Jonathan D. Pollack, Senior Fellow of the John L. Thornton China Center at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C. addressed the final session of this semester’s Critical Issues seminar series with his presentation on the North Korea-China relationship. Pollack discussed whether the new leadership under Xi Jinping might be changing its policy and stance towards its neighbor, as well as the long-term challenges North Korea presents for China and the world. Evidence suggests that Xi may be turning away from China’s “status quo” relationship with the DPRK and taking a less tolerant stance towards the hermit country, attempting to limit its more disruptive actions.

North Korea is in many ways an “implausible state.” With its long-term isolation and de-industrialization, North Korea has been the subject of dire predictions for its future, yet the state persists. It retains the capacity and means to follow its own path and defy outside expectations. Many outsiders have viewed China, as a former ally of the DPRK, as having more power to constrain the country than others. China also remains the only major power with any meaningful relationship with North Korea. In reality, however, China appears up until this juncture unwilling to resolve underlying contradictions in its DPRK policy. The Chinese may insist that they “will not allow trouble on their doorstep,” yet appear to do little to prevent the country from engaging in its more challenging actions. Can this status quo persist? Or, is China re-calibrating its relationship with North Korea?

The historical context of the China-DPRK relationship provides an important backdrop to current events in the field. With the end of the Soviet Union, many expected China to step up in support of the DPRK, but this did not happen. Deng Xiaoping did take Kim Il-sung on a tour of early economic reforms in China, but relations soured between the two countries following the Rangoon bombing, for which Deng held Kim Jong-il responsible. The 1990s were a period of long isolation for North Korea, but beginning in the 2000s Kim Jong-il began visiting China on a regular basis. Following the North Korean leader’s stroke in 2008, China began preparing for a post-Kim Jong-il era, with Hu Jintao exploring the possibility of a new economic and advisory relationship with the DPRK. Chinese leaders calculated that while the DPRK remained a difficult state, with the passage of power there would be internal pressure for reform and change.

More recently, however, unlike with many other neighboring countries, China is not being especially assertive toward North Korea, even as it more openly criticizes North Korean behavior. China’s reluctance to fully confront its difficult neighbor in part stems from its experience during the Korea War, as well as institutional constituencies in the party and military that may limit the leadership’s ability to interfere. China also demonstrates wariness about the prospect of a democratic, unified peninsula with a close relationship with the U.S. Nevertheless, the DPRK’s behavior has in many ways become more troublesome under Kim Jong-un.
China’s worries with North Korea include fears that internal conflict in the North could lead to international incidents. Kim Jong-un has shown a remarkable lack of responsiveness to external pressure and seems to be following his own agenda. China has also been forced to acknowledge that North Korea’s nuclear weapon capabilities are not symbolic – the country fully intends to pursue the development of an operational nuclear capability.

Against the backdrop of this historical “status quo” orientation to relations with the DPRK and growing concerns over the leadership of Kim Jong-un, China’s recent actions suggest a measure of change in orientation. While continuing to maintain trade and investment in North Korea, China has allowed its economic activities to reach a plateau, deferring any major acceleration of economic projects. China has also curtailed high-level exchanges of officials. Senior officials visiting the North are principally from the Foreign Ministry rather than party organizations, demonstrating that China seeks a government-to-government rather than “special” relationship with the North. Kim Jong-un has never visited China, an omission which stands in stark contrast to the state visit of South Korea President Park Geun-hye to China and her warm personal relationship with Xi Jinping. Chinese publications have increased their criticisms of the DPRK, especially in the aftermath of the execution of Jang Song-thaek. These actions suggest a measured dissociation from North Korea behavior, especially with its continued pursuit of nuclear weapons and its threats directed against South Korea, and an attempt by China’s leadership to forge a new path in its relations.

Long-term challenges remain for China in its relations with the DPRK. South Korea’s growing relationship with China and the possibility of reunification between the two Koreas may create additional complexity in Sino-American relations. While supporting the “peaceful, independent reunification of Korea,” China may object to an immediate neighbor maintaining a close security relationship with the United States. In the absence of unification, North Korea’s increasing military capabilities might further embolden the North, thereby undermining Chinese interests. As a consequence, Xi may ultimately be more prepared to act on these challenges than his predecessors.