

**CHINA'S CORE INTERESTS AND CRITICAL
ROLE IN NORTH KOREA'S
DENUCLEARISATION**

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Executive Summary

1. China and North Korea have maintained a unique relationship, one of ‘lips and teeth’ and sealed in blood, for nearly seven decades. It was buttressed by their shared communist ideology and joint armed conflict during the Korean War.
2. The relationship has also experienced periods of estrangement and at times deep frustration for Beijing. Since the early 1990s, with the establishment of China-South Korea diplomatic relations, China has adopted a Two-Korea Policy, promoting economic ties with the South while continuing to provide the necessary political and military support to the North.
3. This delicate balancing act has enabled China to accrue significant benefits in growing trade, investment and security cooperation with South Korea. However, it has also presented serious challenges. In recent years, Beijing has to deal with an unwieldy North Korea as it escalates peninsular tensions with nuclear and missile tests, which in turn undermine vital Chinese interests.
4. Pyongyang has defied Beijing’s wishes to refrain from provocative activities even as its dependence on China for trade, critical energy and food supplies has increased. While China has supported UN Security Council resolutions to impose sanctions on North Korea, it has opposed indiscriminate use and expansion of punitive measures that could inflict hardship on the Korean people.
5. Beijing kept a low profile during the first nuclear crisis in 1993-94, emphasising that the issue should be resolved between North Korea and the United States. China adopted a more active posture during the second nuclear crisis in late 2002 and was instrumental in initiating and chairing first the trilateral and then the Six-Party Talks.
6. Beijing’s approach to dealing with the North Korean nuclear issue can be understood in the larger contexts of its fundamental security interests in maintaining peace and stability on the peninsula and the continuation of its Two-Korea Policy.

7. These contexts explain Chinese policies towards North Korea. China remains an indispensable player in the peninsular de-nuclearisation process. This has been reinforced by the four meetings between Kim Jong-un and Xi Jinping in the past year since March 2018. Beijing has been willing to enforce sanctions on North Korea when necessary, but it opposes measures that could lead to regime collapse.
8. This consideration derives from Beijing's geo-strategic calculation that its role and cooperation in the North Korean de-nuclearisation process must ensure that its fundamental interests in the region will be protected. This becomes all the more important given the increasingly competitive nature of US-China relations and their growing disputes over trade, Taiwan and the South China Sea.