



# North Korea-China Relations and the Role of China in the COVID-19 Crisis

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## New Trends in North Korea-China Relations during the COVID-19 crisis

The leaders of North Korea and China are utilizing 'verbal messages' as a new mode of communication in order to portray the robustness of and willingness to develop their bilateral relations. Although North Korea is undergoing economic difficulties due to sanctions, it closed its border with China—its most important trade partner—on January 22. Hence the exchange in letters between the two leaders displays their prioritization of developing North Korea-China relations even in the face of the COVID-19 crisis. However, when looking closely at the communication methods and contents between the two leaders, there also seems to be a subtle difference in their approach.

The verbal correspondence was initiated by Chairman Kim Jong-un, to whom President Xi Jinping responded. Chairman Kim Jong-un sent a consolation letter to Xi Jinping regarding the spread of COVID-19 on February 1, and congratulated China's quarantine efforts within a verbal letter three months following, on May 7. Considering North Korea's insistence on "self-reliance and head-on strategy" after the failure of Hanoi Summit, this could be interpreted as a challenging signal for cooperation with China. In the correspondence, Chairman Kim actively expressed his intimacy by using words including "members of one family", and "flesh and blood."

President Xi Jinping has engaged in "telephone diplomacy" with leaders worldwide since the outbreak of COVID-19. However, North Korea is the only case in which he has communicated

through verbal messages. Based on China's announcement made on the official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, President Xi Jinping is believed to have responded to Chairman Kim's letter as a courtesy. The spokesman of the Ministry has only provided basic responses such as "China and North Korea are close neighbors, and we will work with North Korea to advance bilateral relations."

Furthermore, Xi Jinping also mentioned attentive statements such as "China stands ready to strengthen cooperation with the DPRK to fight COVID-19 and provide support in line with the DPRK's needs within its capability." He also stated that "Comrade Chairman, under your leadership, the party and the people of the DPRK have adopted a host of measures against the virus and achieved positive outcomes. I am pleased and heartened by your efforts," confirming the success of North Korea's quarantine efforts. At the same time, the statement also sends an important message apart from that related to quarantine. For instance, Xi Jinping emphasized the "enhance strategic communication" between the two countries that "take forward China-DPRK relations in the new era" and especially its "contributions to peace, stability, development and prosperity of the region." Although North Korea and China agree their need to develop their bilateral relations, they pursue different approaches: while North Korea focuses on bilateral relations, China shows subtle differences by seeing the bilateral relations within a larger framework of regional stability and international contributions.

### **The Bilateral Strategy of "Same Bed, Different Dreams" as Seen through the Outbreak of COVID-19**

There is a subtle difference in the motives of North Korea and China in regard to the development of their bilateral relations. What North Korea immediately needs to do is to resume dialogue with the U.S. and overcome its economic difficulties by easing U.S. sanctions and hostile policies towards North Korea. North Korea sends cooperation signals to China in order to achieve these two purposes. In other words, it seems necessary for North Korea to open its border with China and resume bilateral exchanges to overcome its urgent economic difficulties. Although North Korea preemptively closed its border with China due to the COVID-19 outbreak, the North Korean economy has faced grave difficulties with the prolonged pandemic. Due to its closed border, North Korea's trade level with China decreased by 91 percent in March compared to that of the previous year. North Korea is also reportedly facing major difficulties with Pyongyang residents stocking up on grocery. Resumption of bilateral trade with China is hence a priority concern.

In addition, U.S.-North Korea dialogues have been stalled for a while, and the possibility of resuming dialogue before the U.S. presidential election decreases with time. Moreover, North Korea has already given up its hopes for South Korea's role in changing the tough stance of the U.S. Under these circumstances, North Korea has high hopes towards China, its traditional ally, as an alternative method for persuading the U.S. to return to dialogue. Conflicts between the U.S. and China are escalating as the two countries are engaged in a fierce battle over the responsibility of the COVID-19 crisis. Therefore, under these circumstances, North Korea is able to draw international attention towards itself by developing its bilateral relations with China and provoking the Trump administration. On the other hand, China's support and cooperation are also important for North Korea considering how difficult it would be to resume dialogue with the U.S. following its presidential election.

On the other hand, the Xi Jinping administration has not changed much in its management of North Korea, China's strategic buffer, in terms of its basic policy stance towards the Korean Peninsula; such stance includes "stabilization through the maintenance of the status quo on the Korean Peninsula" and "balanced diplomacy on two Koreas." Xi Jinping's response letter to Chairman Kim also mentioned "peace and stability" out of courtesy. China's North Korea policy and North Korea-China relations, of course, are not only concerned with stability and continuity. There are situations and variables that lead to tactical changes. For instance, China has shown tactical changes when there have been unexpected changes on the Korean Peninsula, including shifts in U.S.-North Korea relations and inter-Korean relations, as well as situations in which it interprets North Korea as suffering crises in maintaining its regime.

Such characteristics of China's North Korea policy and North Korea-China relations can be seen through patterns in bilateral summits. An annual summit between the two countries lies at the background of the special bilateral relations between North Korea and China. However, the regularity by which the two countries held summits since the establishment of diplomatic ties between South Korea and China in 1992 has been broken in actuality. Nevertheless, due to the nature of North Korea and China's political systems, the summits still serve as an important barometer in determining the status of their bilateral relations.

For instance, China's economic aid to North Korea, which has been suspended since the establishment of South Korea-China diplomatic relations, has been resumed since 1995 when North Korea underwent major food shortages. The summit between North Korea and China also resumed for the first time in eight years in May 2000, just before the inter-Korean summit. In the run-up to the hereditary succession of Kim Jong-un, three summits were held in an unusual manner for a year

since May 2010 with Kim-Jong-il's visits to China. After Kim Jong-un took power, seven years passed without bilateral summits after which they were held five times within a year and a half time frame with the inter-Korean summit and the U.S.-North Korea summit in 2018. In short, China has had strategic communication with North Korea through summit talks to stabilize the situation on the Korean Peninsula and maintain China's influence while managing North Korea.

### **New Variables in North Korea-China Relations and the North Korean Nuclear Problem caused by the COVID-19 Crisis**

The North Korean regime is destabilizing in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis. Therefore, China should begin managing North Korea both directly or indirectly through economic aid to stabilize the North Korean regime. However, the current situation is complicated and uncertain for China to focus only on managing North Korea. Currently, China's internal situation is still difficult due to the COVID-19 crisis and U.S.-China tensions are rising with a low possibility for resumption in U.S.-North Korea bilateral talks. From China's point of view, strategic thinking has become inevitable due to new situations and complex and flexible variables.

China is actively promoting its activities related to the COVID-19 crisis such as sending medical supplies to 125 countries and conducting COVID-19 video conferences with 150 countries. However, aid to North Korea has not been officially mentioned. China appears to be in consideration of a complex strategy under new circumstances. First of all, it is difficult for North Korea to accept quarantine assistance from China when it claims to have succeeded in preventing COVID-19. China has taken into account North Korea's complex position. In addition, although quarantine aid may be humanitarian, China may refrain from sending aid since it does not wish to aggravate conflicts with the U.S. over the potential controversy of violating UN sanctions, especially when its tensions with the U.S. are high. Lastly, it is possible that in the current situation in which U.S.-China relations and North Korea-U.S. relations are volatile and uncertain, China may judge that the crisis in North Korea has not yet reached a critical point, and that the possibility of a high-intensity provocation by North Korea is comparatively low. If it is true that the Sino-North Korean border has partially opened and the New Yalu River Bridge constructions have resumed, China may have decided that it is necessary to cooperate with North Korea even on a limited basis to stabilize the North Korean regime and deter provocations.

Despite its relatively early recovery from the COVID-19 crisis, the Xi Jinping administration still has challenges to resolve. First of all, concerns remain over the spread of

COVID-19, and China faces the task of improving its national image, which has been damaged by its poor initial responses to the virus outbreak and responsibility over the origination of the “Wuhan virus.” In particular, as the basis for its communist legitimacy still lies in economic growth, China faces a difficult task of improving its economy, and doing so in a rapid manner.

Chinese leaders are historically aware that a regime crisis could occur when internal and external challenges overlap(內憂外患). Therefore, since China is currently unstable due to COVID-19, there is a high possibility that its focus will be on stabilizing the situation near its borders. In other words, for a considerable period of time, China will be wary of potential security instabilities originating from North Korea in order to stabilize the surrounding circumstances and resolve the economic difficulties raised by the COVID-19 crisis. Therefore, China will abstain from seeking an active and forward-looking role in resolving the North Korean nuclear issue if it is not an immediate cause of imminent security instabilities.

China has been prioritizing the “U.S. variable” in considering the North Korea nuclear problem. While China agrees with North Korea that the issue should be resolved through bilateral discussions between North Korea and the United States, China has sought to avoid conflicts with the U.S. due to North Korea nuclear problem. With the COVID-19 pandemic adding to U.S.-China competition and further halting denuclearization talks between the U.S. and North Korea, both China and North Korea have been highlighting each other’s traditional strategic values. North Korea is strategically important as a buffer zone for China, while China serves as a “back-up supporter” for North Korea. However, differences that the two countries pursue in their strategic purposes also limit North Korea and China from returning to their previous special relations. North Korea eventually needs the “China card” to push the U.S. back onto the negotiating table. For China, the incentive to stabilize North Korea as its buffer zone increases as its tensions with the United States aggravate. But on the other hand, it will still look towards avoiding increased tensions with the U.S. when it comes to North Korea and its nuclear issue.

### **Can the North Korean Nuclear Problem Call Forth a New ‘China Role’?**

With both U.S.-North Korean talks and developments in inter-Korean relations at a stalemate, there is a growing necessity for a new breakthrough in resolving the North Korean nuclear problem. With prolonged economic sanctions and the shutdown of Sino-North Korean borders, there have been rising concerns over whether North Korea will find its own breakthrough using high-stake provocations. With such uncertainty and instability, “China’s role” in the crisis will gain further

attention and serve as a feasible alternative. Cooperation has helped to restore South Korea-China relations and North Korea has also not been shy to lend a helping hand to China. As such, the South Korean government—faced with time constraints—has a growing expectation towards “China's role” in helping to resolve the North Korean nuclear problem.

However, South Korea has experienced problems caused by over-reliance on and over-negligence of the “role of China.” South Korea's over-reliance on China has raised concerns of its “inclination towards China,” causing negative impacts on South Korea-U.S. relations, and eventually leading to a deterioration in South Korea-China relations. On the other hand, overlooking China's role in midst of progress in U.S.-North Korean talks and inter-Korean discussions have also raised concerns that South Korea is “alienating China,” limiting China's necessary support towards South Korea. With high uncertainties in U.S.-China relations, North Korea-China relations, and inter-Korean relations, it is important to prioritize the improvement of South Korea's role in the long-run rather than over-rely on China's role based on short-term improvements in South Korea-China relations.

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