Xi Jinping’s Shadow Over North Korea

Looking into the history of relations between China and Korea, one can observe that as long as there has been an empire in China it has had suzerain relations with the kingdoms of Korea. Although the rise of the Japanese Empire after the Meiji Restoration of 1868 coupled with the modernization of the region has worked to disrupt these ties, to many observers it is not hard to find its continuation today, between the People’s Republic of China (from here on, China) and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (from here on, North Korea). These two countries, both formed in the aftermath of the Second World War (WWII) in East Asia have found pursued a close relationship which has been scrutinized greatly, especially within the context of Korean unification, North Korean de-/nuclearization, and relations with the United States of America (US). However, the rise of Xi Jinping as a new and stronger leader, which will be discussed in due course, and the concurrent “rise of China” has brought about – both real and potential – change to the balances of power and political dynamics of East Asia, and China in particular. This development, and the impact of Xi Jinping’s leadership on China’s relations with North Korea has to be analyzed in terms of its current impact on the relations between the two states as a separate and important factor.

As such, the aim of this paper will be to study how Xi Jinping’s personal leadership in the context of a “rising” China affects relations with North Korea, ultimately aiming to understand whether his power as the leader of China is reflected onto the relations between the two countries. The argument of this paper will assert that indeed as the highest and strongest powerholder in China’s political structures, Xi Jinping does hold great power over determining the course of Chinese foreign policy with regards to North Korea. The discussion will begin first by looking into the historical roots between the two states, then move into a discussion of Xi’s power as the
leader of a “rising” China, and will then move into an examination of recent developments between the two sides under Xi’s tenure, seeking to define his position and also offer a look into the potential developments for the future development of relations under Xi Jinping.

**Comrades: Context and Content of a Relationship**

When WWII ended in East Asia with the surrender of the Empire of Japan in August 15, 1945 the vacuum left by the withdrawal of the Japanese military and colonial structures opened the regions of China and Korea to instability. For China, this meant a slide back into civil war, from which the Chinese Communists, led by Mao Zedong and his Communist Party of China (CPC) emerged victorious in October 1, 1949. For Korea, the division along the 38th parallel and the subsequent division between a communist north and a capitalist south erupted into what was effectively both a civil war and the final act in the beginning of the Cold War. It was in the context of the Korean War that the Chinese and North Koreans were to forge their relationship which has lasted into the contemporary.

Although the Chinese sat out the earlier months of the war in 1950, by October the rush of US troops alongside troops of the Republic of Korea (from here on, South Korea) to the Yalu River presented a security threat to the Chinese leadership in Beijing. As such, the entry of the Chinese into the Korean War on the side of the North Koreans came as a result of the Chinese desire to protect their interests and ensure the safety of their own regime, which Pyongyang has not had any illusions about (Simmon 161; Daewon & Richey 486). However, the entry of the Chinese into the war became a turning point which decided the nature of the final stalemate that was reached between the sides for much of the later part of the war and for the state of affairs after the armistice was signed in 1953. It has been in this context that the Chinese and the North Koreans have signed an alliance, and formed a bond that brought the two countries into what was
described as a “special relationship” that was not only state to state but also party to party (Daewon & Richey 486). Since then, the Chinese have remained as the lifeline of North Korea, being its only treaty ally and internationally significant benefactor, which has had a tangible commitment to the security of the Kim regime for the purpose of securing its own security (Xu 1, 2; Lee 100). As I shall discuss later in this section, this has created a unique self-interest-based calculus for the Chinese in how they manage their relations with the North Korean regime.

Of course, this solitary ally and benefactor relationship did not to mean that the relations have always been calm and rosy between the two sides. The North Koreans in fact have sought at times to exploit the cleavages between the Chinese and the United Soviet Socialist Republics (from here on, the Soviets) during the Cold War, so as to extract greater benefits for their own regime (Daewon & Richey 486). In fact, the Sino-Soviet split allowed Kim Il Sung to pursue his own brand of socialist development named “Juche” (Daewon & Richey 486). As such, what existed between the two sides was not an absolute dependence of North Korea on China, but rather a relationship in which as the biggest and sole committed partner of North Korea, China enjoyed a large amount of prestige and power. Yet, when things came down to the wire, the North Koreans could and would turn to others in the socialist camp, mainly the Soviets or even pursue an independent path which would secure their own interests. However, the relationship between the two sides have never collapsed due to the double hedging of the North Koreans. The first serious challenge came with the opening-up reforms of Deng Xiaoping, which was seen as a move away from the socialist principles and despite later being offered to North Korea as a model, was not met with much enthusiasm (Daewon & Richey 487). However, the relations between Pyongyang and Beijing have continued on largely without great tensions or changes to the content of the alliance or Chinese policy.
It would not be until the end of the Cold War and the intensification of outside – and mainly US – pressures on North Korea that things began to change. With the collapse of the Soviets, the only international benefactor that an isolated North Korean regime could turn to ended up being China, which intensified the relations between the two countries as North Korea became dependent on the inflows from China. However, second serious challenge to relations, which has also come to define much of the post-Cold War interactions of North Korea with the outside world, came with the attempts of the North Koreans at nuclearization. For the greater part of this period the Chinese have taken softer and temporary measures with limited sanctions towards North Korea, although as shall be discussed later on continued nuclear tests since 2013 have been looked upon with dismay and brought about a much sterner Chinese response (Snyder 4; Xu 1; Scobell 7). One could see that although the Chinese have been secure in the knowledge that the North Korean nuclear weapons have not been directed at them, their desire to reduce tensions in the region and score prestige internationally might have influenced their decision (Shulong 274; Lee 104; Daewon & Richey 489).

However, these developments have not entirely overtaken and reshaped the fundamentals of the relationship between the two countries. Indeed, the Chinese still push forward, as they have done in the past with the Six-Party Talks, for a diplomatic solution to the nuclearization crisis (Lee 102-103, 104; Shin 297; Song & Lee 5). As such, China plays a role where it is using coercive measures to curb the further development of North Korean nuclear capabilities and the ability of the regime to provoke the US, whilst also using its power to bring about a peaceful settlement to the crisis at hand. Despite these conflicts, the longer commitment to the survival of the Pyongyang regime is undeniably still more important to the Chinese due to its possible immediate impacts on China’s own security.
Looking into the underlying currents that shape relations, an important point one should keep in mind is that what was clear to the Kim Il Sung regime in 1950 must be just as clear to the Kim Jong Un regime of today: the Chinese are here not out of the kindness of their heart but out of a concern for their own security. For the North Koreans, the knowledge of this underlying dynamic means that the regime in Pyongyang, as mentioned above, finds greater room to act independently on its own and even in defiance of the interests and wishes of Beijing. However, for the Chinese, this situation means that they must prop up the North Korean regime indefinitely, or until a tipping point comes in which the Chinese find it beneficial to abandon North Korea as a liability. There are several questions that form the basis of this security calculus for China. On the one side, as mentioned above, ever since their entry to the Korean War the Chinese have always been fearful of the presence of a united Korea which would be aligned with the US. The presence of such a power on their immediate borderlands could position their greatest regional rival in a strategic position to encircle them, and strike at vital targets or establish defensive lines close to the heart of China (Xu 2; Cheng 28; Menegazzi 6; Song & Lee 11-12). As such, it seems that the Chinese have elected to live with a problematic North Korean regime, which remains a thorn on their side, rather than face the possibility of coming face to face with an adversary which would become the bane of China’s security and foreign policy calculus.

On another side, the Chinese are wary of the social upheaval the collapse of the North Korean regime would cause at their borders, where an influx of North Koreans could become and impossible to manage crisis for the Chinese (Xu 2-3; Scobell 2; Daewon & Richey 495). Given that the northern Chinese provinces which border North Korea are amongst the relatively poorer provinces, the Chinese leadership might be found facing a crisis in which an influx of North Koreans could drive an already bad economic situation to an even worse state for these
provinces. The inability to provide economically could lead to a crisis of legitimacy, which
Beijing will seek to avoid at all costs. Moreover, one might also argue that there is both a
demographic and political problem for these Chinese, where an influx of disgruntled North
Koreans might destabilize these regions. On a further point, the Chinese are also committed to
their North Korean partners because the act of abandoning them or pushing them to a corner by
heavy sanctions can cause a complete breakdown of relations in which a rouge North Korea,
with nuclear weapons, will become a new threat to China’s security (Shulong 274, 275; Cheng
28; Scobell 3; Daewon & Richey 484; Song & Lee 6, 9). Thus, the Chinese have to be extremely
cautious in how they handle the situation in North Korea, because the nuclear weapons now
threatening the US, might come to threaten the Chinese mainland.

However, the Chinese are not only guided by their safety concerns when it comes to
North Korea. For a rising China, there are also prestige costs involved with their interaction with
the internationally ostracized North Korean state, which China must keep on the lookout for
because its “rise” will depend upon its reputation (Xu 4; Scobell 2; Menegazzi 5; Yoo & Jin 62;
Daewon & Richey 490). A China that seeks to be a responsible and assertive global power, as
shall be discussed later, must eventually seek to evaluate its commitments to the North Korean
regime, because the global order will not tolerate the Chinese support for such a regime,
especially if they are to accept China as a major player in world affairs. As such, one can also
find that the calculus which defines the relationship between China and North Korea depends a
great deal upon the way in which China sees the impact of this continued close alliance on its
own “rise”. In relation to its “rise”, China needs to keep the peace, especially in East Asia,
because it depends upon the existence of regional peace and stability to further its own economic
development (Shulong 274; Cheng 28; Menegazzi 5; Daewon & Richey 494). A North Korea
that disrupts regional peace and stability will ultimately hurt China’s development prospects and thus figure in China’s calculus regarding the necessity of the continued state of affairs between China and North Korea.

From this discussion, one important aspect of the relationship stands out: in the China-North Korea relationship, it is the cost-benefit calculus of the Chinese side which seems to determine broader directions and avenues of interaction for the sides. However, what seems to ultimately frame the security policy of China seems to be support for the survival of the North Korean regime, coupled with a dedication to the “Three Nos” as the broad policy guidelines towards solving the nuclear crisis in Korea (Scobell 2; Lee 104; Daewon & Richey 490). Yet, as we shall see, Xi Jinping has both the means and the motives to challenge the basics of this policy and relationship between the two countries.

*The Chairman of Everything: Xi Jinping*

In defining the extent of Xi Jinping’s power over and direction in defining foreign policy it is important to highlight both his personal power within the party-state structures of China and the rising trends within Chinese society that have come to prominence. As it will become clear, the political rise of Xi to supremacy has accompanied the rise of China and the political forces in China that have greater enthusiasm to have China recognized and exercising its power as a global power.

On the side of his personal rise in politics, Xi has been occupying the top positions of power in the Chinese political structures, such as the position of CPC General Secretary, the President of the People’s Republic of China, and the Chairman of the Central Military Commission, since 2012. Although Xi opened his tenure from a position of power, a number of key developments in Xi’s solidification of his personal control of power emerged especially
towards and with the 19th Party Congress in 2017. By this time, Xi had come to be termed the “core leader” and had assumed a large number of chairmanship positions in key and influential committees, effectively creating a “chairman responsibility system” (Mulvenon 46, 47; Solinger 3; Shirk 23, 24; Szczudlik 20-21, 24). This has given him greater access to information and greater power to influence and determine policy in a wide array of political, economic, and diplomatic areas that are of interest to China. It can be argued that Xi has effectively created a system of policy control that cannot function effectively without his participation, in a “hub-and-spokes” fashion where Xi himself is the vital “hub” to decision-making.

Furthermore, Xi has resided over an overall leftward turn in the politics of China where ensuring loyalty to and extolling his person has become practices which have been revived from China’s Maoist past (Shirk 25). Thus, he has ensured that the system of political control and personal power and responsibility has been reinforced by the elevation of his person to a position of utmost reverence and importance, whilst the focus on “redness” in politics has ensured him the ability to choose those that are less probable to challenging him. As such, on the one had Xi has position himself as an indispensable leader, with subordinates that do not can cannot seek to oppose him or take action without him. Moreover, the removal of official term limits from the positions of presidency and vice-presidency of China and the enshrining of the “Xi Jinping Thought” in the constitution of China in the 19th Party Congress has not only granted Xi a position a prestige previously only matched by Mao Zedong but also opened to path to his lifetime rule (NPC Observer; Solinger 3; Pei 21; Shirk 23, 26; Szczudlik 26, 28-29). Due to these changes, Xi’s political power is ensured to last for an unforeseeable amount of time into the future and his outlook towards the world is bound to become a mainstay of Chinese policymaking processes and policy.
As such, Xi’s tenure has seen a steadily advancing rejection and deconstruction of the collective and institutionalized leadership that Deng Xiaoping had carefully constructed in order to stop a repetition of the excesses and destructiveness of the Mao era. Xi has become increasingly important and indispensable in shaping the political directions and policy choices of China. As part of his rise, foreign policy has been amongst those sectors of policymaking over which Xi has come to exercise his unshaking control and power. This position has seen a further level of solidification, given that Xi is the “face” of China in the world and the amount of attention that is concentrated on his person eventually translates into real power, where his actions and words are seized upon immediately.

It is important to note here, before moving onto more situational developments in China, what has Xi’s control over foreign policy has translated into in terms of broader policy directions. Overall, China’s foreign policy under Xi has been – and is expected to be increasingly – more assertive and more recognizant of China’s rise as a global great power (Menegazzi 2-3; Daewon & Richey 496; Shin 285, 295; Szczudlik 37). As such, Xi has – as shall be discussed in the next section of this paper – become more open to using coercive measures and taking a more concrete stand for the protection and promotion of Chinese interest. As a result, with his tenure marked with a desire to take stronger measures against threats to China’s interests and security, it appears that Xi has been more open to revisiting the lasting relations with North Korea. For the relations of China with North Korea this carries the potential of being a defining strand of thinking in how the relationship evolves into the future. This is because it carries the potential that the moment North Korea becomes a burden in the eyes of Xi for the future of China, it might find itself carefully jettisoned from Chinese foreign policy at the earliest convenient occasion.
In terms of contextual changes in the Chinese political landscape the undercurrent which defines all changes is the perceived “rise” of China by its people and leaders. On the side of leaders, and especially Xi, the rise of China is equated with a desire to have China accepted as a global great power (Shin 285-286, 288; Zhao 644, 649, 655). For Xi, this situation has been one reason for his assertiveness which has been noted above, and it has also been a force which has allowed him to define the “core” interests of China, from which North Korea is left out as a “significant but not core” interest (Shin 285, 290). Thus, Xi is left with a strategic configuration in which he has a mandate to pursue the most urgent and critical interests of the Chinese state to which its secondary interests can be sacrificed. With regards to relations with North Korea, this has meant that Xi has been given greater leeway regarding the way in which he deals with the regime in Pyongyang and the possibility of sacrificing Pyongyang for the greater good of Beijing’s interests has increased.

On the side of the people, the rise of China has seen a growth of Chinese nationalism, which translates into a desire by the Chinese leaders to deliver to the people those national goals promised to them, such as economic growth and prosperity, in order to maintain their rule and legitimacy (Szczudlik 21). What is important in the rise of Chinese nationalism as a factor in national politics and foreign policy is the extent to which relations with North Korea figures within it. Accepting that the interests of the Chinese people lie with – and are socialized by the party-state towards – the core interests of China as they have been defined by the party-state itself, then it can be expected that North Korea will not figure greatly in the worldview of the Chinese as a crucial interest. In fact, a North Korea that might place a roadblock on the rise of China through reputational and economic costs because of a continued alliance and actions that destabilize the region, respectively, might cause the Chinese people to press their government
into revising the state of affairs that exists with North Korea. However, this does not mean that Xi gets dragged along by these currents that exist within the broader public in the making of his foreign policy. In fact, through his control over the party-state Xi’s power to shape or ignore these public currents is much more stronger, but since the public outlook and Xi’s political outlook appear to be in conjunction with another, they emerge as mutually supportive trends in Chinese foreign policy, which only strengthens Xi’s hand.

One should keep in mind, that the result of these changes in Chinese policymaking does not mean that China will now abandon North Korea just because it is likelier for the people or Xi Jinping to desire such a change in foreign policy. As the discussion about the context and content of the relationship between the two states show, China appears to be adhering to a policy of keeping its ties with North Korea close and continues to act as the greatest global beneficiary of the regime in Pyongyang. What the discussion above rather highlights is that the changes in the political sphere of China, coupled with the consolidation of power of Xi Jinping has created a situation in which increasing Chinese sensitivity to ensuring its rise and recognition as a global great power invites greater possibilities for the revision of the existing relationship between the two sides. The important takeaway from this discussion is that any change in the relationship between the two countries initiated by the Chinese side, will most likely come from Xi himself who has managed to position himself as the key to China’s foreign policy and – in this case – as the key to the relationship with North Korea as I shall discuss in the next section.

**Riding the Beijing-Pyongyang Train, Xi Jinping Style**

Having explored the historic and current dynamics of the relations of China and North Korea, and having demonstrated the rise of Xi Jinping as the supreme political and foreign policy authority in China – backed by changes in Chinese society – I will now focus on reflections of
Xi’s power in relations with North Korea. The focus will be on three distinct events that have taken place since Xi has taken power in China. These three events are North Korea’s nuclear tests, Xi’s overtures to Seoul, and the landmark meeting of Xi with Kim Jong Un in Pyongyang in 2019. A final thought will then be left in mention of possible future directions for changes in China’s foreign policy towards North Korea, under Xi Jinping. It should be kept in mind that the aim of this section is not to evaluate the instances in which I propose Xi’s personal power came to figure in relations with North Korea with regards to what China won or lost but rather with regards to how Xi’s power could be seen in determining the actions taken by the Chinese side. As such, it will not be the concern here to judge whether Xi’s responses have secured expected or “positive” North Korean reactions but rather to see what were Xi’s movers, motives, and how his power could be observed as a key element of policy towards North Korea given the status quo in how these relations are conducted.

When the North Koreans conducted nuclear tests in 2013 and threatened to move forward with more tests in 2014, it was a watershed moment for Xi’s power over foreign policy both as a demonstration of his power and as a breaking moment in which Kim Jong Un defied him openly (Snyder 3; Lee 104; Daewon & Richey 485, 491). The Chinese action to the provocations of Pyongyang translated into closer adherence to UN sanctions, as well as closer cooperation with the US and South Korea in order to counter the nuclearization of North Korea, accompanied by a harder rhetoric against Pyongyang (Snyder 1, 3; Pei 31; Lee 100; Daewon & Richey 484, 491-492). The defiance of North Korea towards Xi Jinping, despite him openly expressing his and China’s position that Pyongyang should not pursue further nuclearization might appear as a blow to Xi’s power and authority. However, the true demonstration of Xi’s power lies with the response he has directed China to give in the face of Pyongyang’s defiance and provocations. It
can be seen that Xi was able to effectively translate the blow that he had suffered personally into policy action towards the punishment of North Korea for its actions, which were also harmful to China’s interests regionally and globally. Had Xi not been in such total control of China’s key foreign policymaking positions, as early as he did in his tenure, it might not have been possible for him to direct China’s foreign policy towards a more hardline stance against North Korea, because pro-North Korea powers in government could have influenced foreign policy. It was precisely because he held a great degree of control over Chinese politics and foreign policy that Xi could singlehandedly shape the Chinese response, which was also tinged with a personal element of showing to the North Koreans the extent and non-dismissible nature of his power.

With a cooldown of relations in this period, a major reflection of how Xi’s power figured in China’s relations with North Korea came with his groundbreaking visit to Seoul in 2014, before he had made any official visits to Pyongyang and with a degree of enthusiasm (Xu 3; Cathart & Green). Coming at a time when Xi’s personal authority had been snubbed by the North Koreans, the turn towards Seoul with a high-profile state visit by Xi himself is a reflection of how Xi takes challenges to his power very seriously and how he shapes China’s foreign policy against North Korea. A warm-up of relations with the South Korean state is not only something to unsettle the Korean leadership deeply but Xi’s personal appearance and initiation of this warm-up is something to cause alarm, which could be seen as a policy tool for Xi to send a signal to North Korea. Perhaps the only thing that warrants such attention, besides Xi leading the visit, is the fact that this visit came before any such visit to Pyongyang had taken place. As such, the visit signified to the North Koreans an implicit threat on the part of Xi Jinping that the relations between the two countries had reached a breaking point and that if necessary Xi would take measures to bring about a rupture. Once again, it was Xi’s personalized control of China’s
foreign policy that he could override both pro-North Korean and anti-South Korean concerns and embark on what could be called a policy of localized détente. Thus, by utilizing his great personal control over Chinese foreign policy, Xi could strike an existential chord with the regime in Pyongyang by demonstrating that it would not be hard for a China led by him to make friends elsewhere in the Korean peninsula.

Contrary to the cooling down of relations these two events signified for China and North Korea, Xi’s official state visit to Pyongyang in 2019 was a turning point which signified a restart of relations between the two sides, whose significance was trumpeted by China and North Korea (Xinhuanet, Infographic; BBC News, 17 Jun 2019; Xinhuanet 21 Jun 2019). What was highlighted by the visit was the importance that was given to Xi’s personal appearance in Pyongyang, noted to be the first of its kind in 14 years, in which both sides saw this as an affirmation of their alliance and Xi was showered with affection by the North Koreans (Xinhuanet, Infographic; BBC News, 17 Jun 2019; BBC News 21 Jun 2019; The Mainichi, Xi Jinping holds talks; The Mainichi, 21 Jun 2019). It was clear that the Pyongyang regime was doing its best to cling to this visit, as a clear signal on the part of China that the power of Beijing – which had by then become the power of Xi Jinping – was turning once again to their side. As such, this state visit, despite the fact that it might not have achieved anything significant or concrete in the ties between the two sides, did function as a symbolic turning point, especially given how Xi’s words and actions have been indicative of the future of relations with North Korea (Xinhuanet, Infographic; The Mainichi, Xi arrives in North Korea; Xinhuanet 21 Jun 2019; Rui; Xinhuanet, Xi, Kim agree). His affirmation of continued friendship and alliance with North Korea, although is not as significant as a treaty being signed, did bring to the Pyongyang regime a verbal affirmation that Beijing still placed its power on the side of North Korea. As
such, Xi’s personal appearance – which is of significance regardless of the power held by the person that leads the Chinese state – by virtue of carrying the entire weight of the Chinese party-state on its back signaled a fundamental continuity in China’s relations with North Korea.

As it can be seen through these three events, Xi’s own personal control over the foreign policy decision-making has allowed him to work in contravention of the existing order of the relationship between China and North Korea. Furthermore, his control over foreign policy has also allowed for those of his actions that have been in continuation of the existing order to have increased significance, because it bears a guarantee of the highest office and strongest office holder in China. Although the balance – of these three cases in particular – appears to be ambivalent, in that Xi appears to have continued an older balance where relations have ebbed back and forth what is different is the increased assertiveness and significance of Xi, which has changed the dynamics of this balance. It can be seen that an increasingly assertive China, under an equally assertive Xi, has been more inclined towards taking a harder stance towards the provocative actions of North Korea in the global stage. Xi has not shied away from showing to the regime in Pyongyang that his control over the party-state structures and power of China is so complete that he can reevaluate the relationship with the North Koreans with great ease. Moreover, he has also shown – through his visit to Pyongyang, within the context of denuclearization talks with the US – that he could also use his power to bear upon North Korea in a more positive way to reward behavior that China finds in line with its interests.

In looking to the future for the possible directions of development of relations between China and North Korea from the perspective of Beijing, Xi Jinping will likely remain the center definitive pillar of Beijing’s relations with Pyongyang. It can be expected that the pattern which emerges from the three cases mentioned above will come to define the future of relations
between the states under Xi’s guidance. An assertive Xi can be expected to take greater risk and perhaps even become more proactive in trying to use coercive measures to change the behavior of North Korea, especially as Xi’s confidence and power grows commensurate to that of China in the world. However, the ongoing security and economic constraints – which as of yet remain unsolved – that have sustained the continuation of relations between the two sides will keep influencing the capacity of Xi to act. This dynamic will most likely keep Xi from taking the most drastic coercive action towards North Korea, keeping ties that have propped up the regime intact for the better part, and will also incentivize the use of “carrots” to reward the North Koreans for actions perceived as “positive” by the regime in Beijing.

**Conclusion**

Before concluding, it is important to note here two areas of future developments that should be taken into account in future studies, because they can have a fundamental impact in both defining Xi’s power and the fundamental context of China’s relations with North Korea. Although the approach here has focused on the personal power and agency of Xi Jinping, it is also important to study the institutional constraints and agency that is imbedded in the party-state structures of China and how they might influence Xi’s decision-making and policy implementation processes. For the foreseeable future, the amount of control and power over the Chinese party-state, which Xi now enjoys will reign supreme but with the opaqueness of the Chinese party-state structures a shift towards collective leadership might once again take place. As such, for the outside observers it will be prudent also to focus on the institutional power and agency in shaping China’s relations with North Korea. Furthermore, it will be important to pay attention to the developments between the North Korean and US governments on the question of denuclearization, which has taken on a new dimension under President Donald J. Trump. If this
bilateral approach between the leaders is successful in denuclearization, this might strengthen Xi’s hand in revising the relations with North Korea. However, failure might bring about greater situational constraints on how Xi could act.

As this study has demonstrated, Xi Jinping is and remains for the foreseeable future the most powerful actor in the Chinese political structures, and when it comes to relations with North Korea, Xi is and will remain the solitary actor to determine the direction of Chinese foreign policy. Although Xi seems to be adhering to an established pattern of relations, and has to keep in mind the contextual constraint that abound from the relationship with North Korea, his assertiveness and desire to protect Chinese core interests have already reflected on the relations between the two states. As long as Xi remains at the helm of China, it can be expected that the current state of affairs where Xi’s personal power is the central aspect in defining the state of affairs between the sides and the Chinese response to developments in North Korea.
Works Cited


