



## 60 years of the North Korea-China Treaty of Friendship and its implications in the present

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### 1. The establishment of the North Korea-China Treaty of Friendship and their relations

July 11, 2021 marks the 60th anniversary of the ‘North Korea-China Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance’(hereinafter referred to as the “Treaty of Friendship”). North Korea and China, which had essentially created a security alliance during the Korean War, officially consigned their alliance into writing with the Treaty of Friendship on July 11, 1961 during the Sino-Soviet split.

Although the Treaty of Friendship was created through the perception of the a common threat posed by capitalist countries such as South Korea, the United States and Japan, the North Korea-China Treaty of Friendship was signed against the backdrop of the Sino-Soviet split. At the time, China was in conflict with Russia and had border disputes with India. In an effort to secure its border, it reached out to North Korea and Vietnam to sign a friendship treaty. North Korea, which was receiving security assistance from both China and the Soviet Union, worried that neither country would help it as a result of the Sino-Soviet dispute and signed a treaty that included security cooperation with China.

At the beginning of the Sino-Soviet conflict, North Korea remained neutral and did not take either side and as a result signed a friendship treaty that included an article on security assistance with both the Soviet Union and China in July 1961. However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union,

the North Korea-Soviet Union treaty was replaced by the Treaty of Friendship, Good-Neighborly Relations and Cooperation (also called “the new friendship treaty”) in 2000. In the new treaty, the article on security assistance was deleted.

It is reasonable to view North Korea-China relations as a security alliance due to the North Korea-China Treaty of Friendship as the treaty contains an article on security cooperation and it is still in effect. Article II of the treaty deals with security cooperation, stating that “in the event during which one of the Contracting Parties is subjected to armed attack by any state or several states jointly and is thus involved in a state of war, the other Contracting Party shall immediately render military and other assistance by all means at its disposal.” Article VII of the treaty also says that the treaty will remain in force until both parties agree on its amendment or termination, ensuring that the treaty cannot be annulled by any one party.

However, there is not enough evidence to suggest that North Korea-China relations are asymmetric like general alliances between powerful and weak states. The relationship between North Korea and China is different from the typical model of asymmetric alliances where powerful and weak states exchange security assistance for autonomy. North Korea immediately began to strengthen its military strength after signing friendship treaties with the Soviet Union and China and announced ‘the independent line’ in 1966. North Korea especially made efforts to gain autonomy from China and stopped relying on China for security assistance after the Détente period in the 1970s, when tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union eased.

North Korea-China relations changed drastically after the end of the Cold War and especially after South Korea and China established diplomatic ties. These changes questioned the validity of the North Korea-China friendship treaty. When we take a closer look at the articles of the treaty, it becomes clear that both North Korea and China are violating the Treaty of Friendship.

For example, Article III states that “neither Contracting Party shall take part in any bloc or in any action or measure directed against the other Contracting Party” but this article was breached when China established diplomatic relations with South Korea. Also, both states agreed to cooperate with each other and exchange opinions on international issues as Article IV says that “the Contracting Parties will continue to consult with each other on all important international questions.” However, North Korea infringed this article when it acted on its own and continued its nuclear testing without consulting China. Both North Korea and China have criticized the other party for their transgressions but this did not influence either country to terminate the treaty.

After the changes in the North Korea-China ties after the end of the Cold War, the North Korea-China Treaty of Friendship transcended from the only thing that defined the two states’ bond into a

symbolic foundation of their cooperation. In other words, each article of the treaty is not strictly in effect nor is there any need for them to be observed at all costs.

## **2. China–North Korea relations under Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-un through 60 years of the Treaty of Friendship**

As mentioned above, the bond between North Korea and China as a security alliance weakened and both parties have lost trust in each other. However, friendly cooperation between the two states has continued up until 2021 through commemorating the anniversary of the North Korea-China Treaty of Friendship as the treaty was not modified or nullified for the past 60 years.

On July 11th on account of the 60th anniversary of the signing of the North Korea-China Treaty of Friendship, the leaders of North Korea and China exchanged congratulatory messages. Kim Jong-un, General Secretary of the Workers' Party of Korea, emphasized the changing international situation in his message by writing that “the international situation has been unprecedentedly complicated” and “hostile forces have become more desperate in their obstructive moves”, showing that the external environment surrounding North Korea has taken a turn for the worse. Both North Korea and China emphasized their great accomplishments, referring to the construction of socialism. Using phrases such as “[the treaty is] propelling the socialist cause of the two countries” and “comradely trust and militant friendship”, the two parties stressed their cooperation.

Kim also wrote in present tense that “the traditional North Korea-China friendship is gaining momentum and comprehensively developing onto a higher stage in all fields including politics, economy, military and culture”, reflecting that North Korea and China are becoming closer.

In his message, Chinese President Xi Jinping wrote that the “world is undergoing a great and rapid change unprecedented in 100 years”, referring to how China became a powerful nation in just 100 years after establishing the Chinese Communist Party and its current conflict with the United States. Xi Jinping also mentioned the Kim-Xi meetings, saying they helped “enrich the China-DPRK friendship in the new era and reached a series of important consensuses”.

President Xi also wrote about cooperation between the two states in the future tense in his letter, stating that he would “lift the friendly cooperation between the two countries to new levels so as to bring more benefits to the two countries and their people”, reflecting that they have yet to cooperate actively. The Chinese president’s congratulatory message focused more on the fact that North Korea and China have created a foundation for cooperative measures than measures actually taken so far.

As such, the exchange in congratulatory remarks shows that the two countries share the will to

defend socialism amidst the U.S.-China competition and that ‘strategic communication’ is smoothly taking place to this end. From this message, it is possible to conclude that North Korea-China cooperation has been bolstered after 2018.

### **3. The meaning of the North Korea-China friendship treaty in the era of U.S.-China competition**

The Biden administration’s policy towards China is to cooperate with allies to put more pressure on China. The U.S. and European countries reaffirmed their will to cooperate in the United States’ China policy at the NATO Brussels Summit in June and the G7 Summit in London. As more fingers point to China as the country responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic, the policy of the United States and the EU member states to pressure China is bearing fruit.

The international community’s attitude towards China is similar to that after China’s ‘June Fourth Incident’(Tiananmen Incident) in 1989. The United States and EU member states decreased economic ties with China and twisted its arm over human rights issues. In response, China chose to strengthen its relations with neighboring countries and intensified cooperation with North Korea as well.

Currently both Pyongyang and Beijing are worried that the ROK-U.S. alliance will become stronger as competition between the U.S. and China intensifies. China’s perception of the U.S. as a threat in the U.S.-China competition era makes room for cooperation between North Korea and China. Needless to say, security-related conflicts over North Korea’s nuclear program still exist among the two countries. However, it isn’t hard for either country to find common ground when it comes to their policies toward the U.S. for the benefit of their peoples. The more Washington raises issues over socialism and human rights infringements in China like the current situation in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, the more North Korea will emphasize its shared achievements with China, leading to even more room for the two socialist states to cooperate.

The North Korea-China Treaty of Friendship exists because it is beneficial for both countries when it comes to the Korea Peninsula. The treaty has not been modified or annulled for this same reason as well. As the U.S. and South Korea have no choice but to take into consideration that China may interfere in problems on the Korean Peninsula due to the friendship treaty, North Korea and China both claim that the treaty helps prevent armed conflict from breaking out and that maintaining the treaty contributes to safety on the peninsula. In other words, North Korea and China’s shared benefit from the friendship treaty is hindering the U.S. and South Korea from acting

unilaterally to deal with problems on the Korean Peninsula.

It is also China's objective to be able to justify managing North Korea's instability and intervene in the case of an emergency on the Korean Peninsula. This being the case, China will maintain the treaty even if the costs are high.

North Korea and China are maintaining the Treaty of Friendship while being vague about the validity of the treaty. There will always be tension and conflict in North Korea-China relations, but the two states can at least prevent the United States and South Korea from changing the situation on the Korean Peninsula as they wish. As such, it can be said that the North Korea-China Treaty of Friendship can be used to prevent passive conflicts on the Korean Peninsula and ensure that the two countries cooperate even a little during the U.S.-China competition era. ■

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