# Lips and Teeth in the Indo-Pacific Era: Analysing the role of the China-DPRK alliance in Beijing's regional ambitions and power projection

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**Abstract**

The alliance between the People's Republic of China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is one of the oldest alliances in history. With the signing of the Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty between the People's Republic of China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in 1961, the ties between these two East Asian Communist states were strengthened following their shared struggle against UN-led forces during the Korean War. Nevertheless, despite it being China's only formal alliance, the China-DPRK alliance seems to play a marginal role in its regional ambitions in Asia. Concurrently, while stressed as a military alliance, there is little to any military integration between the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the Korean People's Army (KPA). This is despite China implementing reforms to modernize its military and to expand the power projection of the PLA. Importantly, the main challenge for China's ambitions in Asia is the ever growing United States-China strategic competition that is redefining the regional order in Asia. However, outside of the Korean Peninsula, the China-DPRK alliance seems to play only a limited role for China in the greater US-China strategic competition.

Therefore, this thesis analyses why the China-DPRK alliance does not play a central role in China's regional ambitions, power projection and strategic competition with the United States. The timeframe of the China-DPRK alliance chosen is the era of Xi Jinping's leadership as it is under the Xi administration that China's regional ambitions in Asia have been clearly articulated. It is also the era where China has gained greater impetus to modernize its armed forces and project power in Asia and beyond. It is also under Xi Jinping that the United States-China strategic competition has become more pronounced and where the concept of the Indo-Pacific represents a challenge to China's regional ambitions in Asia. Most important, is that the Xi administration renewed the China-DPRK alliance in 2021, showing that it seemingly still plays a role in China's regional calculations. With use of alliance theory, this thesis finds that although the China-DPRK alliance is an alliance under the theory, in many areas it does not follow the parameters of alliance theory. It finds that China has a preference for other avenues to pursue its regional ambitions in Asia aside from the alliance. This is due to the DPRK's status as a "rogue state" and that its independent streak precludes it from being included as an effective tool for China's regional ambitions. This thesis also finds that China has a preference for internal balancing with regards to its power projection. Although, China has engaged in limited external balancing with several nations, this does not include the DPRK. The DPRK nuclear arsenal, which this thesis finds were a means to achieve DPRK autonomy and independence from China, also precludes further military integration between China and the DPRK even though the closer military integration of these two nuclear weapons states would shift the balance of power in favour for the China-CPRK alliance. Finally, this thesis also views that the China-DPRK alliance has limited utility for China strategic competition with the United States. Although DPRK bandwagoning towards China cannot be overruled entirely, there still remains a level of strategic rift and mistrust that prevents this. Although currently unlikely, outright DPRK defection to United States cannot also be ruled out entirely. Further use of the China-DPRK alliance to confront the United States is also limited as the DPRK nuclear issue remains a

possible avenue of improved relations between China and the United States. Overall, this thesis seeks to demonstrate that although an alliance under the definition of alliance theory the China-DPRK alliance has only a limited role in Beijing's regional ambitions to become the "centre of activity in Asia" and its projection of power.

**Key Words: China, North Korea, alliance, US-China Strategic Competition, People's Liberation Army**

**Glossary**

| | |
|---|---|
| Air launched ballistic missile | ALBM |
| Asian Development Bank | ADB |
| Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank | AIIB |
| Belt and Road Initiative | BRI |
| Chinese Communist Party | CCP |
| Democratic People's Republic of Korea | DPRK |
| Democratic Republic of Vietnam | DRV |
| Intercontinental ballistic missile | ICBM |
| Korean People’s Army | KPA |
| Korean Worker’s Party | KWP |
| *National Volksarmee* | *NVA* |
| North Atlantic Treaty Organization | NATO |
| People’s Liberation Army | PLA |
| People’s Republic of China | PRC |
| Republic of Korea | ROK |
| Shanghai Cooperation Organization | SCO |
| Submarine-launched ballistic missiles | SLBM |

## Introduction

The China-Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) alliance is one of the pillars of the geopolitical landscape in Northeast Asia (Jagannath, 2021). It is also one of the longest alliances in history having lasted for over 60 years and was recently renewed in 2021. Established during the Cold War, the Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty between the People's Republic of China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea that was signed in 1961 seemingly cemented the ties between the two East Asian Communist states that were formed during the Korean War. Both nations have waxed lyrical about the nature of the alliance in that it is as close as "lips and teeth" and that it is a "blood alliance" (Jian, 2018, pp.11; Revere, 2019, pp.2). Nonetheless, despite it having lasted for over 60 years, the alliance does not appear to be integrated into China's regional ambitions for Asia. This is despite Article 1 of the Treaty that proclaims that both nations *would actively make efforts for the maintenance of security and peace in Asia* (China-DPRK Treaty, 1961). Equally, the DPRK does not seem willing to be integrated into China's vision for Asia despite its growing economic dependence on China.

China's regional ambitions in Asia are crucial for it in establishing itself as a global power. The seeming lack of a role for China's only formal alliance treaty partner in its regional ambitions is perplexing as one would assume that the China-DPRK alliance would have a special place for China's aims to achieve centrality in Asia. However the alliance and the DPRK are absent from the vehicles of China's regional ambitions such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), New Asian Security Concept (NASC), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and many others. The China-DPRK alliance only seems to be relevant for Beijing's regional calculations on the Korean Peninsula where it is wishes to maintain stability and the prevention of renewed conflict (Shin, 2018, pp.296-302). I found this to be a strange set of circumstances as both countries have always praised their "blood alliance" yet are seemingly reluctant to be part of initiatives that would boost China's influence in Asia.

Concurrently the alliance is explicitly referred to as a military alliance. Indeed, Article 2 of the alliance treaty commits both nations to render military assistance to each other should one of the countries suffer armed attack. Conscious of the importance of military power to become a global power, in recent years China has improved its military capabilities to project its power in Asia and beyond (Wuthnow, 2021, pp.1-16). At the same time, the DPRK has also developed its military capabilities, perhaps notoriously with its nuclear and ballistic missile technology (Fukuda, 2022). Nonetheless, despite the military nature of the alliance and the improving military capabilities of both nations, there has been no attempt to integrate these abilities to improve China's power projection nor utilize the Korean People's Army as a force multiplier. I found this interesting. A closer military coordination between China and the DPRK would present problems for the United States and its allies in East Asia such as Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK). While not ignoring the economic and technological strengths of Japan and the ROK as well as the DPRK's relatively outdated conventional forces, the fact that both China and the DPRK are nuclear weapons states could shift the balance of power favourably towards China as Japan and the ROK are reliant on the United States for nuclear deterrence.

China's regional ambitions and its attempts at power projection face significant challenges, namely the increasing United States-China strategic competition that is defining the regional order in Asia. The Indo-Pacific concept as articulated by the United

States and its allies have created a perception in China that it is gradually being encircled and contained (Kawashima, 2020, pp.58-60). Indeed, the response of the United States and its allies to China's growing power and assertiveness has been for them to further integrate their alliances. While living in Japan since 2021, I have noticed greater alliance coordination between Japan and the United States to address the rise of China. I have remained puzzled as to why China has not done so with its only formal alliance partner which is the DPRK. Rhetoric aside, there is seemingly little if any concrete coordination between these two East Asian Communist states. Nonetheless, aside for its limited utility on the Korean Peninsula, the alliance seems to factor little in the overall US-China strategic competition in Asia.

To ascertain the answers to these ponderings of mine, this thesis aims to examine why the China-DPRK alliance has not played an influential role in Beijing's regional ambitions and its projection of power. As the US-China strategic competition is the major impediment to the realization of Beijing's regional ambitions in Asia as well as its desires to project power regionally and beyond, the role of the alliance in this competition will also be analysed. A note on the timeframe of this thesis. I have chosen the Xi Jinping era as it has been under his administration that China has defined for itself specific vision, policies and goals to achieve its regional and global ambitions. Xi Jinping's administration has also seen the centralization or over-centralization of China's foreign policy-decision making, therefore I felt that this timeframe was more relevant as compared to other eras, where there might have been more diffusion of responsibilities and decision-making based on horizontal bureaucratic interests (Zhao, 2023, pp.74-80). It is also under Xi Jinping that the United States and its allies have propagated the Indo-Pacific vision that although not expressly, hopes to challenge China's reordering of the regional and global order.

# Chapter 1

# The China-DPRK Alliance in the Regional Context: The Continued Importance of Geopolitics

## 1.1 Geopolitical Importance of the Korean Peninsula

The Korean Peninsula retains geopolitical importance for the United States and China in particular. For China, the Korean Peninsula is the gateway to Northeast Asia and a path to the mainland from which threats may arise (Buszynski, 2019, pp.89). As a peripheral area protruding from China's Northern provinces, the Korean Peninsula has been regarded by China as a funnel for foreign invasion since Toyotomi Hideyoshi's failed invasion of Korea in the 1590s until the Korean War (Buszynski, 2019, pp.89). Since then it has been in China's geopolitical interest to prevent any hostile forces from gaining a foothold on the Korean Peninsula that could threaten its territorial integrity. The division of Korea and the resulting Korean War left China allied with the DPRK, a relationship that was formalized with the Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty between the People's Republic of China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea that was signed in 1961. Therefore, arguably the DPRK has remained a strategic asset to China, and its existence and survival is sufficient for China's geopolitical objectives Buszynski, 2019, pp.91-92).

Although the China-DPRK alliance is important for China's geopolitical objectives on the Korean Peninsula, China under Xi Jinping has greater ambitions for Asia beyond the Korean Peninsula. The China-DPRK alliance is seemingly absent from China's overarching ambitions in Asia. However, China renewed the alliance treaty with the DPRK in 2021, therefore showing that the alliance remains an important factor for China's geopolitical calculations for Asia. Nonetheless, what is unanswered is why the China-DPRK alliance, being China's only formal alliance does not appear to be calculated into China's regional ambitions.

## 1.2 Main Research Questions

The unanswered question of why the China-DPRK alliance does not figure prominently in China's regional ambitions has prompted the development of this thesis. To address this, four research questions have been identified to guide the flow of this thesis and hopefully ascertain a satisfactory answer. The first research question is considering whether the China-DPRK alliance is an alliance under alliance theory. This question reviews the history and contemporary relations of China and the DPRK to determine whether the term "alliance" is still applicable to the relations between the two nations. The second main research question is why does the China-DPRK alliance not serve as the cornerstone of China's regional ambitions in Asia outside of the Korean Peninsula? This question was prompted by reference in the China-DPRK alliance treaty that refers that both nations will actively promote peace and security in Asia. In light of this treaty provision, China and the DPRK should be actively coordinating their policies with regards to Asia. As China's projection of power is critical to its regional ambitions, the third main research question is despite being defined explicitly as a military alliance, why does the China-DPRK alliance play no role in China's projection of power and as a force

multiplier. This question would hope to address the seeming lack of integration between the militaries of China and the DPRK as well the developments of both these nation's militaries that do not factor in their military alliance. Indeed, closer integration of China and the DPRK's militaries could shift the balance of power in favour of the China-DPRK alliance as both states are armed with nuclear weapons. Finally, the fourth main research question would address that since US-China strategic competition is the major challenge to Beijing's regional ambitions in Asia and its attempts at projecting power, why hasn't the China-DPRK alliance gained greater prominence in a world of increasing US-China strategic competition. This question will hope to address the utility of the China-DPRK alliance in an era of heightened US-China strategic competition.

## 1.3 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this thesis is grounded in alliance theory. I employ alliance theory as articulated by Stephen Walt (Walt, 1987). Within this framework, Walt's hypotheses on the influence of foreign aid and common ideology will be considered as they are relevant to the China-DPRK alliance. Concurrently, Walt's considerations of balancing and bandwagoning will also be explored. For the DPRK, bandwagoning does present an option due to the asymmetric nature of its alliance with China. Nonetheless, this paper will show that despite the conditions that are seemingly apparent for the DPRK to bandwagon towards China, it has not chosen to do so under timeframe being examined.

In addition to Walt's alliance theory, I have also consulted other alliance scholars such as Glenn Snyder. His description of alliances that go beyond the defense of homeland are particularly relevant for this study (Snyder, 1997, pp.15). The relevance here is reflected in the fact that Article 1 of the China-DPRK alliance treaty emphasizes that both states will proactively seek peace and stability in Asia. Therefore, the terms of the alliance treaty itself suggest that China-DPRK coordination in the wider region is permissible. Concurrently, I will also consider Snyder's alliance security dilemma and how it relates to the expansion of the China-DPRK alliance to be more integrated with China's regional ambitions and power projection in Asia. Specifically, I will consider the determinants of choice in the alliance security dilemma as identified by Snyder (Snyder, 1984, pp.471-477). The determinants considered will be those of dependence, strategic interest, explicitness and allies' interests (Snyder, 1984, pp.471-477).

As the China-DPRK has been recognized as an asymmetric alliance, therefore asymmetric alliances will also be considered. Indeed as identified by James Morrow, asymmetric alliances are more enduring than symmetric alliances as the longevity of the China-DPRK alliance demonstrates. At the same time Morrow also identified, that asymmetric allies that increase their capabilities are likely to break away from the alliance (Morrow, 1991, pp.913-916). Thus, although the DPRK has not broken its alliance with China, its increased nuclear and ballistic missile technology has shown its improved capabilities and suggest why it has not sought greater security in its alliance with China. These are relevant considerations for whether the China-DPRK alliance can be utilized for Beijing's regional ambitions and power projection.

Additionally, I also consider alliance institutionalization. An alliance that is institutionalized offers a patron greater ability to influence a client's military, distribution of finance and arms as well as legitimate preferred political groups (Kim & Woods, 2022,

pp.1-3). An uninstitutionalized alliance however offers a patron relatively lesser influence with a client's internal affairs. As the China-DPRK alliance is an uninstitutionalized alliance, this is a relevant factor to consider on the utility of this alliance to Beijing's regional ambitions and power projection.

On the other hand, alliances also serve as a means of control of the client state or smaller ally. As Victor Cha has argued with his use of the term powerplay, great power patrons construct asymmetric alliances to not only deter threats but also to constrain smaller allies (Cha, 2009, pp.158-160). Concurrently, as Cha has argued, this powerplay is also reflected in the great power patron shaping the smaller ally so that it would better serve its interests (Cha, 2017, pp.1-14). Although Cha's references were to the US-alliance system in Asia, specifically those of Japan, the ROK and Taiwan, his notion of powerplay is relevant to this study, specifically on China's ability to restrain the DPRK and also shape it into furthering its own interests. This I believe would give explain why China has not utilized its alliance with the DPRK in other areas of its interests.

Following from the above reference to powerplay, the history of alliances demonstrates that alliances have been crucial for the ambitions and power projection of a Great Power. This was notable with the close Soviet-East German alliance for the Soviet's ambitions and power projection in Europe (Macgregor, 1989, pp.39-51). This is also apparent, historically as well as contemporary with the importance of the US-Japan alliance to the maintenance of the US-led order in Asia (Kubo, 2020, pp.27-32). These alliances were also important force multipliers for their great power patrons. Indeed, Woosang Kim has identified through alliance transition theory that a pivotal middle power is able to help reinforce a dominant state's power preponderance over its potential challenger (Kim, 2015, pp.254-258). To bolster his argument, Kim argued that the ROK could be a crucial addition to the United States' capabilities to maintain its preponderance of power over its potential challenger, China (Kim, 2015, pp.258-262). Concurrently, rising powers, which China is, do form alliances to institutionalize their rules and encourage smaller states to align with them (Han & Papa, 2021, pp.159-160). Therefore, consideration for great power use of alliances for regional ambitions and power projection is a common theme of this paper and with references to these two great power alliances, it hopes to illuminate why China has not utilized its only formal alliance partner in achieving its ambitions and power project. Admittedly, the alliances referenced are of a different nature to the China-DRPK alliance, as it will be explored throughout this paper, but it is because of these differences that may assist in answering the research questions.

## 1.4 Structure of Thesis

The structure of this thesis will proceed with Chapter 2, which will identify China's regional ambitions in Asia as well as current trends in its projection of power. Chapter 3 will then address the first research question by reviewing the China-DPRK alliance. It will consider whether the China-DPRK alliance is an "alliance" as defined under alliance theory. This chapter will also highlight the history of China-DPRK relations, which ultimately culminated in the signing of the alliance treaty in 1961. Concurrently, the chapter will also review contemporary China-DPRK relations under Xi Jinping which can be characterized as having fluctuated between tension and camaraderie. The second main research question will be addressed in Chapter 4, which will explore the reasons why the China-DPRK alliance is absent from China's major regional initiatives that are necessary for the

realization of its ambitions in Asia. It will also highlight the function of the China-DPRK alliance for China's policies on the Korean Peninsula. This thesis will then proceed with Chapter 5, which considers the third main research question. In this chapter, China's current military strategy and projection of power will be explored. It will also note the lack of engagement between the militaries of China and the DPRK. Furthermore, it will consider the preferences of China and the DPRK in the projection of power. Lastly this paper will assess the utility of the China-DPRK alliance in the era of US-China strategic competition. It will include considerations of coordination between Beijing and Pyongyang (or lack thereof) in confronting their supposed common foes which are the United States and its allies. Nonetheless, it will highlight the limitations of the China-DPRK alliance in China's calculations in the US-China strategic competition due to several factors. The conclusion will provide a summary of the analysis explained in previous chapters while also answering the main research questions in understanding why the China-DPRK alliance has not figured prominently in Beijing's regional ambitions in Asia and its projection of power.

## 1.5 Research Methodology

This research was conducted by performing a documentary analysis of various texts. While this paper is the product of primarily qualitative studies to analyse the China-DPRK alliance, it also includes quantitative studies. The quantitative studies were employed to illustrate various factors from the DPRK's growing economic reliance on China to China's increased military spending among others. The data collected in this research consists primarily of academic and non-academic books, think tank publications, peer-reviewed academic journal articles, media outlets and government documents. The majority of these sources were accessed online and from the University of Tokyo library. Although mostly secondary source data has been used in the writing of this paper, primary-source data has also been utilized, primarily to highlight the official policies of China. Therefore this thesis largely consists of qualitative research, with analysis being content-based.

## 1.6 Significance and Limitations of Research

### Significance

China and the DPRK are considered security challenges for the United States, Japan and the ROK. However, both China and North Korea are considered separately as reflected in Japan's National Security Strategy (National Security Strategy of Japan, 2022, pp.8-9) and the United States National Security Strategy (White House, 2022). This paper hopes to explain why despite the alliance treaty between China and the DPRK, the challenges presented by both countries are treated separately. Concurrently, this paper hopes to provide consideration for countries that view China and the DPRK as security challenges whether or not their policies should consider China and the DPRK in unison. This thesis also hopes to highlight China's current preferences for achieving its regional ambitions and power projection. As will be noted further below, China has not chosen alliances to further its regional ambitions. This thesis aims to consider if China will be amenable to changing its position on alliances.

Although it is debatable whether China seeks hegemony in Asia, it is undeniable that China aims to redefine the regional order in Asia around itself (Stokes, 2020, pp.5-9). Therefore, this paper aims to show that the DPRK's seeming recalcitrant behaviour vis-à-vis China, can provide an indication of how secure a China-led order in Asia would look like should its ambitions be achieved. Of more supplementary significance, I aim with this paper to challenge an emerging narrative that the world order is being divided into "democracy vs autocracy" (White House, 2022). According to this view, closer alliance integration between China and the DPRK is inevitable as both are autocracies. Nonetheless, as I hope to demonstrate with this paper, this view is simplistic and risks creating notions of the "monolithic" Communist bloc that existed during the Cold War.

Limitations

Opaque nature of Communist regimes such as China and DPRK means that access to internal documents of the leaderships of both the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Korean Worker's Party (KWP) on their views on integrating the China-DPRK alliance into China's regional ambitions and power projection are limited if not unavailable. It is such the current limitation of this researcher that he did not discover such documentation if it does in fact exist. Additionally, China's internal views on the DPRK are a sensitive topic and there are also limitations on what can be published regarding China-DPRK ties in China (Shen & Xia, 2018, pp.2). Nonetheless, to the best of this researcher's efforts, I have referenced articles by Chinese scholars regarding China-DPRK relations that hope to mitigate in part any limitations produced by this thesis paper. Another limitation is that this thesis provides an analysis of ongoing issues. As these issues continue to evolve, the main difficulty in research was including the latest relevant information into this research. Added to this is also the fluctuation of China-DPRK relations which may render certain viewpoints relevant or outdated. The author's lack of language ability in Chinese or Korean may have also limited the literature consulted for this research. However, efforts were made to obtain research by Chinese and Korean scholars produced in the English language and with this it is hoped that this thesis has factored in those views sufficiently.

# Chapter 2

# China's Regional Ambitions and Power Projection

Before the main research questions can be sufficiently addressed, it is necessary to review China's regional ambitions and power projection. To realize its regional ambitions, Beijing has developed several interconnected visions, strategies, and policies in the economic and security arenas of Asia. Related to this is the importance that China under Xi Jinping has attached to the projection of power. China has embarked on military modernization of the PLA in order to increase its power projection in China's periphery. This has also translated into expanded missions for the PLA that go beyond just the defense of China's borders but include overseas interests as well.

At this early stage, it is important to consider whether China seeks hegemony in Asia as part of its regional ambitions. China has officially denied that it seeks hegemony in Asia. Xi Jinping has clearly stated that desire for hegemonic power is not in the "blood of the Chinese people" (Kawashima, 2019, pp.125). Although the word "hegemony" is a loaded term, this chapter will nonetheless establish that China seeks to become the "centre of activity" in Asia. It does seek to become Asia's preeminent power and amend the regional order to reflect that.

## 2.1 China's Regional Ambitions in Asia

### 2.1.1 China Dream & US-China Strategic Competition

Xi Jinping first articulated the China Dream in 2012 when he attended an exhibition on the theme of "The Road to Rejuvenation" at the National Museum in Beijing. In its most basic form, Xi stated that the China Dream is "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation". With references to China's 5,000-year history, the idea of the China Dream was to restore China to its historical greatness and that it would achieve under the CCP's leadership. It refers to the ascertainment of a fair, corruption-free, safe, secure, orderly and rich society (Hayes, 2020, pp.32). It presented the idea of improved living standards being in reach of all Chinese citizens, not only the elite, and which the CCP was meant to be delivering to the people, rather than creating for itself (Brown, 2023, pp.106). Crucially, the China Dream is premised on the attainment of a number of concrete objectives: China should double its per-capita GDP from 2010 to 2020; it should have a military "capable of fighting and winning wars"; and it should meet the social needs of the people (Economy, 2018, pp.4). The China Dream has provided a unifying ideology for both the CCP and the Chinese population, one that incorporates nationalism with further development, reform and revolution (Hayes, 2020, pp.32). Especially in domestic affairs, the China Dream has provided justification Xi Jinping justification in consolidating power with the CCP. This has in effect led to more centralization of power in Xi Jinping's hands, overturning the more consensus-based leadership adopted by Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. Concurrently, Xi Jinping Thought has been enshrined in the Party and National constitutions and along with the abolishment of the two-term limit on the Presidency, has allowed Xi Jinping to retain leadership positions in the party, state and the military (Gill, 2022, pp.22). Therefore, domestically, the China Dream has reinforced CCP rule and allowed for Xi Jinping to establish a more personalistic style of leadership.

The China Dream extends to include foreign affairs. The most salient feature of the China Dream was that the previous approach Deng, Jiang and Hu was set aside with “hide its strength and bide time” no longer being used in internal communications and documents (Gill, 2022, pp.25). This was replaced by a more activist approach to international affairs and rejuvenation, one in which a more capable China would face up to the challenge of coping with a less forgiving security environment. Xi’s strategy of rejuvenation is defined by three distinctive efforts. First, China will continue to reassure other countries; second, China will press for reform of the international system; and finally China will rely on its growing power to more resolutely resist challenges to core interests as the CCP defined them (Goldstein, 2020, pp.178-191). Ultimately, Xi Jinping believes that external conditions are favourable for China’s expanding leadership and that with the perceived decline of the United States, the opportunity has presented itself for China to pursue its interests more actively and shape the international order (Gill, 2022, pp.29-31).

Xi Jinping’s China Dream also has important implications for Asia. It is also about establishing China as the pre-eminent power in Asia. These two concepts tied together gives an idea that China wishes to establish a Sino-centric order in Asia in the reflection of the traditional Chinese notion of *Tianxia* or “all under heaven” (Singh, 2023, pp.72). For Asia in particular, these suggest an attempt to restore the Chinese tributary system that defined China’s relations with Asia until its ultimate destruction in the First Sino-Japanese War (Paine, 2017, pp.37-46). Although, suggestions that China maybe attempting to restore its tributary system with Asia are perhaps overstated, it is apparent that Xi has sought to unite the Chinese people behind the CCP to accomplish the task of recovering the status and respect that China enjoyed at the height of its imperial power – essentially that Chinese rejuvenation is linked with centrality in Asia. Accompanied with this, is the idea of hierarchy, where in Asia, China seeks to consolidate a position of undisputed superiority (Roth, 2023, pp.115). This is also reflected with the fact that Asia has a special focus for Chinese diplomacy. The tone of Xi’s articulation on Asia and China’s relations with neighbouring countries gives an indication that the region has immense strategic importance for China. What the China Dream entails for Asia is that it must accept Xi Jinping’s vision for Asia for the Asians and community building efforts under China’s norms, leadership, guidance and supervision (Singh, 2023, pp.100). Concurrently, it is in Asia that most of the political and strategic contests involving China are playing out (Singh, 2023, pp.100). The logical culmination of this is that China must exclude or at the very least reduce the role of other powers (i.e the United States) in order to achieve this. Crucially, China’s pre-eminence in Asia is necessary for it to establish itself as a truly global power. Thus this represents a general outline of China’s regional ambitions in Asia as reflected through the China Dream. We next turn to the Asia-specific strategies, visions and policies that China has employed in order to achieve its regional ambitions.

The most serious challenge to the realization of the China Dream has come in the form of the US-China strategic competition. Although it is difficult to trace precisely the beginnings of this strategic competition, a possible starting point was when the National Security Strategy released by the Trump Administration in 2017 labelled China a “revisionist power” and “strategic competitor”. This marked the start of the competition extending to all aspects of American policy towards China (Zhao, 2019, pp.372). Even with the change from the Trump to Biden Administrations in the United States, “competing” with China has remained the most important consideration of US foreign policy (Mishra, 2022). The Biden Administration has been redefined with “three Cs”, namely “competitive

when it should be, collaborative when it can be, and confrontational when it must be" (Fan, 2021, pp.235). China is conscious that the strategic competition with the United States could become full-fledged and cross-domain (Zhao, 2019, pp.380). This competition has begun to encompass economic relations between the two countries, technology, the contestation of international rules and institutions and also international security (Zhao, 2019, pp.380-382). Most significantly however, is that China has appreciated that the main focal point of US-China strategic competition will be in the Asia-Pacific, specifically Western Pacific (Zhao, 2019, pp.382-383). This has also led to China viewing the strengthening of US alliances in Asia and other US-led efforts such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and Australia-United Kingdom-United States trilateral pact (AUKUS) as a means to contain China (Gering, 2021). Indeed, several Chinese scholars have viewed the BRI and the United States' Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) as a manifestation of the US-China strategic competition on a regional level (Zhao, 2019, pp.384). Ultimately, they view the IPS as a counter-balance to the BRI which aims to check the emergence of any potential hegemon on the Eurasian continent from either the eastern and western front lines of the Pacific and Indian oceans (Zhao, 2019, pp.384-385). Chinese analysts agree that the US-China strategic competition is likely to be intense, holistic and long-term (Zhao, 2019, pp.387).

There are many potential risks should US-China strategic competition not be managed effectively. These risks include a renewed Cold War or in a worse case scenario, conflict between China and the United States in one of several flashpoints such as the South China Sea, Taiwan or the Korean Peninsula. The threat of a Cold War style hostility with the United States or an open conflict with it would seriously derail the China Dream that was proudly proclaimed by Xi Jinping. However, the US-China strategic competition remains an obstacle to China's regional ambitions in Asia. Therefore, how China manages it will determine whether its ambitions can be achieved.

### 2.1.2 Asia-specific approaches to achieve regional ambitions

As highlighted in the previous section, the China Dream has important implications for Asia. To gain regional leadership and make China the centre of activity in Asia, it would need specific visions that encompass economic and security considerations in order to shape the regional order. Indeed, China is utilizing both economic and security approaches to achieve its regional ambitions. In the economic arena, China has used its economic power to expand its influence in Asia. It has done so through two key initiatives such as the BRI and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). These two initiatives utilized by Beijing as part of a geoeconomic strategy, which focuses on the use economic instruments to promote and defend national interests, and to produce beneficial geopolitical results (Pu, 2019, pp.70-71). Security in Asia is an equally important matter for Beijing, and it has always been worried about an external power establishing military bases around its periphery and encroaching on its territory. In China's view, the most pertinent issue in its ability to influence the regional order in Asia has been the presence of US alliances in the region. To mitigate this situation and offer an alternative security order, China has promoted the New Asian Security Concept (NASC). This concept calls for "Asian security to be left to Asians" (Pu, 2019, pp.71). Although it is debatable that this concept represents a true alternative security order as provided for by the US alliance system, China has employed this concept to criticize the maintenance and strengthening

of the US alliance system in Asia. Importantly the NASC has called for relations between states in Asia that are free from alliance commitments and structures that characterize the US alliance system in Asia. Concurrently, China has also promoted the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a multilateral body that can provide a regional order for Asia. Therefore what is noticeable is that China is employing both economic and security approaches to realize its ambitions in Asia. It is creating alternative security partnerships, institutions, and principles that generate a stronger sense of Asian integration.

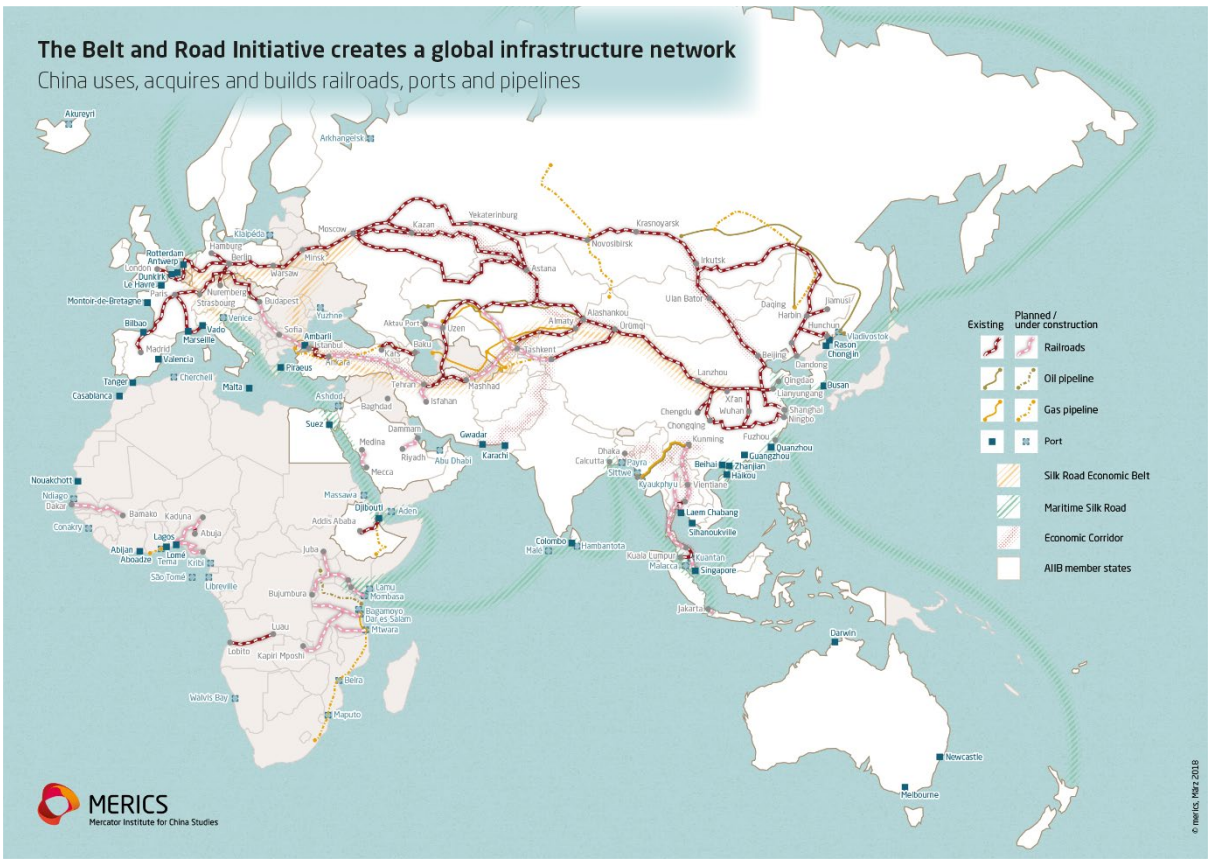
Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

The BRI represents the key initiative of Xi Jinping in pursuit of the China Dream. The initiative is an ambitious plan to develop new trade routes (or rather restoring historical trade routes) connecting China with the rest of the world. Initially it was two separate projects, then subsequently referred to as the "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) until it was finally decided on the BRI. The "belt" part of the BRI refers to a plan to revitalize ancient overland trading routes connecting Europe and Asia to be built by Chinese investments and capital. This idea was first purposed by Xi Jinping during a visit to Kazakhstan in 2013, highlighting the importance of Central Asia to the "belt" element of the BRI. The "road" element of BRI was announced by Xi Jinping in Indonesia during 2014. It aims to establish a new maritime trade infrastructure along the route of Marco Polo – a maritime silk road connecting China, Southeast Asia, Africa and Europe. The BRI involves the construction of a network of infrastructure projects for the vast areas Asia, Africa and Europe through Chinese investments including roads, railways, oil and natural gas pipelines, telecommunications, electricity projects, ports and coastal infrastructure projects (Cai, 2018, pp.833). At the outset 65 countries were a part of the BRI. As of 2019, 123 countries and 29 international organizations had signed official documents to be a part of the BRI (Deng, 2021, pp.736). Reflecting Chinese regional ambitions in Asia, the centre of the BRI is to be the integrated economic zone of China and neighbouring countries along its periphery (Deng, 2021, pp.740). China has also tried to connect the BRI with various regional plans that are already being implemented. In Southeast Asia, China signed an agreement with ASEAN to participate in the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025 (Deng, 2021, pp.745). Indeed, several countries in Asia have linked their national development strategies to the BRI. For example, the BRI figures in Kazakhstan's "Bright Plan", Indonesia's "Global Maritime Fulcrum", and Mongolia's "Road of Steppe" (Deng, 2021, pp.745). As the BRI has become tied to the national destinies of several Asian countries and also the great importance China has attached to its implementation, some scholars have suggested that the BRI is a cultural and moral alternative to the US-led

international order (Callahan, 2016, pp.237). Therefore, the BRI is essential to the realization of China's regional ambitions in Asia.

The BRI and its implications for Asia, the BRI does fulfil a critical gap in much needed infrastructure investment in Asia. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has estimated that Asia needs USD 26 trillion or USD 1.7 trillion per year if the region is to maintain its growth momentum, eradicate poverty, and respond to climate change (ADB, 2017). Concurrently, as of 2021, China has invested approximately USD 60 billion and is expected reach USD 1.3 trillion by 2027 (Umbach, 2022). Therefore, there are clear benefits to the region for participation in the BRI. However, there are also concerns for Asian countries through their participation in the BRI. One of the most common and serious criticisms is China's "debt trap" diplomacy where countries are saddled with BRI loans, leading to developing countries having to cede their sovereignty and strategic assets to China (Deng, 2021, pp.241). Although the "debt trap" diplomacy claim may perhaps be overstated, there is still a real risk that dependence on China through the BRI may expose Asian countries to pressure and influence from Beijing. Additionally, the BRI may also expose recipient countries to political and financial risks such as in Malaysia (Shambaugh, pp.170-171).

At the same time, some analysts have noted the possibility of the securitization of BRI projects. Although China has insisted that BRI projects serve only economic purposes, analysts have noted that there is potential for China to establish a military or security presence in several BRI countries. China's expanding interests provide compelling incentives for Chinese leaders to expand the PLA's operational presence abroad, especially to protect key economic links with developing countries that are BRI members



Map of the Belt and Road Initiative. Source: Mercator Institute for China Studies. Accessed at https://www.merics.org/en/tracker/mapping-belt-and-road-initiative-where-we-stand

(Garafola, Watts, & Leuschner, 2022, pp.8). Indeed, China has utilized private security companies to protect Chinese nationals and assets in BRI member countries (Sukhanin, 2023). Although of a different nature to an official Chinese military presence, analysts have forecasted that the likely launchpad for Chinese power projection overseas could be in BRI countries (Dreyfuss and Karlin, 2019, pp.4-5).

Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)

The AIIB was another significant initiative launched at the same time as the BRI. It was first proposed by Xi Jinping in October 2013 as a development bank dedicated to lending for infrastructure projects in Asia. After negotiations throughout 2014, the AIIB entered into force on 25 December 2015. By 2020, the AIIB had 103 members representing approximately 79 percent of the global population and 65 percent of global GDP (AIIB, 2021). The AIIB has a registered capital of USD 100 billion of which 31 percent comes from China (Cai, 2018, pp.834). As the largest stakeholder, China holds 26.6 percent of voting power. Referred to as China's "World Bank" for the Asia-Pacific region, the AIIB is widely seen as Beijing's efforts to provide an alternative to the postwar US-dominated financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (Cai, 2018, pp.834). It is also viewed as a challenge to the ADB that is dominated by Japan. Since its inception, the AIIB has provided infrastructure financing to several countries. It is important to note that the majority of infrastructure investment projects have been approved by the AIIB in conjunction with the World Bank, ADB and other international financial institutions to reduce risk (Cai, 2018, pp.834). On the other hand, joint financing by the AIIB also allows the World Bank, the ADB and other financial institutions to be able to finance more development projects for developing countries. Therefore, unlike the BRI, the AIIB while led by China does factor in more multilateral cooperation.

Nonetheless, like the BRI, the AIIB also serves to compliment China's regional ambitions. It is meant to achieve Beijing's multiple economic, diplomatic and security objectives. The AIIB reflects China's efforts to promote reform of the existing international economic system dominated by the United States to allow China to play a more active role. Additionally, it aims to promote Chinese influence in the region, weaken US dominance in the regional economy and minimize the effects of what China perceives as the US's policy of containing it (Cai, 2018, pp.837-841). From a geopolitical perspective, China, through the AIIB is offering a large number of Asian countries with huge amounts of highly attractive economic benefits and opportunities (Cai, 2018, pp.841). Nonetheless, the more multilateral nature of the AIIB has made it more attractive than the BRI. Indeed, unlike the BRI, the AIIB has been accepted by both developing and developed countries. Tellingly, several US allies such as the United Kingdom and Australia have joined the AIIB despite some opposition from the United States regarding the AIIB. The confidence in the AIIB is perhaps since it is a multilateral institution that is governed in a multilateral fashion, although China does have the largest voting share given the proportion of its capital subscriptions (Cai, 2018, pp.842). This stands in contrast to the BRI, that is unilaterally

operated by China and could easily be used to pursue its own national agenda and promote its national interests (Cai, 2018, pp.842).

New Asian Security Concept (NASC) and Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA)

Having dealt with China's economic initiatives to realize its ambitions in Asia, it is now timely to consider its security initiatives. The most notable security initiative regarding Asia proposed by Xi Jinping's China is the NASC or New Asian Security Concept. Xi Jinping had first outlined his vision for Asian security order in a 2014 speech at the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measure in Asia (CICA). During this speech he encouraged Asian countries to "*innovate our security concept, establish a new regional security cooperation architecture, and jointly build a road for security of Asia*" (Xi, 2014). Furthermore, Xi argued that changes were needed because of emerging traditional and non-traditional security challenges that the current architecture could not address (Wuthnow, 2018, pp.231). In particular, Xi took aim at regional alliances, declaring that they "*are not conducive to maintaining regional stability*" (Wuthnow, 2018, pp.231). To address these new challenges, Xi advocated a new security architecture, based on "*inclusive, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable" security, which would reflect a number of principles, including respect for sovereignty, non-intervention, peaceful settlement of disputes, and the inter-weaving of economic and security cooperation"* (Wuthnow, 2018, pp.231). During this same speech Xi also seemed to ironically outline some version of "Asia for the Asians" rhetoric that had been used by Imperial Japan before and during World War 2. Xi's precise wording was "*In the final analysis, it is for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia and uphold the security of Asia*" (Xi, 2014). The implication of this rhetoric is that China aims to exclude or reduce the US role in Asia. In this regard, Xi Jinping is the first Chinese leader to prominently elevate a "new security architecture" as a central pillar of Chinese strategy, reflecting a new focus on reforming global institutions, and more specifically, the "global security governance system" (Ford, 2019, pp.3). In sum, the NASC can be defined by five characteristics:

- First, China is seeking a security architecture in which the United States and other countries China deems "external" to the region play a limited role;
- Second, China is seeking a security architecture that explicitly rejects treaty alliances as a legitimate organizing structure;
- Third, China is seeking a security architecture more closely integrated with the Asian economic order;
- Fourth, China is seeking a security architecture that is reoriented around activities that better address its domestic security concerns; and
- Finally, China is seeking a security architecture that is more accommodating of CCP ideology and principles (Ford, 2019, pp.3-13).

The main implication of this is of course that China's regional ambitions encompass reforming and redefining the security order in Asia (Takagi, 2014; Wuthnow, 2014).

Related to the NASC is the CICA meeting. Established in 1992 by Kazakhstan, it is an international forum intended to ensure Asia's peace, security and stability by strengthening regional cooperation (Dongxiao, 2015, pp.448). Since its inception, it has

developed into a multilateral international platform with 26 member states and 11 observers. With in-depth cooperation among Asian countries as a basis, CICA aims to tap its potential of building itself into the new platform of regional security cooperation, realizing the mechanism's transformation and development, and ultimately achieving the goal of making Asia's counties assume a leadership role in Asian security (Dongxiao, 2015, pp.455). However for China, CICA seems to be platform of choice for the promotion of its NASC and regional ambitions for Asian security (Contessi, 2023, pp.92). Indeed, it was this forum, that Xi Jinping introduced his NASC to the world. Having held its rotating chairmanship for two terms between 2014 and 2018, Beijing charted the course of giving the organization new weight, revamping it into the cornerstone of a new security architecture for Asia (Contessi, 2023, pp.96). CICA thus serves as a platform for China to reassure its Asian neighbours but also to promote a platform rejecting "Cold War mentality" (meaning alliances). Importantly, China wishes to use it to build a sense of Asian regional autonomy. Taken altogether, the implications of this are tied to the aim of reducing or excluding the US role in Asia's security.

In accordance with these efforts, China has also released its White Paper on Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific in 2017 that clarifies its position on Asian security. The document mentions several security challenges in Asia such as Korean nuclear crisis, Afghan reconciliation process, the South China Sea and the Senkaku Islands dispute (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2017). China again reemphasized its opposition to alliances in Asia preferring what it calls partnerships but at the same time calling for these alliances to be more transparent and avoid confrontations so as to avoid confrontation in the region (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2017). The paper also reaffirms China's ambition to synchronize the progress of regional economic and security cooperation (Ford, 2020, pp.10; State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2017). Concurrently the paper also warns small and medium sized countries need not and should not take sides among big countries (Joshi, 2017; State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2017). Importantly the paper outlines China's position that old security concepts are outdated as they are based on Cold War mentality and zero-sum game. Importantly, the documents affirms China's support for various multilateral forums in Asia such as ASEAN, CICA and the SCO among others (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2017). In sum, the white paper updates and clarifies the NASC and China's regional ambitions for security in Asia.

Shanghai Cooperation Organization

Another initiative that Beijing utilizes for its regional ambitions in Asia, particularly in security is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization or SCO. The SCO was founded in 1996, among China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan known as the "Shanghai Five" to settle border disputes and separatist movements. On 15 June 2001, the Shanghai Five extended membership to Uzbekistan and all six countries signed the Declaration of the Establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The SCO as an organization has focused on what China calls "the three evil forces" – terrorism, separatism, and extremism (Yazdani, 2020, pp.456). The organization has evolved into one of the most influential Eurasian political, economic, and security institutions after India and Pakistan gained accession in June 2017, with Iran, Afghanistan, Belarus, and Mongolia being observer states and Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka,

and Turkey dialogue partners (Yazdani, 2020, pp.457). Ultimately, China perceives the organization as a vehicle to hone its own leadership skills on the international stage (Yazdani, 2020, pp.460). The current value of the SCO is as a forum for Beijing to define and articulate its interests, shape the focus of international institutions based on its own domestic priorities, lobby its neighbours to adopt its approach, and codify those views within an internationally legitimate multilateral process (Yazdani, 2020, pp.460). Indeed, China has been making efforts to align the SCO with the BRI. China is able to build on the framework of bilateral engagement with individual SCO affiliated states to shape the group's receptiveness toward Chinese investment (Yazdani, 2020, pp.461). To realize, this SCO members released a ten-year development strategy calling for closer economic integration by better utilizing the BRI (Yazdani, 2020, pp.458).

For China's regional security ambitions in Asia, the SCO is also a useful forum. This is particularly in China's ambitions to project power beyond its borders. Beijing has used the SCO to build its capacity to project military force into Central Asia (Southerland, Green and Janik, 2020, pp.5). Through the SCO, China has taken new steps to extend its defensive perimeter by establishing a military outpost and conducting its first real-world military operations in Central Asia to project power (Southerland, Green and Janik, 2020, pp.5). The SCO allows for China a unique training opportunity for expeditionary operations; deploying across borders by rail, road and air; commanding expeditionary operations; practising cross-border counterterrorism and ground and air forces training for conventional warfare abroad (Southerland, Green and Janik, 2020, pp.9-13). Thus, the SCO is an important forum for China's regional ambitions in Asia.

Although not exclusive of all of China's initiatives to realize its regional ambitions, in sum, China's ambitions in Asia are to establish a security architecture that is more exclusively "Asian", free of alliances, more attendant to its security concerns and solidly rooted in Chinese economic power (Ford, 2020, pp.1)

## 2.2 Beijing's Projection of Power

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) of China is the largest military in the world and perhaps is already the most powerful military in Asia. Since Xi Jinping's ascension to power, the strengthening and modernization of the PLA has become a key focus of the CCP. China has become richer and its interests overseas have expanded considerably, there is also a growing role for the PLA in areas beyond its borders. Indeed, we have seen the expansion of PLA activities in the South and East China Seas. The PLA has also become involved in anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, marking the first time that it had operated outside of China's immediate periphery. As China's interests in Asia and beyond continue to grow, Beijing has begun to think seriously about projecting power beyond its borders. Power projection refers to the ability of a state to exercise effective military power, in peace or in war, at a substantial distance from its own territory (Garfola, Heath at al, 2022, pp.8). The PLA has also considered power projection with the concept "strategic power projection" or "strategic delivery" (Academy of Military Sciences, pp.58). Concurrently, this has led to China considering the development and use of overseas bases in order to project its power. Nonetheless, the PLA and its projection of power have become necessary tools for China's regional ambitions in Asia.

### 2.2.1 "Rich Nation and Strong Army"

Ever since coming to power, Xi Jinping has declared that a strong military is indispensable for achieving the China Dream (Jian, 2018, pp.223-224). Consistent with this declaration, Xi has also made numerous references to China achieving a "strong army" and "world-class military" (Fravel, 2020, pp.86-89). The PLA has embarked on significant reforms to its overall force structure and organization (to be discussed further below). Additionally, in support of developing and strengthening PLA capabilities, China has been gradually increasing its defense budget since 2013 (China Power, 2023). In March 2023, China announced a yearly defense budget of RMB 1.55 trillion (USD 224.8 billion)[1], marking a nominal 7.2 percent increase from the 2022 budget of RMB 1.45 trillion (USD 229.6 billion). This continues a recent trend that has seen nominal yearly percentage increases in the upper single digits (China Power, 2023). This year's increase is the eighth consecutive single-digit uptick in China's defense spending, with the last double-digit jump of 10.1 percent recorded in 2015. In the interim, the PRC's estimated yearly military budget increases have been 7.6 percent in 2016, 7 percent in 2017, 8.1 percent in 2018, 7.5 percent in 2019, 6.6 percent in 2020, 6.8 percent in 2021 and 7.1 percent last year, respectively (Jash, 2023). This reflects the CCP's commitment to sustain military modernization despite the possible economic downturns as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, the results of China's defense spending has seen impressive improvements in PLA firepower ranging from new aircraft carriers to hypersonic missiles. It must also be noted that China's military budget already surpasses that of most Asian countries (see table 1). However it also should be noted that the notion of building a "world-class military" does not reflect a global military strategy or illuminate China's global ambitions (Fravel, 2020, pp.86). Nonetheless, China's increasing military might is complimentary to its regional ambitions of achieving pre-eminence in Asia.

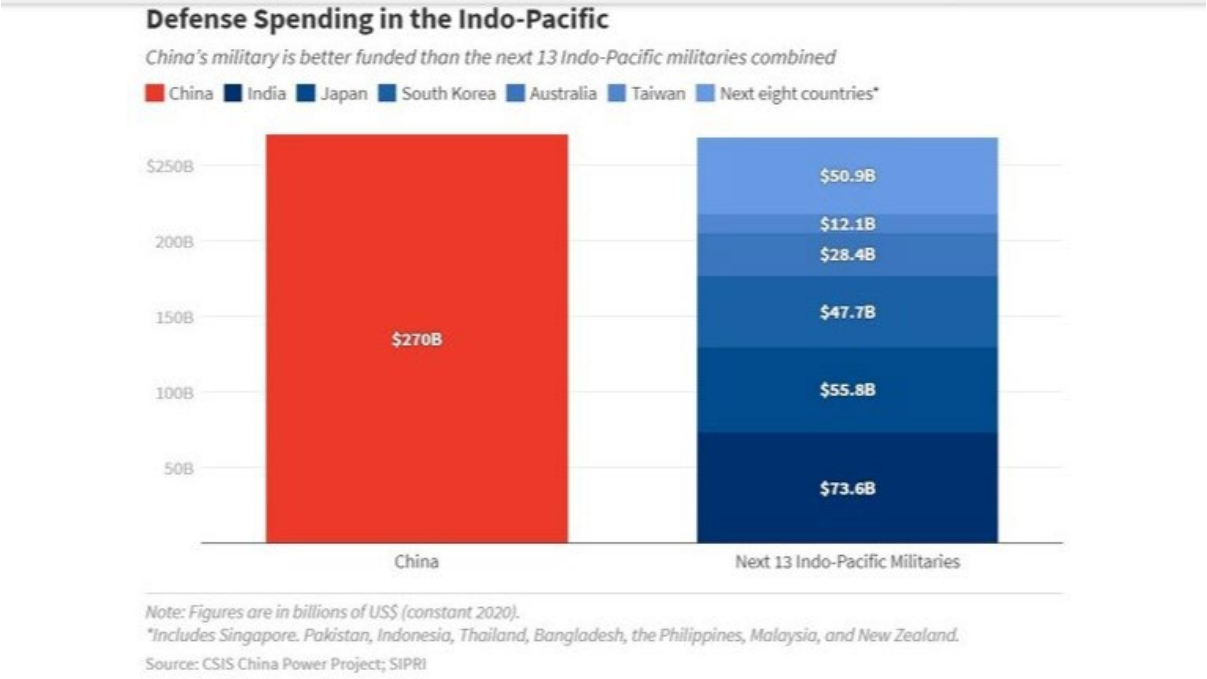


Table 1: Comparison of defense spending between China and other Asian countries. Source: China Power, accessed at https://chinapower.csis.org/military-spending/

### 2.2.2 Modernization of the People's Liberation Army

In line with achieving a "world-class military" to ensure the success of the China Dream, Xi Jinping embarked on widespread reforms of the PLA. Beginning in 2013, Xi had announced his intention to overhaul the military's command structure, update its training and logistics systems, adjust the size and composition of the services, unveil new rules and regulations governing military personnel, and strengthen civil-military cooperation in technological development and other areas (Wuthnow, 2019, pp.2.). Some of the key reforms included a reorganization of the bureaucratic structure under the Central Military Commission (CMC), creation of a system of five joint theater commands (TCs), and establishment of two new quasi-services that will support joint operations: the Strategic Support Force (SSF) and Joint Logistics Support Force (JLSF). These reforms were all encompassing of PLA affairs and its goal was to reform the military leadership system; joint operations command structure; the scale, structure, and composition of the military forces; military training, education, and recruitment; policy; integration of civilian and military defence R&D and industry; restructuring the People's Armed Police; and the military legal system (Jian, 2018, pp.222-223). Xi's reforms have been acknowledged as the most significant reform to the PLA since its foundation. Fundamentally, the reforms were meant to support the long-term vision for Xi as he outlined at 19th Party Congress in October 2017 which are by 2020 the PLA should basically achieve mechanization and make strides in applying information technology and developing strategic capabilities; by 2035, national defense modernization should be basically completed; by mid-century, the people's armed forces should become "world-class forces" (Wuthnow, 2019, pp.2). Concurrently, reforms to the PLA were needed to better prepare China for a changed security environment as the perceived corruption in the PLA prior to the Xi Jinping era had made previous mechanisms at governing civil-military interactions no longer feasible (Char, 2019, pp.12-15). Concurrently, another driver for PLA reform and modernization has been China's ambition to project power wherever it holds strategic and economic interests (Sarkar, pp.278).

### 2.2.3 PLA projecting power in Asia

The PLA has been a tool for Beijing's power projection in Asia. Importantly it has been utilized by China to forcefully defends what it calls "core national interests" specifically the enforcing of its territorial claims and sovereignty. This has become evident in the South China Sea. China claims sovereignty over several features in the South China Sea overlapping with the claims of Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Taiwan. China has supported it claims on the basis of its Nine-Dash Line by arguing that it encompasses its "historical rights". Nonetheless China has enforced its claims in the South China Sea through continuous land reclamation and militarization of several features in the area (Sarkar, 2021, pp.286). Importantly, the PLA has played an important role in projecting Chinese power in the South China Sea as it has been instrumental in incrementally expanding China's control over the islands and the adjacent waters in the South China Sea (Sarkar, pp.286). Significantly, China has constructed military and civilian dual use

facilities on several features that are able to accommodate fighter jets and bombers (Sarkar, 2021, pp.287). Additionally, in 2018, China deployed long-range anti-ship cruise missiles and air-defense missiles in the Spratly Islands, providing the islands with offensive reach for the first time (Sarkar, pp.286). The projection of the PLA's power in the South China Sea is a stern message from Beijing that it considers the islands a core national interest and that it would be best for the other claimant states to accommodate China's interests rather than challenge them.

The South China Sea issue revolves maritime claims, but Beijing has also utilized the PLA to project power to defend its perceived territorial claims with India. The unresolved border dispute has been the flashpoint of Sino-Indian relations for decades, but tensions increased after the Doklam Incident in mid-June of 2017. The incident involved India's disruption of Chinese road building in the Doklam area which led to a scuffle between both sides (Sarkar, 2021, pp.292). China's response was to increase its military posture in the region through re-enforcements and put diplomatic pressure on India to withdraw its troops (Sarkar, 2021, pp.292). Tensions eventually returned to normalcy after a 72 days standoff between the Chinese and Indian armies (Sarkar, 2021, pp.293). Nonetheless, border tensions between China and India remain uneasy and as recent in 2020 saw Chinese and Indian troops clash in the Galwan Valley, which resulted in casualties on both sides (Zhang, 2023, pp.399). Nonetheless, these border incidents with India have demonstrated the PLA as tool of projecting power to assert sovereignty claims on disputed territory through military means (Sarkar, 2021, pp.293).

The PLA has also projected power in Central Asia, though not as aggressively as in the South China Sea or with India. As highlighted above, China has utilized the SCO to build its capacity to project military force into Central Asia. Ultimately, PLA projection of power is consistent with China's regional ambitions in Asia to achieve centrality and pre-eminence.

### 2.2.4 The Search for Overseas Basing

As referred to only briefly above, China has begun to consider the possibility of overseas basing. Traditionally, China has been opposed to deploying its troops overseas as the focus of its military strategy has been on "active defense" with the resulting military planning focused on homeland defense (Dreyfuss and Karlin, 2019, pp.3). Concurrently, China has also not been interested in overseas due to not wanting to be accused of being "imperialist" in addition to its stated respect for other state's sovereignty (Dreyfuss and Karlin, 2019, pp.3). Nonetheless, China's views on overseas basing have gradually evolved since the launch of the BRI in 2013. In line with expanded overseas interests due to BRI-related projects, China has transitioned into accepting the necessity of accepting overseas bases. Concurrently, other trends have influenced PLA interest in overseas bases. One would be the shifting balance of international power, where China's economic might provide an incentive for China's military to prioritize the building of bilateral and multilateral security partnerships with other developing countries to help shape an international order that better suits Beijing's needs (Garfola, Heath at al, 2022, pp.). Additionally, is the reality of an intensifying great-power competition. In this regard Intensifying competition with the United States and other rival Asian powers could motivate the PLA to consider a broader range of operations abroad than the military conducts today, including some form of combat operations (Garfola, Heath at al, 2022, pp.). China's

acceptance of oversea basing has become apparent with the 2017 opening of its first overseas base in Djibouti. Since then, Western and Chinese analysts have predicted that China may establish overseas bases in several Asian countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, Cambodia and Myanmar (Garfola, Heath at al, 2022, pp.57-67). Indeed, there have been rumours and perhaps exaggerated responses from the United States that China aimed to establish a naval base in Cambodia (Bradford, 2022, pp.2-4.). Nonetheless, overseas bases are a means to project power, and China's possible locations for establishing further overseas bases are in Asia.

## Chapter 3

## Review of the China-DPRK Alliance

Before addressing the first research question on whether the China-DPRK alliance is an “alliance”, we must consider the China’s views on alliances. Indeed, great powers have utilized alliances to increase their influence and project power. As Stephen Walt noted, the Cold War was essentially a competition for alliances between the United States and the Soviet Union. Alliances may or may not factor into Beijing’s calculations for its regional aspirations and power projection. Therefore before reviewing the China-DPRK alliance, I will address China’s relationship with alliances and whether they are a factor in its regional ambitions and power projections.

### 3.1 China views of alliances

China’s traditional rhetoric is that it opposes alliances. CCP leaders have interpreted security alliances as inherently “zero sum” and exclusively negative with the assumed purpose of containing threatening states (Liff, 2017, pp.140). At the same time China has viewed such security alliances, particularly US led alliances, as relics from the Cold War and not suitable for security in Asia (Liff, 2017, pp.141; Ruonan & Feng, 2016, pp.2-3; Han & Papa, 2021, pp.160). Indeed, the official stance of China since the leadership of Deng Xiaoping has been one of “non-alliance” or “non-alignment. This was a principle also adopted by Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao (Ruonan & Feng, 2016, pp.2-3). Xi Jinping’s China has also seemingly confirmed a non-alliance policy with the NASC referring to military alliances as not conducive to maintaining common security (Xi, 2014). Nonetheless, there has been scholarly opinion in China advocating that China should seek alliances to defend its rise. Arguing that history has rarely seen a great power rise without allies, these scholars such as Yan Xuetong, suggest that China should abandon its non-alliance policy it will only lead to more security challenges (Ruonan & Feng, 2016, pp.6). Furthermore, noting that China’s security environment should be what informs China’s foreign policy, and in light of the dangers posed to China’s national security by the United States, these “revisionist” scholars believe that China needs alliances Ruonan & Feng, 2016, pp.6). There are also Chinese scholars who advocate a middle path between alliance and non-alliance. Viewing that a complete abandonment of the non-alliance policy is unrealistic as potential alliance partners are few and any alliance formed would not only be weak, but likely to provoke a response from the United States, these scholars prefer that China adopt coalitions, strategic partnerships and quasi-alliances instead. Indeed, as explored below strategic partnerships and to some extent quasi-alliances have become China’s preferred choice. Nonetheless, despite these debates China’s interpretation of formal security alliances as being inherently zero-sum and relics from the Cold War is longstanding. The history of China’s failed alliances also provides an understanding to Beijing’s reluctance to form military alliances. This is a matter that will be briefly explored next.

#### Historical baggage: Collapse of Soviet and North Vietnamese alliances

The first significant alliance of the People’s Republic of China was its treaty of alliance with the Soviet Union that was signed on 14 February 1950. Known as officially

as the Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance between the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union, the treaty pledged that both sides would render military assistance and other assistance by "all means at its disposal" should one side be attacked by Japan, or any country allied with it (in reality the United States). The Sino-Soviet treaty provided immense benefits to China through military and technical assistance provided by the Soviet Union. Indeed, with military assistance from the Soviet Union, China was able to establish itself as a major military power in the immediate aftermath of the Korean War where the Soviets provided China with equipment to arm and upgrade 186 army divisions, 12 air force divisions and 36 naval vessels (Ji, 2010, pp.132). However the seeds of China's mistrust of alliances comes from its experience with the Sino-Soviet alliance. During the Korean War, the Soviet Union had promised Soviet air cover for Chinese armies in Korea. However, Stalin later withheld this air support resulting in Chinese armies being fully exposed to US air superiority (Xiaoming, 2002). While this air cover was later provided, Stalin had placed restrictions on the involvement of his fighter jets in the conflict. Additionally, the Chinese had also complained of delays in Soviet equipment for their armies. The Soviets also required the Chinese to pay for some of the military assistance provided, which left China of a debt totalling USD650 million to the Soviet Union (Xiaoming, 2002). The Chinese leadership had expected the alliance with the Soviet Union to produce unconditional support. What it got was aid that they had to pay for and crucial air cover that was not provided early in the conflict and later only belatedly. Nonetheless, the Korean War experience with its Soviet ally suggested to the Chinese that the Soviet Union was an unreliable ally (Xiaoming, 2002, pp.208). This would ultimately lead to further conflicts in the Sino-Soviet alliance such as over ideology, territorial disputes, and support in the "Third World" and would lead to the Sino-Soviet split. The collapse of this alliance would also lead to China emphasizing self-reliance as a fundamental principle of security.

Another alliance of which China was a part of but had collapsed dramatically was its alliance with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (later reunified as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam). China's support for the Vietnamese Communists was extensive. It has provided considerable military and technical assistance to the Vietnamese Communists in their war of independence against the French (Li, 2019, pp.39-87). Once North Vietnam had achieved its independence, relations had become stronger and China had referred to the relations between the two as "brother plus comrade" (Zhang, 2015, pp.1; Li, 2020, pp.257). The Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and China began an alliance relationship during the Vietnam War. During that conflict China had provided the DRV with extensive military aid. From 1964 to 1966, China shipped to the DRV 270,000 rifles and machine guns; 540 artillery pieces; 900,000 artillery shells; 200 million rounds of ammunition; and 700 tons of dynamite, along with other military supplies (Li, 2020, pp.228). Furthermore from 1966 to 1973, China provided miliary aid totalling RMB 42.6 billion (USD 14 billion), including guns, ammunition, tanks, naval vessels, armoured vehicles, trucks, airplane, medicine, medicinal instruments, and other war materials (Li, 2020, pp.228). Thus, during the Vietnam War, China provided the DRV with total aid of USD 20 billion. Additionally, China had deployed almost 320,000 soldiers into North Vietnam to provide it with anti-aircraft defence and engineering support (Li, 2020, pp.48, 76-85). Concurrently, China's support for the DRV also provided deterrence from a US ground invasion of North Vietnam. Indeed, China had issued clear and repeated warnings to the United States. Indeed, there is evidence that the United States took these warnings seriously after remembering China's intervention in the Korean War and therefore led to it

limiting the level of military action against North Vietnam and below a threshold that would provoke a direct Chinese intervention (Zhai, 2000, pp.137-139). Nonetheless, the alliance eventually collapsed as China viewed the DRV as becoming closer politically with the Soviet Union, which China had declared as its main security threat in the 1960s. Mistrust further spread after the Sino-American rapprochement in 1972, which North Vietnam perceived as a betrayal of its own interests. China's perception of its "brother plus comrade" changed after Vietnamese unification in 1975 and Vietnam's subsequent conclusion of an alliance with the Soviet Union in 1978. Subsequently this had led to China viewing the Soviet-Vietnamese alliance as an attempt to spread Soviet hegemony in Asia and also encircle China from the north and south (Khoo, 2011, pp.112-120). The Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia (a country that China considered as friendly) in 1979 was the final straw for Beijing, and on 17 January 1979, the two former allies went to war when China invaded northern Vietnam (Xiaoming, 2015, pp.13-67; Khoo, 2011, pp.120-131). The collapse of this alliance also contributed to China's distrust of alliances and has left a legacy of bitterness, where it believes that the Vietnamese were ungrateful for the assistance it had provided previously.

## 3.2 Review of China-DPRK relations

After consideration of China's views on alliances, it is timely to review the history of China-DPRK relations. Both China and the DPRK are party-states and relations between the CCP and the Korean Worker's Party (KWP) precede the establishment of their respective states. Indeed, the beginnings of the relationship have in them a joint struggle against Japanese imperialism in the 1930s. Many Koreans had served with CCP affiliated armies in resisting Japanese expansionism in Manchuria and China, including Kim Il Sung, the DPRK's first leader. The CCP also supported aspirations for Korean independence by establishing organizations such as the Korean Independence League and Korean Volunteer Army that were staffed by Korean communists in Yanan, China (Jingyi, 2015, pp.109-114). Many of these Korean communists would later become members of the Yanan faction, a group that would makeup part of the DPRK leadership in its early years. The contribution of Korean communists to the CCP victory in the Chinese Civil War was also recognized by Mao Zedong who stated "the bright five-starred national flag of the People's Republic of China was also dyed with the blood of the Korean revolutionaries" (Matray, 2012, pp.109). Additionally, to support Kim Il Sung's aspirations for the unification for Korea, the CCP transferred almost 50,000 ethnic Korean soldiers over to the DPRK (Shen & Xia, 2018, pp.27-30). Nonetheless, it was during the Korean War and its aftermath that the ties between these two Communists states were cemented, of which we turn our attention to next.

### 3.2.1 Korean War and its Aftermath

The Korean War began with the invasion of the ROK by the DPRK on 25 June 1950. Although a detailed account of the conflict need not concern us here, China began considering intervention in the conflict once the Korean People's Army (KPA) began to be pushed back to the DPRK border by United Nations (UN)-led forces commanded by General Douglas MacArthur. China's motivations in intervening in the Korean War were complex and multifaceted. It consisted of security considerations, as Mao believed that

China's Northeast would be endangered by a US military presence in a conquered DPRK. Mao believed that the United States represented a real security threat to China and its revolution. This view was further enforced when the United States deployed its Seventh Fleet to protect Taiwan immediately after the North Korean invasion of South Korea which saw Chinese perceive that the US aimed to destroy the newly established PRC by attacking it from Taiwan and Korea (Li, 2020, pp.21-23). He viewed that the United States had intruded into, and threatened China's security in three areas: Korea, Vietnam and Taiwan (Li, (b), 2020, pp.48). Concerned with the geopolitics, regional economy and transportation capacity of these three areas of conflict, the Chinese believed that the United States' intervention in Korea was the most critical to the new regime (Li, 2019, pp.65). Indeed, Mao himself had described the United States involvement in those areas as similar to three knives around China's body: America in Korea was like a knife over her head; Taiwan was one around her waist, and Vietnam was one on her feet (Li, 2019, pp 65-66). Therefore, Korea was the most immediate security threat and it was Korea where Mao decided to confront the United States. Concurrently other motivations concerned repaying the DPRK and Korean communists for its support for the CCP's own revolution. Although a secondary motivation compared to China's own security concerns, the desire to support fellow communists in the DPRK was a motivating factor for Chinese intervention. Therefore with these various motivations, the Chinese People's Volunteer Army (CPVA) commanded by General Peng Dehuai crossed the China-DPRK border on November 1950.

The Chinese intervention was crucial in saving the DPRK. The CPVA managed to push back the UN Forces until the 38$^{th}$ Parallel, along the original border of the DPRK and the ROK. Chinese support was not without friction. Indeed, from the start, there was reluctance on the part of Kim Il Sung to subordinate his forces to the CPVA and establish a joint command. It was only after pressure from Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, that Kim Il Sung begrudgingly agreed to establish a joint CVA-KPA Joint Command with General Peng Dehuai as the Commander in Chief (Shen & Xia, 2018, pp.44-53). Most significantly, there were also disagreements over strategy, where Mao Zedong had overruled Kim Il Sung's desire – expressed as early as February 1952, to conclude an armistice agreement with the UN Forces, instead choosing to prolong the war to achieve China's broader geopolitical goals (Shen & Xia, 2018, pp.70-75). On the other hand it is undeniable that Chinese intervention had saved the DPRK, although the DPRK has frequently refused to publicly recognize the significance of China's contributions to the war (Wertz, 2019, pp.4).

The end of the Korean War had seen China's influence and role in the DPRK increase dramatically. The CPVA remained stationed in the DPRK with thirty-three divisions and was a crucial source of free labour for the reconstruction of North Korea (Shen & Xia, 2012, pp.3). Additionally, China continued to provide critical economic aid to the DPRK along with the Soviet Union and other fraternal socialist countries. Significantly, China and the DPRK concluded an Economic and Cultural Agreement in November 1953 which saw the cancellation of the DPRK's wartime debts to China that amounted to RMB 729 million (USD 362.5 million) and a gift of RMB 800 million (USD 400 million) in aid for the period between 1954 and 1957 (Shen & Xia, 2012, pp.5). Nonetheless, the continued Chinese military presence created tensions with the DPRK which bred resentment that the CVA was an occupying army in violation of DPRK sovereignty (Shen & Xia, 2018, pp79-80, pp116-117). Thus as a mark of goodwill to Kim Il Sung and the DPRK, Mao

Zedong ordered the withdrawal of the CPVA in 1958, marking the end of a permanent Chinese military presence in the DPRK.

### 3.2.2 The signing of the Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty between the People's Republic of China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea 1961

A key event that marked the cementing of ties between China and the DPRK was the signing of Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty between the People's Republic of China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in 1961. Motivated by China's security concerns with the Soviet Union as well as the DPRK's desire to play both China and the Soviet Union for external aid, the treaty pledged that both countries shall render military and other assistance by "all means at its disposal" should either country be subjected to an armed attack (1961, Treaty of Friendship, Co-operation and Mutual Assistance Between the People's Republic of China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea). Essentially an alliance treaty, it was notable as that it committed both China and the DPRK to immediately assist each other by "all means at their disposal", which was evaluated as a more direct and categorial commitment than that of the Soviet-DPRK alliance treaty and the US-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty (Dongjun, 2012, pp.129). China's own security objectives led to the conclusion of this alliance treaty. Firstly, the Chinese leadership viewed the DPRK's diplomatic support as a strategic necessity to create a "new situation" in diplomacy, especially in its Soviet policy. Therefore, Mao changed his way of thinking about alliance and decided to conclude a military alliance treaty with the DPRK in March 1960. The greater Sino-Soviet conflicts intensified; the more Beijing wanted to draw the DPRK into its camp. After all, as mentioned above, just after the Soviet-North Korean treaty came into view, under severe pressure China hastened to co-opt North Korea to its side by providing more compelling commitments than the Soviet-North Korean treaty (Dongjun, 2012, pp.131). Secondly, considering its security situation, China could no longer leave the relationship with the DPRK unsettled. For China, an uneasy relationship with North Korea was the same one that made a new enemy of an old brother, which of course would not be in its security interest (Dongjun, 2012, pp.131). Therefore, the alliance treaty was necessary to tighten China-DPRK relations to better serve China's own national security objectives.

### 3.2.3 China-DPRK relations during the Cold War

The signing of the alliance treaty between China and the DPRK marked a high point in the relations between these two East Asian Communist states. China had increased its aid to the DPRK throughout the 1960s. The DPRK on the other hand either sided with China or remained neutral on polemical issues regarding the Sino-Soviet split. Interestingly, during this period, China appeared very deferential to the DPRK's interests. Two occasions require closer examination. One was the settlement of border demarcation between China and the DPRK. In marked contrast to China's jealous contemporary defense of its perceived territorial sovereignty in the South China Sea, China in 1962 conceded to the DPRK's demands for border demarcation between the two states. The resulting Sino-Korean Border Treaty of 1962 resulted in the DPRK gaining 54.5 percent of the Tianchi lake, consisting of 98 square kilometres that had been held by China (Shen & Xia, 2018, pp.159-162). Concurrently, China had lost 500 square kilometres with respect

to the source of the Tumen River which divides the two countries (Shen & Xia, 2018, pp.162). China had decided to accede to the DPRK's demand in order to cater to their national sentiments. A second occasion of China's deference to the DPRK was the offer of Mao Zedong for China's Northeast to serve as the rear base of the DPRK in the event of another conflict on the Korean Peninsula. With reference to Northeast China's support as rear and logistics support base for CPVA and the KPA during the Korean War, Mao Zedong told Kim Il Sung that "*Should a war break out in the future, the great rear base will be turned over to Comrade Kim Il Sung for a "unified command*" (Shen & Xia, 2018, pp.166). As Mao had repeated this suggestion to the DPRK, it demonstrated his trust in the DPRK as an ally.

Nonetheless, despite these signs of deference, relations between China and the DPRK cooled during the Cultural Revolution. Indeed, during this period, radical CCP factions accused Kim Il Sung of ideological heresy ("fat revisionist") and persecuted thousands of ethnic Koreans in China on the suspicion of spying for the DPRK (Shen & Xia, 2018, pp.182-184; 202-203; 217). Sino-American rapprochement also cooled relations between China and the DPRK as the DPRK considered the United States its primary enemy. However, China sought to assure its ally by including discussions on the Korean Peninsula in normalization talks with the United States and also offering Pyongyang enhanced cooperation and military aid (Shen & Xia, 2018, pp.203-209, pp.221-224).

The death of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping's accession to leadership also marked a significant change in relations between China and the DPRK. Relations were complicated by the fact that Kim Il Sung had nominated his son Kim Jong Il as his successor. Deng Xiaoping registered disapproval for this hereditary succession in a Communist state but eventually begrudgingly acquiesced to it (Delury, 2022, pp.4, pp.16-24). Concurrently, DPRK actions seem to embarrass initiatives from China, perhaps a recurring theme of this relationship. A marked incident was when Deng Xiaoping had remarked to the United States that Kim Il Sung was ready for talks with ROK President Chun Doo Hwan, but the DPRK had tried to assassinate him on 9 October 1983 with a bomb in Yangon, Myanmar. China was outraged and Deng refused to meet with DPRK officials for a time and never again visited the DPRK or welcomed Kim Jong Il to China (Delury, 2022, pp.24).

### 3.2.4 Post-Cold War relations

The end of the Cold War changed the nature of China-DPRK relations. It had removed the Soviet Union as a benefactor for the DPRK. An important moment in the post-Cold War era was the normalization of ties between China and the ROK in 1992. The DPRK saw this as a great betrayal and fiercely criticized China for doing so. As a result China had refused to meet with Kim Jong Il's personal envoy in May 1993 and revoked invitations to WPK party leaders and KPA military delegations that year (Kong, 2021, pp.14). According to Shen Zhihua and Yafeng Xia, China's normalization with the DPRK's primary rival "cut the last cord in the 'brotherly' political foundations of the Sino-DPRK special relationship (Shen & Xia, 2018, pp.240). With this move, the "strategic, economic, and political foundations of the Sino-DPRK "special relationship" collapsed completely (Shen & Xia, 2018, pp.240). Indeed, the economic relationship between China and the DPRK had become more "commercialised" as China insisted on a cash payment basis

rather than “friendship price system” (Park & Kim, 2017, pp.82; Kong, 2021, pp.15). At the same time, China had encouraged the DPRK to adopt the same market reforms that China had, but this was rejected by the DPRK as a “betrayal of socialism” (Kim, 2017, pp119-120). In security matters, the DPRK embarked on several provocative adventures, one of which was withdrawing from the Armistice Committee in Panmunjon and called for a new peace mechanism between Pyongyang and Washington (Chung, 2013, pp.10). This event happened without the DPRK consulting with China (Chung, 2013, pp.10).

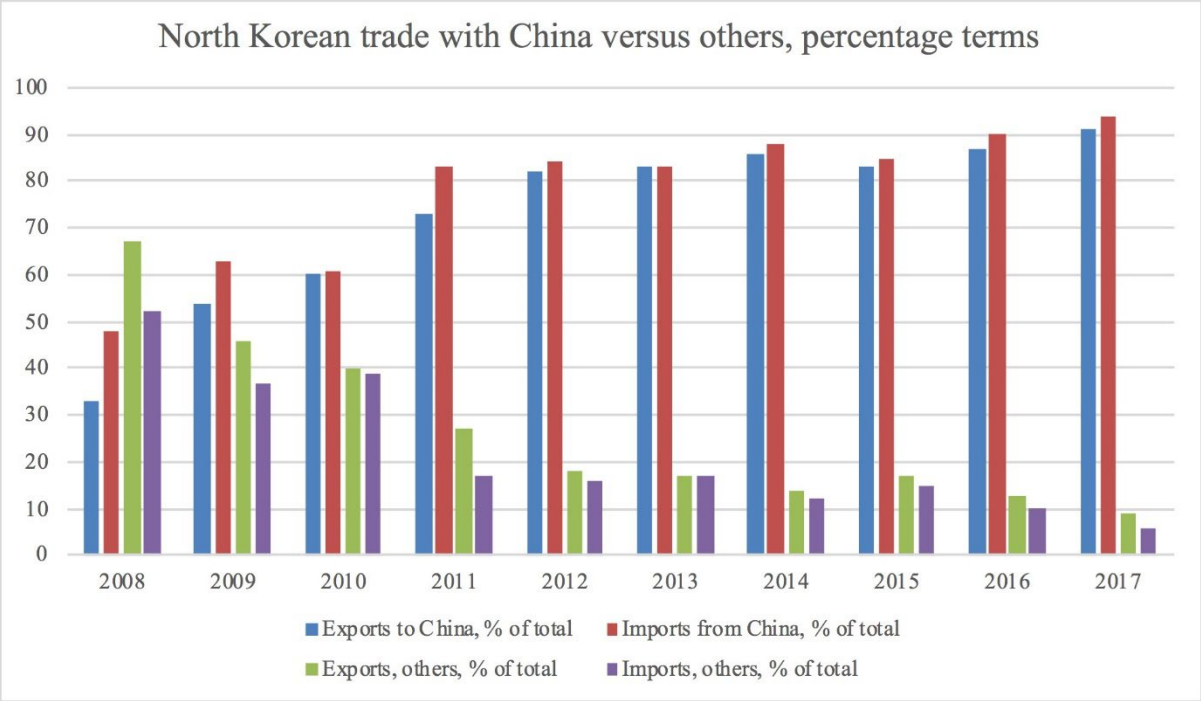
Arguably however, the core of China-DPRK relations in the Post-Cold War period has been China’s attempt to mediate the Second North Korean Nuclear Crisis. Concerned by the US rhetoric that branded the DPRK as a member of the “axis of evil” and worried that it might engage in an Iraq War style pre-emptive war to stop the DPRK from acquiring, China decided to host the Six-Party Talks (SPT) to with the aim of achieving the denuclearization of the DPRK (Aoyama, 2016, pp.147-148). Through the SPT, China chose to manage the DPRK nuclear problem through multilateral consultations in order to achieve the long-term goal of the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula (Aoyama, 2016, pp.149). Nonetheless, despite the SPT, the DPRK tested its first nuclear weapon on 6 October 2006. China’s reaction was to severely criticize the DPRK and was notable for referring to the nuclear test as a “*brazen violation of international rules*”, a term that had been reserved for serious affronts to China’s dignity by countries that have been historical rivals and enemies (Lanteigne, 2020, pp.184; Chung, 2013, pp.17). The DPRK’s second nuclear test in 2009, also led to much anger within and outside the Chinese government (Yang, 2019, pp.4). Nonetheless, these actions did not result in a complete abandonment of the DPRK by China. In contrast China refused to condemn further DPRK military provocations such as the *Cheonan* sinking in 2010 and the *Yeonpyong* Islands shelling in 2011 (Luo, 2022, pp.924; Yang, 2019, pp.4; Chung, 2022, pp.318). The final years of Kim Jong Il’s rule also saw a warming of ties between China and the DPRK. From 2009 to 2011, there were high-level exchanges among counterparts from the Party, government, and military (Snyder, 2012, pp.36). However, although there was an increase in high-level exchanges, there was a notable change in how China had referred to the relationship between the two countries in which Hu Jintao had described as “increasing vigorous exchange and cooperation” rather than as a “traditional friendship” (Glaser & Billingsley, 2012, pp.9). These exchanges near the end of Kim Jong Il’s rule in the DPRK also indicated that China was dissatisfied with the nature of bilateral consultations between the two states and its continued frustration over the DPRK’s reluctance to heed its advice to pursue economic reforms (Glaser & Billingsley, 2012, pp.9-10). Therefore, China-DPRK relations in the period after the end of the Cold War seemed to have been marked by differing perceptions of closeness and mistrust.

### 3.2.5 China-DPRK relations in the Xi Jinping Era

Both China and the DPRK saw leadership changes in 2013 and 2012 respectively with the rise to power of Xi Jinping and Kim Jong Un. The DPRK under Kim Jong Un has adopted a much more aggressive military policy compared to his father. This has resulted in a nuclear test in 2013 and three further nuclear tests from 2016 to 2017. In response to those tests, China vehemently criticized the DPRK. In addition, it voted for UN Security Council Resolutions 1718 (in 2006), 1874 (in 2009), 2094 (in 2013), 2270 (in 2016), and 321 (in 2016), which imposed strict sanctions on Pyongyang (Kim, 2017, pp.110).

Following the sixth test in 2017, China agreed to introduce regulations on the export of crude oil and refined petroleum products to the DPRK (Li & Kim, 2020, pp.7). Significantly this was a change from China's previous position that sanctions were counter-productive to resolving DPRK's nuclear weapons. Nonetheless, China's support for UN sanctions had worsened relations between the two East Asian Communist states. This was reflected with the fact that Xi Jinping had met with President of the ROK first before meeting Kim Jong Un. At the same time within the DPRK, official media allowed criticism of China with references to the "thousand-year enemy". There were other tensions such as the purging and execution of Jang Song-thaek, Kim Jong Un's uncle who was considered pro-China; the 2017 assassination of Kim Jong Nam in Malaysia, who was perceived as being under the protection of China and other incidents such as the arrest of Chinese fishermen in 2014.

Despite China's support for UN sanctions against the DPRK, economic relations between China and the DPRK have increased significantly. Due to UN sanctions, China has increasingly become the economic lifeline of the DPRK, where Chinese trade, aid and investment has become critical to the DPRK's social stability, economic productivity, source of technology and hard currency (Jung & Rich, 2016, pp.10.). Indeed, trade with China now accounts for over 90 percent of the DPRK's exports (see Table 2).




China-DPRK trade 2008-2017. Source: Silberstein, Benjamin Katzeef, 2019, 38 North, Accessed at https://www.38north.org/2019/09/bkatzeffsilberstein091019/

Although the COVID-19 pandemic had affected the overall value of China-DPRK trade, China still retained its position as the DPRK's largest trading partner (Watanabe, 2023). With the easing of COVID-19 restrictions in the DPRK, trade with China is resuming to pre-pandemic levels (Bremer, 2023). China is also an important source of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the DPRK. It is the largest investor in the DPRK due to the collapse of inter-Korean investment. Chinese investment in the DPRK consists of the construction of social infrastructure (roads and railways), mineral extraction, computer production, marine

production and fishing licensing (Gao, 2019, pp.2). It has also supported DPRK Special Economic Zones (SEZ) such as in Rason, Hwanggumpyong and Sinuiju (Silberstein, 2019; Clement, 2019, pp.2-8; Gao, 2019, pp.5). China has also been crucial in providing economic aid to the DPRK. It is also acknowledged to provide a significant amount of aid to the DPRK although the exact total has not been revealed (Park & Kim, 2017, pp.83). Nonetheless, the volume of Chinese aid to the DPRK has been estimated to be USD 4 billion in 2014 (Park & Kim, 2017, pp.85). This assistance has come in the form of infrastructure construction, especially in China's border areas with the DPRK (Park & Kim, 2017, p.82). Significantly, it also provides oil to the DPRK and the DPRK is depended on oil supplied by China for virtually all of its oil (Hotta, 2016, pp.8-11). Nonetheless, despite this economic lifeline that China provides to the DPRK, the DPRK is anxious about its economic dependence on China due to historical concerns over China's dominance over the Korean Peninsula (Gao, 2019, pp.115).

However from 2018, relations between China and the DPRK have improved. This had become possible after Kim Jong Un's visit to China on 25 March 2018 (Sun, 2018). Since then both Xi Jinping and Kim Jong Un have met five times between 2018 and 2019, with Xi Jinping visiting the DPRK in June 2019 (Pak, 2019). Both countries have reaffirmed that "shared ideals, beliefs and goals are the driving force of the China-DPRK relationship" (Revere, 2019 pp.7). Although the COVID-19 pandemic had affected bilateral visits, regular messages of congratulations are exchanged between Xi Jinping and Kim Jong Un, signifying that the thaw is relations between China and the DPRK is continuing for now (Johnson, 2022, AFP-Jiji, 2022). At the same time, China has also had a muted response to the numerous ballistic missiles testing from the DPRK and has attached blame on the US-ROK alliance for increasing tensions on the Korean Peninsula (Tiezzi, 2023). Nonetheless, despite the seeming camaraderie many analysts are sceptical that this warm relations between China and the DPRK can be sustained in the long-term due to the history of mistrust that was highlighted in previous sections (Revere, 2019, pp.8-9; Wertz, 2019, pp.15; Zhao, 2020, pp.159).

### 3.3 Is the China-DPRK alliance an "alliance"?

As described above the relations between China and the DPRK have been described as a blood alliance and a relationship as "close as lips and teeth". The indication of these terms suggests the unique closeness of the relationship between China and the DPRK. In recent years both countries have reaffirmed their "historical relationship" and Xi Jinping spoke of "*no matter how the international and regional situations change, the firm stance of the Communist Party of China and the Chinese Government on consolidating and developing relations with the DPRK remains unchanged, the Chinese people's friendship with the DPRK people remains unchanged, and China's support for the socialist DPRK remains unchanged*" (Yongming, 2019). These feelings of goodwill were also reciprocated by Kim Jong Un on the occasion of Xi Jinping's visit to the DPRK in 2019, where he remarked "*that it is an unswerving policy of the DPRK's party and government to carry forward the DPRK-China friendship from generation to generation*" (Xiaoying, 2019). Thus, the official rhetoric from both China and the DPRK is that their relationship is strong, continues to grow and remain "special" due to their strong historical ties. Nonetheless, the relationship has suffered from strong tensions and mistrust. Indeed, not only has mistrust been apparent in the relationship, but it has also been characterized as

a “mutual hostage” relationship, where although unhappy with each other, the DPRK needs China for its survival and China wishes to prevent the DPRK’s collapse (Cha, 2011).

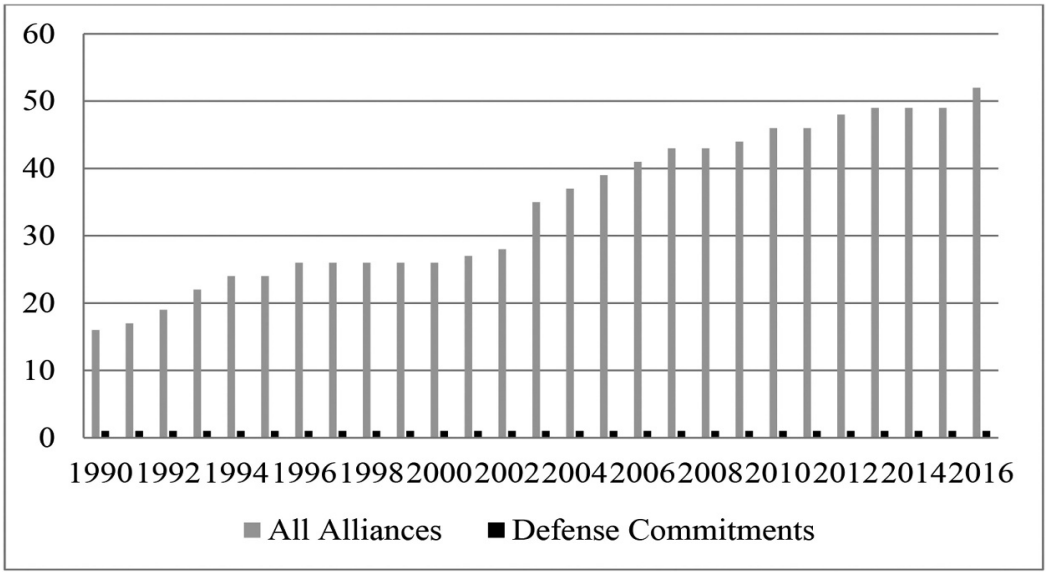
Nonetheless, as two party-states, the relations between China and the DPRK are more than just the relations between two states. Indeed, the relations between China and the DPRK encompasses several tiers which are party to party, government to government and military to military. There are various channels of communications between the two states which consist of the two leaders’ personal relationship, relations between the CCP and the KWP and also on a state-to-state basis (Hoshino & Hiraiwa, 2020, pp.19). Importantly there are several factors that create a “special relationship” between China and the DPRK. Hoshino and Hiraiwa have identified four factors which are national security issues, Socialist ideology, traditional ties and economic relations that create a special relationship between China and the DPRK (Hoshino & Hiraiwa, 2020, pp.19-22). Nonetheless, they identify that these four factors can not only bring China and the DPRK closer together, but they can also push them apart. This analysis is agreeable as the previous sections have highlighted instances where China and the DPRK have become closer yet have also drifted apart.

Having reviewed the nature and characteristics of China-DPRK relations, it is now timely to answer the first research question on whether the China-DPRK alliance is an “alliance” as defined by alliance theory. Recalling Stephen Walt’s definition of an alliance, it is “a formal or informal relationship of security cooperation between two or more sovereign states” (Walt, 1987, pp.1). Looking at the text of the Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty between the People's Republic of China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, it is clear that a formal relationship is established between the two states. Most importantly this is reflected in Article 2 of the Treaty which states, “*The Contracting Parties undertake jointly to adopt all measures to prevent aggression against either of the Contracting Parties by any state. In the event of one of the Contracting Parties being subjected to the armed attack by any state or several states jointly and thus being involved in a state of war, the other Contracting Party shall immediately render military and other assistance by all means at its disposal*”. This not only established a formal alliance relationship but also establish a formal commitment for both sides to assist each other in times of war. Importantly Article 7 of the Treaty states “The present Treaty will remain in force until *the Contracting Parties agree on its amendment or termination…*”. As the China-DPRK Treaty was renewed in 2021 it is apparent that the alliance commitments from the Treaty are still in effect.

Next is the consideration of whether the China-DPRK Alliance Treaty is a treaty under international law. Article 2 of the Law of Treaties 1969 defines a treaty as “*an international agreement concluded between States in written form and governed by international law, whether embodied in a single instrument or in two or more related instruments and whatever its particular designation*” (UN, 1969). Additionally, according to the Law of Treaties, a treaty must be in written form, concluded between States, and governed by international law. In this regard, China and the DPRK exchanged treaty documents by the title of the Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty between the People's Republic of China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea on July 11, 1961. Therefore, it satisfies the first qualification (Sumi, 2018, pp.250). Secondly, North Korea adopted the Socialist Constitution of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea on September 8, 1948, forming a cabinet with Kim Il Sung as the premier on September 9, and announcing the foundation of the DPRK on the same day. The People’s Republic of

China was established after the Civil war, in October 1949, and recognized the DPRK as a state by establishing diplomatic relations with it. Based on both the constitutive and declaratory theories of state recognition, the two states were recognized by each another. Hence, it is an agreement concluded between states (Sumi, 2018, pp.250). Lastly, this treaty is an agreement between the DPRK and China, which is not regulated by domestic laws of a single or third party, thus it qualifies as a treaty regulated by international law (Sumi, 2018, pp.250). Thus as a treaty under international law as well as the alliance commitments found with the China-DPRK Treaty, it can be concluded that it is indeed an alliance treaty.

Further consideration in determining whether the China-DPRK Alliance Treaty is an alliance requires us to refer to the Alliance Treaty Obligations and Provisions (ATOP), which provides data regarding the content of military alliance agreements signed by all countries of the world between 1815 and 2018 (ATOP, 2018). This would provide indication whether the China-DPRK Alliance Treaty falls under the category of alliances. Indeed, the strongest alliances involve defense commitments or "promises to assist a partner actively in the event of an attack on the partner's sovereignty or territorial integrity (Han & Papa, 2021, pp.14). From a survey of China's partnerships and alliances, ATOP found that only one of these had firm defense commitments and this was the China-DPRK alliance (See Table 3).




(Table 3) Number of China's alliances vs defense commitments with foreign countries. Source: ATOP, cited in Han & Papa, 2021, pp.15.

Indeed, as the other "alliances" cited in the ATOP survey are perhaps more reflective of partnerships rather than alliances without firm defense commitments, the survey clearly shows that the China-DPRK Alliance Treaty is an alliance under alliance theory. The defense commitments as found in Article 2 of the China-DPRK Alliance Treaty are what separates it from China's other partnerships and thus a key determinator of it as an alliance.

When considering other aspects of alliance theory, we also find that the China-DPRK Alliance Treaty classifies as an alliance. Remembering Glenn Snyder's assertion that alliances can go beyond the defense of the homeland, the China-DPRK Alliance Treaty seems to fit this assertion with Article 1 of the Treaty that states, "*The Contracting*

*Parties will continue to make every effort to safeguard the peace of Asia and the world and the security of all peoples."* Concurrently, the China-DPRK Alliance Treaty fits in the mould of an uninstitutionalized alliance as defined Kim and Woods. Indeed the facts are apparent as the nature of the China-DPRK Alliance Treaty without a formal bilateral consultation mechanism minimizes any room for Chinese interference in DPRK affairs but at the same time retains defense commitment features. The China-DPRK Alliance Treaty also has features of an asymmetric alliance as identified by James Morrow. Indeed the power gap between China and the DPRK has grown considerably since the Treaty's signing in 1961, but as Morrow noted asymmetric alliances are likely to endure as the China-DPRK Alliance Treaty has remained in effect since 1961. Thus, when considering other aspects of alliance theory, the China-DPRK Alliance Treaty does indeed have the trappings of an alliance.

Nonetheless, despite outlining how the China-DPRK Alliance Treaty represents an alliance, it is significant that China itself has seemingly denied the existence of an alliance between itself and the DPRK. This has been reflected in several statements where China has described its relationship with the DPRK as based on international norms and denied the DPRK as a military ally (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2006; Li & Kim, 2020, pp.6; Hotta, 2016, pp.3). This is consistent with China's preferences, as noted above, for eschewing alliances. Additional statements also signify China's disregard for its defense commitments to the DPRK, where it has warned that China will not defend the DPRK should it commit military aggression (Yang, 2019, pp.7; Zhang & Denton, 2019, pp.8). China has also tried to convince the DPRK to revoke the mutual defense clause of Article 2 of the China-DPRK Alliance Treaty (Albert, 2019). Concurrently, Chinese scholars are also reluctant to refer to the DPRK as an ally despite the existence of the China-DPRK Alliance Treaty (Yang, 2019, pp.6-8). Importantly, there have been also discussions in China for the abandonment of the Alliance Treaty with the DPRK (Hotta, 2016, pp.4; Hotta, 2021, pp.4).

China's denial of an alliance with the DPRK are significant and represents China's preference for partnerships of which it hopes to define the regional order on its terms. Nevertheless, despite these statements that the DPRK is not an ally, more significant was China's decision to renew its alliance treaty with the DPRK on 11 July 2021, which concurrently marked the 60$^{th}$ anniversary of the signing of the Treaty. The motivations of the renewal of the China-DPRK Alliance Treaty is that China views it as an diplomatic tool in the overall US-China strategic competition (Hotta, 2021, pp.5). Importantly, the Treaty allows China an instrument to sustain its engagement with the DPRK and play an influential role in the affairs of the Korean Peninsula (Panda, 2021). There are also several other reasons why China continues to view the Alliance Treaty with the DPRK as important to its interests. First, the Treaty stipulates that it cannot be abrogated unless both parties agree to do so and, for the reasons listed below, China does not want to be the first to propose it (Chung, 2013, pp.10). Second, given the high uncertainties surrounding the strategic landscape of Northeast Asia and the future of North Korea, China wishes to retain the treaty as an option poised against the US-ROK alliance (Chung, 2013, pp.10). Third, Article 4 of the Treaty stipulates that both parties are obliged to notify and coordinate with each other on key issues (Chung, 2013, pp.10). This means that the treaty can also be used as a useful, though not always effective, mechanism of constraining North Korea from carrying out an adventurist act. Thus, the China-DPRK Alliance Treaty remains in effect and that China still views it as important to its regional ambitions.

## 3.4 Chapter Conclusion

This section has found that the China-DPRK Alliance Treaty does constitute an alliance under alliance theory. This finding is based on the consideration of China-DPRK relations, the Alliance Treaty itself and most significantly the decision of both countries to renew the treaty in 2021. The existence of an alliance between China and the DPRK is in seeming contrast to China's official rejection of alliances in its conduct of international relations and its unfavourable experiences with alliances in general. Nonetheless, due to the international environment, the nature of the China-DPRK alliance has changed and China's mitigation of its alliance commitments to the DPRK are reflective of this. Nonetheless, as the Articles of the China-DPRK Alliance Treaty remain unamended, the existence of an alliance in fact between China and the DPRK is difficult to deny. Nonetheless, I agree with Xingxing Wang and Jiajia Wang whose study of China-DPRK relations reveal that the alliance relationship between China and the DPRK is fundamentally different from similar relations between other countries. Having answered the question on whether the China-DPRK alliance is an alliance, we must now consider whether this alliance will play a role for China's regional ambitions and power projection.

# Chapter 4

# Unsuitability of the China-DPRK Alliance for Beijing's Regional Ambitions

It is now necessary to address the second research question of this paper, which is why does the China-DPRK alliance not serve as the cornerstone of China's regional ambitions in Asia outside of the Korean Peninsula. Notably, great powers have used the alliances they form as a tool in achieving their regional ambitions. That China has not used its only alliance treaty partner to similar effect is perplexing. This section will examine China's views of its alliance partner. It will then consider the DPRK's absence from China's regional initiatives in Asia. It will find that China's preference for partnerships and the DPRK's own behaviour exclude it from being included in China's regional ambitions. This in effect also demonstrates that the China-DPRK alliance does not fully follow alliance theory.

## 4.1 China's view of the DPRK: Buffer Zone and Liability on the Korean Peninsula

China's view of the DPRK has become more complex. While official rhetoric as referenced above has highlighted the traditional "blood ties" between the two Communist states, recent views are more nuanced. Indeed, there has been growth of feelings of annoyance at the DPRK's provocative behaviour with its nuclear weapons testing. Such actions from the DPRK have led China to consider it disrespectful, particularly when the DPRK performs provocative acts that undermine Chinese efforts at promoting stability in the region (Easley & Park, 2016, pp.11). At the same time there is unease in China when the DPRK does not reciprocate its goodwill or openly flouts its authority (Easley & Park, 2016, pp.14, pp.17). In this regard, China has allowed limited public criticism of the DPRK and public opinion in China has become increasingly negative of the DPRK (Easley & Park, 2016, pp.15; Li & Kim, 2020, pp.14-15). It is these contested views of the DPRK that lead us to consider how China views it in the pursuit of its regional ambitions.

### 4.1.2 Strategic Buffer

China has allowed limited debate on the worth of the DPRK to its interests. There remains strong opinion in China that the DPRK retains its value to China as a strategic buffer. Those who hold this view have been classified as Nationalists and Realists (Feng & Beauchamp-Mustafaga, 2015, pp.41). In this debate the Nationalists still believe in the traditional expression of China-DPRK relations as one of "lips and teeth", denoting the two countries' interdependence and the DPRK's role as China's buffer against US troops in the ROK (Feng & Beauchamp-Mustafaga, 2015, pp.41). The Realists on the other hand Realists maintain that Pyongyang is still a strategic asset to China, so Beijing must protect the DPRK and ensure that China does not lose this asset to the United States. They regard the regime's nuclear program as a failure

of Chinese policy linked to excessively close ties to the United States (Feng & Beauchamp-Mustafaga, 2015, pp.41). Notably the Nationalist view is more reflected in the International Liaison Department of the Chinese Communist Party (ILD) and both Nationalist and Realist views are generally represented in the PLA (Feng & Beauchamp-Mustafaga, 2015, pp.41). Additionally, support for the DPRK is seen as necessary due to fear that its collapse may bring about an influx of refugees, criminal activity along the border and potential irredentism (Feng & Beauchamp-Mustafaga, 2015, pp.37). Nonetheless, the worth of the DPRK as a strategic buffer has remained a strong and compelling reason for China to continue to support it. This view has been strengthened by the perception of the importance of the Korean Peninsula as the traditional battleground for influence in Northeast Asia and the historical memory of Japanese domination of Asia following the First Sino-Japanese War (Feng & Beauchamp-Mustafaga, 2015, pp.44). More recently, China's experience during the Korean War left an indelible and enduring association between DPRK's continued existence and utility as a military buffer state with China's own security (Beauchamp-Mustafaga, 2015, pp.44; Li(b), 2019, pp.159). For more contemporary times, the DPRK represents a political and security buffer between the United States and China, and Pyongyang acts as a bulwark against unification with the ROK allied with the United States, which would open the possibility of US troops being deployed near the Chinese border (Dingli, 2006, pp.20; Beauchamp-Mustafaga, 2015, pp.44; Guoliang, 2015, pp.165; Kim, 2017, pp.110; Lee, 2018, pp.353; Revere, 2019, pp.8; Yang, 2019, pp.11; Viswanath, 2020, pp.42; Hiraiwa, 2021). Thus, the argument that the DPRK is still useful to China as a strategic buffer remains a strong consideration amongst Chinese policy circles.

### 4.1.2 Strategic Liability

On the other hand there is also opinion in China that the DPRK is a strategic liability to China's regional interests. These viewpoints are represented by Internationalists and Liberalists. Internationalists focus on the negative effects of the DPRK's behaviour on China's national interests and the damage done to China's international reputation from supporting Kim Jong-un throughout his provocations (Feng & Beauchamp-Mustafaga, 2015, pp.41). The Liberalists for their part draw upon humanitarian arguments to reject DPRK's value to China, either as a strategic buffer or for any other strategic purpose (Feng & Beauchamp-Mustafaga, 2015, pp.41). These views are more represented in China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Feng & Beauchamp-Mustafaga, 2015, pp.42). Concurrently, these viewpoints are also related to the worries that DPRK's actions particularly with its nuclear weapons programme may bring consequences that may risk China's security such as increased US military presence in Asia and also pushing Japan and the ROK towards closer security cooperation (Feng & Beauchamp-Mustafaga, 2015, pp.45-51, pp.52-54). Additionally, these views also discount the DPRK's value as a strategic buffer due to the changing nature of warfare. A summary of this view is perhaps best reflected by Peking University professor Jia Qingguo who commented that "*North Korea is not China's property, so it is not a question of abandonment. In an era without fighter jets and missiles, foreign powers thinking of invading China used to come through North Korea,*

*so North Korea had a high value as a strategic buffer. But the current era has witnessed change and North Korea's value to China as a strategic buffer is not at all what it used to be*" (Feng & Beauchamp-Mustafaga, 2015, pp.44). Thus a diversity of opinion in China about the DPRK's value has led to the questioning of the traditional assumptions of the DPRK as a strategic buffer.

### 4.1.3 The Alliance's Value on the Korean Peninsula

Considering the differing views of the value of the DPRK to China, it can be said that perhaps there is no consensus view on the DPRK. Nonetheless, it is submitted that the China-DPRK Alliance still retains value for China's ambitions on the Korean Peninsula. Indeed, the alliance is necessary to maintain the DPRK as a strategic buffer against US military forces stationed in the ROK. Although, the strategic buffer argument has been questioned by some in China, it nonetheless remains strongly entrenched among many in the Chinese strategic community. Also it is important to remember China's strategic objectives on the Korean Peninsula which are:

- Ensuring that China plays a central role in any future peace mechanism on the Korean Peninsula;
- Pursuing a Korean War peace treaty that undermines the rationale for the US-ROK alliance;
- Maintaining good relations with both Koreas;
- Avoiding the collapse of the DPRK and the reunification of the peninsula under a US-allied ROK;
- Reducing the threat posed by the US-ROK alliance and, if possible, ending that alliance and the US presence on China's doorstep;
- Reducing the vulnerability caused by the DPRK's continued possession of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles; and
- Ensuring the United States understands that China's support, cooperation, and assent are essential if peace and stability are to be preserved on the peninsula (Revere, 2019, pp.8-9).

Therefore, when considering China's ambitions on the Korean Peninsula, its alliance with the DPRK is necessary as through that alliance, it provides China with justification to have a voice to project and protect its interests on the Korean Peninsula.

## 4.2 The Absence of the China-DPRK Alliance in China's Major Regional Foreign Policy Initiatives

Having established that the China-DPRK alliance remains relevant to China's regional ambitions on the Korean Peninsula, it is now timely to consider its absence in China's major regional initiatives in Asia. Recalling that China has several regional initiatives to further its ambitions in Asia, it is noticeable that there is no mention of the China-DPRK alliance. This is significant as Article 1 of the China-DPRK Alliance Treaty mentions that "*The Contracting Parties will continue to make every effort to safeguard*

*the peace of Asia and the world and the security of all peoples*." Therefore the China-DPRK Alliance Treaty would give justification for China to use the alliance with the DPRK as a cornerstone for its greater ambitions in Asia. Indeed, great powers have utilized their alliances to support their regional ambitions. In the case of the US-Japan alliance, it is utilized for the maintenance of the US-led order in Asia. In this regard, Japan's economic engagement in Southeast Asia has complimented the US-led order in Asia. At the same time Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision compliments the United States Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy. Importantly, the United States has referred to the US-Japan alliance as the "*cornerstone of peace, security, and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific*" (White House, 2023). Indeed, Article IV of the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security Between Japan and the United States mentions "*The Parties will consult together from time to time regarding the implementation of this Treaty, and, at the request of either Party, whenever the security of Japan or international peace and security in the Far East is threatened*", thus showing the expanded geographic scope in the US-Japan Alliance (MOFA, 1960). Additionally as Victor Cha has highlighted, the US-Japan alliance was also a means for the United States to advance its interests in Asia and cement the US position of supremacy (Cha, 2017, pp.20-23). Additionally, as Woosang Kim has highlighted through alliance transition theory, a pivotal middle power is able to help reinforce a dominant state's power preponderance over its potential challenger. Although it is debatable that the DPRK is a pivotal middle power and China is a rising power, not a dominant one, the logic of alliances being used to strengthen a great power's position is still relevant for present purposes. Thus, there is ample evidence of great powers utilizing alliances to further regional ambitions. As a great power, the absence of the China-DPRK alliance in China's greater ambitions in Asia will be explored next.

As was articulated above, the BRI is the key initiative for China to attain its regional ambitions of pre-eminence in Asia. However, the DPRK is absent from the initiative. It is true that the Northeast Asia is not a major focus of the BRI (Byun, 2019). At the same time, China does view economic relations as necessary for the development of its North-eastern regions. This explains China's support for various SEZs in the DPRK that aim to integrate it with China's North-eastern provinces. But nonetheless, the BRI is the signature initiative of Xi Jinping's China and the DPRK's absence from it indicates that China does not value its only treaty ally as a key part of its regional ambitions in Asia. Indeed, it has been suggested that China's regional ambitions as represented by the BRI are incompatible with its traditional relationship with the DPRK (Cathcart & Green, 2017, pp.131). This is logical as the BRI is meant to establish China as a regional and eventual global stakeholder, while the China-DPRK alliance is aimed primarily in maintaining the DPRK as a strategic buffer on the Korean Peninsula. Additionally, the politics inside the DPRK that remains distrustful of China and also the DPRK's provocative behaviour complicate efforts to integrate the DPRK into the BRI, even if China should wish to do so (Cathcart & Green, 2017, pp.135). Therefore, these factors explain why China has not included its only ally in its key initiative to realize its regional ambitions in Asia.

The AIIB also represents China's regional ambitions in Asia to reform the international economic system and also serve its economic, security and development

interests. It also provides China the avenue to lead a multilateral economic institution. In this area however, unlike with the BRI, China has expressly refused the DPRK's application to join the AIIB (Abrahamian, 2015; Easley, 2019, pp.113.). The justification for this refusal was because the DPRK had refused to share economic data and was not transparent with this data (Abrahamian, 2015; Easley, 2019, pp.113). While there has been intermittent talk of the AIIB lending to the DPRK for infrastructure projects, no concrete action has taken place (Oi-hyun, 2016; Suk-yee, 2018). It is significant that China had blocked the DPRK's entry into the AIIB and has not used that institution for lending to Pyongyang. Indeed as alliance theory suggests, a great power would aim for its ally to be stronger so that it could better support its interests. Nonetheless, China has done almost the exact opposite by not allowing the DPRK to join the AIIB and not extending loans via that institution. It is of likely that the more multilateral nature of the AIIB precludes China from including the DPRK, a known "rogue" state and that is not transparent with its economic data. Nonetheless, as its only treaty ally, China may still have exercised a decisive voice in the DPRK's entry into the AIIB as it holds the most shares in that institution. It thus can be surmised that China does not views its only ally as a key component to its regional ambitions in Asia as represented by the AIIB. Indeed, it would be counterproductive as the DPRK is not transparent with its economic data in addition to it being heavily sanctioned by the United Nations and other countries, which include AIIB members.

It is also necessary to consider why the alliance is not part of China's security ambitions in Asia. As noted previously the NASC is the main crystallization of China's security ambitions in Asia. It iterates for a new security architecture, based on "*inclusive, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable" security, which would reflect a number of principles, including respect for sovereignty, non-intervention, peaceful settlement of disputes, and the inter-weaving of economic and security cooperation* (Wuthnow, 2018, pp.231). Importantly it also includes a call for "Asia for the Asians". Concurrently, the NASC would also aim to undermine the US-alliance system in Asia. On first reading, these aspects of the NASC would be consistent with the China-DPRK alliance, and indeed the alliance treaty would provide justification for integrating it with the NASC due to Article 1 referencing that both China and the DPRK "*will make every effort to safeguard peace and security in Asia*". Nonetheless, it is submitted that China has decided not to include its alliance with the DPRK as the NASC is also opposed to alliances for the maintenance of regional security and peace. Recalling that through the NASC, China has declared that security alliances are "relics of the Cold War" and inconsistent with the non-alliance approach of the NASC, including or integrating the China-DPRK Alliance into the NASC would undermine the ambitions that China is trying to achieve. Indeed, by introducing the NASC, China is demonstrating that the China-DPRK alliance is insufficient for its wider security ambitions in Asia. Concurrently, the DPRK is also not a member of CICA, the forum that China aims to utilize to promote the NASC. Instead CICA has been a platform to call for the complete denuclearization of the DPRK, a prospect irksome to the Kim regime (Yonhap News Agency, 2016). Indeed, China's White Paper on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation maintained China's ambivalence about security alliances and also noted that the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula remained a key goal of China. Therefore, what can be surmised is that China has preferred other avenues to realize its regional

ambitions in Asia and does not even reference the China-DPRK alliance in the key initiatives to realize them.

Other security-related initiatives that are related to China's regional ambitions in Asia are the SCO. Nonetheless, the DPRK remains absent from the SCO. The SCO is notable for an organization that China perceives as a vehicle to hone its own leadership skills on the international stage (Yazdani, 2020, pp.460). The current value of the SCO is as a forum for Beijing to define and articulate its interests, shape the focus of international institutions based on its own domestic priorities, lobby its neighbours to adopt its approach, and codify those views within an internationally legitimate multilateral process (Yazdani, 2020, pp.460). The conspicuous absence of the China's only alliance treaty partner is significant. The implication is that China sees no need to integrate its alliance with the DPRK into the SCO even though that organization is a vehicle for China to expand its influence in Asia. This also demonstrates that China does not view the China-DPRK alliance as a means to further its ambitions in Asia as remembering Article 1 of the China-DPRK Alliance Treaty that places an importance on peace and security in Asia.

By not integrating its only alliance partner China is in contrast to other great powers such as the United States which have integrated its alliances into its Indo-Pacific Strategy such as with the US-Japan alliance. This would also be somewhat inconsistent with alliance transition theory, where a great power would utilize its alliance partners to boost its own position. But perhaps this is consistent with Chinese regional ambitions for Asia where it aims to establish a security architecture that is more exclusively "Asian", free of alliances, more attendant to its security concerns and solidly rooted in Chinese economic power (Ford, 2020, pp.1). An Asia free of alliances is what China aims to achieve, therefore its alliance with the DPRK is incompatible with this vision.

### 4.3 The Preference for Partnerships

China's aims for security alliances to play a reduced or no role in Asia is significant in explaining why it has not integrated its alliance with the DPRK into its regional initiatives. As previously noted, this contrasts with other great powers which have utilized their alliances for greater regional ambitions. Another reason why the China-DPRK Alliance has not been used as a cornerstone for China's greater regional ambitions is that China has had a stated preference for partnerships. Indeed strategic partnerships have been the mainstay of Chinese diplomacy since the end of the Cold War. Begun originally as part of China's "non-alliance" principle, strategic partnerships have evolved as a comprehensive diplomatic framework for governing a wide range of policy areas (Liu, Wu et al, 2021, pp.191). They are also do not target a third party and lack an antagonistic connotation, which means they also eschew alignment (Ruonan & Feng, 2016, pp.8). The aim of strategic partnerships are to share an equal and mutually beneficial relationship, a win-win scenario for all parties concerned. It is meant to be all-encompassing and includes cooperation in economic, cultural, technological and political fields (Li & Ye, 2019). The literature on China's strategic partnerships has suggested that there are different types of partnerships which are

namely, comprehensive strategic partnership, strategic partnerships and other partnerships (Liu, Wu et al, 2021, pp.192). The comprehensive strategic partnership type of partnership is regarded as the highest of diplomatic closeness among all types of China's partnerships (Liu, Wu et al, 2021, pp.192; Li & Ye, 2019). This currently characterizes China's relations with Russia. The second in terms of diplomatic closeness to China is the strategic partnership and the least significant are other partnerships such as a cooperative partnership. Under Xi Jinping, the number of partnerships has increased from 65 in 2013 to 103 in 2019 (See table 4). China has not only expanded its partnerships in quantity but also enhanced them in quality (Liu, Wu et al, 2021, pp.193).

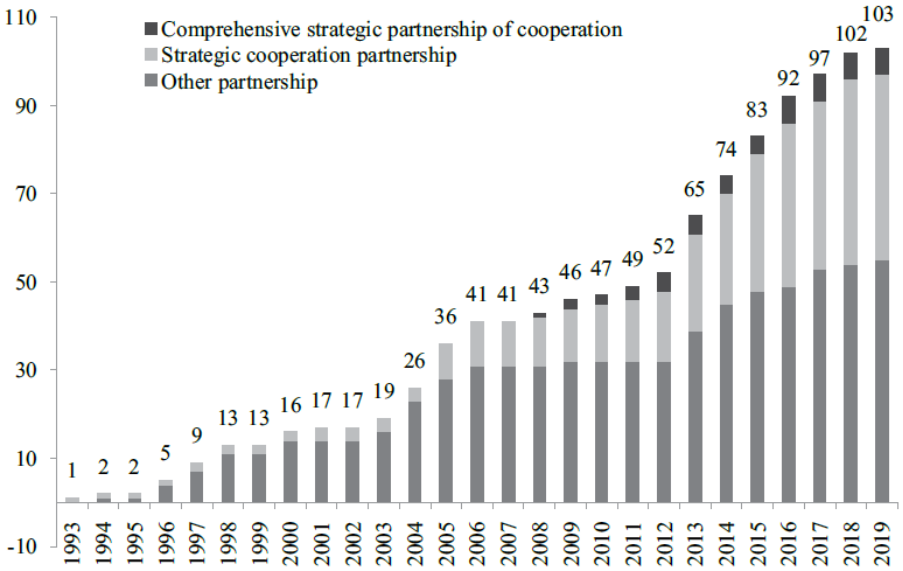



Table 4: China's strategic partnerships (1993-2019). Source: Liu, Wu et al, 2021, pp.192

At the same time, the focus of China's strategic partnerships lies in Asia. China's partnerships with its neighbouring countries have the geopolitical implications that the peace and security at the border is China's top priority with strategic partners (Liu, Wu et al, 2021, pp.194). China had its first strategic partners in Asia and under Xi Jinping, China's partnerships in Asia have expanded from 24 in 2013 to 37 in 2019 (see Table 5).

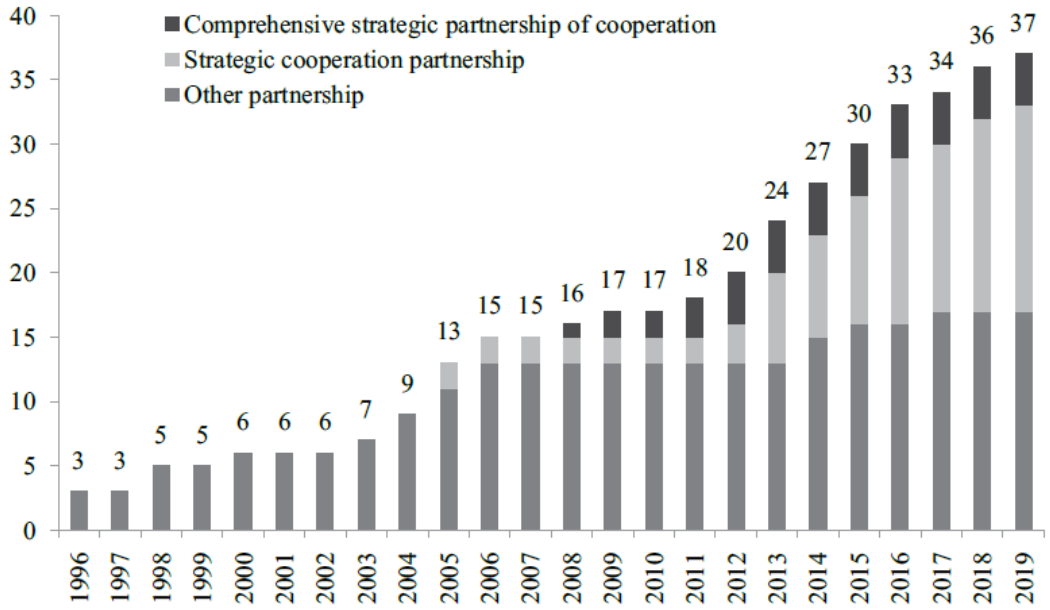



Table 5: China's partnerships in Asia (1996 – 2019). Source: Liu, Wu et al, 2021, pp.195.

The highlighting of China's partnerships is significant in considering why the China-DPRK alliance is not utilized for Beijing's regional ambitions in Asia. An alliance with firm defense commitments would seem to indicate the level of closeness in diplomatic relations, but China has chosen partnerships instead to show a level of closeness. Additionally, China has utilized partnerships for its regional ambitions in Asia precisely because they do not have firm defense commitments unlike the China-DPRK alliance. Partnerships are consistent with China's regional ambitions to see alliances play a reduced role in Asia. It is thus for this reason why China has chosen partnerships to realize its ambitions in Asia, rather than the China-DPRK alliance. By emphasizing partnerships, China aims to demonstrate that it is committed to an "alliance free" Asia, therefore integrating the China-DPRK alliance into its vision for regional pre-eminence would be contradictory. It is also seemingly different from other great powers that have used alliances for regional ambitions, but China appears to have selected a different method to achieve its own ambitions.

## 4.4 DPRK as Unsuitable for Closer Integration

While we have looked at various factors as to why the China-DPRK alliance has not been the cornerstone of China's ambitions in Asia, it is now timely to consider the behaviour of the DPRK as a factor. It is important to note that the DPRK is a relative outlier in the regional order in Asia. Pyongyang is associated with troubled economic projects, isolating sanctions, limited institutional engagement and military provocations that threaten international security (Easley, 2019, pp.111). Importantly, the DPRK remains mostly isolated from regional institutions and mechanisms, not least of which are Asia's growing web of trade agreements (Easley, 2019, pp.115). This isolation also includes regional institutions led by China as highlighted above. Concurrently, the various sanctions imposed on the DPRK by the UN and others preclude its legal

economic interactions until it has begun denuclearizing. Additionally, the aforementioned nuclear and ballistic missile testing from the DPRK has given it the image and role as a regional provocateur (Easley, 2019, pp.116). Considering these factors, the DPRK, even though an ally, is unattractive for China to integrate into its wider regional ambitions. Should China even wish to do so, it may create complications for China's economic initiatives in Asia since the DPRK is heavily sanctioned. In terms of China's security ambitions in Asia, the DPRK's regular military provocations may complicate its grandiose pronouncements for peace and security in Asia. Therefore, these reasons may explain why China has not closely integrated its alliance partner into its greater regional ambitions in Asia.

Although in an asymmetric alliance with China, the DPRK retains agency and it is debatable if it wants to be tied to closely to China's regional ambitions. As has been noted in previous sections, the DPRK is mistrustful of China and is ever suspicious of any Chinese attempts to interfere with its internal affairs. Due to China's proximity, capability and long history of interference on the Korean Peninsula, the DPRK has had reason to be wary of China's influence in the country (Zhang & Denton, 2019, pp.7). At the same time, the DPRK has been anxious about its economic dependence on China and has actively downplayed China's importance for its economy (Zhang & Denton, 2019, pp.10). Of course the implication of China's economic influence over the DPRK would imply strong leverage to incorporate it into its regional ambitions. Nonetheless, in reality the more China attempts to maintain leverage on the DPRK, the more likely the DPRK will take actions that resist China's influence (Zhang & Denton, 2019, pp.11). On the other hand, the DPRK's independent streak also makes it unreliable to integrate with China's wider regional ambitions in Asia. Indeed, the aforementioned nuclear and ballistic missiles testing have been an embarrassment to China, and some of these nuclear testing were done on dates that undermined China's grand ambitions in Asia. Concurrently, there are also those in China who also view that the DPRK's nuclear capabilities allow it to retain autonomy in its relations with China and in the worse case scenario even attempt nuclear blackmail against it (Feng & Beauchamp-Mustafaga, 2015, pp.49). This would be consistent with asymmetric alliances declining once the asymmetrical partner has improved its own capabilities. Therefore, while the China-DPRK alliance remains, it is unlikely that China will further integrate into its wider regional ambitions considering the DPRK's own behaviour and agency.

Related to the above considerations are that military provocations are a part of the DPRK's military-diplomatic campaigns for engaging with the wider world. As noted by Michishita Narushige, the DPRK regularly engages in brinkmanship as part of it military-diplomatic campaigns to achieve its political objectives (Michishita, 2010, pp.1, pp.7-16). In recent years this has evolved to nuclear and ballistic missile testing that threatens regional peace and security. Despite UN sanctions, placed on the DPRK due to these activities, it continues with them. In this sense, Victor Cha's idea of powerplay does not apply to the China-DPRK alliance, as China has not been successful in restraining the DPRK's military provocations. Therefore after appreciating that military provocations are a part of the DPRK's military-diplomatic campaigns for engagement with the wider region, it explains why China has not further

integrated its alliance partner with its regional ambitions in Asia. Afterall, the DPRK's military provocations have increased US involvement in the region and led to closer US-Japan-ROK Trilateral cooperation which are contrary to China's ambitions in Asia. Subsequently, China's regional ambitions in Asia speak of a region that is at peace and secure, and the actions of the DPRK threaten this. Additionally, the DPRK's military provocations are incompatible with China's vision for Asian security as articulated through the NASC, and its status as a nuclear weapons armed state would make the proclamations of the NASC seem hollow as it not able to restrain its alliance partner. Thus due to the DPRK's military provocations, China has preferred not to integrate its alliance with the DPRK into its wider ambitions in Asia.

## 4.5 Chapter Conclusion

After a careful review of the DPRK's absence from China's regional ambitions in Asia, it is safe to conclude that there are several factors that make the China-DPRK Alliance unsuitable for China's regional ambitions in Asia. These are due to the DPRK's behaviour, mistrust of China and use of military provocations as part of its foreign policy. Additionally, the DPRK's isolation from regional institutions and the fact that it is heavily sanctioned by the UN and others make it an unattractive partner for further regional economic integration on China's terms. China's preference for utilizing partnerships is also significant as it hopes to build a security architecture in Asia that is "alliance free". Overall, including its alliance partner in its regional initiatives may even be counterproductive and undermine the message that China is trying to spread about its ideas of peace and security in Asia. Significantly, further integration of the DPRK into Chinese ambitions in Asia will give the indication that one can ignore China's preferences and suffer no consequences, a prospect that China will want to avoid as it tries to achieve regional pre-eminence. Nonetheless, the China-DPRK alliance still retains utility for China's ambitions on the Korean Peninsula, where it serves as a strategic buffer dividing itself from the US-allied ROK. As it stands however, China is unlikely to use its alliance with the DPRK for its wider regional ambitions in Asia. Thus, unlike other great powers, China has limited the use of its alliance with the DPRK and does not use it beyond the Korean Peninsula.

## Chapter 5

## Power Projection and Force Multiplier: The Lack of Integration Between the People's Liberation Army and the Korean People's Army

It is timely to address the third research question, that despite its nature as a military alliance, why does the China-DPRK alliance not factor into China's projection of power. The China-DPRK Alliance Treaty clearly defines the relationship between China and the DPRK as a military alliance. This is reflected in Article 2 of the treaty that commits both nations to render military assistance to each other should one of the countries suffer armed attack. This chapter will then proceed in highlighting the importance of alliances for a great power's power projection and as a force multiplier. It will then consider China's current military strategy which has a focus on Taiwan and military diplomacy. It will then explore the relationship between the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the Korean People's Army (KPA). Following from this it will consider overseas basing for China's power projection and the absence of PLA forces in the DPRK despite their alliance treaty. Then, the chapter will explore the reasons for the lack of integration between the PLA and the KPA due to the preference of both China and the DPRK for internal balancing. Finally, it will consider the probable contingency plans for PLA intervention into the DPRK and how these represent a significant hurdle for closer integration between the two nations' militaries. Overall, the lack of military integration between the PLA and KPA demonstrates the limits of alliance theory in explaining the China-DPRK alliance.

### 5.1 Great Powers and alliances: Tools for power projection and as force multipliers

A review of great powers and alliances shows that they are tools for power projection and also as force multipliers. In the case of the Soviet Union, its alliance with the German Democratic Republic allowed for its forces to be forward deployed for any war with NATO. Indeed, at peak strength, the Soviet Union deployed 380,000 troops, organized into 20 ground force divisions equipped with about 5,000 to 6,000 tanks (Library of Congress, 1987). Indeed the Soviet forces in the GDR, known as the Group of Soviet Forces in Germany (GSFG), allowed the Soviet Union to project power in Eastern Europe and into Western Europe should war occur. Thus, the Soviet Union's alliance with the GDR was critical to its power projection in Europe. In terms of force multiplication, the East German military (National People's Army/ *Nationale Volksarmee*) was also critical military force that would have increased the capabilities of the GSFG should war with NATO had occurred. In this regard, the *Nationale Volksarmee* (NVA) was the best equipped of the non-Soviet Warsaw Pact armies and fielded six divisions with a strength 167,000 soldiers (Macgregor, 1989, pp.43-44, Library of Congress, 1995). The NVA was also closely integrated with the GSFG and during wartime, NVA divisions would serve under Soviet command (Macgregor, 1989, pp.63-79, 135). As such, the NVA and the GDR became the centre of Soviet military strategic interests vis-à-vis the West (Macgregor, pp.61). As the asymmetric ally, the GDR leadership also rationalized that a more significant military role of the NVA in in Soviet military affairs would provide greater leverage for the GDR in other areas of interest to them in Soviet-East German relations (Macgregor, pp.61). The institutionalized alliance nature of the Soviet-GDR alliance through the Warsaw Pact also made this closer military integration possible.

Concurrently, with the United States, the US-Japan alliance allows for US military forces to be forward deployed in Asia for any contingency that may threaten its interest or the regional order it leads. Indeed, Article VI of the US-Japan Security establishes that US forces in Japan are for the purpose of contributing to the security of Japan and the maintenance of international peace and security in the Far East (MOFA, 1960). This has been proven as Japan was used as a critical logistics base for the US military to support military operations during the Korean and Vietnam War (Havens, 1987, pp.84-104). Indeed, analysts have stated that US bases in Japan are critical for US power projection in Asia. Most important are the air force bases at Yokota, Kadena, and Misawa; the naval bases at Yokosuka and Sasebo; and the Marine Corps air stations at Iwakuni and Futenma (Easton, 2014, pp.18). These seven facilities represent the cornerstone of US power projection in Asia (Easton, 2014, pp.18). Without them, it would be highly difficult for the US to fight and win a war in Asia (Easton, 2014, pp.18). The US-Japan alliance has been critical to the power projection of the United States in Asia. In terms of force multiplication, the US-Japan alliance has also served to increase the military potential of the United States. Although, the Cold War had precluded active contributions from Japan to US interventions in Asia, a division of labour had existed in the alliance to counter the Soviet Union in Asia. This division of labour known informally as the “spear and shield” relationship assigned the US the role of the “spear” with more offensive power, while Japan served as the “shield” with more focus on defense (Tsuyoshi, 2020). While the US-Japan alliance does not have a combined command function like the Soviet-East German military alliance, recent years have seen closer military integration between the United States Forces Japan (USFJ) and the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) (Hughes, 2022, pp.40-55). The US-Japan alliance is also an institutionalized alliance with various mechanisms for bilateral cooperation between the two nation’s militaries. In this regard, Japanese leaders have seen closer integration with their US ally as necessary to confront the rising power of China (Hughes, 2022, pp.41).

Thus in both examples, we have demonstrated how alliances boost the power projection of great powers and also serve as force multipliers. Importantly, the asymmetric ally also align their interests with the great power patron which furthered closer military integration. In the following sections, it will be shown that these are not currently present in the China-DPRK alliance and as such has precluded military integration between their militaries.

## 5.2 Relations between the People’s Liberation Army and the Korean People’s Army

As has been noted previously, China-DPRK relations encompass several primary channels that serves as institutional components of overall bilateral relations. The relations between the PLA and the KPA are longstanding. Indeed, the shared joint struggle against the UN Forces during the Korean War arguably had given birth to the “blood alliance” rhetoric that has supposedly defined the relations between China and the DPRK. These shared sacrifices have led to some to describe the military relationship as the “connective tissue that binds the two countries together” (RUSI, 2004). Nonetheless, relations between the PLA and KPA were not completely smooth sailing, as noted in previous sections, with the KPA being reluctant to be placed under Chinese command. During the Cold War, China was one of the key providers of military armaments to the KPA (RUSI, 2004). A key feature of PLA-KPA relations were the connections formed by senior

PLA and KPA officers that had served in the Korean War. However this has become less relevant since the 1980s and 1990s with the passing of the generation that had combat experience during the Korean War (RUSI, 2004). Despite the signing of the alliance treaty in 1961, there has been no establishment of any combined command similar to the Soviet-East German alliance or US-ROK alliance.

Despite their standings as alliance partners, the actual military relationship between the PLA and the KPA seems to be limited. In contrast to the "blood alliance" rhetoric, the relationship between the two militaries has been described as "opaque" and one that is kept at "arm's length" (RUSI, 2004, Scobell, 2015, pp.199). The relationship in the post-Cold War period seems to be defined by symbolism rather than being task oriented (RUSI, 2004). The nature of PLA-KPA relations consists of high-level exchanges, visits by regional commanders, functional military dialogue between foreign affairs bureaus, logistics and equipment related officials, military academy/CPV goodwill visits and port visits by naval ships (RUSI, 2004). However, there is no institutional mechanism for military coordination, consultation or integration (Scobell, 2015, pp.199; Harnisch, 2017, pp.6.). There is also a lack of joint military exercises between the PLA and the KPA or any integrated defense planning (Scobell, 2015, pp.212; Harnisch, 2017, pp.10). Significantly, China has been reluctant to extend armaments sales or aid to the KPA despite the fact that this would improve its aging and obsolete inventory (Snyder, 2012, pp.42). In the Xi Jinping era, until 2018, there have been suggestions that relations between the PLA and the KPA have declined considerably. Indeed, there were several reports suggesting that there were very few contacts between the PLA and the KPA, with senior PLA officers stating that they did not have any contacts or ties with the KPA (Cathcart, 2016; Cathcart, 2017). Nonetheless, once ties improved between China and the DPRK after 2018, there seems to have been re-established ties between the PLA and the KPA. These signs of more active bilateral military dialogue and possible cooperation are results following Xi's first visit to Pyongyang in 2019. Director of the Korean People's Army Political Bureau Kim Su Gil and China's Central Military Commission (CMC) Vice Chairman Zhang Youxia met in Beijing on 17 August 2019, where both sides recognized the driving momentum of Xi's June 2019 visit for bilateral military ties. The last high-level visit from the KPA to China was by Gen. Yon Kyong Chol, Director of the Foreign Affairs Bureau of the Ministry of People's Armed Forces, DPRK, who met with Gen. Wei Fenghe, the then Minister of National Defense of China (Hang, 2019). During that meeting, both the PLA and KPA reaffirmed their relations and pledged to promote new developments in the relations between the two militaries (Hang, 2019). In other areas such as naval cooperation there has also been a warming of relations between the KPA Navy and the PLA Navy, especially with visits by high-ranking delegations to China (Cathcart, 2019).

Nonetheless, these warming ties and official rhetoric have still not produced active or substantial military cooperation between the two militaries. Indeed, a precursory search of the official website of the Chinese Ministry of National Defense has not recorded any meetings between the PLA and KPA officials since 2019. Secondly as will be shown below, the KPA is not a priority in PLA military diplomacy in comparison to other militaries. And perhaps most importantly, there remains no major military exercises between the PLA and the KPA in contrast to non-alliance partners like Russia. Therefore, it appears that the KPA is not considered as a significant factor for force multiplication for the PLA.

Indeed, China has begun increasing military activities in areas adjacent to the Korean Peninsula. China is actively adopting a more proactive, far-reaching defense

posture and modernizing its military to alter the military balance in Northeast Asia and optimize its influence on the Korean Peninsula (Kim, 2020, pp.58). Since 2004, China has sought to strengthen its ability to conduct joint operations on the Korean Peninsula (Kim, 2020, pp.59). Such efforts have been represented through the establishment of the Northern Theatre Command which ensures that the PLA could intervene quickly on the Korean Peninsula, conducting military exercise and naval drills off the Korean Peninsula (Kim, 2020, pp.59). China has also had significant strategic forces that are deployed under the Northern Theatre Command (Kim, 2020, pp.61). Complimentary to these efforts are also changes to the operational behaviour of the PLA around the Korean Peninsula. This is apparent with the increased patrols around the Korean Peninsula, and regularized large-scale naval exercises in the West and Yellow Seas (Kim, 2020, pp.62; Cho, 2021, pp.1-2). These activities from the PLA also appear to be a response to DPRK missile tests with the implications that China was signalling to Pyongyang to refrain from further military provocation and escalation (Kim, 2020, pp.63). In addition to naval activity, Chinese military has also regularly violated the Korean Air Defense Identification Zone (KADIZ). It is estimated that between 2017 and 2020, Chinese military aircraft had violated KADIZ over 60 times (Cho, 2021, pp.3). What is noticeable from increased Chinese military activity in areas around the Korean Peninsula is that they are being conducted by unilaterally or in conjunction with Russia. The DPRK is absent from these Chinese military activities around the Korean Peninsula and there are no indications that the KPA will be integrated into these activities. Indeed, some of these military activities may also be directed against the DPRK in addition to the US-ROK alliance.

Unlike other great powers, China has preferred to engage in military activities around the Korean Peninsula unilaterally rather than with its alliance partner. The lack of DPRK participation in the increased Chinese military posture near the Korean Peninsula despite their status as military allies demonstrates that the KPA does not serve as a force multiplier for the PLA for any contingency on the Korean Peninsula. This is puzzling as increased jointness between the PLA and the KPA would significantly strengthen the deterrent effect of their alliance. Significantly, as both the PLA and KPA are equipped with nuclear weapons, this would significantly shift the balance of power in Northeast Asia in favour of China and the DPRK as US allies such as Japan and the ROK do not have their own nuclear deterrent are dependent on extended deterrence from the United States. Nonetheless, China would appear to prefer its own efforts rather than integrating its alliance partner. Ultimately, China's opposition to the DPRK's nuclear arsenal also suggests that military integration between the PLA and the KPA is not in China's interests to pursue.

### 5.3 Overseas Basing

Having established that China does not consider the DPRK a partner for force multiplication despite their alliance treaty and in contrast to other great powers, we now consider the power projection possibilities of the China-DPRK alliance. A particular focus of power projection is overseas basing. Indeed, overseas bases are key elements in of a great power's regional and global military posture. Although advances in technology have obviated the need for numerous and sizable installations to sustain a regional or global presence, a twenty first century great power requires at least a modest network of overseas bases or basing access (Harkavy, 2007, pp.1-28). In this sense, China remains

a minor player in overseas basing as it has only one official base in comparison to the United States that has an estimated 750 bases (Scobell, 2023, pp.2). As noted above, China has previously adopted an attitude that opposed overseas bases but this thinking has shifted to the realization that overseas basing will be needed to defend China's overseas interests in the future. Also as highlighted in previous sections, possible locations for future Chinese military bases overseas are Pakistan, Bangladesh, Cambodia and Myanmar (Garfola, Heath at al, 2022, pp.57-67). If realized, these potential locations would amplify Chinese power projection in Asia. Concurrently, China has also recognized the importance of overseas basing for the United States to project power into Asia. Indeed, Chinese military analysts highlight the US military's reliance on regional bases, such as those it maintains in Japan, recognizing the importance of US military bases to project US air and naval forces essential to the US ability to fight a war in the area, and as a vulnerability that the PLA can exploit in times of conflict (Chase, Garafola & Mustafaga, 2018, pp.142-143).

As China's only treaty ally, the DPRK would seemingly be a suitable location for Chinese overseas military bases. Indeed, as noted previously, the CPV was stationed in the DPRK until 1958 and served as a deterrent force in addition to its role as helping the reconstruction of the DPRK. Theoretically, Chinese military bases in the DPRK would allow for greater projection of Chinese military power on the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia. The deployment of ground troops would bolster DPRK conventional forces and increase the deterrent value of the China-DPRK alliance. Naval deployments would also strengthen Chinese efforts to secure the Yellow and West Seas from any possible incursion from the United States and its allies. Concurrent naval deployments on the Sea of Japan coast of the DPRK could also put added pressure on the US-Japan alliance and maintain lines of communications with Russia easier. The stationing of aerial assets in the DPRK would also shorten the distance to retaliate against US military bases in the ROK in times of conflict. Nonetheless, in reality China has chosen not to station troops in the DPRK, nor is there any suggestion that it is planning this in the near future. The main reason why China has not chosen to station troops in the DPRK, despite their alliance treaty, is because of mistrust of the DPRK towards China's intentions. As has been noted elsewhere, the DPRK is mistrustful of Chinese attempts to interfere in its domestic affairs, and the negative historical experience of the CPV stationed in the DPRK in the post-Korean War period also would influence the reluctance of Pyongyang to allow Chinese troops on its territory. Additionally, allowing Chinese troops to be stationed on DPRK soil would undermine the Juche ideology that is propagated as a legitimizing tool by the Kim regime which in turn would undermine the regime's security and legitimacy. For China's part, stationing military forces in the DPRK maybe redundant, as it has already achieved a significant projection of power from its own territory specifically in the West and Yellow Seas. Indeed, as highlighted above, China has already projected power onto the Korean Peninsula through its own efforts thus making stationing of its own forces in the DPRK unnecessary. For its wider ambitions of projecting power into Asia, China has preferred doing so from its peripheral territories as is seen with its base construction in the South China Sea and further base construction in Xinjiang and Tibet (China Power, 2023). Thus, despite the alliance between China and the DPRK, it does not seem to be a factor for Beijing's projection of power purposes.

## 5.4 China's Preference for Internal Balancing and limited External Balancing

Although previous sections have touched on China's preference for focusing on its own efforts rather than utilizing its only alliance treaty partner, in the overall picture, it has not decided to further integrate the DPRK for either power projection or force multiplication as it prefers internal balancing. As noted by Kenneth Waltz, internal balancing refers to the investment of military power to match up with other states (Waltz, 1979, pp.168). China has also opted for a limited external balancing where it cooperates with other states but not in an alliance. This limited external balancing does not include the DPRK.

### 5.4.1 Internal Balancing: Military Modernization and Strategy

The PLA's military modernization under Xi Jinping represents a key element of China's internal balancing. As was noted in previous chapters, military modernization of the PLA is necessary for the achieving of the China Dream. In this regard the CCP has directed the PLA to prioritize several areas for reform which are joint operations, developing advanced equipment and civil-military fusion (Wuthnow, 2022, pp.14-15). Progress in these three areas will enhance PLA capabilities and thus confidence in escalating disputes against regional rivals (Wuthnow, 2022, pp.15-16). Indeed, the fruits of this military modernization are impressive and from 2013 until 2023, the PLA has added aircraft carriers, destroyers, new main battle tanks, strategic transport aircraft, stealth fighter aircraft and ballistic missiles to its inventory (Jiayao & Xinjuan, 2023). These new armaments have not only added to Beijing's arsenal but have also contributed to its projection of power. In other areas, China has also chosen internal balancing to project power. This is most apparent with the expansion of the PLAN Marine Corps, which has now given Beijing the capabilities to project power into the East China Sea and in other areas far from the Chinese mainland (Iida, 2023, pp.2-9). Further internal balancing to project power is apparent with China's development of hypersonic missiles, which it claims can defeat US carrier battle groups (Boyd, 2023). Overall, China has preferred internal balancing rather than its only alliance partner to strengthen its ability to project power in Asia. The modernization and reform of the PLA has allowed it to develop its power projection in East and Southeast Asia (US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2020, pp.387).

Concurrent with the modernization of the PLA is the development of China's military strategy as another tool of internal balancing. For the PLA, a military strategic guideline contains the essence of China's military strategy at any given point in time (Wuthnow & Fravel, 2022, pp.4). The latest of China's military strategy was adopted in 2019 when the CMC announced the "military strategic guideline for the new era" (Wuthnow & Fravel, 2022, pp.1-4, 9-14). This latest military strategy of China identifies the primary contingency for the PLA is a conflict against Taiwan and the United States off China's southwest coast, with missions to counter US intervention stretching into the Western Pacific (Wuthnow & Fravel, 2022, pp.10). Indeed the focus of Taiwan is confirmed by China's 2019 Defense White Paper which mentions that the PLA "would resolutely defeat Taiwan independence and defend the unity of the country at all costs" (State Council Information Office, 2019). Notably, China's military strategy is different from other great powers in the sense that it does not envision a multi-front war unlike those of the Soviet Union in the 1980s that planned for a war on three fronts, while the US has planned for a war on two fronts (Wuthnow & Fravel, 2022, pp.24). What is telling from China's military strategy is that it

does not contemplate the involvement of its only treaty ally, the DPRK. Indeed the 2019 Defense White Paper only makes two references to the Korean Peninsula and continues to adopt rhetoric opposing military alliances (State Council Information Office, 2019). Thus, internal balancing remains the preferred choice of China's power projection and does not factor its only treaty ally into its calculations.

### 5.4.2 Limited External Balancing: PLA Military Diplomacy and Quasi-Alliances

Although China has preferred internal balancing for its power projection purposes it does also engage in limited external balancing. This is the most noticeable with increasing military diplomacy from the PLA and quasi-alliance like relationships with Russia.

#### 5.4.2.1 PLA Military Diplomacy

China has always engaged in military diplomacy with various countries. Under Xi Jinping however, there has been a growing impetus to conduct military diplomacy. Indeed, military diplomacy is a key part of Xi Jinping's vision for" great power diplomacy with Chinese characteristic" (Chatuverdy, 2021, pp.441; Zhao, 2023, pp.83) In 2015, Xi emphasized the need for military diplomacy in China's overall foreign policy strategy (Chatuverdy, 2021, pp.441; Sbragia & Allen, 2022, pp.9). He added that the CCP had always viewed military diplomacy as an important tool for advancing China's overall diplomatic goals, which has become more prominent in China's national diplomacy and security strategy in a changing regional and security landscape (Chatuverdy, 2021, pp.441). Therefore the goals of Chinese military diplomacy are to advance its foreign policy and shape its security environment. In this regard, through military diplomacy it seeks to create a favourable international image, develop soft power, and shape international discourse. Other objectives include shaping China's security environment, collecting intelligence, and learning from advanced militaries (Allen, Saunders & Chen, 2017, pp.7-15). For the PLA, military diplomacy serves both operational and strategic purposes, and the activities it engages with overseas counterparts include senior-level meetings and visits; military exercises; naval port calls; functional exchanges and nontraditional security operations (Allen, Saunders & Chen, 2017, pp.15-44). Notably, PLA military diplomacy places a strong emphasis on Asia and most of the PLA diplomatic activities are conducted in that region (Allen, Saunders & Chen, 2017, pp.55). Nonetheless, what is noticeable is that PLA military diplomacy is somewhat lacking with the DPRK. In a survey of PLA senior officers engagements with their counterparts from 2021-2022, there appears to have been no meeting with KPA senior officers despite the fact that there were meetings with countries that could be said to be antagonistic to China such as the US, Japan and India (Allen, 2022, pp. 15-18). Indeed as noted previously, the last known meeting between senior officers from the PLA and the KPA was in 2019. Thus the limited external balancing that China employs through military diplomacy has not factored in its only alliance partner the DPRK.

5.4.2.2 “Quasi alliance with Russia”

Related to PLA military diplomacy and another aspect of limited external balancing is China’s “quasi alliance” with Russia. For the purposes of power projection, China and Russia have increasingly engaged in sophisticated combat oriented joint exercises. Notably, these exercises have been conducted both bilaterally and multilaterally under the auspices of the SCO. Significantly, Sino-Russian military exercises have also been conducted in the airspace waters around the Korean Peninsula and Japan. Nonetheless, despite oft-mentioned commentary that Sino-Russian military relations have evolved into an actual alliance, it must be submitted that the relationship at best remains a quasi-alliance with no firm alliance commitments. Indeed, it cannot be wholly dismissed that there maybe a rupture in future Sino-Russian relations due to competing interests in Central Asia (Sheridan, 2023). This explains why this remains a limited external balancing from China. What is interesting however, is that China preferred to conduct closer military relations with Russia in order to project power in Asia such as the Korean Peninsula, rather than its own alliance partner the DPRK. This suggests that should China seek external partners to improve its power projection in Asia, the DPRK remains a low priority in Beijing’s calculations to achieve this.

## 5.5 DPRK Preference for Internal Balancing

Having explored China’s preference for internal balancing and limited external balancing for it to project power, it is timely to remember that the DPRK also has agency despite the asymmetric nature of its alliance with China. What can be surmised is that the DPRK also strongly prefers internal balancing rather than closer integration with its alliance partner. Indeed, the DPRK’s defense planning doctrine has clearly outlined a preference for a self-reliant military (Hinata-Yamaguchi, 2021). This self-reliant military is enshrined into the DPRK Constitution as the Line of Self-Reliant Defense (Hinata-Yamaguchi, 2021). What this entails is that the DPRK must train a cadre army, modernize the army, arm all the people and fortify the country on the basis of equipping the army and the people politically and ideologically (Hinata-Yamaguchi, 2021). Notably, this defense planning doctrine seems to exclude mention of its alliance treaty partner China. The preference to be self-reliant also explains why the DPRK remains one of the most militarized countries on the planet. In order to realise these self-reliant efforts, the DPRK has maintained a million-man army and posses thousands of tanks, armoured personnel carriers, attack helicopters and fighter jets, though this inventory is outdated (Hinata-Yamaguchi, 2021). Nonetheless, the DPRK’s proclamations to be militarily self-reliant and also the actions it has taken to realize them explain why it has not chosen to be more integrated with China. When added to its mistrust of China, it demonstrates that the DPRK prefers self-reliance rather than military integration with its much stronger alliance partner.

Perhaps the most important indicator of the DPRK’s internal balancing is it’s decision to acquire nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them. The DPRK is a de-facto nuclear weapons state and as of 2022 is estimated to have built 10 to 20 nuclear warheads with material to build 45 to 55 nuclear warheads (Kristensen & Korda, 2022). It also possesses a significant ballistic missile inventory which can deliver these nuclear weapons and its capabilities in this area are estimated to improve further. As highlighted above, closer integration with China would significantly shift the balance of power in Northeast Asia as only China and the DPRK are both nuclear armed states in comparison

to US allies in the region that are dependent on the US nuclear umbrella. However China has continuously opposed the DPRK acquiring nuclear weapons. Significantly, there is a credible suggestion that the DPRK has acquired nuclear weapons for the purpose in safeguarding its autonomy and independence from China (Kim, 2020, pp.2,5). Indeed, there is logic to this suggestion as the mistrust in relations between China and the DPRK as well as an alliance which keeps shifting over time depending on strategic environments cannot be a substitute for nuclear weapons whose values are not only quite stable but also unconditional on strategic circumstances (Kim, 2020, pp.5). Concurrently, there are also worries in China that it may be the target of DPRK nuclear blackmail in the future (Feng & Beauchamp-Mustafaga, 2015, pp.49). Therefore when considering that the DPRK's nuclear weapons are a means to maximize its independence from China, it is difficult to envision closer military integration with China. This is a situation that Morrow referred to with asymmetric alliances, where the patron will drift away once its own capabilities will improve. Ultimately, the China-DPRK alliance is not useful for Beijing's power projections as a key component of the DPRK's military strategy, its nuclear weapons, may undermine the basis of the alliance itself.

### 5.6 Contingency for DPRK Collapse

Aside from the preferences of China and the DPRK which preclude closer military integration, perhaps the most significant barrier is that China may have contingency plans for intervention into the DPRK. The PLA does hold particular views on the DPRK. As noted above, the PLA is mostly on the side of the Nationalist and Realist side of the debate on the DPRK and views it as a strategic buffer. However there are equal concerns about the outcome of a possible DPRK collapse. These concerns are in the form of an influx of refugees, criminal activity along the border and potential irredentism (Feng & Beauchamp-Mustafaga, 2015, pp.37). Additionally there also concerns about the DPRK's nuclear weapons as many of its nuclear and missile sites are located close to the border with China (Mastro, 2018, pp.97-98). Perhaps most important of all is that a collapse of the DPRK would lead to its absorption by the US-allied ROK. Therefore, these concerns have led to speculation that China has planned a contingency to militarily intervene into the DPRK should it suffer state collapse or if its nuclear provocations get out of hand. Indeed, there is evidence that China is well positioned to intervene in the DPRK should this state of affairs occur as the PLA's Northern Theatre Command which commands forces in China's Northeast consists of three army groups with more than 200,000 soldiers (Westad, 2021, pp.157). It is a well-equipped army supported by several air force units, tank battalions, attack and supply helicopters, army and navy special forces units and units of People's Armed Police, some of which consist of detachments of Korean speakers (Westad, 2021, pp.157-158; Mastro, 2018, pp.102-103). In this regard, Chinese military leaders appear convinced that they would be able to secure a buffer zone of at least 50-80 kilometres inside the DPRK within hours if ordered to do so. It should also be remembered that some of the PLA's military posture towards the Korean Peninsula is directed towards the DPRK as well as the US-ROK alliance. Thus, while considering these likely Chinese military contingency plans for intervention into the DPRK, it is unlikely that the DPRK would acquiesce to closer military integration with China. Afterall, closer military integration with the PLA would expose KPA weakness as well as increase the likelihood of success for the PLA in any DPRK contingency as it will gain more intelligence about KPA capabilities. Ultimately, closer military integration has not occurred as it would ease

the chances of PLA success should it decide to carry out its contingency plans. As the Kim regime is concerned about its own security, this not an outcome that is in its interests.

### 5.7 Chapter Conclusion

Thus, after a careful review of the lack of military integration between the PLA and the KPA it can be concluded that there are several reasons why this has not occurred despite the stated military nature of the alliance between China and the DPRK. Firstly is the mistrust that exists between China and the DPRK. As has been highlighted on multiple occasions in this paper and elsewhere, there is exist a deep mistrust between China and the DPRK despite rhetoric of being as “close as lips and teeth”. Just as important is that China has preferred internal balancing for its power projection and force multiplication despite the seeming benefits that closer military integration with the DPRK may bring. Even when China has pursued a limited external balancing, it has preferred other partners to the DPRK, most notably Russia of which it has a “quasi alliance” relationship with. Importantly, China has also preferred PLA military diplomacy to shape the security environment to realize its regional ambitions in Asia, rather than utilize its alliance partner. Significantly, even if China wished to integrate its alliance with the DPRK to reflect an actual military alliance, the DPRK’s own preference for internal balancing would represent a significant hurdle. The DPRK’s nuclear arsenal, though seemingly able to change the balance of power in favour of China, also represents significant roadblocks to closer military integration as they represent the DPRK’s goal to maximize independence from China, not integrate closer to it. The fact that the DPRK could be a target of Chinese military intervention also explains reluctance for closer military integration as this would only expose DRPK weakness and make any possible Chinese intervention easier to implement. Nonetheless, this state of affairs reflects the nature of asymmetric alliances, where the asymmetric ally is likely to breakaway from the patron once it has acquired better capabilities. The DPRK’s nuclear arsenal ultimately represents these better capabilities. The “powerplay” that Victor Cha referred to does not apply as China is not able to restrain the DPRK. Thus, it also because of these factors that China, unlike other, great powers has not utilized its only alliance partner for power projection and force multiplication.

## Chapter 6

## Confronting the Common Foe: The Utility of the Alliance in the Era of US-China Strategic Competition

As has been established above, US-China Strategic Competition is the main challenge to Beijing's regional ambitions and power projection in Asia. Great powers have utilized their alliances to counter and deter their opponents. Indeed the very nature of alliances implies that it is directed towards a third party. Therefore this section will explore the utility of the China-DPRK alliance in confronting the most important challenge to Beijing, which is its strategic competition with the United States. To begin, we will explore the use of alliances by great powers to confront third parties as was apparent during the Cold War. It will then proceed in examining the increasing coordination in rhetoric between China and the DPRK and the implications of it. Following from this, we will consider the utility of the alliance in confronting the United States on the Korean Peninsula and the wider Asia. Subsequently, this section will also highlight the strategic rift between China and the DPRK that reduces the utility of the alliance in the wider US-China Strategic Competition. In this section the fear of the DPRK's defection and China's attempts to wedge the ROK from the United States are of particular importance to the overall utility of the China-DPRK alliance in US-China Strategic Competition. It will also reaffirm how the China-DPRK alliance does not factor into Beijing's military calculations for possible conflict with the United States. Paradoxically, the DPRK does remain a possible area of cooperation between China and the United States, and this reason limits the utility of the alliance in US-China Strategic Competition.

### 6.1 Great power alliances and competition

Great powers have utilized the alliances they form against third parties. This was especially so during the Cold War, where Stephen Walt had highlighted that the Soviet Union and the United States competed with each other to establish alliances with states throughout the world. Indeed alliances formed during the Cold War were directed towards third parties. The Soviet Union through its Warsaw Pact alliances were not only used to maintain control of its Eastern European satellites, but also directed towards the US-led NATO. At the same time, in Asia, the US formed bilateral alliances with Japan, the ROK, the Philippines and Australia to deter possible Communist aggression. As mentioned previously, the US-Japan alliance was instrumental for the US to project power into Asia to confront Communist forces during the Korean and Vietnam Wars. In the era of US-China Strategic Competition, the US is revitalizing its alliances in Asia in order to confront the rising security challenges of China in Asia (Lopez, 2023). Thus, great powers have utilized alliances in order to confront and deter the challenges they face from third parties. As the DPRK, is China's only alliance partner, has it utilized this alliance to do the same?

### 6.2 Rhetorical Coordination: Return of the "Blood Alliance"?

The improved China-DPRK relations has resulted in much rhetorical support and coordination between the two countries such as the DPRK's support for Beijing's position on pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong (Snyder & Byun, 2019, pp.90). Additionally, the DPRK has defended China from alleged of repression of Uyghur Muslims in its western

province Xinjiang by Western countries by criticizing Western accusations as a symptom of a "human rights virus" (Volodzko, 2021). In this regard the DPRK has also signed letters and joint statements, along with other states, in support of China's position in Xinjiang, (Kumakura, 2021; Lawler, 2019). The DPRK has also seemingly supported China's position in the South China Sea (Kyu-Seok, 2020). Regular messages of congratulations are exchanged between Xi Jinping and Kim Jong Un, demonstrating that there is an improved relations between the two states (Johnson, 2022, AFP-Jiji, 2022). At the same time, China has also had a muted response to the numerous ballistic missiles testing from the DPRK and has attached blame on the US-ROK alliance for increasing tensions on the Korean Peninsula (Tiezzi, 2023). Concurrently, China has called for UN sanctions relief on the DPRK and has attempted to get the UN Security Council to relax sanctions although without much success. Of significance is that China and the DPRK renewed their alliance treaty in 2021, which some attribute to the desire of both states to strengthen ties between the two authoritarian party-states and supposed shared ideological values (Vu, 2021). Importantly, there has been more significant rhetorical support from the DPRK on China's position on Taiwan. It condemned US House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan on August 2022, and criticized what it called "imprudent interference" from the US in China's internal affairs (Shin, 2022). It also reaffirmed China's position on Taiwan and fully supportive of it by commenting "*We…fully support the Chinese government's just stand to resolutely defend the sovereignty of the country and territorial integrity*" (Shin, 2022). Indeed, the DPRK has linked US efforts to protect Taiwan to its own quarrels with the US by commenting "*that the huge forces of the US and its satellite states, which are being concentrated near Taiwan," can be "committed to a military operation targeting the DPRK at any time*" (Cho, 2021). Indeed, the combination of this rhetorical support and the general improvement in relations have led analysts to note that Beijing will most likely double down on strengthening China-DRPK relations (Cho, 2021). Ultimately this has led to references that China-DPRK relations have entered an era of "peak comradeship" (Cho, 2021).

Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that there has been much rhetorical support from the DPRK for matters that are a part of China's "core interests". The DPRK has affirm its support for China's position on Taiwan, Hong Kong and Xinjiang, all areas which Beijing considers a part of its "core interests". However despite this rhetorical support, there has been little substance in any coordination between China and the DPRK. It is important to remember that the China-DPRK alliance is a military alliance. As the previous chapter had highlighted, there has been no significant military cooperation between the PLA and the KPA to confront the increasing US military posture in Asia. Nor has there been any attempt to integrate the DPRK in China's regional initiatives in Asia. The lack of these factors in supposed improved China-DPRK relations demonstrates that the improvement is based on rhetoric rather than substance. Indeed these contrasts to US efforts with its allies in Asia, where there has been much coordination in rhetoric and substance against China's increasing military power as well as its use of economic coercion (Galic, 2023). Therefore one must question if China-DPRK have really entered an era of "peak comradeship". A timely reminder is that relations between China and the DPRK have and are characterized by strong mistrust, therefore it cannot be ruled out that relations will decline again in the future. At this moment however, it is safe to surmise that improved China-DPRK relations are based on rhetoric. Although useful perhaps for discourse power, it is insufficient to confront the United States in the greater US-China strategic competition.

## 6.3 The Alliance in US-China Strategic Competition on the Korean Peninsula and Asia

Having established that there is little actual alliance coordination aside from rhetoric between China and the DPRK, what role would it actually play in US-China strategic competition. Alliance transition theory would suggest that China could utilize the DPRK to boost its position vis-à-vis the United States. However, as noted in previous chapters, China has chosen not to do so. Nonetheless, on the Korean Peninsula, the DPRK remains useful as a strategic buffer. Indeed Chinese analysts believe that if Korea were lost completely to the United States, the range of strategic choices available to China would be narrowed down; in geographical terms the Korean Peninsula is on the frontline of the United States' Asia strategy of containing China (Ekmektsioglou & Lee, 2022, pp.602). It is also possible that the DPRK may decide to bandwagon with China which would open up opportunities for a more combined China-DPRK approach towards US military posture in Asia. This however is unlikely as the DPRK's known mistrust of China and acquiring nuclear weapons to maximize its autonomy from China suggest that bandwagoning is not currently being considered by it. Despite these factors, the China-DPRK alliance can still play a role in US-China strategic competition. These are more specifically in distracting the US and a possible situation involving Taiwan.

### 6.3.1 Distraction for the United States

Military provocations involving the DPRK are of serious concerns to the United States. The United States is treaty bound to the ROK to defend it from aggression from the DPRK. DPRK ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons also threaten Japan, another treaty ally of the US. This therefore requires the United States to commit military resources to satisfy its alliance commitments to both Japan and the ROK. This can be advantageous to China which is increasing its military power through internal balancing such as military modernization. Indeed, DPRK military provocations can be advantageous to China as it would serve to distract the United States and its allies from focusing on China's own significant military build-up (Beauchamp-Mustafaga, 2020, pp. 2; Al Jazeera, 2022). Additionally this would affect the overall deployment US military resources in Asia as significant number of them must be committed to dealing with a possible conflict with the DPRK rather than fully being committed to confronting rising Chinese military power.

Indeed, there some analysts have argued that US distraction with military and nuclear provocations from the DPRK has allowed China to make gains in the wider Asia-Pacific region. A cited example is that of the South China Sea. The argument is that as the United States was distracted attempting to deal with the DPRK's nuclear weapons in 2017, this had allowed China to fortify its position in the South China Sea (Campbell, 2017; Mollman, 2017; Luce, 2017; Bloomberg, 2017). There was indeed an increase of Chinese militarization and artificial expansion of its claimed islands in the South China Sea during this time period (Mollman, 2017). Additionally, there was indications that the then Trump Administration was willing to lessen its criticism of Chinese activities in the South China Sea in exchange for Beijing's assistance in dealing with North Korea's nuclear weapons (Rapp-Hopper & Edel, 2017). Nonetheless, there is no evidence of any coordinated action between China and the DPRK to achieve this outcome. Equally it is also unknown what the United States could have done to deter Chinese militarization of its claimed islands in the South China Sea if it were not distracted by the DPRK's nuclear weapons testing.

Nonetheless, it is apparent that China benefitted from DPRK provocations to advance its interests in other areas in Asia. Nonetheless, the existence of a military alliance between China and the DPRK was not required for this outcome and thus does not fully show that the China-DPRK alliance has utility in wider US-China strategic competition.

### 6.3.2 Taiwan Contingency

Out of all of China's "core interests", none perhaps is the goal of unification with Taiwan. As has been illuminated previously, China's current military strategy is focused on preventing any declaration of Taiwanese independence. China is also developing its military capabilities to deter and if necessary, defeat any US military intervention in support of Taiwan. On the part of the US, its bases in Japan and possibly the ROK would be needed to successfully deter a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. The unknown factor is the role of the China-DPRK alliance for China's efforts to achieve unification with Taiwan. Taiwan would seem to be intrinsically linked with China-DPRK relations. For China the DPRK issue and Taiwan are "the front and back of the same coin" (Wang & Wang, 2022, pp.100). Prior to its intervention in the Korean War, China postponed its planned invasion of Taiwan in order to assist the DRPK against UN forces. Indeed, China during the Korean War had linked the war with Taiwan by declaring "*The seriousness of the US government's armed intervention in Korea and of the aggression of Taiwan against China are closely linked*" (Wang & Wang, 2022, pp.101). During and after the Korean War, the Chinese government always insisted on making the resolution of the Taiwan issue part of an overall framework for addressing security issues by resolving the DPRK issue (Wang & Wang, 2022, pp.102). In addition to the closeness of security issues regarding Taiwan and the Korean Peninsula for China, it also is concerned that the US-ROK alliance might be utilized to check it's efforts in resolving the Taiwan issue (Ekmektsioglou & Lee, 2022, pp.600). In this regard, China is right to be concerned as due to legal and strategic reasons, it would be difficult for the ROK to refuse to assist the United States against a possible Chinese invasion of China without undermining its alliance with Washington (Kim, 2022, pp.2). At the same time China is most likely worried about recent developments in the US-ROK alliance, where there is a seeming acknowledgement of the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Straits to the alliance (Kim, 2022, pp.3). Although Seoul has remained publicly ambivalent about whether it will assist the United States in a Taiwan contingency, this uncertainty is unlikely to reassure China.

Nonetheless, having shown that security issues in Taiwan and the Korean Peninsula are linked and that the US-ROK alliance may play a role in assisting Taiwan in the event of an invasion by China, the role of the China-DPRK alliance would appear to be limited. Indeed, as noted there has been precious little overall military coordination between the PLA and the KPA and most certainly not for the KPA to assist the PLA in the event of retaking Taiwan. This does not mean however that there is no role for the DPRK in a Taiwan contingency. As noted above with the DPRK serving a role as distracting the US, specifically for the Taiwan issue, the DPRK's nuclear and ballistic missile threat allows China to reduce its deployment in Northeast China and focus more directly on the issue of Taiwan independence (Dingli, 2006, pp.20). This means that the DPRK reduces the military pressure China faces from the United States in the contingency of Taiwanese independence (Dingli, 2006, pp.20). The DPRK's nuclear forces also restrict the US military's room to take action in the Korean Peninsula. The net effect of this also helps to

contain the freedom of US military action regarding Taiwan (Dingli, 2006, pp.20). Essentially, even if China does not require it, a nuclear armed DPRK's ability to pin down US military forces in a Taiwan Straits contingency deters America's consideration of possible military intervention (Dingli, 2006, pp.21). Thus, even if uncoordinated with China, the DPRK and its nuclear weapons do serve a role as limiting US military options to assist Taiwan. Nonetheless, this does not require an alliance relationship for this outcome to be achieved. Indeed, a coordinated China-DPRK action regarding Taiwan is unlikely as it would mean exposing the DPRK to retaliation from the US and its allies for what is in essence China's core interests but not the DPRK's. Therefore any Chinese advantage vis-à-vis Taiwan that is accrued from DPRK military provocations is likely to be opportunistic on China's part. Ultimately, alliance coordination regarding Taiwan from the China-DPRK alliance is limited, not exceeding the rhetorical support that has been highlighted above.

## 6.4 China-DPRK alliance not a factor in military contingency against the United States

As the United States remains the main military challenge to China, the China-DPRK alliance as China's only military alliance should factor into any military contingency regarding any possible confrontation with the United States. However as demonstrated above, it does not as China has preferred internal balancing through strengthening its military. Taiwan remains the primary objective of current Chinese military strategy and it does factor in potential US military support for the island in its calculations. Nonetheless as noted above, there does not seem to be any joint coordination between China and the DPRK regarding possible conflict on Taiwan except for rhetoric and potential distraction to the United States caused by DPRK military provocations. With regards to Taiwan, China is developing its own military capability to subdue the island should it be necessary to do so (Chen, 2023). To prepare for possible military confrontation with the United States, China has preferred its own efforts such as the development of conventional ballistic missiles and modernizing its nuclear forces.

### 6.4.1 China's Ballistic Missile Forces

China has and is currently developing an extensive ballistic and cruise missile force. China's emphasis on rapid and significant improvements in its missile capabilities is driven by the strategic desire to hold at risk US and allied naval forces throughout North and Southeast Asia (Bowers, 2022, pp.11). China reportedly possesses a potent array of intercontinental, intermediate, medium, and short-range ballistic missiles alongside a large inventory of air-, sea-, and ground-launched cruise missiles (Bowers, 2022, pp.12; China Power, 2020). Importantly, this wide inventory of ballistic and cruise missiles can be deployed against US military bases in Asia, especially those in Japan and Guam. Added to these capabilities, is Chinese development of hypersonic missiles, which are also designed to overwhelm any US and allied anti-missle defense (Ekmektsioglou & Lee, 2022, pp.605). This effectively means that China now has the capability to overwhelm US naval platforms and facilities in Japan and the ROK, potentially destroying capabilities before they are deployed (Bowers, 2022, pp.11; Shugart, 2017). The likely outcome of the use of these ballistic and cruise missiles would be to destroy or disable US military bases in the event of any conflict between China and the United States. This represents a

significant challenge for the United States, as its force projection in Asia is reliant on forward deployment of its military forces in bases in Japan, the ROK and other areas. Indeed, it is because of the importance of these overseas basing to US military posture in Asia that China has designed its missile forces to counter their use in the event of conflict (Chase, Garafola & Beauchamp-Mustafaga, 2018, pp.143).

Nonetheless, as there is already a real risk that US and allied anti-missile defense run the risk of being overrun by Chinese conventional ballistic and cruise missiles, it is perplexing why China has not combined these efforts with the DPRK's own ballistic and cruise missile forces. As has been noted elsewhere, the DPRK's ballistic and cruise missile forces are improving and has also amassed a wide variety of missiles from ballistic missiles, long-range cruise missiles up to ranges of 1,500km, submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM), and mobile platforms such as as railway-borne missile launching capabilities (Fukuda, 2022). A combined China-DPRK missile force would significantly undermine already hard-pressed US and allied anti-missile defense capabilities. However, as we have elaborated above, China has preferred internal balancing rather than closer military integration with its alliance partner the DPRK. As such it plans to deal with US military bases in the region with its own efforts rather than seek a combined effort with the DPRK.

### 6.4.2 China's Nuclear Modernization

In addition to China's deployment of a vast conventional ballistic and cruise missile force to counter US military posture in Asia, it has also begun efforts to modernize its nuclear weapons arsenal. The motivations for China's nuclear modernization lie in its worry about US military capabilities, particularly missile defense and conventional precision strike weapons, which could undermine the credibility of China's capacity to retaliate against a nuclear attack (Zhao, 2021). example, China has strengthened its strategic forces by fielding a new, road-mobile, intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) capable of carrying multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles (MIRVs); planning follow-on nuclear-powered ballistic submarines (SSBN) and SLBMs; and developing a nuclear-capable air launched ballistic missile (ALBM). It is not just improved capabilities that are significant but the effect that they can have on US military posture in Asia. Notably, improved China's improved nuclear capabilities can be used to strain US extended deterrence commitments and isolate potential targets like Taiwan (Montgomery & Yoshihara, 2022, pp.51). In addition to its conventional missile forces, an expanded and diverse nuclear arsenal would allow China to threaten US military bases in Asia (Montgomery & Yoshihara, 2022, pp.52). More significantly, China's nuclear missile arsenal or the threat of its use can be used to drive a wedge between the US and its allies not only due to the danger of their exposure to China's nuclear weapons for hosting US military bases but also raise doubts about US extended deterrence commitments (Montgomery & Yoshihara, 2022, pp.52-53). Nuclear threats might induce greater restraint on the part of the United States, particularly when it comes to direct military intervention, and drive a wedge between Washington and frontline allies like Japan that might find themselves in the immediate crosshairs (Montgomery & Yoshihara, 2022, pp.54). Therefore with improved nuclear weapons Beijing maybe able to undercut US extended deterrence and isolate America's allies and partners in a crisis (Montgomery & Yoshihara, 2022, pp.55).

As with a potential combined China-DPRK conventional ballistic missile force, the combined nuclear forces of China and the DPRK could very well shift the balance of power in favour of both countries as US allies are not equipped with nuclear weapons and are reliant on American extended deterrence. Nonetheless, as highlighted above, the DPRK's nuclear weapons are also partially for maximizing autonomy and independence from China. Additionally, combining nuclear forces with the DPRK would be tantamount to recognizing it as nuclear weapons states would go against its policy of denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula as well as its strong support for non-proliferation. Importantly, joint China-DPRK nuclear forces may encourage Japan, the ROK and even Taiwan to acquire nuclear weapons, a prospect that Beijing would seek to avoid. Therefore, in this regard China has again elected for internal balancing to counter US military posture in Asia. A combined China-DPRK nuclear force would be detrimental in the overall US-China Strategic Competition. This overall explains why the China-DPRK alliance is not included in any military contingency against the US in Asia.

## 6.5 Strategic Rift Between China and the DPRK

We have explored that the China-DPRK alliance does not play an active role in China's efforts to confront the United States militarily in Asia. A possible explanation is also through the alliance security dilemma. Remembering what Glenn Snyder referred to as alliance security dilemma, he mentions it is the dilemma states face after allying on how firmly to commit themselves to the alliance partner and how much support to give that partner in specific conflict interactions with the adversary (Snyder, 1984, pp.466). The determinants of choice in alliance security dilemma dependence of the partners on the alliance; the degree of strategic interest; explicitness in alliance agreement and the degree of the allies' interests that are in conflict with the adversary they share (Snyder, 1984, pp.471-477). In this regard there seems to be a strategic rift between China and the DPRK. It is oft said that China-DPRK relations can be translated as "sharing the same bed, but having different dreams" (Lee, 2020). Therefore, we must explore the strategic rift between China and the DPRK which perhaps explains why the alliance has limited utility in China's wider strategic competition with the United States. Several factors are worthy of consideration. These are China's fear of the DPRK's defection, the DPRK's fear of closer China-ROK relations and China's worry over a nuclear war.

### 6.5.1 China's fear of DPRK defection

The strategic rift between China and the DPRK is perhaps most pronounced with its fear of the DPRK's defection to the United States and its allies. Although seemingly unlikely outcome due to the US and its allies pronounced distaste for the Kim regime in Pyongyang, China has been concerned during occasions of US-DPRK bilateral talks. Indeed, during the first DPRK nuclear crisis in the 1990s, it attempted to exclude China from multilateral discussions about its nuclear program and a potential peace agreement on the Korean Peninsula (Frohman, Rafaelof et al, 2022, pp.6). These fears remain constant with China as it was also concerned that the Kim-Trump talks from 2018 and 2019 would have reached an agreement that would been detrimental to Chinese interests (Frohman, Rafaelof et al, 2022, pp.11). Chinese concerns were most reflected in April 2018 when both the DPRK and ROK released a statement listing China as an optional

participant in a potential future peace declaration ending the Korean War. China responded that it would be impossible to achieve a peace agreement without its participation (Frohman, Rafelof et al, 2022, pp.11). Chinese concerns over DPRK defection seem well placed considering the mistrust that defines the relations between the two countries. Indeed, Chinese academics have noted that China remains worried about the possibility of closer US-DPRK relations for the purposes of containing China, comparing such a geopolitical shift to the establishment of US-China diplomatic ties to "contain the Soviet Union during the Cold War" (Frohman, Rafelof et al, 2022, pp.13). These fears would be well-founded. Although perhaps projection from China, it cannot be denied that US-China cooperation during the Cold War was effective in containing the Soviet Union (Westad, 2012, pp.376-377). And as mentioned above, despite the rhetoric of the DPRK in support of China, it continues to value its own strategic autonomy and acts to defend its own interests. Thus, these factors limit an effective utilization of the China-DPRK alliance in the greater US-China Strategic Competition as there remains a fear of DPRK defection.

Another strategic rift is on their position regarding the US military presence on the Korean Peninsula. There is a seeming common interest between China and the DPRK to weaken the US military presence on the Korean Peninsula (Cho, 2021). However on several occasions, the DPRK has suggested that it accepts a US military presence on the Korean Peninsula and has withdrawn its demands for the withdrawal of this military presence (Frohman, Rafelof et al, 2022, pp.6, 13; McKirdy, 2018). This represents a strategic rift as China has always aimed for the reduction and gradual withdrawal of US military forces from the Korean Peninsula (Kim, 2020, pp.57-58). A concurrent implication is that the DPRK wishes for the retention of US military forces on the Korean Peninsula in order to counterbalance China (Frohman, Rafelof et al, 2022, pp.6; KBS, 2023). Thus, this significant strategic rift could preclude the full utilization of China-DPRK alliance in the greater US-China Strategic Competition as both China and the DPRK have a fundamental disagreement on the presence of US military forces on the Korean Peninsula. This of course leads to greater considerations of whether the DPRK is willing to be dragged into the US-China Strategic Competition considering that it has differing strategic interests than China. Yukihiro Hotta is apt when he mentions that it remains to be seen whether Pyongyang will lend China a hand in the greater US-China Strategic Competition (Hotta, 2021, pp.5).

### 6.5.2 China and the Republic of Korea

Elaborated previously was the DPRK's view of China's "great betrayal" after China and the ROK established diplomatic relations in the 1990s. Since then China-ROK relations have grown considerably, where China has become the ROK's largest trading partner (Maduz, 2023, pp.250). However more significantly are China's attempts to wedge the ROK from the United States. By attempting to wedge the ROK from the United States China aims to achieve several objectives which primarily are the reduction and eventual withdrawal of US military forces from the Korean Peninsula and the weakening of US alliances in Asia (Ross, 2021, pp.139;). Indeed, the ROK's own attempts at achieving strategic autonomy from its alliance with United States are an opportunity viewed by Beijing (Ross, 2021, pp.135-137; Kim, 2020, pp.58). Concurrently, the ROK is also attempting to balance its relations with both the United States and China and so far has

not fully committed to balancing against China (Pak, 2020, pp.5). Because of this potential for wedging, Beijing is likely to keep trying to exploit the seams and gaps in perceived alliance weaknesses and is taking an approach that is a combination of positive assurances and public and private pressure and threats. In some regards China has demonstrated a degree of restraint with the ROK it has not demonstrated with other US allies such as Japan. This is especially so regarding the Socotra Rock (Ieodo/Suyanjiao) dispute in the Yellow Sea between China and the ROK, which China claims as belonging within its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). In contrast to China's politicization and aggressive enforcement of claims in the ECS and SCS, China's claims enforcement with regards to the Socotra Rock remain restrained and unpoliticized (Cho, 2021, pp.6-7). This restraint of can be explained by a reluctance from China to alienate its diplomatic ties with the ROK (Cho, 2021, pp.6-7; Luo, 2022, pp.914). Equally wedging can also take a more coercive stance as with China's indirect economic sanctions on the ROK after is decision to deploy US Terminal High-Altitude Anti-Air Defense (THAAD) Missiles in response to DPRK military provocations (Simonelli, Hundt & He, 2023). This also represents a strategic rift with the DPRK as it appears that China is favouring the ROK. Although reconciled to China's recognition of the ROK, its open attempts to court the ROK is sure to raise concern with Pyongyang as the ROK with its stronger economy and more advanced military seems like a more attractive partner. More importantly, China's courting of the ROK would also suggest that the Korean Peninsula is to remain divided, an outcome that would not be in the DPRK's interests at it still seeks the long-term goal of unification under its terms. It also gives the indication that China maybe willing to sacrifice its ties with the DPRK in order to win over the ROK, a prospect that would only further encourage mistrust of China.

In addition to wedging the ROK from the US and how this creates a strategic rift between China and the DPRK, the issue of potential ROK nuclear weapons acquisition would represent another strategic rift. Indeed, there have been debates in the ROK for it to acquire its own nuclear deterrent due to uncertainty over US extended deterrence. Although China's views on the matter are not publicly known at this time, it must not welcome such talk as it has always remained committed to denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and non-proliferation. As the ROK's primary security threat still remains the DPRK, China could demonstrate its concern for the ROK's security interests by engaging in bilateral discussions with it about the challenges its faces in deterring the DPRK's nuclear weapons (Zhao & Kang, 2023). This would also have the added effect in mitigating the ROK's possible interest in nuclear weapons to deter the DPRK. There are incentives for China to pursue this course as it is linked with its aim to wedge the ROK from the United States. Nonetheless, should Beijing engage this path, it would create a further strategic rift with the DPRK, as the DPRK views nuclear weapons as critical to regime security and survival. Thus, the issue of the ROK possibly acquiring nuclear weapons creates a strategic rift between China and the DPRK as it would involve the core tool of the DPRK's arsenal, which are its nuclear weapons. Thus considering these factors, China's relationship and aims with the ROK create a strategic rift with the DPRK, which prevents the China-DPRK alliance from being fully utilized in the wider US-China strategic competition.

### 6.5.3 China's concerns over nuclear war

Although, it has been noted that DPRK nuclear and ballistic missile arsenals are a tool for distraction for the United States, it also creates risk for nuclear conflict on the Korean Peninsula and the wider Asia. Indeed, Chinese analysts have worried that DPRK nuclear and military provocations have the potential for spiralling into nuclear conflict (Feng & Beauchamp-Mustafaga, 2015, pp.47). In this regard China has always remained adamant for its support for peace and security on the Korean Peninsula. Xi Jinping has reaffirmed that China continues to maintain the Three Principles which are No war, No chaos and No nuclear weapons. The DPRK's nuclear and non-nuclear brinkmanship are inconsistent with China principles for the Korean Peninsula. A strategic rift is thus apparent, as we have noted in Chapter 4 that military provocations are a part of DPRK foreign policy to extract concessions from the outside world. These are inconsistent with China's desires to maintain peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. To add to this, the DPRK is unlikely to give up its nuclear weapons, therefore adding to the strategic rift. It is also timely to remember that the DPRK's nuclear arsenal are meant to maximize its autonomy and independence from China. This suggests the irreconcilability of the strategic interests of China and the DPRK. Thus as a final remark, the strategic rift between China and the DPRK precludes the China-DPRK alliance from being utilized in the wider US-China Strategic Competition. Although the existence of an alliance is a fact there remains a significant divergence of strategic interests. For both China and the DPRK, this is consistent with the alliance security dilemma as identified by Glenn Snyder. Both countries have significant differences that can't be reconciled which precludes the full utilization of their alliance against the United States.

## 6.6 DPRK as a possible area of cooperation for the United States and China

Although the US-China Strategic Competition represents the greatest threat to China's regional ambitions and power projection in Asia, China is also concerned that the competition could spiral into a great power war with the United States (Fan, 2021, pp.239). As such, while China aims to compete with the United States, it also aims to take steps to reduce tensions with it. In this regard the DPRK represents an area of possible cooperation between China and the United States. Admittedly recent years have seen an unwillingness of China to censure the DPRK's behaviour, however cooperation on the DPRK cannot be ruled out altogether as both the United States and China have an interest in the denuclearization of the DPRK. Concurrently, the Korean Peninsula is one of the flashpoints of potential US-China conflict. Therefore there is an interest to seek cooperation or at least an understanding between these two countries.

### 6.5.1 US-China Security Dilemma

Previous sections have highlighted how the DPRK can serve as a distraction for the United States to the benefit of China. This is of course done through the DPRK's military and nuclear provocations. However the DPRK's nuclear and missile testing also negatively effects China's interests as it contributes further to the US-China Security Dilemma. On the Korean Peninsula this is represented by the US strengthening missile defense with the ROK in response to the threat from the DPRK's missiles. This in turn feeds China's insecurities as it believes that upgraded US missile defense that are meant

for the DPRK's ballistic missiles will be used to deteriorate its own nuclear deterrent (Ekmeksioglou & Lee, 2022, pp.588-602). This in turn has justified Chinese countermeasures such as the development of hypersonic missiles (Ekmeksioglou & Lee, 2022, pp.604-608). Nonetheless, despite the increasing security dilemma between China and the United States as a result of the DPRK's, there is a possibility for cooperation between both regarding missile defense. Indeed, there has been suggestion that China is amenable to US missile defense at a qualitative capability that can intercept DPRK ballistic missiles but not Chinese ballistic missiles (Zhao, 2023, pp.23-25). Concurrently, there is also interest from the United States to reassure China that its missile defenses are solely targeted towards the DPRK and that it has no interest in eroding Chinese nuclear deterrence (Ekmeksioglou & Lee, 2022, pp.595-596; Zhao, 2023, pp.5-18). Although dialogue between China and the United States regarding this has not occurred at the time of writing, such an approach from both great powers cannot be ruled out as it is in their interest to reduce tensions in their bilateral relations. What this means however is that China would be amenable to accepting US missile defenses targeted solely at the DPRK's ballistic missiles. As its ballistic missile arsenal is a key part of its own military strategy against the United States and the ROK, the DPRK is unlikely to be pleased that China would be willing to trade it for an understanding with the United States. The possibility of this is thus an impediment to the utilization of the China-DPRK alliance in the greater US-China Strategic Competition as it cannot be ruled out that China would sacrifice the DPRK's interests to lessen the security dilemma between it and the United States.

### 6.5.2 Common Interest in Denuclearization

Both China and the United States have affirmed that it is their goal for the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula (Yao, 2019, pp.95). Both countries have also affirmed their commitment to the global non-proliferation regime. In this regard, the United States is concerned about the DPRK's nuclear strike capabilities against its homeland and Asian allies (Yao, 2019, pp.95). China on the other hand is concerned about the safety and security of nuclear research, as well as development and tests along its border area (Yao, 2019, pp.95). Therefore, both China and the US have an incentive to cooperate in this matter. Indeed, there is opinion in China that the Korean Peninsula can be an area of security cooperation between China and the United States (Cho, 2020, pp.2). Concurrently from the United States, there is an appreciation that cooperation with China is essential to resolve the issue of DPRK's nuclear weapons program (Bandow, 2022; Pollack, 2020, pp.1-5; Taylor, 2017). Prior to 2018, there was coordination between the United States and China regarding UN sanctions on the DPRK's nuclear test in 2017 (Li & Kim, 2020, pp.9). Some American academics have even suggested that there can cooperation between the United States and China for intervention in the case of DPRK collapse or dealing with its nuclear weapons (Mastro, 2018, pp.103-116). Additionally, the DPRK is not Chinese territory and is thus not a "core interest". This implies that there is a greater room for policy flexibility and negotiation for China concerning Korean affairs compared to other region (Cho, 2020, pp.3). Coincidentally, there have also been suggestions for the Korean Peninsula to be an area of US-China cooperation in a "spiral of cooperation" which will result in the DPRK's denuclearization (Goldstein, 2016, pp.93-97; Goldstein, 2015, pp.210-218) Therefore in theory there can be an understanding between the United States and China regarding the DPRK's nuclear weapons program. However it should be noted that China's influence and leverage with the DPRK should not

be overestimated. As this paper has highlighted, the DPRK has often ignored China's preferences. The DPRK would also be unlikely to cooperate with a US-China agreement to disarm its nuclear weapons, which are a key part of military strategy and deterrence. Thus the China-DPRK alliance would be of limited utility in overall US-China Strategic Competition, as it is possible that the DPRK's nuclear weapons would be a condition of US-China cooperation. Essentially the DPRK's "trump card" would be sacrificed for improved US-China relations, an outcome that may suit China, but not the DPRK. This is of course consistent with DPRK fears that China may undermine its interests in order to achieve an understanding with the United States

## 6.7 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has addressed the research question of the utility of the China-DPRK alliance in the wider US-China Strategic Competition. It must be concluded that the actual alliance will have a limited role in the overall US-China strategic competition. This is of course due to the fact that the China-DPRK alliance does not factor into China's military calculations for confronting US military posture in Asia. In this regard, China has preferred internal balancing to counter the US military in Asia. This does not mean however that there is no role. As has been noted, the DPRK can serve as a distraction for the United States from China and it may play this role in the event of a confrontation over Taiwan. Nonetheless, there remain important strategic rifts between China and the DPRK that make actual coordination against the United States difficult. The oft-mentioned mistrust between China and the DPRK remains an important factor, and it cannot be entirely ruled out that the DPRK may seek accommodation with the United States to counterbalance China. In such a situation actual cooperation against the United States by these two allies will be difficult. This represents Glenn Snyder's alliance security dilemma, where the strategic interests of allies diverge. Paradoxically, the DPRK also represents an area of cooperation, though currently difficult, between the United States and China. Both have common interests for a denuclearized DPRK which could lead to an understanding and lessen tensions in the current decline in US-China relations. Ultimately, the implications are that China would be willing to sacrifice the DPRK's interests in the defense of its own interests. China also does not appear to be actively using its alliance partner in its strategic competition with the United States in contrast to other great powers. Nonetheless, the China-DPRK alliance is a tool in the US-China strategic competition. Directly and indirectly it can be used as a tool for confrontation and a tool for cooperation.

## Conclusion

This thesis set out to explain the role of the China-DPRK alliance in Beijing's regional ambitions and power projection in Asia. It was inspired by the fact that great powers have utilized alliances for their regional ambitions and power projection. The examples that illustrate this are the Soviet Union's alliance with the German Democratic Republic and the United States' alliance with Japan. To determine the role of the China-DPRK alliance in Beijing's regional ambitions and power projection in Asia, several research questions were developed to guide this inquiry. Firstly, it was examined whether the China-DPRK alliance is an alliance under alliance theory. A careful review confirmed the alliance. This is despite China's official position that rejects alliances in international relations. Nonetheless, this finding was based on a consideration of China-DPRK relations, a review of the China-DPRK Alliance Treaty, and the decision of both countries to renew the treaty in 2021. The Articles of the alliance treaty have also remained unamended, and those articles have clear alliance commitments. However, it was also found that due to the international environment, the nature of the China-DPRK alliance has changed. In this sense, I am in agreement with Xingxing Wang and Jiajia Wang whose study of China-DPRK relations that the alliance relationship between China and the DPRK is fundamentally different from similar relations between other countries.

Our second research question considered why the China-DPRK alliance has not been the cornerstone of China's regional ambitions in Asia. In answering the question it was determined that the DPRK's behaviour, international isolation, mistrust of China and military provocations make it an unsuitable partner for China's ambitions in Asia. China's preference for utilizing partnerships is also significant as it hopes to build a security architecture in Asia that is "alliance free". Including its alliance partner in its regional initiatives may even be counterproductive and undermine the message that China is trying to spread about its ideas of peace and security in Asia. Significantly, further integration of the DPRK into Chinese ambitions in Asia will give the indication that one can ignore China's preferences and suffer no consequences, a prospect that China will want to avoid as it tries to achieve regional pre-eminence. The China-DPRK alliance remains useful on the Korean Peninsula however. Although there have been debates about the DPRK's utility as a strategic buffer, this perception remains strong among policymakers in China. Thus, unlike other Great Powers, China has limited the use of its alliance with the DPRK and does not use it beyond the Korean Peninsula.

For the third research question that explored why the China-DPRK alliance is not used for power projection and force multiplication despite its nature as a military alliance, it was surmised that the mistrust between China and the DPRK plays a key factor. It was also noted that both China and the DPRK have a preference for internal balancing. For China this is represented through its extensive military modernization and with the DPRK ultimately with its nuclear weapons. Another critical hurdle for closer military integration between China and the DPRK is that the DPRK's nuclear weapons are also an important strategic tool to maximise its autonomy and independence from China. Additionally, China has also employed limited external balancing through PLA military diplomacy and its quasi-alliance relationship with Russia.

The last research question addressed the utility of the China-DPRK alliance in the wider US-China Strategic Competition. It must be concluded that the actual alliance will have a limited role in the overall US-China Strategic Competition. This is of course since

the China-DPRK alliance does not factor into China's military calculations for confronting US military posture in Asia. This does not mean however that there is no role, as the DPRK's military and nuclear provocations can serve as an important distraction for the United States and its allies. Nonetheless, there are important strategic rifts between China and the DPRK that make actual coordination against the United States difficult. It was also determined that the DPRK also represents an area of cooperation, though currently difficult, between the United States and China. Both have common interests for a denuclearized DPRK which could lead to an understanding and lessen tensions in the current decline in US-China relations. Ultimately, the implications are that China would be willing to sacrifice the DPRK's interests in the defense of its own interests.

It is hoped that this thesis would contribute to the literature on China-DPRK relations. The relations between China and the DPRK have always fluctuated between camaraderie and tension, thus it is hoped that this thesis would help illuminate the nature of China-DPRK relations. Additionally, I hope to that this thesis contributes to the literature of great powers and alliances. In this regard, I hope it contributes by demonstrating that great powers are not entirely dominant in the asymmetric that they are a part of, as their clients have agency that can prevent closer integration. I also hope that this thesis contributes to the literature on China's regional ambitions in Asia. Indeed, China wishes to be the pre-eminent power in Asia. However, the DPRK's behaviour that regularly disregards China's preferences can give us indication of how a Chinese-led Asia might appear in reality, where there maybe space for other countries in Asia to pushback against China's domineering attitudes. This is of course speculation, but it can give food for thought. And finally, I hope my thesis represents a pushback against those who advocate a "democracy vs autocracy" narrative in international relations. As this study has hopefully demonstrated, there can be significant disagreements between autocracies that prevents closer integration between them. Indeed, China's negative attitude towards alliances is due to the collapse of its alliances with other autocracies. Thus a "democracy vs autocracy" narrative is more of ideological argument rather than helpful policy. It assumes a monolithic "autocratic" bloc and is reminiscent of the simplistic and inaccurate monolithic Communist bloc narrative of the Cold War.

Relatedly, I hope that my thesis leads to research on considerations on whether the DPRK can be detached from China completely. As there is a noted mistrust between the two East Asian Communist states, this is a possibility. Indeed, China has feared that the DPRK will emulate its own actions during the Cold War, by reaching an understanding with the United States and its allies. This can also hopefully lead to other research which will explore what China will do to prevent this outcome, and whether it will be consistent with its larger ambitions in Asia.

Finally, while undertaking research for this thesis, I gained valuable insight into the China-DPRK relations as well as security in Asia. Although my research was limited by inability to read and speak Chinese and Korean, I was thus encouraged to search for as much as possible information that was available in the English language. Undertaking my research has also reaffirmed by interest International Relations and Security in Asia. I hope to continue explore new developments in the region regarding security especially considering the ever growing US-China Strategic Competition. As a final note, the China-DPRK alliance is a pillar of security in Asia, and since it has always changed according to the international environment, it will interesting to observe how it will continue to evolve.

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