

## **IS CHINA PREPARING TO WITHDRAW SUPPORT TO NORTH KOREA?**

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The most surprising fact about the increased sanctions against North Korea voted in the U.N. Security Council on March 7, following North Korean nuclear tests in February this year is China's strong support for tightened sanctions. Even though China opposes North Korea's nuclear program, it has traditionally acted as its ally, providing economic support together with a clearly stated support for regime continuation in Pyongyang.

There are however some visible signs that the new Chinese leaders may be reconsidering their support of North Korea. Deng Yuwen, the deputy editor of the journal of the Central Party School of the Communist Party of China, wrote on February 27 a revealing article in the Financial Times "China Should Abandon North Korea". The article, which did not go unnoticed in China and Asia, is interesting not only because of its title but also because of its tone of utter disillusionment with the Pyongyang regime. It claims that shared communist ideology is not a reason to support North Korea, and that the differences between the North Korean regime and China are larger than those between China and the West. Moreover, the North Korean regime is not willing to engage in economic reforms and is therefore doomed to fail. Why continuing supporting a regime that is bound to collapse sooner or later? Moreover, North Korea has no use as a geopolitical ally to China. It is more of a nuisance because North Korea's aggressive stance is only likely to increase unnecessary tensions with the U.S. and in Northeast Asia. Finally, North Korean possession of nuclear weapons can also be used to blackmail China, not only South Korea and the U.S.. The simple fact that this article was published in such a visible media outlet is an indication that the new Chinese leaders may be reconsidering their position toward North Korea.

China has tried to pursue two conflicting objectives in North Korea: on the one hand, it does not want North Korea to have nuclear weapons; on the other hand, it has shown its desire to keep the North Korean communist regime in place. The Chinese leaders are realizing that these objectives are becoming increasingly contradictory. It is becoming increasingly clear that the North Korean leaders are not willing to abandon their nuclear program, however much economic and political support China may be willing to give them in exchange. The North Korean leaders believe that abandoning their nuclear program would be suicidal, as they cannot trust the Chinese not to drop in the future their support for the regime. They have been consistently using their nuclear program to blackmail the international community to provide life-support for their agonizing economy. South Korean leaders have understood that providing aid to North Korea will do nothing to liberalize the regime and to shut down their nuclear program. The Chinese leaders seem to start understanding this too. It is too soon to say whether China is ready to abandon North Korea, but one thing is certain: China holds the largest key to ease tensions and promote a peaceful unification process in the Korean peninsula.