

SINO-NK

Chinese Bureaucratic Politics and Sino-North Korean Relations: Dynamics and Implications



Zhou Yongkang, right, with DPRK Minister of Public Security Ri Myong Su in Beijing, July 23, 2012 | Via NK Leadership Watch

With so much recent attention levied toward real and perceived changes in Pyongyang, the PRC outlook on its North Korean partner has gotten decidedly short shrift of late. Fortunately, reinforcements are on the way. Currently in a dual-degree masters [program](#) with Peking University and the London School of Economics, Nathan Beauchamp-

Mustafaga offers a number of highly-detailed and solidly researched data on the whole scope of China's North Korea policy. The young scholar describes his writing as "focusing on contemporary Sino-North Korean relations with special emphasis on China's foreign policy management structure through the lens of bureaucratic politics." Over the course of a series of posts for SinoNK, Nathan will be illuminating various aspects of the Sino-North Korean relationship and their implications for future Chinese policy as well as U.S.-China cooperation on the Korean Peninsula. The following sets the table for the discussion. – Adam Cathcart, Editor-in-Chief.

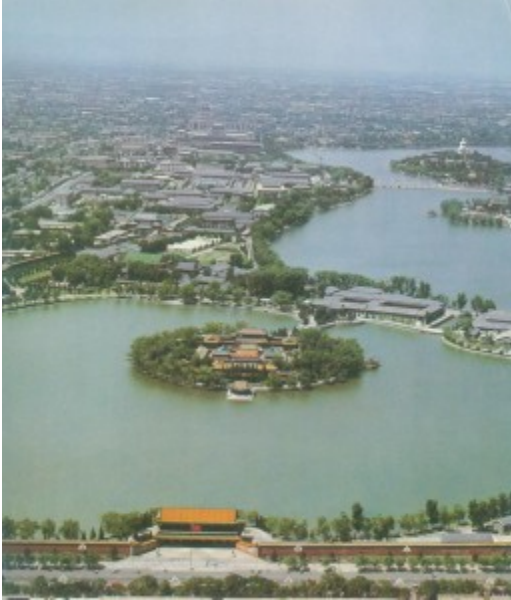
Chinese Bureaucratic Politics and Sino-North Korean Relations: Dynamics and Implications

by Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga

What do we really know about how China makes its North Korea policy?

I contend that Chinese bureaucratic politics largely drives the direction of the Sino-North Korean relationship and has significant implications for the policy management of China's North Korea policy. [\[1\]](#)

In examining China's North Korea policy, two final decision-making bodies stand at the apex. The Politburo Standing Committee (PSC; 中共中央政治局常委) and Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group (FALSG; 中央外事工作小组) are the top tier stakeholders in the Sino-North Korean relationship and wield ultimate power and control over the Chinese government's overall policy toward North Korea. The PSC is the highest authority of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and consists of the top nine CCP members who ultimately govern China. The FALSG consists of the most important actors in Chinese foreign policy and serves to coordinate their interests and recommend foreign policy directives to the PSC for approval. While, in American terms, "the buck stops" at Zhongnanhai, the presence of other stakeholders complicates China's management of its North Korea policy by injecting bureaucratic politics into China's most sensitive bilateral relationship.



The “yuan” stops at Zhongnanhai (中南海), China’s Leadership compound and apex of power in China.

Stakeholder Politics: Disaggregating China’s North Korean Interests | In order to fully understand the underlying dynamics of bureaucratic politics extant in China’s North Korea policy, it is necessary to first examine the Chinese stakeholders in the relationship through a hierarchy of influence.

Primary stakeholders, namely the International Liaison Department ([ILD](#); 中共中央对外联络部), the People’s Liberation Army ([PLA](#); 解放军) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs ([MFA](#); 外交部), are stakeholders that are widely regarded as having a wide-range of interests in the relationship and the ability to influence the top tier stakeholders to enact their own policy preferences.



The PRC Foreign Ministry in Beijing — Not the Only Game in Town | Image courtesy MOFA

Secondary stakeholders, such as Jilin (吉林省) and Liaoning (辽宁省) provinces, the Ministry of Public Security (MPS; 公安部), the Ministry of State Security (MSS; 国家安全部) the Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM; 商务部), the Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party (中共中央宣传部), and Chinese companies have specific interests and related policy preferences and they can influence the top tier to enact their policy preferences on a limited set of issues.

Peripheral stakeholders, such as academics and netizens, have specific interests but less of an influence to make the top tier enact their policy preferences.

Silent stakeholders, namely the United States and Taiwan, have no access to China's internal debate but are intimately intertwined with China's strategic thinking and interests in North Korea and are affected by China's policies.

Through an examination of stakeholders' interests, strategic views and policy preferences towards North Korea, we can witness three different bureaucratic politics dynamics at play in China's foreign policy towards North Korea. Specifically, inter-bureaucratic convergence and intra-bureaucratic competition, namely a convergence of interests between different stakeholders accompanied by growing competition within their ranks, with a powerful central-local dynamic often at work as well.

China's management of its policy towards the North can thus be seen as increasingly bifurcated – centralized policy formulation with diffuse implementation.



The policy Ministry of Foreign Affairs promulgates (and had limited input to developing)

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...turns into steps implemented all way to the border.

How China's Bureaucratic Inertia Impacts North Korea Policy | Chinese stakeholder interests have aligned to prioritize stability above all else and favor economic reform when possible. No Chinese stakeholder, no matter how diffuse the motivation, desires to see an unstable North Korea and all stakeholders have interests in the benefits of a more open and economically liberalized North Korea. Although this convergence of stakeholder interests supports the Chinese central government's strategic interests and current policy towards the North, analysis indicates North Korea policy decision-making is largely isolated from stakeholder interests, being controlled by the highest levels of Chinese government, the PSC and FALSG.

This chasm between the stakeholders and final decision-making bodies reflects the bifurcated nature of China's North Korea policy management—increasingly centralized policy formulation with diffuse implementation by a wide range of stakeholders. This bifurcation has created immense bureaucratic inertia in the relationship, notably impeding China's responsiveness to North Korean issues and handicapping the decision-making process at even the highest level of government. Chinese President Hu Jintao's personal involvement in writing China's response to the North's 2006 nuclear test and the North Korea section of the 2011 U.S.-China joint statement after President Hu had already arrived in Washington, DC for his January 2011 visit demonstrate the divisive nature of the North Korea issue in the highest levels of Chinese government.

This endemic bureaucratic inertia suggests that China's current policy of support for the North will continue unchanged without an external event to force China's Politburo Standing Committee to fundamentally reconsider their policy preferences and perceived interests.

Notably, it is unlikely that a third nuclear test will serve as the necessary catalyst, as China already revisited the relationship in 2009 and decided to support the North by isolating the nuclear issue from the overall Sino-North Korean relationship. However, the Politburo Standing Committee's decision to reconsider the relationship does not indicate

that there was some sea change of policy in 2009 in favor of greater support for the North.

China's lack of reaction to North Korea's 2010 provocations that left 50 South Koreans dead is better explained due to bureaucratic inertia that inhibited China's ability to respond rather than the commonly-held assumption that China actively sought to support the North after its two deadly attacks for strategic reasons.

Preferred citation: Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Nathan. "Chinese Bureaucratic Politics and Sino-North Korean Relations: Dynamics and Implications." Master's thesis, Peking University, 2012.

Additional Reading:

Bates Gill, [*China's North Korea Policy*](#), Rep, Vol. 283, United States Institute of Peace, 2011.

[*Shades of Red: China's Debate Over North Korea*](#), Rep, Vol. 129, International Crisis Group, 2009.

United States, U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, [*China's Foreign Policy: Challenges and Players*](#), Testimony by Victor Cha, 2011.