

CAN SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM IN IR SHAPE FOREIGN POLICIES? A CASE OF NORTH KOREA-CHINA RELATIONS

Anmol Mukhia¹

Introduction

Why are North Korea and China still considered blood brothers in Northeast Asian politics? The answer to this question lies in the symbolic relations this paper addresses. North Korea lies as a buffer zone in Northeast Asia, with an area of only 120,540 sq km, smaller than the Jilin Province of China, which shares most of its border with the estuary of the Yalu River. It is important to understand North Korean culture, which is distinctive in its history and its strong connection to China when it comes to the “Korean War” (1950-53), rather than how realists perceive material factors, using a ‘balance of power’ or ‘threat’ assumption. Observing these North Korean relations through material factors leads to incomplete understanding because it ignores the social and cultural connection that persists between the DPRK (Democratic People’s Republic of Korea or North Korea) and the PRC (People’s Republic of China or China), which may be attributable to longstanding historical and symbolic connections. The DPRK and the PRC share ‘lips and teeth’ relations, especially from the Korean War of 1950-1953. In North Korea, this friendship is referred to as young ch’inson (Korean-Chinese friendship), and in China, this relationship is referred to as the Chinese-DPRK youyi (友谊) or Kunshan (親善) (Kwon, Heonik 2013). About 2 million ethnic Koreans live in and around China’s Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture (Kim, 2003, p. 103). North Korea and China have had a common symbolic understanding of “blood-brothers” since the 1950s (Yoon & Lee, 2013, p. 19). The denomination of “blood-brothers” originates from their military alliance during the Korean War. Officially, the relationship between these two states also symbolizes “lips

¹ South Asian University, New Delhi, India. E-mail: anmol.mukhia@gmail.com. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9815-5729>.

and teeth relations,” addressing North Korea and China’s deep bond.²

The Korean War started with the North Korean forces at 4 a.m. on Sunday marching toward South Korea from the Uijongbu Corridor on June 25, 1950, in an attempt to reunite Korea (Thomas & Abbott, 1986, p. 3). The South Korean army, on the other hand, was, however, successful in pushing back North Korean soldiers, not on their own, but with the help of the US. This led China to be active on its borders, aiming to sweep out any foreign hegemony in Northeast Asia. During the night of October 19, 1950, more than 360,000 Chinese People Volunteers crossed the Yalu River to rescue their symbolic North Korean brothers. Lee Kwon-mu reports in the newspaper *Rodong Sinmun*, with the title “Invincible Ties between the Korean and Chinese Peoples Cemented with Blood,” highlighting the friendship and solidarity during the patriotic liberation war of the Korean people.³ Many analysts, however, fail to elaborate on explaining North Korea-China relations as an alliance or assume from the realist model of a ‘balance of power’ and ‘balance of threats.’ The realist further views that the state is self-interested and motivated by the desire for survival and security (Slaughter, 2011, pp. 1-2). The existing literature has extensive work on North Korea-China relations as an “Asymmetric Alliance” or “Comradeship” or “Special Relationship” (Dwivedi, 2012; Cho, 2021; Hoshino & Hiraiwa, 2020). This literature has focused on the “problem of economics,” “problem of war,” or “problem of communism versus capitalism,” which leads the state to group up in their support. All these issues also contribute to understanding North Korea’s symbolic relations, but they fall short of explaining the stronger ties that are the product of social construction. Ignoring social differences has led to a lack of understanding at many levels: social categorization, ethnic violence, migration problems, and, most importantly, cultural-based politics etc.

According to Jonathan Corrado (2021), Western (mainly US) policymakers failed to predict China’s interest in the Korean War and North Korea’s socio-cultural connection with China (Corrado, 2021, p. 1). Asmolov (2020) asserts that the Chinese government recalls the Korean War as China nobly defending North Korea from external invasion. Moreover, the Korean War was perceived as a war against China itself, which the West assisted in terms of escalation of the war against the entire communist world. He argues that China’s entry into the Korean War was thus reflected not as a conflict

2 Xinhua News, Liu Yushan visits North Korea. October 9, 2015. URL: <http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/cnleaders/liuyunshan/lys201510chx/yw.htm> (accessed: 21.06.2021).

3 FBIS Daily Report, Foreign Radio Broadcasts, FBIS-FRB-55-062 on 1955-03-30, under the heading (s): North Korea (1955: FFF3). URL: http://phwo1.newsbank.com/cache//fbis2/fullsize/sp_1315B186B9EBAAD0.pdf (accessed: 23.02.2018).

but as a preventive measure toward World War III.⁴ It was perceived as a defensive measure that gradually constructed the idea of comradeship.

I argue that the constructivist explanation can be suitable for explaining the dynamics of North Korean and China relations because they look at the history and social dynamics within states for its outcome. Social constructivists view “anarchy as what the State makes of it” as the normative factors that lead the State to demonstrate its actions. The constant social interactions between North Korean and Chinese leaders throughout the Chinese Civil War (1927-49) and Korean War (1950-53) pushed them to gain a deeper understanding of assimilation with each other’s culture, ideas, and ideology than compared to a less interacted world. Mutual trust and cooperation through exchanging ideas and interests amongst states further developed to pursue peace. The constructivist explanation can better explain the dynamism of relations between North Korea and China by looking at the state’s history and social dynamics.

Conceptual Framework

The constructivist approach to international relations differs from the realist and liberal approaches in asserting that it rejects the material foundation of social interaction. Instead, it claims that social interactions create a shared understanding and shape material reality. In the larger spectrum, Social Constructivism in International Relations explains the epistemological claim that knowledge is socially constructed, the ontological claim that social reality is constructed, and the reflexive claim that knowledge and reality are mutually constitutive (Jung, 2019, p. 2). According to Alexander Wendt (1999), international relations is a socially constructed reality based on two basic constructivist tenets: 1) human association is determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces, and 2) an actor’s identities and interests are constructed by shared ideas rather than pre-given nature (Wendt, 1999, p. 1).

Constructivist theories look at social science, viewing how ‘reality,’ including the ‘interests’ that partly define the actor’s identity, is socially constructed (Katzenstein et al., 1998, p. 646). Robin O. Andreasen (2000), in his study, highlights race (Korean race, Yellow race, etc.) as socially constructed (Andreasen, 2000, p. 654). Social interactions create a shared understanding of daily life’s material reality or structures. In turn, those

4 Asmolv, K., “How Truthful is China’s Stance on the Korean War?”, *New Eastern Outlook*. Nov. 16, 2020. URL: <https://journal-neo.org/2020/11/16/how-truthful-is-china-s-stance-on-the-korean-war/> (accessed: 06.05.2022)

structures help reinforce or weaken new shared understanding. Wendt's (1992) article "Anarchy is what the State makes of it" suggests that anarchy in the international system is not a constructivist given but inherited by the system itself. Similarly, a state's existence is founded not on material foundations but on shared understanding and belief that gives meaning to those foundations. For example, the US maintains a nuclear stockpile of about 7,500 warheads, and Russia has a similar number; France has about 300 warheads, China about 250 warheads, the US about 200 warheads, India 100 warheads, Pakistan 100 warheads, Israel 80 warheads, and North Korea has approximately eight warheads. Each of these nuclear warheads could cause immense damage, quickly destroying a city like New York or San Francisco. However, why is it that we view North Korea's eight nuclear warheads as an existential crisis to the security of the US but express no concern over the UK's 200? Why is it that the US is so preoccupied with the threat posed by Iran's potential development of nuclear weapons but not with Israel's actual possession of them? Wendt offers a possible explanation: States act differently toward enemies than they do toward friends because enemies are threatening and friends are not. Each country's foreign policy can be seen in part, at least as a reflection of the nation's history and shared understanding of it.

A constructivist argues that these ideas and interests matter in international relations. They reject realist assertions about the nature of the international system being a given and the self-help and survival requirements that flow from that claim. They are also critical of liberal assertions about the inherent possibility of cooperation and the overriding concern with protecting human rights and establishing a liberal international order. Indeed, constructivists argue that ideas and identities shape national identities, foreign policy goals, and all international relations. Political culture, the nature of government, history, and domestic politics can all shape national identities, which can be unique to specific countries. The state has identities, and nation-states are not all alike. North Korea and China look very different from the identities of South Korea and the US. Moreover, as a result, the state behaves in different ways.

Constructivism also gives us a way to think about the role of norms in global politics. Norms are standards of appropriate behavior for specific actors in international relations, which lead to how actors ought to behave. Norms are not necessarily codified in international law, and norms serve as a guide for the behavior of a state. Norms emerge with individual actors promoting ideas about how the international system should function and what it ought to be. Through persuasion, they can convince other actors, eventually states and international organizations, of the importance of those norms. The

norms became operationalized through practice, and norms of “lips and teeth relations” or “blood brother” encouraged North Korea and China to support each other during the Korean War.

Thus, collective meaning constitutes the structures around which we organize our actions. Such shared understanding also plays out domestically, affecting foreign policy and decision-making. Following are the takeaways regarding social constructivism: 1) First, identity matters, and beliefs about the international system shape its function and structure, as well as its reality. 2) The interests of actors should not be taken as a given; instead, they should be viewed as reflections of their identities and based on perceptions that can change over time. 3) Interest is not there to be discovered; it is constructed through social interaction. 3) Norms are important; shared understanding, that is, norms of expected behavior, can shape or constrain the behavior of actors in the international system. This paper will use the constructivist approach and focuses on the following basic assumptions in North Korean relations: i) North Korean and Chinese interaction is not shaped by material factors but primarily by ideational ones; ii) the most significant ideational factors in this context are the inter-subjective belief of ‘blood brothers’ or “lips and teeth relations”; iii) and these beliefs construct the actor’s identities and interest.

The ideational factors in the transition of North Korea and China relations. A constructivist has no single design or method for interpreting inter-subjective discourse. They choose the method and analytical tools best suited to the research question with the help of process tracing, interviews, participation observation, content analysis, etc., to capture intersubjective meanings (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001). Conventional constructivism traditionally focuses on historical junctures, where new structural arrangements and interactions between existing structures and agents develop. For example, Iain Johnston developed a constructivist argument to explain China’s consistent militant security strategy (Katzenstein et al., 1998, p. 676). Conventional constructivists follow the methodological tasks of nationalist or utilitarian camps, gathering evidence and asserting it with an explanation. The paper will explain North Korean and Chinese relations, highlighting social and cultural meanings through the lens of conventional constructivism (Startt & Sloan, 2003). The Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) reports and the *Pyongyang Times* newspaper (weekly newspaper) are contextually studied to collect the data and follow the pattern. It helps us to link why North Korea and China were considered the “blood-brother” or “lips and teeth relations” from the social constructivism approach.

State as Socially Constructed

To understand North Korea as a social construct, we need to understand how States are socially constructed. The material factor of a State primarily is its territory, population, economy, etc., but States are also created by ideas (communism), culture (secular, ethnic), and norms (rule of law). What makes North Korea – the North Korea? Is it the infrastructure? Or is it the military? Or is it the system of government? Constructivists argue that it is the shared sense of identity claimed by North Koreans. Moreover, it is a shared belief that comes from North Korean existence. In the international system, a state could not exist without its territory or territory without the state. However, when the international system changes, state borders also change, and people inside it adopt or find new identities and cultures based on its norms. This can be reflected in the translation biography of Kim Il Sung published from Pyongyang, which shows that he attended his secondary school in Jilin (Northeast China), known as the “Second Shanghai,” where Korean revolutionaries gathered. He gradually learned how to conduct and organize the peasants’ union in Xinantun, Jiangdong village, Kalun Dahuanggou, etc. (Foreign et al., 2008). Gradually, North Korean society officially adopted communist ideology after gaining its independence from Japanese rule, but before the revolutionary society was introduced in the 1920s. Most Koreans adopted the communist ideology with a background of peasants and freedom movement, who mainly had encountered the Russian and Chinese communist groups. For example, the Bolsheviks came to power in Russia (former USSR) in October 1917. The ‘Bolshevik Revolution’ gave the first impression of re-constructing identity through revolution upon the Korean peasants under ‘Japanese rule’ (1910-1945). Gradually, the new politically communist identity was seen as the identity of Korean society. Two communist parties amongst Korean groups were formed in the same year. In January 1918, the Korean Bolshevik Party (KBP) was formed in Irkutsk, Western Siberia, and in June 1918, the Korean Socialist Party (KSP) was formed in Khabarovsk, located in Eastern Siberia. Both Parties aimed at national liberation from the Japanese imperialist rule and searching for the construction of their own identity. The latter group moved to Shanghai in 1919, joining with other Korean nationals, and in 1925, the Korean Communist Party was formed (KCP) in Seoul (Kwon, 2010, pp. 286-287). In 1927, the KCP formed a united front of nationalists. In 1930, communist ideology amongst Koreans spread throughout the countryside, mobilizing the peasant and labor groups with the same interests of freedom and class struggle. In this event, Kim Il Sung (the first President of North Korea) was fighting against the Japanese ‘imperialist’ power under the

direction of the Chinese Communist Party. Throughout the years of the late 1930s and early 1940s, a group of Korean Communist comrades, other than Kim, including Il Yu, who would later become North Korea's Deputy Prime Minister, traveled to Yan-an (the "Red Capital" of the Chinese Communist Party), to join Chinese "War of Resistance" (China's freedom movement, 1937-1945) against imperialist Japan.

The existence of North Korea, in other words, rests not on any material foundations but on shared understanding and belief that gives those material foundations meaning. After the freedom struggle movement against Japanese rule, the Northern part of Korea was under Soviet occupation from 1945 to 1948, giving a victorious mark to communist ideology. However, after the establishment of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea on September 9, 1948, communist ideologies flourished in North Korea. In June 1949, the idea of a unified communist party, the Korean Workers Party (KWP), was established with the plan to merge North and South communist parties. Kim Il Sung was unanimously elected as Chairman, and Pak Hon Young was the Vice-Chairman of North Korea (Kwon, 2010, p. 288). The party membership increased dramatically from 0.0005 percent (4,530 members) in 1945 to 8 percent in the year 1948 (725,762 members) (ibid. 290). Most KWP members were peasants without previous political experience (Kwon, 2010, pp. 288-291). There were altogether five major political factions noticed: 1) the indigenous nationalists, 2) the domestic communists, 3) returnees from China, known as the Yan-an faction, 4) returnees from the Soviet Union, called the Soviet faction, and 5) Kim Il Sung's followers who had participated in guerrilla activities, called the Kapsan faction or the Partisan group. Many policy disputes and controversial reports were circulated by the party newspaper *Rodong Sinmun*, the mouthpiece of KWP (Kim, 1975, pp. 65-76). Kim Il Sung eliminated the Yan-an group in 1956, the Soviet group between 1957 and 1959, and his Kapsan group in 1967 in the power struggle (Lee, 1995, pp. 17-19). Social constructivism explains how leaders construct ideas and make decisions that become a reality. With this view, reality itself is constructed over time. When the leader comes up with a contested idea, and if it survives, it becomes the reality of the State. Also, the construction of any political party is accomplished by ideas accepted by a vast majority of society (Horton, 2020, p. 13). Social Constructivism defines this idea as a concept developed over time through an 'intersection' of material, historical, and institutional factors (ibid).

North Korea and China in the Lens of Social Constructivism

In a systemic approach, a State allows cooperation in the “Prisoner’s Dilemma” context to avoid conflicts. Suppose these actors believe that cooperation is not only possible but beneficial. In that case, they will act accordingly to protect their interests (Binding, 2017, p. 19). Social constructivists have taken these views as constitutive of conflicts and peace or choosing friends throughout history, focusing on cultural aspects. Such explanations may help constructivists understand the pressure for political reform or radical political change. However, they do not explain why North Korea and China were closely connected during the Korean War. Timothy Hildebrandt (2003), in his report on “Uneasy Allies,” says that the “closer than lips and teeth” proverb was once used in propaganda to propagate stronger North Korea-China relations. For example, there are many similarities between the development of the Korean and Chinese communist movements. Korean communist movement development was seen in pre-1945, while the Chinese communist movement was seen before the emergence of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. Communist activities in both countries began between the late 1910s and early 1920s, when Korea was under Japanese colonial rule and China under semi-colonial rule. Both countries had traditional agricultural societies during that period and needed to modernize their semi-feudal societies. In both countries, revolutionary movements were led by the rural and peasant base, and intellectuals introduced the communist ideology. Ideology and norms emerge in a context of mutually constituted understanding. Norms emerge with individual actors promoting ideas (ideology) about how the international system should function and what it ought to be. Constructivists argue that North Korea and China eventually believed that they were communists. Alternatively, more importantly, they started acting as if communism was a struggle for them to achieve their goal. Freed from the structural constraints, individuals chose to identify as communists, and the power of identity and ideas for constructivists led to the formation of the “blood brother” metaphor in each other’s relations.

Two of the most cherished revolutionary songs in North Korea in the metaphorical song are *Song of Comradely Love* (1980) and *The Song of Korean-Chinese Friendship*, show well the morality of revolutionary comradeship arising from the hardship of anticolonial partisan struggles:

No matter how arduous the way may be, We shall climb over the hills of hardship.

No matter how strong the wind of fire may be, We shall stay together in life and death.

You cannot purchase, even with tons of gold, The boundless love of

comrades.

Let our resolve live forever, Looking up at the Single Star” (Kwon, 2013).

The Song of Korean-Chinese Friendship says

We are faithful brothers, blood-sharing comrades.

Our heart keeps intensely the amity of Korean-Chinese Friendship.

For our common purpose, hand in hand,

We march in step, singing our friendship song (ibid).

One of the essential cultural criteria is ‘ideology,’ which drives states to choose their friends and enemies. A person or group manufactures ideology to function and make decisions (Freedman, 2006, p. 20). Social constructivism reflects that ideology plays a pivotal role in a leader’s perception of threats and in shaping their interests (Jung, 2019, p. 6). It is remarked that Kim Il Sung and Mao Zedong’s friendship was based on the ideology of ‘Marxism-Leninism and proletarian internationalism.’ To this, Kim Il Sung calls it a ‘fighting alliance between class brothers’ (ibid). When neither the UN nor Chinese forces were willing to leave Korean soil, Zhou Enlai reiterated that ‘China now prepares itself for the Third World War.’ Daily Intelligence Summary (DIS) showed that 116,000 Chinese troops were present in Manchuria, followed by 217,000 to 246,000 in late September, with a possible strength of 450,000 men ready to fight as a rapid reaction force if needed.⁵ During the Korean War, the NKDP declassified documents showing China was also offering tactical instruction from September to October 1950 to Kim Il Sung to win a “protracted war.” This period resulted in a series of exchanges between Zhou and Ambassador Ni Zhiliang, who was also responsible for conveying Zhou’s remarks to Kim Il Sung. Zhou then sent a Chinese military observer to Korea and invited the North Korean leader, Pak Il-u, to China to get a detailed report from the ground.⁶ On February 11, 1950, Mao Zedong supported Kim’s army with additional equipment, such as aircraft and engines, aviation tools, ammunition, and

5 Cohen, E. A., “The Chinese Intervention in Korea”, Unclassified CIA Historical Review Program. 1950: page.56. URL: http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/44/1988-11-01.pdf (accessed: 24.06.2016).

6 Kraus, C. Zhou, “Enlai and China’s Response to the Korean War”, North Korea International Documentation Project, E-DOSSIER 9, 2012. URL www.wilsoncenter.org/nkidp (accessed: 21.05.2019).

models for making aircraft wheels. For the student's involvement in the fighting, the requisition paper signed by Mao Zedong on February 15, 1950, included 42 aircraft (20 IA 18, 10 R9, and 12 T2), 24 engines, 200 parachutes, and 10,000 rounds of ammunition, which General Liu Yalou ordered from General Shtemenko.⁷

There were 169 official visits between 1953 and 2019 among North Korean and Chinese delegates. A series of North Korean-level political visits were witnessed after the Korean War: five visits in the 1950s, two visits in the 1960s, six visits in the 1970s, and eighteen visits in the 1980s were recorded. These contacts indicated eleven 'friendly visits' (six from China), 20 'official visits' (with official friendly visits); five 'unofficial visits' were made (North Korea making three visits), including Kim Il Sung in a 1982 'state visit' and so on. *The Pyongyang Times* (Sep. 4, 2010) headline "Kim Jong Il pays unofficial visit to China" highlighted the visit of Kim to China accompanied by Vice Chairman of North Korea Kim Yong Chun, Kim Ki Nam, Thae Jong Su, Kang Sok Ju, Jang Song Thaek, Hong Sok Hyong, Kim Yok Il, Kim Yang Gon, Choe Ryong Hae, Kim Phyong Hae and Pak to Chun. On the Chinese side was Hu Jintao, accompanied by Ling Juhua, Dai Bingguo, Wang Jiarui, Yang Jiechi, Zhang Ping, Chen Deming, Liu Jieyi, and Liu Hongcai. The news reported that Kim Jong Il focused on the North Korean friendship during this visit, highlighting the unchanged ties despite the passage of time and generation. *The Pyongyang Times* reflects Hu Jintao's friendly relationship with North Korea. This period opened many doors for trade and commerce, education, and exchanging ideas and culture between the two states.

The delegations between the DPRK and PRC during the 1950s included 35 visits to China and 44 to North Korea, of which Kim Il Sung accompanied six essential visits. Social constructivists claim it as inter-subjectivity, where a shared understanding is developed among individuals whose interaction is based on shared interests that form their communication. This inter-subjectivity provides the platform for communication and supports each other in extending their understanding of new information and activities. Thus, knowledge of 'friendship,' 'partners,' or 'brotherhood' is derived from cultural interactions. This construction of knowledge is influenced by inter-subjectivity formed by cultural and historical factors of the community.

7 Document No. 1. Telegram from Zhou Enlai to Bulganin), (Source: Jianguoyilai Zhou Enlaiwengao (Zhou Enlai's Manuscripts since the Founding of the PRC), vol. 2, Zhonggongzhongyangwenxianyanjiushi (CPC Central Historical Documents Research Office) and Zhongyangdang'anguan (Central Archives), eds., (Beijing: Zhongyangwenxianchubanshe, 2008: 299-300. Translated by Jingxia Yang and Douglas Stiffler), NKIDP e-Dossier no. 9, April 13, 1950. URL www.wilsoncenter.org/nkidp (accessed: 20.09.2018).

The Korean War came to an end with the signing of an armistice on July 27, 1953, between the US, China, North Korea, and South Korea. However, it also marked a victory for the “blood brothers,” giving meaning to their social bonding. In his New Year message, Kim Il Sung addressed “all men and officers of the Chinese volunteer units” as ‘blood brothers.’⁸ His New Year message was widely broadcast from January 1-9, 1951.⁹ Likewise, the International Women’s Day message was addressed to leaders such as Stalin, Mao, and Kim Il Sung with heartfelt gratitude for the support and pledge, culminating in the final victory.¹⁰ Thus, leader’s images were portrayed as heroic symbols with a connection to each other cultures in the forms of “Beijing Operas” (*yangbanxi*) in the PRC and “revolutionary operas” (*hukmyung kageuk*) in the case of the DPRK (Kim, 2005, pp. 2-3). Mustapha Fersi (1983), in his work published from Pyongyang (the capital of North Korea), highlights the excerpt of Kim Il Sung’s interview with the Xinhua News Agency on April 23, 1981. In his own words, Kim says, “North Korea and China are neighbors linked by the same mountain and river. For ages, people have been close to comrades in arms and class brothers whose destinies are bound to each other in the socialist revolution and the construction of an example of proletarian internationalism.” He further says, “No force on earth can destroy the great friendship between the North Korea and Chinese people, which is sealed in blood in the flames of arduous revolutionary struggle” (Fersi, 1983, pp. 207-8). When the state councilor and minister of Public Security of China Meng Jianzhu visited North Korea in February 2011, he wrote in the visitors’ book, “Kim Il Sung will live in the hearts of the Chinese people” (*The Pyongyang Times*, Feb. 19, 2011)

North Korea and China in the Present Context

Even in the present context, DPRK leader Kim Jong Un and PRC President Xi Jinping vowed to strengthen cooperation on the anniversary of their treaty of friendship, which was signed on July 11, 1961. This friendship treaty was earlier signed due to South Korea’s installation of a military government in May 1961, which North Korea speculated as South Korea’s

8 Far East Survey, North Korea: “Fight on to attain the Final Victory,” January 5, 1951. URL: <https://archive.org/details/KoreanWarCIA> (accessed: 15.02.2018).

9 Far East Survey, North Korea: “Fight on to attain the Final Victory” (Continued), January 18, 1951. URL: <https://archive.org/details/KoreanWarCIA>. (accessed: 17.02.2018)

10 Far East Survey, North Korea: Continuing Faith in Ultimate Victory. March 15, 1951. URL: <https://archive.org/details/KoreanWarCIA> (accessed: 17.02.2018)

stronger ties with the US (Hoshino & Hiriwa, 2020, p. 20). According to the Seoul-based Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA), bilateral trade increased between 2000 and 2015, whereas in 2014, it was at 6.86 billion USD (Albert, 2019).

The trade between North Korea and China has not been steady since the UN sanctions. However, a significant portion of North Korea's trade with third countries is hugely routed through China, which makes them rely on each other. Hoshino and Hiriwa (2020) further write that Beijing and Pyongyang have become more dependent on each other. They categorize dependency into four factors: national security, socialist ideology, traditional ties, and economic relations. On June 20, 2019, Xi Jinping visited Pyongyang, marking his first trip to North Korea. During his visit, he promised to build the new Yalu River Bridge, which was earlier promised by Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao in 2009 and stopped after only completing a 3 km span in 2015 at the cost of 350 million USD to China.¹¹

Despite North Korea getting economic benefits, the Pyongyang nuclear test in October 2006 moved Beijing to back the UN Security Council's decision on Resolution 1718 sanctions (ibid, 2019). With China's equal closer moves toward South Korea, continuous Pyongyang nuclear testing, etc., some have even predicted that North Korea and China no longer have "lips and teeth" relations.¹² Since the 2016 North Korea nuclear testing, South Korea became proactive in receiving THAAD (American anti-ballistic missile defense system) and worked close ties with the US. This was also because of China's reluctance to pressure North Korea while the former urged the international community to step in. China objected strongly when it viewed the deployment of THAAD in South Korea, which was seen as a threat to the Korean peninsula (Hoshino & Hiriwa, 2020, p. 26). This further assisted in continuing the ties' historical legacy in the geopolitical scenario.

Analysis of the Korean War

The Korean War is not just a part of political history; many war historians are still interested in socio-cultural factors and remember it

¹¹ Wertz, D., China-North Korea Relations, The National Committee on North Korea. Nov. 2019. URL: <https://www.ncnk.org/resources/briefing-papers/all-briefing-papers/china-north-korea-relations> (accessed: 4.10.2021)

¹² Wen, P. and Shepherd, C. 'Lips and teeth' no more as China's ties with North Korea fray, Reuters, September 8, 2017. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-missiles-china-idUSKCN1BJoIN> (accessed: 27.01.2022)

as psychological warfare, which further constructed the ideas of cultural relations (Hong, 2018, pp. 244-245). Both North and South Korea circulated approximately 2.5 million propaganda leaflets or flyers during the Korean War, reflecting the views of cultural-historical connections, but this is also another part of 'ideational' studies. Hong (2018) asserts that it was the first time the US army met Communist propaganda, which led multidisciplinary scholars to investigate the Korean War history and DPRK and PRC ties (ibid). Furthermore, earlier research, including governmental reports, has provided significant information about psychological warfare, though most of it is from Western perspectives, primarily from the United States (Kim & Haley, 2018, p. 938). Others who studied from a cultural perspective understood that the communist propaganda was far better than the UN propaganda. Chung (2004) divided the information offered in the Korean War propaganda into two broad categories: i) personal interests and ii) politics and ideologies. This earlier research provides some insight into Korean War propaganda regarding its themes. Schneider and Ingram (1993) assert that social constructions influence the policy agenda, tools, and rationale that legitimizes policy choices. They claim that communists tried to focus more on building their soldiers' faith and staying focused. At the same time, the UN propaganda centered more on presenting information of their superiority based on their advanced weapons (ibid).

From the *Pyongyang Times*, through the lens of constructivism, one can see that the relations between North Korea and China are seen as socially constructed. Social constructivism illustrates the social reality as those 350 Chinese nuclear weapons are less threatening to North Korea than five American THAAD acquired by South Korea. These reflect that it is not about the nuclear weapon or ballistic missile (material power) but rather by giving meaning to the material structure (ideational structure). In this view, the social relationship between North Korea and China and the US and South Korea is perceived in the shared understanding (inter-subjectivity) based on their interactions. Thus, it shows that nuclear weapons or missiles do not have meaning unless we understand them through social context, and it changes over time depending upon the ideas and beliefs of an actor.

This agency and structure are mutually constructed, which implies that structure influences agency and agency influences structure. From the lens of constructivism, the social reality of "lips and teeth relations" or "blood brothers" between North Korea and China represents the inter-subjective structure (shared ideas and beliefs of both states), where North Korea and China are the actors who can change the existing structure or social relationship of friendship. This change depends upon the beliefs and ideas

of States. This belief system is, however, constructed constantly through the cultural industry. For example, the *Pyongyang Times* (Aug. 28, 2010) reports that the Chinese businessman Zhang Joangrong, who was working in North Korea, noticed three Korean girls drifting near the seashore of Rason City (Kwanbuk region of North Korea). He and his friend Yuan Xinwang rushed to rescue the girls but unfortunately lost their own lives. This incident marked Zhang as a heroic figure in North Korea and praised the legacy of North Korea and China's friendship from generation to generation. In North Korea, this friendship content is called young chains (Korean-Chinese friendship); in China, this relationship is called the "youyi or Kunshan" (PRC-DPRK ties). The role of ideas is crucial in constructing social life, and it is centrally concerned with the social rather than the material (Cho, 2009, p. 79). The history of the Chinese soldiers in the Korean War is continuously remembered through postal stamps issued in North Korea. The State Stamp Bureau issued official stamps marking the 60th anniversary of Chinese people's volunteers in the Korean War to keep the two sides' history alive (*The Pyongyang Times*, Sept. 18, 2010). The construction of the Sino-North Korean Friendship Bridge at the Yalu River between North Korea and China sets another symbolic example of a constructed image of friendship. This place bustles with the fast-growing traffic of goods and raw materials between the two countries. This bridge connects the city of Dandong (former Andong), China's border town in Liaoning Province, and Sinuiju, one of North Korea's northernmost towns. Others commemorate symbolic points, like Pyongyang's 'Friendship Tower' (Uuitap). Its primary function is to keep it as a war memorial dedicated to the Chinese martyrs who fought in the Korean War. Inside this thirty-meter-high granite tower, the memorial has kept the records of 22,700 fallen Chinese soldiers. Social Constructivism asserts that "war" is a social construct phenomenon. This means that actors can maneuver warfare by influencing the agent structure system (Binding 2017: 19). This view differs from the realist view, which argues that anarchical structure determines the behavior of states. Constructivists argue that "anarchy is what states make of it," and it depends on the meaning that actors assign to it.

The identities and interests of actors are other central factors in relations between North Korea and China. Constructivism argues that identities are created through social interaction with other actors and constitute interests and actions. The identity of a small state implies a set of interests that are different from the identity of a more significant state. Suppose the tiny state's focus is on survival. In that case, the more significant state is concerned with influence over it in political, economic, and military affairs (Theys 2018: 2). During the 'Chinese Civil War' (1927-1949), between the Chinese Communist

Party (CCP) and the Nationalists, 100,000 ethnic Korean residents were persuaded to join the Chinese Communist forces, where they served as a strategic supporting base to the CCP in Manchuria. The 156th, 164th, and 166th divisions of the best combat units of China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) were mainly composed of these ethnic Korean soldiers who engaged in the battle. Thus, identities are also constructed with the engagement of various actors based on their interests and interactions.

Others, like the social norm, are equally important to social constructivism. Social norms play an essential part in shaping identities. In other words, State identities and interests are shaped by norms that imply preferences and consequent actions (Hopf, 1998, p. 175). State identity must comply with the norms social constructivists call 'logic of appropriateness,' believing that their behaviors are appropriate. According to social constructivism, relevant states must adopt these norms and be internalized in their practices. For example, the Korean Central News Agency is a state-run media outlet in North Korea. It was established on December 5, 1946, and has continually played an essential role in supporting its regime. Similarly, Chinese news outlets, such as Xinhua Agency and People's Daily Online, are run by the military government and, at the same time, are known for being highly paid for their work. The state runs official newspapers in North Korea, such as the Workers Party Newspaper (Minju Choson) (Oh & Hassing, 2000, pp. 4-12). Closely examining through content analysis, the *Pyeongyang Times* (from June 2010 to June 2011) shows 16 headlines dedicated to Kim Il Sung and 25 headlines praising the relations between North Korea and China during the Korean War. The fine arts and photo exhibition artists have reported the most creative practices in their dedication to their leaders, Mao and Kim. This newspaper is thought-provoking regarding foreign relations objectives, as the state continually articulates the idea of "superiority" or "allies" as propaganda to safeguard its interests. It indicates that propaganda constructs ideas and becomes reality when they are accepted by society. In international politics, propaganda is usually directed to target audiences of opinion leaders (Newman, 1951, p. 60). The word "propaganda" (*Xuan Quan*) itself does not necessarily carry the same negative connotation in Chinese culture but is seen as an authored-centered approach (West, 1992, p. 386). Thus, the interflows of ideas shaped by the state media environment and through this representation into everyday interaction simultaneously construct the social reality. The case of North Korean devoted relations has thus been successful and survived in the history of world politics.

Conclusion

The ideational factors between North Korea and China were essential in creating state identity and cooperation throughout the Korean War. The “ideational factors” (culture and identity), which are opposed to the “materialist” (power and technology), stress the role of ideas and identity in giving meaning to the material structures. The Social Constructivist sees shared knowledge and national identity in North Korean relations as distinct due to their shared ideas rather than material factors. The cultural values rooted in Confucius’s ideas, common ‘interest’ to stand against imperialism, the adoption of communist ideology by both Mao Zedong and Kim Il Sung, and the perceived image of “blood-brothers” throughout the Korean War shaped the two countries’ friendship to an extraordinary level.

It is not only the distribution of power and wealth and geographical conditions that explain state behavior but also ideas, identities, and norms. Anarchy and the distribution of power are insufficient to tell us which. For example, China’s military power had a different structural significance for North Korea than for South Korea despite their structural positions. North Korea’s missiles had a different significance for China than for the US. Power distribution may impact state calculations, but how it does so is determined by the inter-subjective understanding and expectation of the distribution of knowledge that comprises their conception of self and others. Assuming North Korea and South Korea decide that they are the actual blood brothers, the Korean War is over. The collective meanings constitute the structure around which we organize our actions. Such shared understanding also plays out domestically, affecting foreign policy and decision-making.

Since the end of the Cold War, North Korea has stood as a buffer state for China, and it is the only country in Northeast Asia to be known as more than a partner. This buffer state lies between China and the US alliances with South Korea and Japan. Constructivism distinguishes between the actual international situation and what important actors knew then. The behavior of multiple states can be different at one time, or the behavior of one state can be different at different times. The North Korean issue looks different from Beijing’s eyes than it does from Washington’s. China, along with the US, does not prefer a nuclear North Korea, but Chinese strategic interests are different from the United States’ objectives. Instead of the US hegemony in Northeast Asia, China is more concerned about the regime’s survival, which is run by the family legacy of the Kim dynasty in North Korea after the Kim Il Sung era. As reality is subjective, the state-controlled media in North Korea and China will continue to create camaraderie through cultural industries, reenergizing

their citizens' ideas, interests, and ideology from generation to generation.

However, Social Constructivism stresses that symbolic “blood brothers” or “lips and teeth” relations between North Korea and China are not fixed but “subject to change.” China has shown more interest in cultivating critical economic relations with South Korea than rejuvenating its ideological partnership with North Korea. China also stood against North Korea during its nuclear tests in 2006 and approved the UNSC Resolution sanctions, which marked the decline in the relationship until Kim Jong Un visited Beijing. A tipping point exists between each stage. Some norms failed to gain traction, and others never emerged from the emergent stage. Others begin to cascade but lose momentum and are never operationalized. North Korea and China remembered brotherhood in October 2019, which led both countries again to celebrate the 70th year of “invincible friendship.”

Thus, the norm life cycle continues with their growth and influence. The norms emerge when individual actors promote ideas about how the international system should function and what it ought to be. Through persuasion, they can continue other actors' eventual states of the importance of those norms, such as “eternal friendship.” This leads to the cascade when more and more actors adopt the norm and behave as though it is true. The region is that they seek to enhance their legitimacy, or a state leader may desire to be seen as acting on a topic of importance on the international stage or the internal or external pressure on stage to confirm it. North Korea and China behave according to the principles outlined in the norms. China has always been a supporter of North Korea in economic aid, and North Korea has always backed China in terms of sovereignty and territorial issues. China aspires to be the next superpower, while North Korea has fallen behind and is constantly fighting for survival. However, as long as the norms continue, North Korea and China's “blood-brother” relations will remain manufactured within the construct of knowledge, which is still unique in the socio-political history of the 21st century.

References

- Andreasen, R. O. (2000), Biological Reality or Social Construct?, *Philosophy of Science*, 67, 653-666.
- Albert, E. (June 25, 2019), The China-North Korea Relationship, Council on Foreign Relations. URL: <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/china-north-korea-relationship>
- Binding, M. (2017), “The Social Construction of War,” *Canadian Military*

Journal, 18 (1), 16-22.

- Corrado, J. (2021), Rethinking Intelligence Failure: China's Intervention in the Korean War, *International Journal of Intelligence and Counter Intelligence*, 0, 1-21.
- Chung, Y. W. (2004), Leaflets and the nature of the Korean War as psychological warfare. *The Review of Korean Studies*, 7 (3), 91-116.
- Cho, Y. C. (2009), "Conventional and Critical Constructivist Approaches to National Security: An Analytical Survey, *The Korean Journal of International Relations*, 49 (3), 75-102.
- Cho, S. (Dec. 21, 2021), China and North Korea: A New Peak of Comradeship, Italian Institute for International Political Studies. URL: <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/china-and-north-korea-new-peak-comradeship-32716>
- Dwivedi, S. S. (2012), North Korea-China Relations: An Asymmetric Alliance, *North Korea Review*, 8 (2), 76-93.
- Finnemore, M., & Sikkink, K. (2001), Taking stock: The constructivist research program in international relations and comparative politics, *Annual Review of Political Science*, 4, 391-416.
- Freeden, M. (2006), "Ideology and Political Theory," *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 11 (1), 3-22.
- Fersi, M. (1983), *The Sun in the East*, Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House.
- Foreign Languages Publishing House (2008), *Kim Il Sung: With the Century*, Excerpt (2), Pyongyang, Korea.
- Hoshino, M. and Hiraiwa, S. (2020), Four factors in the "special relationship" between China and North Korea: a framework for analyzing the China-North Korea Relationship under Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-un, *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies*, 9 (1), 18-28.
- Hildebrandt, T. (2003), Introduction to 'Uneasy allies: fifty years of China-North Korea relations': special report. *Asia Program Special Reports* (115). Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington D.C.
- Hong, S. C. (2018), Propaganda leaflets and Cold War frames during the Korean War, *Media, War & Conflict*, 11 (2), 244-264.
- Hopf, T. (1998), The promise of constructivism in international relations theory, *International Security*, 23 (1), 171-200.
- Horton, H. (2020), "North and South Korea: Division by constructions," Honors Thesis, University of Tennessee, Chattanooga.

- Jung, H. (2019), *The Evolution of Social Constructivism in Political Science: Past to Present*, SAGE Open, Pp. 1-10. First Published Feb. 27, 2019. URL: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2158244019832703>
- Kim, I. P. (1975), *Communist Politics in North Korea*, New York: Praeger Publishers.
- Kim, S. J. (2003) "The Economic Status and Role of Ethnic Koreans in China" in *The Korean Diaspora in the World Economy* (Edited by C. Fred Bergsten and Inbom Chol), Institute for International Economics: Washington D. C.
- Kim, S. Y. (2005), "Revolutionizing the family: a comparative study on the filmed propaganda performances of the People's Republic of China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, 1966-1976", Thesis (Ph.D.), Northwestern University.
- Kim, S. and Haley, E. (2018), Propaganda strategies of Korean War-era leaflets, *International Journal of Advertising*, 37 (6), 937-957.
- Kwon, S. (2010). "State building in North Korea: from a 'self-reliant' to a 'military-first' state." *Asian Affairs*, 34 (3), 286-296.
- Kwon, Heonik (2010), North Korea Politics of Long Going, *Critical Asian Studies*, Vol. 42 (1), 3-22.
- Kwon, Heonik (2013), The Korean War and Sino-North Korean Friendship, *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 11 (32), No. 4, August 12, 2013. URL: <http://www.newfocusintl.com> (Accessed on 12 July 2013).
- Katzenstein, P. et al. (1998), International Organization at Fifty: Exploration and Contestation in the Study of World Politics, *International Organization*, 52 (4), 645-685.
- Lee, I. S. (ed.) (1995), *North Korea, the Land that Never Changes: Before and After Kim Il Sung*. Seoul: Naewoe Press.
- Newman, R. T. (1951), Propaganda: An Instrument of Foreign Policy, *Columbia Journal of International Affairs*, 5 (2), 56-64.
- Nigel, T and Peter Abbott (1986), *The Korean War, 1950-53*, Osprey Men-at-Arms series No. 174, Great Britain: Reed International Books Limited.
- Oh, K. D. and Hassing, R. C. (2000), "North Korea Through the Looking Glass," *Brooking Institution Press*, Washington DC.
- Startt, J. D. and Sloan, W. D. (2003), *Historical methods in mass communication*, Northport, AL: Vision Press.
- Slaughter, A. M. (2011), "International Relations, Principal Theories." *Max Planck Encyclopedia of Public International Law*, 2011. URL: https://scholar.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/slaughter/files/722_

intlrelprincipaltheories_slaughter_20110509zg.pdf.

- Schneider, A. and Ingram, H. (1993), Social Construction of Target Populations: Implications for politics and policy, *American Political Science Review*, 87 (2), 334-347.
- The Pyongyang Times (Jun. 19, 2010), 'Korean performance holds Chinese audience spellbound.' No. 25 (2,591), Pyongyang, Democratic People's Republic of Korea.
- The Pyongyang Times (Aug. 28, 2010), 'Chinese risks his life to rescue Korean girls' No. 35 (2,601), Pyongyang, Democratic People's Republic of Korea.
- The Pyongyang Times (Sep. 4, 2010), 'Kim Jong Il pays an unofficial visit to China.' No. 36 (2,602), Pyongyang, Democratic People's Republic of Korea.
- The Pyongyang Times (Sep. 18, 2010), 'DPRK, Chinese university presidents meet.' No. 38 (2,604), Pyongyang, Democratic People's Republic of Korea.
- The Pyongyang Times (Sep. 18, 2010), 'Stamps feature Chinese soldiers' entry into the Korean war.' No. 38 (2,604), Pyongyang, Democratic People's Republic of Korea.
- The Pyongyang Times (Feb. 19, 2011), 'DPRK, Chinese university presidents meet.' No. 38 (2,604), Pyongyang, Democratic People's Republic of Korea.
- The Pyongyang Times (Feb. 19, 2011), 'Chinese public security minister visits Pyongyang.' No. 38 (2,604), Pyongyang, Democratic People's Republic of Korea.
- Theys, S. (Feb. 23, 2018), *Introducing Constructivism in International Relations Theory*, E-IR Foundations. URL: <https://www.e-ir.info/2018/02/23/introducing-constructivism-in-international-relations-theory/>
- Wendt, A. (1992), *Anarchy is what States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics*, International Organization, Vol. 46 (2): 391-425.
- Wendt, A. (1999) *Social Theory of International Politics* First Edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- West, P. (1992), The Korean War and the Criteria of Significance in Chinese Popular Culture, *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations*, 1 (4), 383-408.
- Yoon, S. H. and Lee, S. O. (2013), From old comrades to new partnerships: dynamic development of economic relations between China and North Korea, *The Geographical Journal*, 179 (1): 19-31.

ABSTRACT

From time to time, North Korea and China's relations have been analyzed by different scholars as a byproduct or satellite state of China. We often debate power, war, and allies from a realist understanding. However, the constructivist approach has not been addressed much. The significant developments during the Korean War were symbolic, shared ideas, and the creation of identities, which were crucial to understanding the state's choice and preference in foreign policy decision-making. In this article, I draw on the work of the constructivist approach to argue the North Korean and China relations during the Korean War. In this way, the constructivist explanation can be suitable for explaining the dynamics of North Korean and China ties because they look at the history and social dynamics within states for its outcome.

KEYWORDS

North Korea, China, Korean War

Received on September 9, 2024

Accepted on October 14, 2025