies that are available to small states within the international system. This chapter will introduce the theoretical framework, which also draws on the social identity theory (SIT) as proposed by Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko.

The second chapter will delve into the historical evolution of the Sino-North Korean relationship from the Korean War (1950-1953) to North Korea's second nuclear test (25 May 2009). The focus will be on the impact of the leadership-driven objective on bilateral relations.

The third chapter will test the Sino-North Korean alliance in relation to Pyongyang's third, fourth and fifth nuclear tests (12 February 2013, 6 January and 13 September 2016). This chapter will discuss new concepts introduced by both leaders at the onset of their terms and their impact on the two states' identity and behavior in the international context. It will do so by employing the status-seeking framework to emphasize the new dynamics that characterize their relationship. Through the analysis of Chinese media, this chapter will emphasize China's different approach to the nuclear issue.

Chapter 1: Alliances, Identity and Status

1.1 Small States and Great Powers

The relationship between China and North Korea has been defined by several studies as an asymmetric alliance, with China as the regional power and North Korea as the weaker state. In the International Relations (IR) literature, definitions are often contested. Scholars may adopt different approaches to classify states into great power, middle power or small powers and have yet to agree upon generally accepted definitions (Baldacchino and Wivel, 2020).

Within neorealism, scholars follow what could be defined as a material approach to measure power. This IR school of thought posits that states are actors that exist in a self-help structure and are constrained by the anarchical structure of the international system to focus on their own survival (Waltz, 1979). States are self-interested units that compete against each other to accumulate as many resources as possible. Therefore, neorealist scholars argue that material resources are linked to the state's power (Long, 2017; Mearsheimer, 2001; Waltz, 1979). It follows that power is defined by the extent of material resources available to an individual or an entity (Long, 2017).

Based on this approach, scholars adopt quantitative criteria to classify states within the international system. Stephen Walt (1993) argued that great powers must have “large population, a vast national territory, resources endowment, economic capability, military strength, political stability and competence”. Great powers are those states that have many resources which make them able to influence the international system. Small states are viewed as vulnerable actors in the international system and as “pawns in great power games” because their limited material resources make them susceptible to the actions of great powers (Neumann and Gstöhl, 2006; Long, 2017; Thorhallsson, 2018).

While neorealist scholars, such as John Mearsheimer and Kenneth Waltz, have argued that the limited material resources available to small states restrict their actions and make them helpless in the international competition, liberal scholars adopt a different approach to this matter. Instead of focusing on resource distribution, liberalism and neoliberalism (or institutional liberalism) highlight the behavior of states in the international system. As concluded by neorealism and realism, liberalism considers that the systemic structure of international relations is anarchical. However, it argues that states may be discouraged from attacking another country through economic interdependence, making the costs of an armed conflict unbearable (Walt, 1998). The economic sector occupies a significant role within the liberal theoretical framework, as it is considered to be a key driver of both politics and societies (Buzan, 1996).

As highlighted by liberalism, cooperation is also part of international politics (Thorhallsson, 2018). It is through international cooperation that states are able to overcome the “dilemma of self-interest” (Stein, 2008). International institutions are capable of promoting norms and rules that shape how states interact with each other so that all parts involved may be able to benefit from it (Ibid.). The main goals are to preserve the status quo and to prevent armed conflict.

Based on these premises, the liberal theoretical perspective considers great powers as those states that have the ability to shape the world economy and international norms (Ikenberry, 2005; Long, 2017). Middle powers are those states that are able to “fulfil managerial or order-producing roles within the region” (Hurrell, 2006). The liberal theoretical perspective does not consider small states to be helpless actors either. Small states can actively participate in international politics and influence great power politics “through international organizations, law, bargaining linkage, and even symbolic uses of force” (Long, 2017; Thorhallsson, 2018).

Middle and small powers are more concerned with what Tom Long (2017) defines as “particular-intrinsic power”. Although small states have a smaller economy compared to great powers, they may be the only source of a specific natural or industrial product, which makes them very important to the global economy (Long, 2017; Panke, 2012; Baldacchino and Wivel, 2020). For instance, members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) may take advantage of their oil resources to pursue their foreign policy agenda (Long, 2017). These resources represent a source of power for middle and small states in issue-specific areas (Neumann and Gstöhl, 2006; Long, 2017).

Finally, post-Cold War IR literature has given more attention to international norms, identity and ideas (Neumann and Gstöhl, 2006). Developed by Alexander Wendt, constructivism does not consider power as constituted by material capabilities (Guzzini, 2013). The international structure is shaped by norms, ideas and identities that are socially constructed (Hopf, 1998). While neorealism takes the identities and interests of states as given, constructivism argues that they are constituted through social interactions (Wendt, 1992; Wendt, 1999; Klotz and Lynch, 2007).

The concept of state identity is particularly significant for constructivist scholars because it shapes interests and behavior of the state (Hopf, 1998). In consideration of the identity of an actor, its actions assume specific meanings. For instance, Ted Hopf (1998) argues that the United States’ military intervention in Vietnam allowed Washington to “reproduce its own identity as a great power”. Therefore, based on its identity, the behavior of the state assumes specific meanings.

Whether a state is considered a great, middle or small power depends on its identity, which in turn shapes its interests and behavior.

1.1.1 Small States and the International System

Scholars of International Relations have traditionally devoted more attention to the study of great powers as they are the ones with enough material capabilities to define the balance of power in the global system (Thorhallsson, 2018). On the contrary, small states have been considered particularly by neorealism as irrelevant to IR studies because they do not have enough “hard power” (Long, 2017; Mearsheimer, 2001).

It appears that small countries find themselves in a position of strategic disadvantage amidst the lack of central authority that could protect them from being attacked by another state (Hurd, 2008). Their weaker military strength makes them more exposed to external military aggressions. Therefore, the only possibility for smaller states to increase their resources to avoid being vulnerable to external threats is to form an alliance (Liska, 1968; Snyder, 1984; Sprecher and Krause, 2006).

In his book *Alliances and Small Powers* published in 1968, Robert Rothstein argues that small states are to be defined based on “distinct patterns of behavior”. The author does not reject the notion that small states have fewer resources than great powers, however, he suggests that the distinguishing feature of this category of states is their high level of dependency on international institutions or alliances. Indeed, it is through their participation in multilateral organizations that small states can “enhance their security and pursue interests” (Long, 2017).

Another common trait of small states' behavior is that they are more concerned with the regional balance of power, rather than with the global balance of power (Rogers, 2007; Keohane, 1971). In fact, regional changes in the distribution of power are likely to have a direct impact on the security of smaller states as opposed to events that may occur in other regions.

However, small states have their own agenda and sometimes may exploit more powerful states to their advantage. For example, they can take advantage of their geographic position and become a buffer between two powers (Efremova, 2019). By exploiting the competition between two great powers, the weaker state can ensure security (Ibid.).

An alliance becomes asymmetrical if the distribution of material resources between the members is uneven (von Hlatky, 2013). The weaker side of the relationship gains a higher

technological advantage in military equipment, privileged access to intelligence information, and diplomatic support from the powerful ally (Ibid.). On the other side, the greater power gains more control over the weaker ally (Cha, 2009). This situation is described by James D. Morrow (1991) in with the “autonomy-security trade off model”.

While the “capability aggregation model” does not take into account differences in the distribution of resources between allies, according to Morrow’s model, it is important to consider whether there are imbalances in the distribution of power within the alliance. He argued that asymmetric alliances are the ones where one ally gains more security, notably the weaker state, and the other more autonomy. Consequently, this type of relationship is likely to last longer than symmetric alliances because each side gets what it values most (Morrow, 1991).

For realists, since the stronger party of the alliance has more capabilities, it will impose its own agenda on the weaker party (Darnton, 2012). In fact, classical realism stress that great powers have enough capabilities to influence the balance of power, leaving smaller states to the sidelines (Grzelcyk, 2016). However, small states are not powerless (Rothstein, 1968). As scholars Keohane and Nye have noted in *Power and Interdependence* (1977), the weaker side of the alliance may manipulate the stronger side of the alliance in its favor, as “debts may give influence to debtors as well as to creditors”. For instance, the United States’ strategy during the Cold War has given to its small allies a high strategic value in its war against the spread of Communism and against the Soviet Union (Ibid.). Therefore, some small states have been able to manipulate the competition between great powers at their benefit (Efremova, 2019). Another example is Pakistan, whose leaders have adopted stances that run counter to the wishes of their American allies to preserve their own autonomy.¹

¹ Islamabad has long been concerned about India’s growing strategic cooperation with the United States even though they are Pakistan’s historical ally. Since the 1950s, Pakistan has nurtured a strong partnership with China albeit no ideological commonalities with Beijing. The Sino-Pakistani alliance aims to counterbalance the alignment between India and the United States, as both Beijing and Islamabad consider India as a threat for their national security. The alliance between China and Pakistan is indeed asymmetrical; Pakistan heavily relies on imports from China while Pakistan’s exports to China are significantly lower. Moreover, China has played a significant role in Pakistan’s nuclear weapons development program (Siddiqi 2016; Ramana 2011).

1.1.2 Small States Strategies

The literature has identified three primary strategies for small states to ensure their security: balancing, bandwagoning e hedging.

Balancing and bandwagoning have been introduced by neorealists. In the first case, states prefer to balance against an external threat either internally or externally (Walt, 1985; Sprecher and Krause, 2006). Internal balancing means that states strengthen their defense capabilities within its own borders while external balance means that states establish defensive alliances to counter a perceived threat (Roy, 2005; Kuik, 2008).

According to Walt (1987), balancing strategy is typically adopted for defensive reasons: the state aims at securing its independence, which may be endangered by the revisionist power. Consequently, the state joins defensive alliances, which are often created against a specific threat (Ibid.). The balancing strategy is chosen to preserve the status quo, thereby ensuring stability (Walt, 1985). Kai He (2015) argues that small states may adopt different strategies from relying on traditional military alliances to balance against an external threat (hard balancing). States are able to respond to threats through international multilateral organization, capitalizing on economic interdependence and on “rulemaking and agenda setting techniques”, performing “institutional balancing” (He, 2015).

Bandwagon means that the state aims to secure benefits from a change to the status quo by siding with the emerging power and source of threat (Walt, 1985; Sprecher and Krause, 2006). States may bandwagon for “profit-seeking” reasons even to the extent of accepting a subordinate role (Roy, 2005; Kuik, 2008). Otherwise, bandwagon may be chosen to avoid being attacked by a stronger state (Walt, 1987).

Scholar Stephen Walt (1987) has argued that bandwagon ensures security or economic benefits for smaller countries. For instance, Russia’s military intervention in Georgia in 2008 and in Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 have posed a threat to regional stability in Europe. However, Belarus has maintained its ties with Russia in the aftermath of these events. Minsk as opted to bandwagon given Russia’s military superiority and a shared border between the two countries.

To avoid being fully dependent on Russia, however, Belarus has signed several agreements with Western countries or with Eurasian associations (such as the Customs Union, or the Eurasian Economic Union) (Preiherman, 2017). Furthermore, Belarus has obtained gas and oil at favorable prices from Russia to resell to Western nations (Shlapentokh, 2012). Belarus’ behavior is partly

captured by the bandwagoning model given that siding with Russia appears to be the only option for Minsk to ensure national stability and regime survival. However, the Belarus government has sought to secure autonomy as well. By maintaining closer ties with Russia while diversifying its economic relationship in order to lessen dependence from Moscow, Belarus has sought to secure regime survival. This aligns with Morrow's autonomy-security trade-offs model.

Between the late 1990s and the early 2000s, scholars have identified other strategies that small states may adopt aside from balancing and bandwagoning. Scholars have proposed a third strategic choice under the name of hedging to "leave strategic opportunities open" (Koga 2018). As John D. Ciorciari and Jürgen Haacke (2019) have noted, there is no clear definition of what hedging is. Generally, scholars agree that this strategy implies that states do not ally or align exclusively with only one great power (Roy, 2005; Kuik, 2008; Figiaconi, 2025). Instead, they pursue economic, political and military relations with both major and rising powers (Ibid.).

For instance, in the context of the ongoing rivalry between China and the United States in the East Asia region, countries such as Singapore have not taken a clear stance in support of Beijing or Washington abiding to a nuanced approach instead (Lim and Cooper, 2015). Singapore engages in collaborative endeavors with both powers at different levels, seeking to capitalize on China's growing economy, and at the same time, to preserve military alliance with the United States. Cheng Chwee Kuik (2024) defines hedging as an "insurance seeking-behavior". In the case of failing to cooperate with one power, the secondary power still has its military alliance with the other (Koga, 2018). Secondary states employ hedging strategies not against current threats, but against possible future threats (Roy, 2005; Marston, 2023).

Another example is Thailand for which a potential military alliance with the United States may be considered by the Chinese leadership as "politically provocative" thereby turning "a perceived threat into a real one" (Kuik, 2008). Therefore, Thailand is not a formal ally of the United States, however, Washington supplies arms to Bangkok.

The connection between hedging strategies and neutrality is still an object of debate among IR scholars. As Fabio Figiaconi (2025) notes, scholars either do not clarify it, or they can use a behavioral approach by arguing that hedging requires a more active role than the traditional "fence-fitting" role attributed to neutral states (Kuik, 2024; Marston, 2023; Figiaconi, 2025). Moreover, other scholars have found that the main difference between neutrality and hedging is the "contingency planning" option argued by Cheng Chwee Kuik and Kei Koga.

1.2 Limits of Material Approaches

The general approach within Alliance Studies is usually based on power and security calculations, establishing that the very purpose of most of the alliances is to regulate the level of power to avoid being defeated (Walt, 1985; Morrow, 1991; Snyder, 1997). This approach is drawn on the realist framework of the balance of power (Wilkins, 2012).

Neorealist scholars diverge from assumptions of classical realism that states' aggressive behavior is due to their inherently aggressive nature (Mearsheimer, 2001; Walt, 1998). Instead, neorealism considers that states' behavior is shaped by the structure of the system (Walt, 1987). Consequently, in order to survive in the anarchical system, states are forced to act in a "self-help" manner to secure as much resources as possible (Waltz, 1979).

One of the core features of neorealism is the balance of power conceptualization. Because "power is the best means for survival", states should pay attention to the distribution of power and maximize their relative power in order to guarantee their survival (Mearsheimer, 2001). Therefore, alliances are tools for maintaining the equilibrium, since significant imbalances could increase the possibility of an armed conflict (Sprecher and Krause, 2006).

While the balance of power framework explains the cause behind states pursuing alliance and their consequences in the international system, the "balance-of-threat" theory proposed by Stephen Walt in 1985 posits that external threats are the main drivers of states' behavior, including alliance formation (He, 2009).

Stephen Walt (1987) argues that threat perception is the most important factor that accounts for how states choose alliance partners, suggesting that weaker states usually align with the source of threat. Accordingly, threat as is composed of three elements: military and economic capabilities, geographic position and perceived aggressive intentions.

Notably, part of the balance-of-threat theory framework comprises non-material factors, as perceived aggressive intentions cannot be quantified through material capabilities alone. However, because neorealism considers states to be characterized by their deterrence of power, it is not possible to use this framework to examine non-material factors that may influence states' decisions to form alliances or not.

The neorealist approach is characterized by the conception of states as autonomous units sharing a common tendency to adopt behaviors aimed at ensuring their survival. The various courses of action available to states depend largely on their relative size, from which derive differing levels

of material resources that shape their choices, positions, and attitudes within the international system. This perspective therefore assigns central importance to power and to states' perceptions of threats.

Constructivist theory enters this debate by challenging the strict materialist orientation of neorealism. It emphasizes instead that perceptions of threat are themselves the product of historical experiences and specific processes of socialization within alliances, thereby constituting a genuine social phenomenon. Contrary to the materialist assumptions of neorealist theory, constructivism adopts an idealist approach to the study of international relations. According to this perspective, the international structure is constituted by ideas, which in turn shape the identities and interests of states (Wendt, 1999; Rousseau, 2006).

Power is not an "absolute concept" defined by material resources, instead it is "relative" (Rousseau and Garcia Retamero, 2007). Based on the constructivist theoretical framework, Audie Klotz and Cecelia Lynch (2007) define power as the "ability to reconstruct discourses and shape practices". Therefore, identities represent a source of power for both great and small powers. For instance, Tom Long (2017) has highlighted that Qatar is able to present itself as a reliable interlocutor for Western democracies through its "hub for globalization" identity.

As mentioned before, the structure of the international system is defined by ideas which in turn shape identities and norms. Norms and rules are another core element of international politics (Hopf, 1998). Their role is to define what type of behaviors are accepted and what are not (Adler-Nissen, 2014). States interact differently with norms (Finnemore and Sikkink, 2001). Those states that do not follow these rules are considered a threat to those who follow them. Therefore, threats usually come from states that do not accept the established system.

1.2.1. State identity

Neorealism is fundamentally based on "individualistic rationality" (Qin 2018). Yaqing Qin and Astrid H. N. Nordin (2019) note that this approach is deeply rooted in the Western tradition of IR studies. Neorealist scholars focus on the behavior of states, taking the identities and interests of states as given (Wendt, 1992). However, Qin and Nordin (2019, p. 609) claim that actions are not "rational or irrational" on their own, but they need to be contextualized. Rationality is not an innate characteristic, but it depends on other states' perception (Ibid).

This argument calls for a different perspective on the study of states' behavior, one that also considers the social dimensions of the state's identity. This finds further development in the constructivist theoretical framework. Constructivism challenges the rationalist assumptions of neorealism studies, questioning the identity and interests' foundation of state and their effect on the

system. State Identity is another factor that defines how states interact with each other, and consequently, which states may pose a threat.

Neorealism claims that anarchy causes states to seek security. States are undifferentiated units in the system, whose actions are limited by the structure. On the other hand, constructivism posits that the system has both causal and constitutive power (Wendt, 1992). Indeed, states are limited by the structure of the system, however, through their interactions with each other they continue to reproduce it (Wendt, 1999). Anarchy is not an innate phenomenon, rather it is the persistent behavior of states towards one another that perpetuates this structural dynamic (Zehfuss, 2004).

Since constructivism originated from social sciences, it emphasizes the significant role of interactions between actors in the international system. It challenges the conventional materialist approaches of realism by highlighting the role of social relations in shaping the international structure (Wendt, 1999). The theoretical materialist-driven approach remains incomplete without social contextualization. Consequently, intersubjectivity is a key concept for constructivism (Zehfuss, 2004).

As mentioned before, identities and interests of states are socially constructed through interactions (Ibid, Wendt, 1992). Whenever these elements change, states change their behavior accordingly (Wendt, 1999; Lebow, 2008). Consequently, as constructivist scholars emphasize, the identity of the state is subject to changes over time and across context (Klotz and Lynch, 2007; Skolimowska, 2017).

Constructivist scholars do not agree on a general definition of identity. In general, scholars consider identity as a “multidimensional concept” which has multiple connotations based on the context the states find themselves in (Zehfuss, 2004; Legro, 2009). Alexander Wendt (1999) considers three types of identity: person or corporate, type, role and collective.²

To understand potential changes that may affect alliances, it is useful to delve into the notion of collective identity. This specific type of identity is defined by Wendt (1999) as the “identification between Self and Other”. This aforementioned identification is not total, usually is about a specific type or role identity (Ibid.). For instance, Western countries share the same regime type namely

² Wendt (1999) describes person or corporate identity in material terms. This type of identity is based on the sense of “I” as opposed to “other” (Ibid.).

Type identity represents different characteristic of the state, such as regime type or its organization (monarchy, capitalistic economy etc.) (Finnemore and Sikkink, 2001).

Role identity exists only in function of the relationship between the “Self” and the “Other”, it is purely social (Wendt, 1999). This defines if a state is considered a friend, enemy, or rivals (Finnemore and Sikkink, 2001).

democracy, therefore, they have developed a collective identity as liberal democracies. This identity affinity makes states feel altruistic towards each other (Zehfuss, 2004). Moreover, the security of state A becomes a concern for state B, as one perceives the other as an extension of self (Ibid.).

If the type or role identity of a state changed, it may not identify with the collective identity. For instance, during the Cold War, collective identity was determined by having a capitalist or a socialist economy. Consequently, if a state was to change their type of identity from one economy to another, its collective identity would have to change accordingly.

Due to its material approach, the balance-of-threat framework does not provide a more comprehensive definition of what “perceived intentions” are (Hopf, 1998). Threats are socially constructed too, as Alexander Wendt (1995) effectively summed up this concept in his famous quote about the United States’ perception of threat, claiming that “500 British nuclear weapons are less threatening to the United States than 5 North Korean nuclear weapons”.

For instance, in the aftermath of the Second World War, many states that used to be allies of the Soviet Union aligned against it. The international society was divided into two different blocs, and each one had a specific collective identity. France and the United Kingdom did not share with the Soviet Union the same anti-Nazism and anti-Fascism collective identity as they did before (Hopf, 1998). Instead, they shared the same anti-communism collective identity with the United States (Ibid.). Therefore, alliances also rely on collective identity. If one state member does not share the same identity, the alliance is challenged.

1.2.2 International Identity and Status

As mentioned before, neorealists argue that the only interest of states is their survival (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001). Alexander Wendt (1999) argues that states have more than one “objective” interest that function as “causal powers that predispose states to act in certain ways”, shaping their foreign policy agenda. Robert Keohane and Alexander George (1980) identified physical survival, autonomy and economic well-being as the objective interests of the state. Wendt (1999) added a fourth one, namely collective self-esteem, and defines it “a group’s need to feel good about itself, for respect or status”. Consequently, the behavior of the state is partly shaped based on how it is regarded by other states.

The expectations of other states are also influenced by their standing in the international order. Jeffrey Legro (2009) argues that the state position in the international community defines its

“international identity”. The “standing, an actor’s rank or position in hierarchy” can also be defined as “status” (Renshon, 2017). Therefore, international politics is partly constituted by status-seeking acts.

Integrating a material and status-based approach, as suggested by scholars Linus Hagström and Magnus Lundström (2019), allows a comprehensive analysis on the dynamics that characterize relations between states. According to them, while pursuing security is a major factor in foreign policy, “interest in status” should be considered also (Ibid.). From this viewpoint, security calculations and status-seeking strategies contribute to shape bilateral relations.

States often engage in “visible” and “symbolic” activities that have little to do with power and security calculations (Larson et al., 2014). Notably, states’ interest in their status is not a great power prerogative. Scholars argue that secondary powers are concerned with it too (Neumann and de Carvalho, 2014; Røren, 2024). As Iver B. Neumann and Benjamin de Carvalho have noted in 2014, since “there is today no viable course of action available to small states seeking to grow territorially”, small states are able to rank higher in the international community by adopting status-seeking activities that may have to do with the moral dimension of states. For instance, countries that aspire to achieve a higher status can promote diplomatic activities, their soft power abroad or develop high technology weapons even when their social welfare is low (Larson et al., 2014).

The status concept derives from Larson and Shevchenko (2010)’s “Social Identity Theory”. This theory was first proposed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in 1979, and it was applied to the socio-psychology field (Brown, 2000).³ Accordingly, state’s behavior is influenced by intersubjective expectations, rather than material factors alone. For instance, states might join international organizations, or promote international events as means to demonstrate their status or adopt confrontational actions to address a “perceived humiliation” (Larson and Shevchenko, 2010).

Status is a fundamentally social concept. Similarly to international identity, status is not an innate characteristic of the state; rather, it is determined by adopting the international community as a reference point (Clunan, 2014; Røren, 2024). Dafoe, Renshon and Huth (2014) argue that the international hierarchy is defined by the states’ “wealth, power, and resolve”. Based on these, states are to expect specific “rights, level of respect and patterns of deference” (Ibid.).

The acquisition of a desired status has to be endorsed by many of the members of the group to which one aspires to become part of (Larson et al., 2014). Notably, the membership in an

³ The main tenet of the Social Identity Theory proposed by Tajfel and Turner was that personal identity and social identity were two separate elements, and their theoretical framework was concerned with the latter (Brown, 2000).

international “club” is not based on material factors alone. The acceptance is based on the members’ perception of the state, which in turn is influenced by specific ideas and shared norms and meanings (Ibid.).

For instance, to be considered part of the 19th century international society, it was necessary to be a “civilized” country (Gong, 2002). The standard of civilized society was derived from European countries’ norms and traditions. Any deviation from this was considered to be “barbarous” and consequently excluded by the international community (Ibid.). Status might also be “relative”, leading states to compete against each other to achieve it, as some social categories are based on exclusivity.

These kinds of strategies involve emulating the behavior of higher-ranking states, norms and institutions (Ibid; Parlar Dal and Dipama, 2019). For example, following the end of the Cold War, the transition process towards democracy in the countries of the former Eastern bloc has been regarded as a social strategy to gain acceptance within Western institutions (Larson and Shevchenko, 2010). These strategies may not be necessarily useful to security interests of the status-seeking states. For example, Røren (2024) noted that the German Empire developed a stronger navy before World War I because, at that time, being part of the great power club required a substantial navy.

Indeed, having a technologically advanced military sector does not guarantee great power status or higher prestige (Ibid.). Membership into groups requires acceptance and recognition by existing members which makes social mobility not always possible (Larson and Shevchenko, 2010; Parlar Dal and Dipama, 2019). The status-seeking state’s identity has to be considered compatible with the beliefs of the higher group (Ibid). Therefore, acquiring nuclear weapons might reinforce the state self-esteem (as nuclear weapons development requires a large number of resources and expertise), but it does not automatically secure membership in the great powers club - even if the great powers possess nuclear weapons.

In these cases, states may adopt other strategies. For instance, states can pursue social competition strategies thereby challenging a higher-status group (Güran, 2022). By adopting aggressive behaviors, the state aims at a specific group in capabilities, or “blocking global governance” mechanisms (Larson and Shevchenko, 2014).

Additionally, states may attempt to pursue social creativity strategies, highlighting the uniqueness of their strengths (Ibid.; Parlar Dal and Dipama, 2019). The scope of this strategy is to rehabilitate their identity in the international community in a “new issue area” (Ibid.).

Rising powers may adopt social creativity strategies to establish a “different ranking system” that highlights their norms and values, as opposed to those that characterize the existing hierarchical system that rejected them (Larson and Shevchenko, 2010).

Indeed, international institutions and informal grouping provide platforms for secondary powers (Parlar Dal and Dipama, 2019). In these settings states are able to establish new areas of cooperation. Parlar Dal and Dipama (Ibid.) note that Mexico’s participation in the MIKTA group (Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey, and Australia) allows the country to engage in collaboration with non-Western countries, thereby enforcing its role as a global player.

As mentioned previously, one of the interests of a state is to have a “good collective self-esteem”, which is shaped by the perception of others (Wendt, 1999). In the case that the state is perceived as positive and respected by others, then it will adopt a “positive” attitude. Contrary, if it feels “humiliated”, it is more likely to adopt an aggressive attitude towards the international community or against specific groups (Ibid.). As noted by the SIT, group members aim to receive positive connotations (Brown, 2000; Rousseau and Garcia Retamero, 2007).

Status is an important aspect of international politics, as it defines how states are able to act. Marina Duque (2018) cited the case of North Korea as an example of this. Even if Pyongyang is developing its nuclear weapons program, it is still not regarded as a great or major power. One reason for this is that its leaders use it as a bargaining tool. No other great power acts in that way (Ibid.).

Both the Status and Identity frameworks provide a wider look into how states conduct international relations. Through their identity approach, it is possible to analyze more international actors from different perspectives, not only great powers. Since the end of Second World War and the collapse of European Empire, the number of small states has grown. These states have also become important actors in shaping international politics. Theories that employ material perspectives have often overlook these categories of states. However, by adopting an identity-approach it is possible to conclude that not only resources define power, but also the meanings that are collectively inscribed on it. Therefore, it is possible to capture more shades of the international system and its agents.

Notably, security calculations are not to be discarded. Instead, constructivism gives context to it by examining how security roles are shaped by intersubjective interactions and socially constructed meanings (Wendt, 1992; Klotz and Lynch, 2007). William Thompson (2014) argues that constructivist theoretical framework, however, downplays the importance of hierarchy in

international relations. Indeed, the Status approach developed by Larson and Shevchenko (2014) offers a useful perspective into states' behavior from a different perspective.

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Chapter 2: The Evolution of PRC – DPRK Relations

2.1 The Korean War and its Aftermath

The bilateral relationship between China and North Korea has deep historical roots. China and the Korean Peninsula are both geographically and culturally close (Zhang, 1998). For centuries, Sino-Korean relations were shaped by the so-called tributary system. In this political structure, the Chinese Empire was the core, while neighboring kingdoms functioned as its tributaries (Zhang, 1998).

The Korean peninsula was not only a culturally connected region to China, but also a strategically important one. Korea is connected by land to both China and Russia, and faces Japan across the sea of Japan (Zhang, 1998). As effectively demonstrated by the Japanese military campaigns against China during the 1930s and 1940s, Korea is a strategic bridge between the Eurasian continent and the Pacific region (Ibid).⁴

During the twentieth century, the relationship between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) underwent significant transformations. Its foundation was laid during China's intervention in the Korean War (1950-53). Mao Zedong's decision to intervene in October 1950 was motivated by both strategic concerns and ideological commitments to communist solidarity. This rationale set the tone of the bilateral relationship, with Beijing initially positioning itself as both Pyongyang's military protector and ideological ally.

In order to understand China's involvement in the Korean War, it is necessary to consider the international context that led to the conflict. The division of the Korean Peninsula into two occupation zones was established by a plan approved by both the Soviet Union and the United States on August 16, 1945, following Japan's surrender (Kim, 2006). Based on this so-called "zonal plan", the Soviet Union assumed control over the North, and the United States took control of the South. The division culminated in the creation of two political entities, namely the Republic of Korea and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in August and September 1948 respectively and became crystallized as a result of the Korean War's armistice (Zhang, 1998).

On June 25th, 1950, the Korean War began with the invasion of South Korea by North Korean troops. Initially, the conflict appeared to favor the Korean communists. However, following the United Nations' authorization of a U.S.-led armed intervention, South Korean troops, supported by allied forces, managed to push the North back to the 38th parallel (Fiori, 2010).

⁴ Between 1910-1945, Korea was a Japanese colony. Compared to other colonies, Korea had a higher level of strategic value for the Japanese Empire, as it worked as a military entryway into Northeast China (Shirane, 2022).

On October 19th, 1950, in response to the UN forces advancing toward the Chinese Korean border, the Chinese leadership covertly deployed the Chinese People's Volunteers Army (Chen, 1992). Chairman Mao was aware that China's national safety would be threatened by the presence of a hostile power on the Korean Peninsula (Zhang, 1998). Thanks to the Chinese intervention, the US-led United Nations forces were forced to retreat, allowing North Korea to regain control over most of its territory by December 1950 (Fiori, 2010). By 1951, the war had reached a stalemate (Ibid.).

China's participation in the conflict came at a significant cost, not only in terms of human losses, but also at the political and economic level. The country was still facing domestic issues: the civil war was still raging in several provinces, and the economy was suffering because of severe inflation (Chung & Choi, 2013). Another considerable sacrifice was postponing the Taiwan issue. Opening a second front was unsustainable for Beijing, which ultimately decided to delay any attempt to regain the island (Ibid.).

In light of Mao's domestic concerns, it is necessary to examine the motivations behind his decision to intervene in the Korean War. The main argument relates to geopolitical calculations. It was the US intervention that made the Chinese leadership rethink its position vis-à-vis the conflict (Chen, 2023). As previously mentioned, the strategic position of the Korean Peninsula meant that the US-led UN forces represented a direct threat to China, as a potential invasion of the northern region could have resulted in a broader invasion of China (Ibid.). Chen Yuhua (2023) also emphasizes the relevance of "historical memory", noting that the Chinese leadership was worried that the United States may seek to conquer China, as their manner reminded them of Imperial Japan.

The "Lips and Teeth" metaphor is frequently used to illustrate the relationship between North Korea and China in terms of geo-strategic rationale. In this metaphor, North Korea is compared to the lips, and China to the teeth. The analogy argues that without lips, the latter would become more vulnerable (Chung and Choi, 2013). Therefore, Mao's decision to intervene was vital to the integrity of Chinese security.

From a realist perspective, the strategic framework which the "Lips and Teeth" refers to can account for Mao's decision to intervene given that the State's primary concern is its own survival.⁵ However, it does not fully capture the ideological component behind the Chinese intervention. In his book entitled "Mao's Military Romanticism", Zhang Shu Guang (1998) calls for a new framework to better understand Beijing's decision. He argues that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) victory

⁵ Mao employed the expression "as close as lips and teeth" to strengthen the Chinese People's Volunteer Army soldiers during the Korean War (Shen, 2008). The phrase also invoked a shared memory of the common struggle against the Japanese aggression during the Second World War (Ibid.).

in the civil war (1946-1949) may have fostered Beijing's ambition to expand the Communist revolution beyond its borders. Therefore, the Korean War appeared to be the ideal opportunity for the newly established People's Republic of China to fight against "Imperialist forces" that were represented by the US-led troops.

Jian Chen (1992) offers an analytical framework that defines Mao's felt duty to help the DPRK as "proletarian internationalist duty". This perspective suggests that Mao's decision to intervene in the Korean War is strongly related to the Marxist approach to foreign policy. According to this view, one of the CCP's tasks was not only to continue the domestic class struggle, but also to actively support the so-called "anti-imperialism" abroad (Chou, 1955). The Marxists ideology continued to shape Beijing's approach to Pyongyang after the Korean War.

The war solidified the division of Korea into two opposing political and ideological systems (Fiori, 2010). After prolonged negotiations, an armistice was signed on July 27, 1953. Yet, South Korean President Syngman Rhee refused to endorse the agreement. The conflict profoundly undermined Korea's shared identity as a unified nation (Kim, 2006). South Korea emerged from the conflict with a stronger, better-prepared army and a political elite that, as Antonio Fiori (2010) described, was "legitimized by the specter of communism". In contrast, North Korea became increasingly isolated from the outside world, further solidifying its authoritarian regime (Ibid.).

During the Korean War, the North territory had been heavily targeted by the bombings (Fiori, 2010). The country's economy was affected by the conflict, leading to be heavily dependent on socialist aid (Agov, 2013). The spirit of "brotherhood" between communist countries helped the North Korean economy in the aftermath of the war, and also made Pyongyang more integrated into the Socialist bloc, playing an important role in the post-war reconstruction.

This phase increased North Korea dependence on China, framing a deeply unequal relationship. Beijing had been what Szalontai and Choi (2013) called the "principal strategic ally, commercial partner and aid donor". Between 1954 and 1957, the PRC gave RMB 5 trillion in aid to North Korea, as part of the Socialist bloc's post-war assistance efforts (Piano, 2014). China and North Korea also signed an Agreement on Economic and Cultural Cooperation in 1953, which was based on several key principles, such as mutual benefit and cultural exchange (Ibid.). Between 1953 and 1964, Chinese economic aid to Pyongyang mainly focused on rebuilding the transportation infrastructure, supplying apparel and other consumer goods, and building factories to manufacture textiles, glass, bicycles, radio, lightbulbs, pens, and paper, mostly for domestic North Korean market (Szalontai and Choi, 2013). Also, various technicians from China were sent to North Korea by the

Chinese government, and North Korea in turn sent workers and technicians to China to acquire professional skills (Piano, 2014). Then, in the following three-year economic plan for 1957-1961, the main objective was to reconstruct agriculture, industry, and infrastructures (Fiori, 2010).

Furthermore, China had a considerable amount of political leverage within the Korean Workers Party (KWP), due to the presence of party members that maintained close ties with Beijing. Notably, the WPK had four different threads: the Guerilla faction, the Domestic, the Soviet Korean and the Yan'an Faction.⁶

The Soviet and the Yan'an factions were respectively close to the Soviet Union and People's Republic of China (Fiori, 2010). The Yan'an faction therefore was a key element for the Chinese leadership as it provided political intelligence, and it also could be source of political pressure within the North Korean political system (Chung and Choi, 2013).

Due to the high level of dependence on China and on the other countries of the socialist bloc, Kim Il Sung was concerned about the autonomy of his leadership (Agov, 2013). While the integration of North Korea into the Soviet system resulted in a significant recovery of the North Korean economy, an excessive reliance on foreign countries could result in North Korea becoming a "puppet" under the Soviet Union's control. To avoid this situation, Kim Il Sung was set on consolidating his political power domestically, so that his position would not be threatened by internal rivals who were aligned with external forces. Being independent in all spheres - political, economic, foreign policy, and defense - was thus Kim's priority (Dhawan, 2013).

To enhance North Korea's independence from foreign influences, both economic and ideological, Pyongyang found it necessary to elaborate a new political framework that would highlight and glorify Korea's national characteristics. Kim Il Sung focus on the concept of self-reliance, not only in the economic field, but also applied to politics and military affairs (Fiori, 2010). It was during a speech delivered on 28th December 1955 that Kim Il Sung used for the first time the term "Juche". This term can be translated as "self-sufficiency", and it functioned as a "governing ideology" (Yin, 2022). The Juche ideology was necessary to set off the leader's central position, hence promoting the personality cult surrounding the Kim family (Castellucci, 2019). Notably, in his 1955 speech, Kim did not mention either Mao Zedong or Joseph Stalin nor classical academics such

⁶ The domestic faction members initially operated in the South but had to relocate to the North between 1945-1950 (Lankov, 2002). The Guerilla faction was comprised two groups: those who were fighting against the Japanese in Manchuria, and those who escaped to the USSR after 1940 (Ibid.). The Soviet faction members were dispatched by the USSR government with the objective of influencing the Korean Workers Party and the government institution in accordance with the Soviet model (Lankov, 2002). Finally, the Yan'an faction was constituted of intellectuals who had fled to China during the 1920s and 1930s, as well as those who had fought with the Chinese Red Army (Lankov, Ibid.).

as Karl Marx, or Frederick Engels, making the Juche concept a unique contribution elaborated by the North Korean leader (David-West, 2011; Dhawan, 2013).

The Juche emphasis on ideological self-reliance was translated into a political strategy whose final aim was to eliminate any foreign powers' influence from the North Korean establishment. The tangible consequences of this ideological framework for North Korean domestic politics were the internal purges that occurred in the late 1950s. In 1955, Kim first started a campaign against the Soviet Korean faction in the KWP aimed at solidifying his power inside the Party and more generally at reducing Soviet cultural influence (Lankov, 1999). Despite the formal termination of the campaign in February, the North Korea leadership did not abandon the initial strategy (Ibid.). The Soviet faction was his primary target, due to the fact that the new Soviet leadership was undergoing the process of "de-Stalinization". As North Korea's power system had largely been organized based on that of the Soviet Union, Kim feared that a similar event could occur in Pyongyang.

The Great Purge of 1957-1960 was the final phase of Kim's plan to eradicate Beijing and Moscow interference into North Korea's domestic politics (David-West, 2011). The purge was triggered by the events that took place at the Central Committee Plenum on August 30, 1956, when members of the Yan'an and Soviet Factions openly attacked Kim's leadership and his methods (Lankov, 2002). The "rebellion" led to a political persecution against Kim's perceived political rivals.

Concerned with the situation in North Korea, Beijing and Moscow sent a joint delegation in September to pressure Kim to halt his campaign (Lankov, 2002). While the Korean government publicly acknowledged the pressures exerted by the PRC and the USSR, it covertly continued with the execution of his plan (Ibid.). By 1960, the Guerilla faction was the sole remaining faction. As David-West (2011) described, the "psychological profile of the party" underwent a significant transformation, assuming an "ultranationalist and ultra centralist" stance.

The Great Purge not only changed the political equilibrium inside of North Korea but also had some effects in the bilateral relations with the PRC. Since the Yan'an faction was China's primary source of information regarding North Korea's development, Chinese influence over the North Korean leadership had experienced a notable decline (Chung and Choi, 2013; Lankov, 2002). Beijing had to rely only on official visits from members of the Pyongyang government, and so it became more vulnerable to falling into false claims (Chung and Choi, 2013).

The Great Purge did not threaten the relationship between China and North Korea, but it did change the general framework. Chairman Mao and Kim Il Sung met in Moscow in November 1957 during the fortieth anniversary of the Russian Revolution. As reported by Alexander Puzanov, who

was the then-Soviet Ambassador to the DPRK, during a private meeting with Kim, Mao expressed his regret over the manner in which the situation had been dealt from the Chinese side. He specifically referred to Peng Dehuai's visit to Pyongyang in September to dissuade Kim from continuing with the purges (Puzanov, 1957). He admitted that China had "interfered in the internal affairs of the KWP", and assured the Korean leader that such actions would not be repeated (Ibid.). "The main thing", Mao reportedly stated, "is that there be friendly relations and complete mutual understanding between our Parties" (Puzanov, 1957).

This diplomatic gesture is understood to have different meanings for the two parties involved. Pyongyang's ultra-nationalistic politics, adopted during the 1950s demanded a redefinition of its bilateral relationship with Beijing. North Korea no longer accepted a subordinate position and sought to be treated as an equal by both China and the Soviet Union (Lankov, 2002). China did accommodate these demands, as North Korea had a strategic value in the midst of the Sino-Soviet split (Chung and Choi, 2013). Thus, recalibrating the relationship with Pyongyang had less to do with the events of 1956, and more to do with preserving North Korea from aligning with Moscow.

Mao's apology strengthened North Korea's position. By acknowledging China's interference in North Korea's internal affairs as a mistake, Beijing silently recognized North Korea's growing assertiveness in the realm of international relations. Mao's gesture therefore marked a shift inside the dynamics of the relationship: North Korea did no longer accept a subordinate role. The traditional hierarchical relation began to shatter, with North Korea gaining more political independence.

The evolution of the economic relationship between China and North Korea reflected the above-mentioned diplomatic and political paradigm shift. In the late 1950s, the economic relationship shifted from what Piao (2014) referred to as "aid-oriented" towards an "egalitarian" type of interaction. As evidence of this, the two countries signed a long-term mutual supply agreement (1959-1962), leading to a significant increase in trade volume (Piao, 2014).

Their relationship was strengthened by the "Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance Between the People's Republic of China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea" signed on July 11, 1961 (Kwon and Grief, 2022). The Treaty was not only a defense agreement, but it also formalized their strategic alliance, establishing cooperation in several sectors (Kim, 2019). Notably, article IV of the Treaty established a formal consultation mechanism between the two countries (Li and Li, 2020). This mechanism enabled each party to inform the other on eventual policy changes, in order to facilitate responsive adjustment to such modifications (Ibid.). Also, the

two countries resolved their boundary dispute by signing the “Chinese-North Korean Border Treaty” in 1962 and the Protocol on the Chinese-North Korean Border in 1964 (Yin, 2022).

The framework of the relationship was challenged again by the Sino-Soviet split. During the early 1960s, China adopted a more accommodating attitude towards North Korea. The primary motivation was related to exogenous factors notably the rising tensions between Beijing and Moscow. Therefore, Mao’s goal was to prevent Pyongyang from aligning with the Soviet Union.⁷

Back then, one of the most important ideological differences between the Soviet Union and China referred to Khrushchev’s peaceful coexistence policy (Samarani, 2017).⁸ This new ideological framework promoted by the Soviet leadership strained its relationship also with North Korea because it led the USSR to reduce its aid to Pyongyang (Yin, 2022). Consequently, China stepped in to fill the gap left by the Soviets and offered Pyongyang a long-term loan and support to develop North Korea’s light industry (Ibid.).

These events led the two countries to get closer, to formalize their relationship and increase their strategic economic collaboration. The motivations behind China’s increased economic involvement with North Korea are related to a specific diplomatic practice, which was a common pattern in Maoist foreign policy. This diplomatic strategy was deploying economic assistance as a strategic tool, with the final aim to strengthen ties with smaller socialist countries, and consequently counter Soviet influence (Yoo, 2023). Chinese economic support to other countries was part of the narrative of its mission to lead anti-imperialist movements across Asia (Ibid.). Therefore, economic assistance became a key element of Maoist foreign policy, as it was a form of “assistance to people who were struggling for liberation” (Yoo, 2023), reinforcing China’s position in the Socialist bloc.

The Sino-North Korea relationship framework changed again in the later years. The Sino-Soviet split highlighted the weak reliability of the North Korean regime. In fact, Pyongyang initially carefully supported Beijing, but later it sided with Moscow (Yin, 2022). Among the reasons for North Korea changing sides was Kim’s fear to become too dependent on one side specifically, which would have made North Korea as a subordinate.

Consequently, China did reduce trade and economic cooperation with North Korea, and also it increased tension on the Chinese-North Korean border (Yin, 2022).

⁷ The tensions between Beijing and Moscow reached a critical point in 1962, when Mao publicly accused the Soviet leadership of embracing revisionism (Samarani, 2017). His primary concern was that a process similar to the “de-Stalinization” could eventually happen in China.

⁸ For “pacific coexistence” it means that the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Nikita Khrushchev intended to pursue a peaceful existence with the Western countries. Instead, Mao viewed this approach as a betrayal of fellow comrades and of the spirit of communist revolution (Kim, 2019).

China's domestic situation pushed North Korea to get some distance, even if they never officially cut ties. The Cultural Revolution launched by Mao in the late 1960s also did have an impact on North Korea-China relations. The Cultural Revolution, which targeted the intellectual elite in order to purge the "old elements" and enforce the communist doctrine within China,⁹ did weaken the two countries' relationship. The Red Guards publicly criticized Kim Il Sung for fostering a personality cult (Kim, 2019). Concerned about the developments in China, North Korean authorities described the Cultural Revolution as a "great madness", arguing that it had "nothing in common with either culture or revolution" (Wilson Center Digital Archive, 1967). However, the Korean leader did not openly criticize China and appeared to closely monitor the growing anti-Chinese sentiment, ensuring it did not escalate into public hostility (Ibid.).

The Cultural Revolution's extreme phase ended with the Ninth Congress of the CCP in April 1969 (Xia and Shen, 2014). The Chinese premier Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong planned to undo some of the more extreme measures taken in the past, such as returning Chinese diplomats to their postings starting from June of the same year (Ibid.). Relations with Pyongyang also benefited from this adjustment as noted on the occasion of Premier Zhou Enlai's visit to North Korea in 1970, followed shortly afterwards by Kim's secret visit to Beijing (Xia and Shen, 2014).

Among the main objectives of the Chinese Prime Minister's visit, there was Beijing's desire to distance Pyongyang from Moscow, which then represented the main adversary for the Chinese leadership (Ibid.). Kim Il Sung's visit to Beijing led to the signing of the 'Agreement on China's Economic and Technical Aid to North Korea' and the 'Long Term Agreement' (Piao, 2014). The relationship between the two states was also fortified by Mao's reassurance that China recognized North Korea's autonomy in managing its foreign policy (Xia and Shen, 2014).

Notably, as Moscow became Beijing's main opponent, the relations with Washington seemed to improve (Samarani, 2017). In 1971, the United States waived its veto and agreed to let the People's Republic of China to become a member of the United Nations (Ibid.). The rapprochement between China and the United States did not endanger the newfound stability with Pyongyang. Zhou Enlai had managed to convince Kim Il Sung that the alliance with the United States could also be beneficial for Pyongyang (Xia and Shen, 2014). As a matter of fact, China presented itself as the guarantor of the North Korean regime's interests at the United Nations. However, when President

⁹ The Cultural Revolution lasted from 1966 to 1981 and can be divided into five distinct stages. The central and most significant phase occurred between 1966 and 1969 (Samarani, 2017). Initially it appeared as a series of mass political activities during the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962) (Thornton, 2019). The Cultural Revolution marked the beginning of a long-term isolation from the rest of the world (Shambaugh, 2013).

Nixon visited China in 1972, Zhou mentioned the Korean Peninsula reunification issue, but did not linger too long (Xia and Shen, 2014).

2.2 The New Paradigm

The post-Mao era saw another turn in the relationship between the PRC and the DPRK. During the 1980s, the relationship was seriously weakened due to China's domestic changes. Deng Xiaoping's pragmatic approach to politics undermined the ideological, geopolitical and economic foundation of the Sino-North Korean relationship (Jiang and Minami, 2025).

After the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, China went through a few years of political crisis, which ended by the surge of Deng Xiaoping in 1978. Deng did not share the same degree of commitment to the ideological campaign as his predecessor did. Instead, the new Chinese leaders shifted from "revolutionary" to "modernization" objectives, making economic growth the main priority for Chinese politics (Samarani, 2017; Zhao, 1997). As a result, this political and ideological shift weakened the foundation of its relationship with North Korea, which was heavily influenced by the shared communist ideology and state-centered planned economic system.

Deng's "Four Modernizations" laid the foundation for the economic growth that China experienced in the following decades.¹⁰ The changes undertaken under Deng's leadership conditioned China's foreign relations, including its economic relationship with North Korea. With Deng's reforms, China was becoming a market-oriented economy, while the North Korea regime remained a self-dependent economy. As the ideological component of their relationship was seriously reduced, a more pragmatic, interest-based dynamic became the key feature of their relationship.

Nevertheless, China's shift towards pragmatism did not immediately jeopardize its relationship with the DPRK. Beijing needed to strengthen its ties with Pyongyang, in order to weaken Moscow (Son, 2023). At the time, the Soviet Union had become the major enemy for China. The PRC was surrounded by Soviet-aligned countries: Mongolia to the north, Vietnam to the south and Afghanistan along the western frontier (Son, 2023). Given this situation, maintaining the Sino-North Korean relationship safe was a top priority to China's regional security strategy. In order to discourage North Korea from getting too close to Moscow, Beijing established unofficial trade

¹⁰ The "Four Modernization" initiative (1978) attempted to strengthen the Chinese economy through changes in industry, research and technology, and military (Samarani, 2017).

relations with South Korea (Son, 2023). The trade relations with Seoul not only served as a strategic leverage over Pyongyang, but they were also important for China's modernization policy (Yi, 1995).

The ideological foundation of the relationship between China and North Korea was seriously challenged. Nevertheless, during the early 1980s, the two sides continued high-level visits and exchanges, and resumed bilateral intelligence cooperation, which were previously interrupted by the abruptness of the Cultural Revolution (Jiang and Minami, 2025; Kim, 2019). North Korea continued to benefit from the tensions between China and the Soviet Union, avoiding being over-dependent on one side or the other. China maintained military and financial assistance to North Korea. However, China provided aid to North Korea because of strategic calculation, not because of the "strong revolutionary feeling of comradeship" that characterized Mao's foreign policy (Jiang and Minami, 2025; Kim, 1991).

By the late 1980s, the bilateral relationship entered a new phase. Deng Xiaoping's political philosophy for an effective governance of China was characterized by the concept of "peace and development" (Shambaugh, 2004). According to Deng, the most effective method to achieve sustained economic growth was to maintain peace, both internationally and domestically (Ibid.). This principle shaped China's foreign policy even after Deng Xiaoping.

Therefore, the objective of achieving sustained economic growth resulted in China establishing trade relationships with capitalist countries, even at the expense of its ties with North Korea (Jiang and Minami, 2025). As China and the Soviet Union were slowly normalizing relations, North Korea was losing its strategic value for the Chinese leadership. In 1984, during a meeting with Brazilian President João Figueiredo (1979-1985), Deng declared that "China had no allies" (Kim, 2019). Politically, this move signaled that Beijing did not consider Pyongyang a "special" partner anymore, since it had no longer any strategic value. Moreover, given that North Korea's market was not as appealing as South Korea's, China increased its cooperation with the latter, even if it meant to compromise its relationship with North Korea (Yi, 1995).

. During the second half of the decade, North Korea increased its dependence on the Soviet Union. At the end of the decade, the relationship between China and North Korea was significantly weakened. China no longer prioritized its alliance with Pyongyang given that Beijing's main drive was its economic interests. Therefore, the North Korean regime viewed China as an unreliable partner. Consequently, this situation reflected lower trade levels between the two countries: in 1981, China's share in DPRK foreign trade was 20%, while in 1989 was 9.15% (Szalontai and Choi, 2013).

2.3 The End of the Cold War

During the 1990s, the bilateral relationship between China and North Korea was shaped by both domestic and international turmoil. Following the end of the Cold War, both Beijing and Pyongyang's leadership had to adjust their foreign policy agendas to adapt to the new international landscape. The pivotal moment in this transformation was the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. The newly established Russian Federation chose to not maintain the economic support previously provided by the Soviet Union to North Korea (Mah, 2019). This move led Pyongyang to lose its most important economic lifeline. Consequently, China became the main economic partner of the North Korean regime. However, the Chinese market-oriented economy was structurally incompatible with North Korea's autarky.

In an attempt to reduce Pyongyang's economic dependence on Beijing, the North Korean regime adopted limited measures to open its economy and attract Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) not only from China, but also from other countries including Japan (Mah, 2019). Despite the efforts, these openings failed to achieve the DPRK's initial goal and, instead, they increased its economic dependence on Beijing. China became North Korea's largest FDI contributor and first trade partner, strengthening North Korea's imbalanced export structure (Szalontai and Choi, 2013).

North Korean textiles and other consumer goods faced limited access to the Chinese domestic market (Ibid.). While Pyongyang's main export items to China were natural resources, which were necessary for Beijing's development programs, they did not effectively contribute to North Korea's process of economic growth and modernization (Yoon and Lee, 2013; Szalontai and Choi, 2013). Moreover, Chinese FDI to North Korea and Sino-North Korean joint ventures were mainly involved in the mining and extractive sectors, and they did not improve North Korea's technology upgrading (Mah, 2019). Therefore, the asymmetric dynamic in their economic relationship was reinforced. While North Korea's exports represented a small portion of China's overall export market, China became North Korea's biggest trading partner (Yoon and Lee, 2013).

In 1992, the normalization of diplomatic relations between China and reinforced Kim Il Sung's concern that the "ideological comradeship" was no longer a priority for the Chinese leadership (Kim, 2019). This led to some diplomatic frictions. Between 1991 and 1999 there were no high-level exchange visits between the two countries (Son, 2023). Most importantly, this event signals a long-term trend in Chinese foreign politics: the normalization of the relations between China and South Korea was driven not by ideological alignment with Seoul, but rather by China's strategic calculation. In fact, following the Tiananmen Square crackdown, China was subject to

economic sanctions (Yi, 1995).¹¹ Strategically, the establishment of official diplomatic relations between Beijing and Seoul allowed China to strengthen their economic relations, overcoming some bureaucratic obstacles such as the lack of legal protection for the investment and difficulties in obtaining visas (Yi, 1995; Mah, 2019).

Notably, the tragic Tiananmen events did not harm China's relationship with either South Korea or North Korea. Kim Il Sung publicly expressed approval of Deng's resolution to halt student demonstrations (Zhao, 1997). Nevertheless, from a report from the Polish Ambassador Mieczysław Dedo, it is possible to find that the North Korean leadership depicted the tragic events of Tiananmen Square as a direct consequence of both the absence of a charismatic leader and of a "tested, valid idea" (Wilson Center Digital Archive, 1989). Also, the Polish Ambassador reported criticism to the Chinese leadership for failing to follow Kim Il Sung's suggestions (Wilson Center Digital Archive, 1989).

In response to international isolation, Beijing's foreign policy became rather passive. Following the "good and friendly neighbor diplomacy" (睦邻友好外交), the Chinese leadership emphasized engaging with East Asian countries, using economic collaboration as a tool to reassure them, and at the same time to restore its international engagement (Medeiros, 2009). International peace became essential for China's economic development. However, the "peace and development" guidelines referred not only to international stability, but also to domestic order. Therefore, the one-party rule would guarantee internal stability, which was the key condition to achieve sustained economic growth (Zhao, 2013). In this context, the CCP positioned itself as the embodiment of the state, and its main goal was advancing the nation's interests (Ibid.). As a result, nationalism emerged as the main driver of the Chinese foreign policy agenda (Zhao, 1997).

According to Deng's guidelines, China must have no enemies and should not take into account ideological differences of its new economic partners (Zhao, 1997). As a result, economic cooperation became China's key element for foreign policy. This political strategy further weakened the foundation of the Sino-DPRK relationship, as it was no longer rooted in ideological similarity, but on interest-driven calculations. This shift contributed to increase Pyongyang's insecurity and diplomatic isolation.

¹¹ The protests, which initially began among university students in 1989, later also attracted other societal groups (Samarani, 2010). The objective of the protests was to encourage the Chinese leadership to adopt a more democratic political system (Ibid.). However, the new General Secretary of the CCP, Li Peng, was concerned about the demonstrations, and so he violently repressed the protests (Samarani, 2017)

While China's international position strengthened, North Korea's quickly deteriorated. North Korea underwent a severe economic crisis, the so-called "Arduous March" (1994-1998).¹² The crisis coincided with a critical moment for the survival of the regime. Following the death of Kim Il Sung in 1994, after a three-year mourning period, his son Kim Jong Il assumed the role of leader, becoming the Secretary General of the Korean Workers Party. Nevertheless, it was his role as Chairman of the National Defense Commission, a position he had occupied since 1993, that finally conferred upon him comprehensive authority (Fiori, 2010).

As the economic situation continued to deteriorate, the North Korean regime experienced declining political authority, and the rising danger of losing control over the population (Lim, 2012; David-West, 2013). In an effort to consolidate his position, Kim Jong Il placed significant emphasis on the role of the military by adopting the *Songun Chongchi* or "military-first policy" (Lim, 2012). This represented a major shift from the Kim Il Sung's line as the KWP was not the focus anymore, but the military was (Suh, 2002). The ideological foundation for the prioritization of the military over the Party was its role in the preservation and protection of the sovereignty of the State (Ibid.). This policy had two functions. First, it consolidated Kim's power internationally through the nuclear threat; and second, it legitimized his position domestically (Lim, 2012; Fiori, 2010). The "military-first policy" represented a useful tool to use in Pyongyang's foreign relations in order to negotiate with both the United States and the international community for what was necessary for its survival (Fiori, 2010; Lim, 2012).

¹² During the 1990s, North Korea experienced a dramatic famine which resulted from a combination of international sanctions, severe natural disasters and agricultural mismanagement against the backdrop of the collapse of economic aid that used to arrive from the Soviet Union (Piao, 2014; Mah, 2019).

2.4 The Nuclear Dossier

The relationship between the DPRK and the PRC was put to the test during the first (1993-1994) and the second (2003-2004) nuclear crisis. These events unveiled the two countries' foreign policy trajectories that were rooted in the previous decade and contributed to increased mutual distrust. For Pyongyang, regime survival was the primary objective, and the development of a nuclear weapons program was directly linked to it (Lankov, 2017; Cho and Lim, 2018). As a result, this strategic priority seriously compromised the effectiveness of China's diplomatic influence over North Korea. For Beijing, these crises marked a significant shift in its foreign policy: from a "low-profile" policy to a proactive policy in the Asia-Pacific region. This "identity shift" of the Chinese leadership was particularly visible as Beijing adopted a more active stance as the second nuclear crisis unfolded (Lee, 2013).

The premises of the first nuclear crisis were established during the 1980s. In 1985, the first 5MWe gas-cooled, graphite moderated nuclear reactor for plutonium production was built independently by North Korea (American Security Project, 2012). The same year, Pyongyang signed the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), however, the regime signed the safeguard clauses only in 1992 (International Crisis group, 2003).

During the second half of the 1980s, the United States intelligence service concluded that the DPRK was actively developing a nuclear fuel cycle (Liang and Li, 2024). In response, in December 1993, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Board of Governors demanded a "special verification" (He, 2010). However, the North Korean government refused to cooperate and accused the IAEA of being maneuvered by Washington (Liang and Li, 2024). Pyongyang demanded that the United States and South Korea halt their joint military drills, but the United States administration was reluctant to be blackmailed by North Korea (Liang and Li, 2024). Subsequently, North Korea threatened to withdraw from the Treaty of Non-Proliferation (Ibid.). China assumed a neutral position on the matter, leaving Pyongyang and Washington to directly negotiate (Lee, 2013).

The crisis was resolved after former US president Jimmy Carter visited North Korea. The talks between Kim and Carter set the foundation for what later would become the Agreed Framework, signed later on 21 October 1994 (He, 2010; Fiori, 2010; Lee, 2013). Notably, in June 1994, Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen warned Kim Il Sung that China did not intend to veto eventual economic sanctions or to support an eventual military confrontation with the United States (Lee, 2013). This move signaled a departure from previous patterns. China was willing to not side with North Korea against the United States if tensions escalated in the Peninsula. North Korea could

no longer count on Beijing's automatic support against the so-called "imperialist forces", namely the United States.

The Agreed Framework stipulated that the DPRK would freeze the Yongbyon nuclear reactor and its processing facilities, and would allow the IAEA inspectors to monitor specific nuclear facilities (Fiori, 2010). In return, the United States committed to build two light-water reactors in North Korea together with an international consortium named the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) to replace the graphite reactors (Fiori, 2010). The agreement would represent an opportunity to create a new peace regime on the peninsula and to build cooperative relations with regional and international actors (Cotton, 2003).

However, the diplomatic opportunity created by the Agreed Framework proved to be short-lived. During the summer of 1998, Pyongyang launched the *Taepodong-1* medium-range missile that overflowed Japan (Fiori, 2010). This event marked the failure of the Four Party Talks involving North Korea, South Korea, China and the United States that was launched in 1996 under the United States and South Korea initiative (Chung and Choi, 2013). Initially, the North Korean regime accepted the proposal, as China promised economic and military aid in exchange (Ibid.). However, fearing that the Four Party Talks could give Beijing too much leverage over the Korean Peninsula issue, Pyongyang made sure that the initiative failed.

On the other hand, the DPRK was willing to improve its relations with the Republic of Korea (He, 2010). The "Sunshine Policy" launched by South Korea's President Kim Dae Jung (1998-2003) was welcomed by the North Korean leadership.¹³ The first inter-Korean summit was held in Pyongyang on 15 June 2000 (He, 2010). On this occasion, Kim Dae Jung and Kim Jong Il signed the North-South Joint Declaration, emphasizing the importance of joint effort for the reunification of the peninsula (He, 2010; Fiori, 2010). This made clear that for Pyongyang, the matter of the Korean Peninsula reunification was a matter of Korean people only, and that no other foreign country should interfere in this process.

Nevertheless, this positive atmosphere proved to be transient. In 2001, the United States elected President George W. Bush, who appeared to prefer a more hawkish approach towards the North Korean regime (Fiori, 2010). In his 2002 State of the Union address, President Bush defined North Korea as part of the "axis of evil" together with Iran and Iraq. The President also warned that "America will do what is necessary to ensure our nation's security" (Cotton, 2003). The antagonistic attitude expressed by the new US leadership was cause for concern within the North Korean regime

¹³ The "Sunshine Policy" strategy aimed at creating economic, trade and cultural ties between the two countries, in order to persuade Pyongyang to adopt a more open agenda (Fiori, 2010).

fueling apprehension for its safety, and therefore leading Pyongyang to improve its conventional and non-conventional defense capabilities (Cai, 2010).

The visit of then-Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly to Pyongyang worsened the situation. During Kelly's talks with DPRK Deputy Foreign Minister Kang Sok Ju, the latter reportedly admitted that the North Korean regime was pursuing a nuclear program based on enriched uranium (Cotton, 2003). The crisis escalated quickly when KEDO suspended its aid to North Korea, and in response the North Korean regime withdrew from the NPT and reactivated the nuclear facilities (Lee, 2013).

In April 2003, a multilateral meeting was held in Beijing. On this occasion, the Six Party Talks were launched (Lee, 2013). The actors involved in these meetings were the DPRK, China, the United States, the ROK, the Russian Federation and Japan. The key objectives of these talks were to ease the tensions, and finally to establish what Cai (2010) defines as a "long-term regional security framework" on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia.

Letting loose of its prior "background role", China became the promoter of the Six Party Talks and acted as the host and facilitator to assure that all the sides involved continued to communicate (Lee, 2013). Given the robust economic performance and the adept capacity to swiftly recover from the 1997 Asian Financial crisis, China's confidence had undergone substantial growth (Ibid.).¹⁴ The "identity shift" process was rooted in China's post-Tiananmen foreign policy. In fact, the Chinese leadership focused on building intertwining positive relationships with neighboring countries to improve its image (Shambaugh, 2004). China yearned for acquiring the role of regional power, following the guidelines prescribed by the "peaceful rise" philosophy. The main objective of Beijing's foreign policy was to become an active and respectable member of the international community (Samarani, 2017). Notably, China's different stance between the first and the second nuclear crisis was not related to changing security concerns. In both cases, the goal was to safeguard the stability in Northeast Asia (Lee, 2013). It was the growing confidence of the Chinese leadership that influenced a different approach in the context of the second nuclear crisis. Also, the Hu Jintao leadership (2002-2012) took office during a favorable international moment for China's position; the United States were involved in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, and North Korea's economic situation had worsened (Daewon and Richey, 2015). These conditions helped the Chinese leadership to proactively deal with the nuclear issue.

¹⁴ The 1997 East Asia financial crisis began in Thailand, following the devaluation of the Thai currency (Rao, 1998). Over time, the currency crisis developed into a financial crisis, affecting the majority of the economies of East Asia (Ibid.)

However, China's ambitious plan did foster North Korea's strategic insecurity (Chung and Choi, 2013). This is because China's growing involvement in the Korean peninsula issue did not mean that it would overtly favor Pyongyang's interests. Kim Jong Il did not appreciate the Six Party Talks, suspecting that China's agenda was to comply with the Bush agenda (Chung and Choi, 2013.). North Korea's persistent suspicion over the Chinese government's real intentions resulted in hampering Chinese attempts to resolve the crisis (Ibid.).

On 19 September 2005, the Joint Statement was issued. The document addressed the following issues: providing North Korea with economic incentives to convince the regime to halt the development of its nuclear program and go back to the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the IAEA safeguards (Cho and Lim, 2018). However, by November 2005, financial sanctions had already been imposed against North Korea. These sanctions were held against Banco Delta Asia, a bank based in Macao that had connection with the North Korean government; the Bank was accused by the United States of engaging in illicit activities, such as money-laundering (Snyder, 2007). This situation appeared to be a pretext to halt the Six Party Talks (Ibid.). Moreover, the tensions increased following North Korea's first nuclear test in 2006 (Cho and Lim, 2018). The second nuclear test occurred in May 2009, and the Six Party Talks were not resumed.

These talks were undermined from the beginning. The development of WMD programs was the only bargaining chip used by the North Korean regime to guarantee its survival, therefore no economic proposition could be enough to convince Pyongyang to renounce to its nuclear program: "North Korea safety is not for sale" (Cho and Lim, 2018). After the Cold War, the DPRK found itself even more internationally isolated while its capitalist counterpart that is South Korea, not only had official diplomatic relations with China, but also had a wealthier economy. This growing disparity increased Pyongyang's sense of insecurity. Moreover, achieving the status of nuclear power not only strengthened North Korea's position vis-à-vis the international community, but it also represented a source of domestic legitimacy for the Kim dynasty.

The nuclear program was not aimed at China, but it was part of a larger strategy pursued by the North Korean leadership. In fact, China and North Korea's economic relationship improved during the 2000s (Mah, 2019). Bilateral trade and high-level visits were reprised in 2000. During his visit to China in May 2000, Kim Jong Il and Jiang Zemin (1989-2002) stated their intent to "make greater efforts to consolidate, develop and deepen the traditional friendship" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PRC, 2001). Jiang's leadership was, in fact, attempting to improve relations with North Korea. From 1997 to 2001, the Chinese government provided economic aid to Pyongyang. Moreover, to help alleviate North Korea's shortage of currency, Beijing reinstated the "friendship

price” for all goods exported to North Korea (Mah, 2019). Chinese assistance proved to be essential for regime survival (Daewon and Richey, 2015).

Under Hu Jintao, the Chinese leadership valued the “traditional friendship” between the two countries. In October 2004, during a visit of a DPRK delegation in Beijing, Hu expressed his willingness to “work along with the DPRK to continue stepping up efforts in strengthening friendly exchange and cooperation” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PRC, 2004). In fact, many initiatives were promoted by both the Chinese and North Korean leadership to increase China’s investment in North Korea (Mah, 2019). This trend continued also in the 2010s. The trade values also continued to increase. This is in part due to the halt in economic cooperation with Japan and South Korea due to the nuclear tests of 2006 and 2009 (Szalontai and Choi, 2013).

This duality in the relationship between the PRC and the DPRK will mark a long-term trend. The development of the nuclear program was a crucial part of Kim Jong Il’s political legitimacy (Cai, 2010). The “military first” principle became a key feature of North Korea’s state identity, and it provided the legitimacy to reinforce control over the population and improved its international status (Ibid.). Therefore, given that nuclear weapons are closely related to national identity, no foreign power can interfere in this matter. Consequently, China has no leverage on the prospect that the North Korea regime would give up its nuclear arsenal (Chung and Choi, 2013).

However, the nuclear issue did not weaken the relationship between Beijing and Pyongyang. Even if bilateral trade between the PRC and DPRK was not worthwhile for China in economic terms, it was important for its strategic calculation given that regional stability has been considered crucial for China’s economic growth (Samarani, 2017). Both Jiang and Hu leaderships were aware that the development of nuclear weapons by North Korea could lead to a “nuclear domino” in the region, or an increase of US military presence in the area (Song and Lee, 2016). Therefore, the economic and diplomatic engagement with North Korea was essential to stop the regime from collapsing and maintain peace in the region.

Conclusion

The historical experience of the State shapes its identity (Kim, 2006). State behavior is the tangible expression of that identity and national interests. Consequently, each action bears a specific meaning (Kim, 2006). For both China and North Korea, the identity of the nation is closely linked respectively to the ruling class: the Chinese Communist Party and the Kim dynasty.

For both systems, nationalism is the core element of the ideological framework. During Mao Zedong's leadership of China, the nature of the relationship between Beijing and Pyongyang rested on the so-called "proletarian internationalist duty" (Chen, 1992). China's intervention in the Korean War was not only based on strategic calculations - a US dominated Korean Peninsula was a serious threat to China's territory - but also on ideological components. In the post-Mao era, Deng Xiaoping and his successors strengthened the link between the Party and the state, which in turn changed the dynamics of China's relationship with North Korea. The Party represented the only defender of national interests (Zhao, 2013). The foundation of the legitimacy of the CCP has predominantly been underpinned by economic development, which requires stability inside and outside of China (Ibid.). North Korea's nuclear development posed a threat to the status quo in Northeast Asia, thus undermining China's national interests. For this reason, China had to implement a series of measures - such as economic and humanitarian aid - to prevent the regime's collapse. In both cases, China provided economic support to North Korea, even though it was not convenient for China's economy. The meanings behind this support varied based on the foreign policies advocated by the two Chinese paramount leaders, which is connected to the national identity.

Conversely, the North Korean regime has from the outset been deeply concerned with resisting foreign interference. The guidelines of Kim Il Sung policy are "independence and unity", which established the theoretical foundation of the Juche ideology (Koh, 1978). Juche is largely based on the country's cultural, political and economic independence and presents an autarkic vision of North Korean nationalism (Kwon, 2016). To preserve its political autonomy, Kim did not hesitate to resort to violence, as exemplified by the Great Purges of 1957-1960. Moreover, North Korea's oscillation between China and the Soviet Union during the 1960s and the following decades reflected strategic calculations aimed at avoiding overdependence on either ally.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the increasing level of China's integration into the international system, the new leadership's main concern shifted from political independence to regime survival. In order to ensure the continuity of the dynasty, Kim Jong Il introduced the

concept of “military first”. Based on this new policy framework, the military became the “central institution of North Korea”, being its only means of protection from foreign powers and the only way to achieve “prosperity” (Kuznar, 2023). The military emerged as the central institution for all social and political tasks (Ibid.). The development of nuclear weapons was part of this new framework. Denuclearization was not possible, as North Korea has no other ironclad means of protection from external forces.

China’s active participation in the promotion of the multilateral Six Party Talks increased North Korea anxiety. It was crucial for Pyongyang to directly conduct talks about reunification only with Seoul, as reunification was the sole prerogative of the Korean people (Chung and Choi, 2013). Yet, North Korea could not survive on its own without China. Following the collapse of the USSR, Beijing became Pyongyang’s largest trade partner (Mah, 2019). Their economic relationship was highly asymmetrical, as North Korea’s trade deficit against China kept on growing (Ibid.).

To conclude, the bilateral relationship between China and North Korea was primarily shaped by leadership-driven objectives. Following the pragmatic shift introduced by Deng Xiaoping’s reforms, strategic calculations prevailed over ideological alignment. Even if mutual distrust has persisted, both regimes continued to rely on rhetoric as a means of enforcing a common history of struggle against imperialism and capitalism (Chung and Choi, 2013). Therefore, ideology functions only as an instrument of legitimation, rather than authentic alignment.

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Chapter 3: New Identities and New Threats

3.1 The Advent of New Leadership

Within the years from 2011 to 2013, both China and North Korea underwent a period of political transition.

The 18th congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2012 and the 12th National People's Congress in 2013 marked the rise of Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang at the helm of Chinese politics (Samarani, 2017). Xi was elected as General Secretary of the Communist Party and chairperson of the Central Military Commission, and later in 2013 president of the PRC whereas Li became the prime minister (Mohanty, 2013).

Xi inherited a country whose economic and international situation had enhanced under Hu Jintao's leadership. As highlighted by the Chinese President during the 17th Party Congress on 15 October 2007, the main objective of Hu's leadership was to create a "moderate prosperous society" through "Scientific Outlook on Development" (Samarani, 2017; Shin, 2018). His politics were aimed at building a "harmonious society", promoting stable economic growth, reducing disparities among Chinese provinces, and environmental sustainability (Ibid.; Ferdinand, 2016).

Indeed, economic policies adopted by the Chinese leadership were successful. China was able to overcome the financial crisis of 2008, and in 2010 it became the second world largest economy, surpassing Japan (Mohanty, 2012). At the same time, Beijing launched some initiatives to improve China's international visibility and soft power, such as the 2008 Olympics game and 2010 Expo in Shanghai (Gallelli, 2021).

Xi Jinping introduced a different political vision from that of his predecessor. Xi's defining policy objective became "National Rejuvenation" (the great renewal of the Chinese nation), famously encapsulated in the concept of the "Chinese Dream." (Economy, 2018). During the First Session of the 12th National People's Congress on 17 March 2013, President Xi Jinping described the "Chinese Dream" as "the national spirit with patriotism at its core.", and as "the source of rejuvenating and strengthening the country" (Xi, 2014). The "patriotic spirit" was expected to foster national unity, and to inspire a renewed sense of pride among the Chinese population.

Whereas Hu Jintao's political agenda was primarily focused on social stability and stable economic development, Xi Jinping introduced a more ambitious project. Based on the "patriotic spirit" that embodies the "Chinese Dream" principle, Xi's leadership marked a departure from Deng Xiaoping's *taoguang yanghui* (韬光养晦, "conceal our capacities and await an opportune

momentum”) (Economy, 2018). As several scholars have argued, the Chinese government portrayed China not as a “peaceful developing country” pursuing peaceful growth, but as a great power with responsibilities and interests within the international system (Brødsgaard and Grünberg, 2013; Zhang, 2016; Economy, 2018; Carrai, 2021). Consequently, Xi Jinping’s leadership represented an important shift in China’s international identity.

The principles underlying the “Chinese Dream” also shaped China’s foreign policy.

Drawing upon the “patriotic” sense of pride derived from China’s cultural and historical identity, China aimed at promoting a new “major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics” (Shin, 2018). This approach highlighted China’s growing role in global affairs. As noted by Foreign Ministry Wang Yi, China as a major power intended “to put moral principles first when we deal with fellow developing countries and be more sensitive to their needs”, highlighting that this aspect reflects the “inherent nature of the socialist system” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People’s Republic of China, 2014). These statements emphasize that the distinctive nature of the Chinese political system shapes its role in conducting international affairs. China’s model of diplomacy was linked to the ideological foundation of the Chinese Communist Party, emphasizing its different approach from that associated with Western powers.

The new leadership developed a new perception regarding the role of China in the world, which also influenced the relationship with North Korea. Before Xi, China’s foreign policy was characterized by a cooperative diplomatic approach to international relations, and it was defined as “engagement-oriented” towards North Korea (Kim, 2010; Kong, 2018). This was exemplified by China’s role during the Six Party Talks (SPT). During Hu’s term, the Chinese leadership frequently urged Pyongyang to refrain from provocative actions but simultaneously argued that economic pressure alone would not solve the nuclear crisis, fearing that sanctions would cripple the collapse of the North Korean regime.

Xi’s leadership demonstrated a greater willingness to defend China’s core interests, and showed less tolerance for what was perceived as undermining China’s security (Gallelli, 2021). The stability of the Korean peninsula remained a fundamental objective of Beijing’s security interests. Any action that could have challenged the regional status quo was viewed as a challenge to China’s strategic objective of peace and stability.

Consequently, Xi adopted a more assertive approach towards North Korea’s nuclear and missile programmes. The third nuclear test that occurred in February 2013 challenged the new administration’s foreign policy and marked the beginning of a strained relationship between Beijing

and Pyongyang. Notably, Masahiro Hoshino and Shunji Hiraiwa (2020) note that during that time, Xi's policy towards the Korean peninsula aimed at balancing between Pyongyang and Seoul by growing closer ties with South Korea and then-president Park Geun-hye.

Both Xi and Park were concerned about an eventual collapse of the North regime (Kim and Martin-Hermisillo, 2013). Because of the regional insecurity caused by North Korea nuclear tests, Seoul was expected to adjust its foreign policy closer with Washington. Therefore, Beijing promoted cooperative bilateral relations with South Korea, seeking to increase its role in the region, and also to ensure its involvement during eventual North-South talks.

Kim Jong Un became General Secretary of the Workers' Party of Korea and president of the State Affairs Commission after the death of his father Kim Jong Il (on 17 December 2011). Kim Jong Un continued to develop the nuclear program that was initiated by his predecessors and made it a crucial element of his father's political agenda (Armstrong, 2017).

During the Central Committee meeting of the Workers' Party of Korea in March 2013, Kim introduced the *byungjin* doctrine, a new strategy according to which, Korea should prioritize the development of nuclear weapons together with the economy (Han and Joo, 2014). This doctrine represented a different approach to North Korean development policies from Kim Jong Il *Songun Chongchi* or "military-first policy", which had prioritized the military development of the country at the expense of living standards (Kong, 2018). The *byungjin* line gave more importance to the economic development of the country in order to enhance people's living conditions and at the same time to strengthen North Korea's nuclear deterrent (Chung et al., 2016). Notably, the economic development objective of state policy did not diminish the strategic importance of military and nuclear capabilities (Ibid.).

3.2. Economic relations

From the economic perspective, the tendencies that were identified in the early 2000s persist in the later decade. The economic relations continued to be characterized by asymmetry. China's economy has significantly more robust than the North Korean economy. Moreover, China's share of North Korean imports increased, especially after the first nuclear test in 2006. As reported by the KOTRA (the Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency), while in 2006 imports from China constituted 57% of total imports of North Korea, in 2009 they rose to 79%. Notably, following South Korea's decision to interrupt its economic ties with Pyongyang after the Cheonan warship incident and the second North Korean nuclear test in 2009, North Korea-China trade underwent significant growth (Park, 2010; Yoon and Lee, 2013).¹⁵

During Hu Jintao's leadership, Beijing sought to enhance its influence over North Korea in order to push Pyongyang towards a path of economic reform similar to the one pursued by China in the 1980s and 1990s (Park, 2010). Then Vice President Xi Jinping conducted a state visit to Pyongyang in June 2008 where he confirmed the Chinese leadership's intention to "deepen economic and trade cooperation" with North Korea (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2008).

Under Xi's term, the bilateral economic relation has continued to grow. In fact, by 2014, North Korea imports from China reached 90%. In 2013, during a meeting with North Korean special envoy Choe Ryong-hae, Xi Jinping stated that "the Chinese Party and the government are willing to work with the DPRK to promote the long-term healthy and stable development of relations between the two countries" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2013). His statement reflected China's new foreign strategy aimed at ensuring better life conditions for all individuals, based on the principles of "amity, sincerity, mutual benefit" that were introduced in October 2013 during the "Work Forum on Chinese Diplomacy Toward the Periphery" (Park, 2016; Chang Liao, 2016).

The economic relationship between the two countries has also been characterized by asymmetry in terms of value-added content. While Chinese imports have mainly consisted of natural resources, such as mineral products or metals, North Korean imports from China have frequently featured "higher-value-added" items such as machinery and electrical equipment (Piao, 2014).

¹⁵ The Cheonan incident is referred to the South Korean navy warship Cheonan sank near the coast of North Korea on 26 March 2010 (Yoon and Lee, 2013). This incident caused diplomatic friction between North Korea and South Korea.

Moreover, Chinese FDI did not make a significant contribution to the development of North Korea's technological sector given that investors generally preferred to focus on the mining industry (Mah, 2019).

The technological and trade volume deficit between the two partners has partly reflected the effects of international sanctions that limited Pyongyang's economic partners as well as North Korea's own economic system. The "self-sufficiency" model dictated by the Juche ruling ideology strictly limited eventual economic reforms. Moreover, the leadership has been adverse to reforms fearing that it could lose its Communist credentials, as in their view happened in China during Deng Xiaoping's era (Hoshino and Hiraiwa, 2020).

Notably, although diplomatic relations were strained in the first phase of Xi's term, levels of trade have remained unaffected. The maintenance of closer ties with North Korea from an economic perspective are essential to Xi Jinping's leadership as they were for Hu Jintao. China has continued to view North Korea a valuable economic partner that must be helped as an eventual collapse of the DPRK would represent a threat to China's security, as it may lead to a large-scale migration across the Chinese borders (Hoshino and Hiraiwa, 2020 Shi, 2015). Moreover, this possible alteration of the regional balance may increase the role of the United States military in close proximity to China's border (Ibid.)

While China as a UNSC permanent member backed resolutions imposing sanctions against North Korea until 2017, it has avoided fully enforcing them. Through illegal trade close to the North Korea-China border as well as ship-to-ship transfers, China-North Korea trade have continued in spite of international sanctions (Lee, 2016). Although avoiding the collapse of the North Korean economy and thus the regime is a top priority for the Chinese leadership, North Korea was not included in the Belt and Road Initiative (due to imposed international sanctions) and Pyongyang was not admitted to the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2015 (Gray and Lee, 2018, Easley, 2017).

3.3 Security calculations

Xi Jinping's leadership aims at obtaining the international identity of "great power" (Economy, 2018). In order to consolidate its international status, China has sought to expand its influence in the Northeast Asian region without engaging in a military confrontation against the United States. A full-scale war against Washington would produce severely negative repercussions on the Chinese economy as well as national security (Weiss and Wallace, 2021). As a matter of fact, security is one of the principles that ensure the legitimacy of the CCP since 1970 together with nationalism and economic growth.

During his visit to the United States in June 2013, Chinese president Xi and U.S. President Barack Obama agreed to "build a new type of great power relationship (Xinhua, 2013). Xi Jinping highlighted that the "Chinese Dream [...] is connected to the American dream and beautiful dreams of people in other countries" (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America, 2013). Moreover, Xi added that through collaboration the two countries would be able to "promote strong, sustainable and balanced economic growth in the Asia Pacific region and the world at large." (Ibid.). Through economic collaboration Beijing aimed at creating a safer security environment that may lead other countries to achieve economic development as China did.

Based on the "new type of great power relationship", the Chinese leadership viewed direct confrontation between great power as not an inevitable scenario (Lampton, 2013). The "peaceful development strategy" put forth by Xi Jinping offered an alternative to the fatalistic argument of realist and neorealist scholars. These principles inform China's policy towards the US as well as Beijing's neighbor. China's foreign policy under Xi has been oriented towards being perceived as a peaceful power that does not cause concern to its neighbors (Lee, 2014). During a conference on the Diplomatic Work on Neighboring Countries in Beijing on October 25th 2013, President Xi considers that "Cooperation with neighbors should be based on mutual benefit and create a close network of common interests" (Shen, 2013).

The Korean Peninsula represents an important strategic region for China's national security (Kim and Kim, 2022; Gray and Lee, 2018). Although China and North Korea do not share identical security interests, their security calculations and strategies may influence each other due to the two countries' geographical proximity. From a geopolitical perspective, North Korea represents a "buffer zone" for China against the United States' presence in the Northeast Asian region. However, North

Korea's aggressive posture represents a source of instability in the region, which harms China's foreign policy agenda and its international identity.

From Beijing's perspective, the debate over whether North Korea represents a strategic asset or a strategic burden is not resolved. In 2009, the Foreign Leading Small Group on Foreign Policy concluded that it was necessary to separate North Korea's nuclear threat from "normal" relations (Lee, 2014; Daewon and Richey, 2015). This framework suggested that China did not want to cut its relationship with Pyongyang, but that relations should be strategically adjusted in light of Pyongyang's aggressive behavior.

While China is concerned with its international reputation and the stability of the Korean Peninsula, North Korea's security interests are related mostly to the survival of the Kim regime (Hong, 2014). The nuclear weapons development program represents North Korea's most effective strategy to ensure the survival of the regime (Wang, 2014).

As literature shows, small states are not concerned with the international structure of the system and whether their actions may change those structures. Small states in the international system are more concerned with their security, given that their military capacities are usually weaker than those of great powers. Indeed, North Korea's weak economy and humanitarian crises have resulted in the country facing significant challenges. However, the DPRK regime has been able to take advantage of its geographical strategic position to survive after the Korean War.

As Robert Rothstein argued (1968), small states often engage in alliances to overcome security threats. Generally, as described by Morrow's "autonomy-security trade off" framework, small states in alliances have to give up part of their autonomy in order to gain more security (Morrow, 1991). Indeed, North Korea's economy is heavily dependent on bilateral trade relations with China (Lee et al., 2020).

However, North Korea refused to renounce its independence. The Juche ideology that shaped North Korean politics highlights that its autonomy is not negotiable. Therefore, China's influence on North Korea's politics is very limited. For instance, following the Third Nuclear test, China has not been able to encourage Pyongyang to cease developing nuclear weapons, despite imposing new unilateral sanctions, including the closure of North Korean bank accounts in four major Chinese state-owned banks (Lee and Kim, 2017).

The nuclear program is central for North Korea, as it is deeply connected to its own national security and regime legitimacy (Lankov, 2017). Despite its alliance with China, North Korea continues to prefer to be self-sufficient even in the security sector. Therefore, from a neorealist

perspective, the acquisition of nuclear weapons may be considered a “rational” response to the anarchical international system. As Lankov (2017) noted, from the point of view of Pyongyang, the fate of Muammar Gaddafi and Saddam Hussein prove that Kim’s regime is safe only through the development of a credible nuclear deterrent.

North Korea considers nuclear weapons the only guarantee to ensure the survival of the regime against external threats (Grzelczyk, 2016). Conversely, economic or security partnerships are not viewed as a sufficient deterrent against future external threats (Cho and Lim, 2018). This argument is not only based on a realist theoretical framework, but it is also shaped by North Korea’s Juche principle.

Similarly to China, North Korea aspires to enhance its status within the international system. As Kim Jong Un leadership announced in January 2013, denuclearization is no longer a possibility and the regime's ambition is to be recognized as a “nuclear weapons state” (Whang et al., 2017). Nuclear deterrence is one of the characteristics that all great powers possess. Kim Jong Un’s leadership aims at being internationally recognized as part of this group of states (Hagström and Lundström).

3.3.1. Third Nuclear Test

On 12 February, 2013, North Korea conducted its third nuclear test. This test highlighted Pyongyang’s higher technological skills compared to the previous ones in 2006 and 2009 (Shi, 2015). The successful test was praised by North Korean authorities and population as reported by the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA). In an article published on the following day, it was reported that the test was an “epoch-making event” and praised “iron-willed courage and far-sighted sagacity of the dear and respected leader Kim Jong Un” (KCNA, 2013). The interviews highlighted how North Korea managed to achieve this great success based on its own capabilities, and it was argued that Pyongyang had the right to conduct such actions (Ibid.).

Hochul Lee (2014) noted that China’s response to the third nuclear test marked some changes in Beijing's stance towards Pyongyang. Indeed, Pyongyang proceeded with the test even if in a letter sent to Kim Jong Un, Xi Jinping had previously recommended him to refrain from continuing with nuclear tests (Lee, 2014; Daewon and Richey, 2015; Wertz, 2019).

In response to the test, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that “China resolutely opposes the DPRK nuclear test” (China Atomic Energy Authority, 2013). The statement published

by the Ministry reaffirmed that Beijing continued to urge all the sides involved to go back to negotiations to address the nuclear issue, and also it recommended Pyongyang to “refrain from any words and actions that may further worsen the situation” (Ibid.).

Similar to the communique that had been published by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2009 following the second nuclear test, in 2013 the Chinese leadership continued to promote the Six Party Talks as a way to deescalate rising tensions in the Northeast Asian region (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2009; China Atomic Energy Authority, 2013). China's reactions to the second and third nuclear tests suggest that Beijing was willing to further pursue its role as a “mediator” (Liao, 2025). By hosting the Six Party Talks since 2003, the Chinese leadership had actively pushed for multilateral talks and negotiations to prevent de-escalations in the region.

While China continued to promote dialogue between the parties to convince North Korea to abandon its nuclear program and thus guarantee peace and stability in the region, on the other hand, its response to North Korea's third test was less tolerant than during previous tests.

Pyongyang's Ambassador to China Ji Jaeryong was summoned to discuss the incident (Gu, 2015). Notably, the PRC had rarely summoned a diplomatic representative (Duchâtel and Schell, 2013). Chinese media outlets reflected Beijing's deep uneasiness with Pyongyang's provocative behaviour. According to a piece published on the *Global Times* (2013), “China should inform Pyongyang that if it continues to conduct nuclear tests, assistance will be further reduced”. Moreover, the same article argued that “China will become more isolated if it still insists on the nuclear path”, which may be not helpful for North Korea as it is the “weakest country in Northeast Asia” (Ibid.). Another piece on the *Global Times* (2013a) that was published on 24 February, accused the Pyongyang regime that “it would please China by saying flattering words [...], but after it gets what it wants, it would show indifference to the policy”. On 11 April another article noted that North Korea's aggressive foreign policy was dangerous for the security of the region, as whether the crisis was to escalate, North Korea “does not have the ability to dominate the situation on the peninsula” (Global Times, 2013b).

These articles highlighted that North Korea's limited economic and military resources would reduce its survival chances should external aid stop. Given the asymmetric distribution of material resources between the two allies, the DPRK should pay attention on the repercussions that its decisions could have on the relations with Beijing. The general tone of these articles was expected to signal to North Korea and to the international community that China's patience was not unlimited, as

Pyongyang's behavior was damaging Beijing's international reputation and its foreign policy agenda.

Moreover, China did not refrain from backing international sanctions against North Korea. Following the 2006 and 2009 nuclear tests, China showed a less strict pattern of actions regarding its support to sanctions. While China voted in favor of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1718 and 1874, during the debate, vice Foreign Minister and Chinese representative to the UN Zhang Yesui stressed that "the sovereignty, territorial integrity and legitimate security concerns and development interests of the DPRK should be respected". Moreover, he added that "the issue of cargo inspection is complicated and sensitive" (Zhang, 2009).

Following the 2013 test, the US and the PRC representatives at the UN collaborated on drafting the Resolution 2094, which not only expanded the list of prohibited items, but also targeted financial sanctions (Kwon and Grief, 2021). Later in the same year, the Bank of China closed the account of the Foreign Trade Bank, North Korea's primary foreign exchange bank (Lee, 2016; Hoshino and Hiraiwa, 2020).

From a constructivist and status-seeking perspective, the North Korean nuclear development program posed a serious threat to China's international credibility as a responsible stakeholder (Easley and Park, 2016; Lee et al., 2020). Based on the status-seeking theoretical framework, the international community has to accept and recognize China's socially constructed identity as a responsible power (Clunan, 2014; Larson et al., 2014). Since the international perception of China's identity is drawn from its behavior, the PRC's limited commitment to encourage North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons development program has made the international community uncertain about China's role as a responsible power (Lee et al., 2020).

The foreign policy agenda of the Chinese leadership has long considered the stability of the Northeast Asia region among its priorities (Daewon and Richey, 2015). To achieve this goal, the stability of the North Korean regime was considered an important requirement (Ibid.). Given the economic and humanitarian situation of the DPRK, China's aid has been essential to guarantee the survival of North Korea. This has constrained China's intention to sanction North Korea for its nuclear activities, leading the international community to believe that Beijing's priority was the regime's survival rather than the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

However, China's active role in drafting Resolution 2094 against North Korea and the criticism coming from Chinese media towards Pyongyang's behavior were interpreted as signs that something was changing on the part of the Chinese leadership (Lee, 2016). Moreover, on several

occasions, representatives of the Chinese government highlighted that the priority was the denuclearization of the peninsula. For instance, as Chinese representative to the UN Li Baodong argued, “[China] has always been firmly devoted to maintain peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia, safeguard the non-proliferation system and the denuclearization of the peninsula, and promote the peaceful resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2013a). Furthermore, Foreign Minister Wang Yi stressed that the denuclearization of the Peninsula was one of the most important drivers of the Chinese leadership’s foreign policy during the World Peace Forum Conference held in Beijing on 27-28 June (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2013b).

It is possible to consider China’s response to North Korea’s third nuclear test as Xi Jinping’s leadership attempt to demonstrate to the international community that the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula was gaining more importance in China’s foreign policy calculations, even if this could create diplomatic frictions with Pyongyang. Having said that, the 1961 China-North Korea Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance was never questioned, and neither the economic ties between the two countries were compromised. It has been suggested that China’s reluctance to abandon North Korea was aimed at preserving Beijing’s influence on the matter and thus prevent Pyongyang and Washington from negotiating directly leaving China as a spectator (Lee et al., 2020).

Washington's perception of China’s role when it comes to the issue of North Korea’s nuclear program is important, as the United States are the hegemonic power and they are able to shape their allies perceptions’ as well. At the time, China’s international identity as a responsible power was reinforced by the Obama’s administration recognition that Beijing’s collaboration was essential to resolve the nuclear issue, as exemplified by then-President Barack Obama’s statements during the meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013 when he argued that “we also have a whole range of challenges on which we have to cooperate, from a nuclear North Korea -- or North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs -- to proliferation” (Obama and Xi, 2013). The following year, the *China Daily* reported that then-Secretary of State John Kerry had argued that “China has enormous ability to be able to have an impact here, and tomorrow my instructions from President Obama are to sit with the Chinese leadership” (Chen and Zhou, 2014). Kerry and Obama’s statements reinforced the view of China’s role as an important actor for safeguarding international stability including in the Korean Peninsula.

3.3.2 Fourth and Fifth Nuclear Tests

In 2016, North Korea conducted its fourth and fifth nuclear tests on 6 January and 9 September respectively. The official reactions from the Chinese leadership echoed the ones of the previous tests. During a daily press briefing in Beijing on 6 January 2016, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, Hua Chunying, emphasized China's "resolute opposition" to the fourth nuclear test (*People's Daily*, 2016). The guiding principles of the Chinese leadership in addressing the North Korean nuclear issue were reinforced. Beijing continued to be "committed to realizing denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula, upholding peace and stability there and peacefully resolving the issue through dialogues and negotiations", as stated by Hua during another press conference on 22 February (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2016a).

US Secretary of State John Kerry argued that both the US administration and the Chinese leadership agreed that the fourth nuclear test "merit an appropriate response through the United Nations Security Council" (Kerry, 2016). Indeed, China voted in favor of the UNSC Resolution 2270 that was adopted on March 2, 2016. The sanctions imposed on North Korea in response to the fourth nuclear test expanded the list of prohibited military-related items and imposed a sweeping sectoral embargo specifically targeting Pyongyang's revenue from coal, minerals, and fuel. Moreover, UNSC Resolution 2270 expanded the financial sanctions against the North Korean government and WPK entities. This time the UNSC sanctions were more restrictive than before. Notably, during the press conference of the Fourth Session of the Twelfth National People's Congress on 9 March 2016, Foreign Minister Wang Yi argued that "sanctions are just a necessary means" while confirming that "China will adopt an objective and impartial attitude during implementation" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2016b). Minister Wang also noted that Resolution 2270 "reiterates support for the Six-Party talks, [...]. Maintaining stability is the pressing priority, and only negotiation can lead to a fundamental solution" (Ibid.).

An article published in *The Global Times* supported sanctions against North Korea, arguing that "North Korea deserves the punishment" (2016a). The article also noted that China should "cushion Washington's harsh sanctions" and it also should "oppose the goal advocated by Washington, Seoul and Tokyo to crush the North Korean economy, or even to collapse the regime" (Ibid.). Indeed, as argued by a piece published in the *People's Daily* (2016b), "the sanctions decision made by the Security Council is essentially to promote North Korea's return to the negotiating track". The same article also argued that "China has always been in an objective and fair position and actively explores feasible ways to solve problems with all parties" (Ibid). These articles

emphasized the role of China as a “responsible power” and highlighted the necessity of going back to the negotiation table.

Chinese media highlighted that China “has always cherished its ties with Pyongyang”, however, North Korea’s behavior continued to damage Beijing’s security interests (Zhu, 2016). As noted in another article published by the *China Daily*, “the DPRK needs to make real efforts to maintain good relations with its neighbor, for instance, by helping guarantee China's border security, rather than making it difficult” (Ibid.). Moreover, a *Global Times* piece (2016b) argued that North Korea’s quest to obtain nuclear weapons was caused by a “deformed security policy”. The same article noted that the security strategy of North Korea was based on a “obsolete way of thinking” which was at odds with the “globalization era” (Ibid.). Indeed, one of the guiding principles of Xi Jinping’s foreign policy was the peaceful development approach, which emphasized economic collaboration as the key point for the stability of international relations. North Korea’s foreign policy contradicted Xi’s foreign agenda.

The fourth nuclear test and an increasing number of missile tests destabilized security on the Korean Peninsula, leading South Korea and the United States to announce the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) in South Korea on 8 June, 2016 (Hoshino and Hiraiwa, 2020).¹⁶

This significant change in the security environment of the Northeast Asian region worried China. Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Hua had previously expressed China’s stance on the possible deployment of the THAAD system by South Korea arguing that Beijing “maintain that countries must not pursue their own security at the expense of others’ security interests” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2016a). During a meeting between the South Korean Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Tokyo, Wang expressed China’s disapproval for the deployment of the THAAD system, urging his counterpart to “weigh pros and cons”, and calling for mutual collaboration to resolve this issue (Xinhua, 2016).

Jih-un Kim (2017) argued that China had considered its collaboration on the drafting of Resolution 2270 as a “bargaining tool” to prevent the employment of the THAAD system. Namely, China’s deployment of strict sanctions against North Korea should have lowered South Korea’s

¹⁶ The THAAD is an American anti-ballistic missile system which is expected to defend against high trajectory missiles from 40 km to 150 km (Sankaran and Fearey, 2017).

threat perception. However, because China continued to consider the collapse of the North Korean regime as a threat to its national security, Beijing did not employ sanctions that could have resulted in serious damage to the North Korean economy. Instead, Seoul expected China to exert more pressure on Pyongyang (Hoshino and Hiraiwa, 2020).

As argued by an article published on *China Daily* on 7 September, the THAAD system deployment was considered by China as an "excuse" for the United States to increase its influence over the Korean Peninsula (Kong, 2018; Zhu, 2016b). The piece also noted that the THAAD had a negative impact on the security balance of the region, as it "widened the trust deficit among the regional powers" (Ibid.). Kihyun Lee and Jangho Kim (2017) argued that even if China apparently changed its "perception of international regimes", it continued to suspect that "sanctions are a means to expand [United States] influence".

Notably, while the North Korean nuclear test damaged China's security interests in the region, South Korea perceived it as a direct threat to its national security (Hong, 2014). Therefore, because Seoul's threat perception was intensified by the fourth nuclear test, then-South Korean President Park Geun-hye strengthened its ties with the United States, which in turn was perceived by Beijing as jeopardizing China's security. It is important to note that, although Beijing and Washington had collaborated closely on the Resolutions against North Korea nuclear test, China and the United States were never allied. China and the United States were not allied, but rather competitors. Consequently, enhancing the ROK-US alliance through the THAAD deployment in South Korea could be viewed by Beijing as strengthening Washington's influence in the region. China's reaction to the deployment of the THAAD system seemed to confirm that North Korea still held strategic value for China's foreign policy agenda aimed at countering the United States' presence in Northeast Asia (Liao, 2025). The United States' aggressive behavior towards North Korea represented a threat for the stability of the region (Kong, 2018).

Despite the rising tensions between China and the United States caused by the THAAD deployment, China later condemned North Korea's fifth nuclear test and voted in favor of Resolution 2321 (Xinhua, 2016b; Su and Saalman, 2017). It is possible to note that China maintained a dual approach to North Korea's nuclear issue. On one side, it collaborated with the United States in order to reaffirm its great power status and to meet the responsibilities that derived from its international role. On the other side, Beijing did not sever its ties with North Korea in order to limit Washington's influence in East Asia (Hoshino and Hiraiwa, 2020). North Korea continued to be considered as a "buffer state" to counter the United States' presence in the region (Liao, 2025). Arguably, the relationship between China and North Korea was shaped by the strategic

calculations of the Chinese leadership that aimed at getting China international recognition as a great power.

3.3.3 Nuclear Weapons and the Pursuit of International Status

The North Korean leadership continued to pursue the goal of becoming a “nuclear power”, despite the fact that some cracks had emerged in its relationship with Xi Jinping. Aiming for a credible nuclear deterrent would target Kim Jong Un’s various security concerns. North Korea could not rely only on China as a security guarantor given that the US military still held a strategic advantage over the PRC military (Easley, 2017; Lee et al., 2020). Moreover, a nuclear deterrent would allow Pyongyang to lessen its overdependence on China (Ibid.). As mentioned before, nuclear weapons have been highly related to North Korea’s state identity, therefore, under Kim Jong Un have not been considered as a “bargaining tool” for security assistance from external powers.

To analyses North Korea’s aggressive behavior, it is necessary to also consider the domestic political context. Since its establishment, the main concern of the North Korean regime has been its security and survival. To strengthen its position inside the Workers’ Party of Korea, Kim Jong Un has relied on purges within the establishment and on conducting an assertive foreign policy, even at the expense of its relationship with China (Kong, 2018; Li and Li, 2020).

Notably, as reported by the KCNA in an article published on 31 March 2013, during the Plenary Meeting of the WPK Central Committee it was established that “nuclear armed forces represent the nation’s life which can never be abandoned as long as the imperialists and nuclear threats exist on earth”. This statement emphasized that North Korea’s identity and the regime’s legitimacy were strictly connected with nuclear deterrence. Therefore, any success in this field was aimed at reinforcing Kim Jong Un’s leadership.

Adopting the constructivist theoretical perspective, it is possible to argue that North Korea’s third nuclear test reaffirmed its nuclear power identity. The North Korean regime demonstrated that it is “capable of producing anything more powerful than a nuke by its own efforts and with its indigenous technology”, reinforcing the Juche self-sufficiency principle “despite the imperialists’ persistent sanctions and moves to stifle it” (KCNA, 2013b).

As Shaheen Akhtar and Zulfiqar Khan (2014) argued, North Korea perceived the United States and other Western countries as “contrary to their national interests and ethos”. Consequently, the North Korean regime's noncompliance with non-proliferation norms may be considered as a source of legitimacy for the regime and also a way to reaffirm its anti-imperialist identity. Arguably,

the communist ideology continues to shape how North Korea interacts with the international community (Ibid.).

China and North Korea's relationship was shaped by their security calculations, which in turn were shaped by their state identity. The North Korean leadership continued to consider nuclear deterrence as the source of both international prestige and legitimacy for the continuity of the Kim dynasty (Whang et al., 2017). Moreover, through the nuclear power development program, North Korea reduced its dependence on Beijing, confirming the need to preserve political autonomy that dates back to Kim Il Sung.

As Easley and Park (2016) suggest, China's contradictory foreign policy regarding North Korea could be explained by the “norm of stability”, which should guarantee a “governable society and regional peace” and its “siege mentality”. Accordingly, this mindset has caused Beijing to prioritize regional stability and anti-Western regime survival over pressuring Pyongyang to denuclearize. Moreover, China’s mediator role in the Korean Peninsula is reinforced by Xi’s principle of “regional community of common destiny” (Chang-Liao, 2016). Based on these principles, China has continued to pursue peace and stability in the region through an engagement approach to North Korea while collaborating with the United States whenever it suited Beijing’s interests best.

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Conclusion

This thesis has examined the evolution of Sino-North Korean relations under the leadership of Xi Jinping and Kim Jong Un during the third, fourth, and fifth nuclear tests. This research has focused on the role of identity and on status-seeking foreign policy behaviors alongside traditional security considerations.

The analysis has shown that strategic calculations are a fundamental component of the Sino-North Korean relationship. The balance-of-threat framework can help make sense of the origins and the endurance of the alliance between China and North Korea. Since the end of the Cold War, Beijing has sought to keep the North Korean economy alive in order to avoid a crisis that might lead to the collapse of the North Korean regime eventually spreading instability across the border. As famously put by Mao Zedong, “if lips are gone, the teeth will be cold”, which was a reference to the strategic importance of North Korea as a geographical security buffer for China (Kim, 2019; Lee, 2021). The shared anti-imperialist narrative and the norms of “socialist internationalism” have informed their alliance and reinforced mutual solidarity.

The global and regional balance of power that emerged following the end of the Cold War led both Pyongyang and Beijing to pursue different strategic interests. North Korea aimed at establishing a more favorable regional balance of power, as the United States’ threat was perceived as higher than during the Cold War period (Dwivedi, 2012). On the contrary, Beijing’s strategic interests called for the maintenance of the status quo in the Korean Peninsula.

These changes were due to Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms and modernization, which emphasized economic growth rather than the communist ideology. The Chinese leadership’s interests shifted from the “anti-imperialism revolution” against both the United States and the Soviet Union to the pursuit of domestic economic growth (Chen, 2021; Wang and Blyth, 2013). Therefore, China’s perception of the international environment changed. Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao pursued foreign policies focused on gaining recognition among Western higher-status countries (Larson and Shevchenko, 2010).

North Korea also aimed at obtaining a higher status in the international system. Pyongyang has continued to refuse to adhere to the US-led international system by adopting Western-like norms (Son, 2018).

Drawing on constructivist insights, this thesis argues that state behavior is shaped not only by material interests but also by identities. Constructivist scholars generally agree that identity is a multidimensional and dynamic construct that influences how states understand themselves and

interact with others. In this context, international identity has proven to be relevant for understanding Sino-North Korean relations.

The three nuclear tests conducted by North Korea during the early years of Kim Jong Un's leadership aimed at improving the international status of Pyongyang, and at the same time they gave legitimacy to the new leader. The *byungjin* line promoted by Kim has connected his legitimacy with nuclear deterrence and economic development. While Pyongyang's foreign policy agenda continues to be shaped by the anti-imperialist revolution, China has pursued "peace and stability" as the cornerstone of its foreign policy.

North Korea's international identity has been constructed in opposition to the dominant international order, therefore, by not adhering to UN Resolutions or the non-proliferation politics, it reinforces its identity. By contrast, China's integration into liberal norms and institutions has represented the source of its economic development, which in turn has allowed Beijing to gain a respected position in the international community.

The divergence in these identity trajectories have contributed to explain moments of tensions between China and North Korea. Fluctuations in the alliance can be traced to the different international identity of the two countries, and to their different position within the global system.

Notably, security calculations are not overlooked by this analysis. North Korea continues to hold importance as a strategic buffer in the eyes of the Chinese leadership given the US presence in South Korea. In turn, for Pyongyang, the economic relationship with Beijing is vital for the survival of the regime. Therefore, material and security considerations continue to play a fundamental role in shaping bilateral relations.

As argued by Linus Hagström and Magnus Lundström (2019), integrating a material and status-based approach allows a comprehensive analysis of the dynamics that characterize the alliance. State survival is a central objective for both actors, the way in which this objective is pursued is also influenced by ideational factors that shape perceptions, interests and foreign policy behavior.

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