In China and North Korea, natural disasters have long been popularly understood to portend dynastic transitions and, more recently, regime changes. Even today, environmental catastrophes can raise doubts as to the stability of each nation’s political order. Like ruling authorities of other states, both the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Korean Workers Party (KWP) attempt to enhance their legitimacy during emergencies through a variety of different mechanisms. However, unlike the CCP, the KWP has harnessed the potential of disasters as vehicles for international communication, capitalizing on these events’ ability to momentarily remove the barriers that isolate it from the West.

The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) regime’s identity as a failed system operating in a hostile international environment has long alienated nearly all of its potential food donors at times when it has most needed their help. For example, during the 1995 North Korean famine, Japan and South Korea combined contributed more than 450,000 MT of food aid after North Korea’s 1995 floods, but Pyongyang’s inhospitable welcome of its adversaries’ food ensured this generosity was not repeated the following year when the famine reached its deadly climax.

However, in recent years, the DPRK’s belligerent attitude toward external aid has begun to change and it has started to welcome humanitarian agencies within its borders. This policy shift is reflected not only in the evolving way in which the DPRK interacts with the outside world, but is also evident in the changing skillsets possessed by DPRK officials and in the perceptions and experiences of DPRK party members.¹ The 2007 Six-party talks’ agreement mirrors this attitude change. After the Talks in February, it became widely known that the DPRK welcomed development aid from multilateral agencies and that the international financial institutions (IFIs) were quietly conducting seminars with a
variety of DPRK officials on the requirements of IFI membership, its development philosophy, its modus operandi and its management skillsets.

Compared to many other countries, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has a particularly significant interest in the DPRK’s natural disasters and famines, which can trigger international incidents that affect its own citizens, including popular unrest. At the same time, while it is to China’s benefit to ensure the continuity of the North Korean state, the Chinese government has made it clear that the scope of its internal financial reforms can leave little room for the waste of budgetary resources on aid that might be needed indefinitely and that it expects North Korea to reform its own economy and agricultural system. However, as yet, from the PRC perspective, true reform is something that Pyongyang has failed to initiate. Therefore, China has found itself performing a delicate balancing act, weighing the short-term benefits of stability that its aid contributes to the region against the insidious long-term effects of continued support, which further retards the development of a productive agricultural and economic system and endangers the regime in the long run.

The PRC’s search for equilibrium between sought-for regional stability and North Korean domestic reform is reflected in its policy on food aid to the DPRK. Analyzing China’s policy toward North Korea through the lens of China’s approach to food aid toward that country illustrates how Chinese policy reflects an interplay of strategic considerations related to China’s (and the region’s) interests and emotional considerations by China toward North Korea. The latter—emotional considerations—emerge from China’s understanding that it has a “special responsibility” toward North Korea. This responsibility is evident in the deep respect China demonstrates for the legitimacy of the DPRK government and its commitment to making all of its policies toward the peninsula consistent with this perspective. At the same time, China must balance this responsibility with its interests, which include its relationships with other countries in the region, regional stability, and its own economic stability and growth. This strategic and emotional perspective shapes China’s efforts to keep North Korea politically and economically stable.

**Historical Context**

North Korea was highly successful in securing foreign aid for its post-Korean War reconstruction. In the immediate post-war period, the Soviet Union, China and other socialist countries provided large-scale aid to North Korea that, in total, reached one-third of North Korea’s financial budget for 1954. The aid came in the form of labor, materials and goods, reconstruction and building plants, civil construction projects, technology transfers and the education of specialists and students. Such support played a vital role in North Korea’s economic recovery. On November 23, 1954, China and North Korea signed the “Sino-Korean Economic and Cultural Cooperation Agreement.” This agreement included the cancellation of North Korea’s war-time debt, which amounted to RMB 729 million (USD 362.5 million), and included a gift by China of RMB 800 million Chinese (USD 400 million) in aid for the period between 1954