



## How “special” is the North Korea-China relationship? Epitomized by Shared Policy Goals, Dictated by Shared Ideology

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In understanding North Korea-China relations, one must be cautious not to overinterpret the underlying diplomatic rhetoric. Approaches calling for literary interpretations of such rhetoric must be avoided. For example, the change in how North Korean and Chinese head of states have referenced their bilateral relations—from “blood alliance” or “relationship forged in blood” to “traditional comradeship” or “traditional friendship”—does not signify that the special meaning and essence of their relationship has expired.

The essence and distinctiveness of the North Korean-Chinese bilateral relations are grounded upon the diplomatic and policy goals that they share as communist states. Their relationship is dominated by communist dogma, principles, and rules. As such, their approach on matters of peace and security on the Korean Peninsula—including the North Korean nuclear problem—is fundamentally different compared to that of South Korea. Therefore, it is important to analyze the ‘special relationship’ between North Korea and China in a political context and understand their working relations based on the dynamics of international politics. An accurate understanding about the foundation and buildup of North Korea-China relations is critical.

### *North Korea and China’s Shared Security Objectives*

North Korea and China share three security objectives. First is to get rid of U.S. presence in the region, which they consider their biggest security threat. Such policy—which is rooted in anti-imperialism—is still effective today as their greatest policy end goal in terms of security. In 1950,

Premier Zhou Enlai proclaimed that ‘the problems of Asia should be solved by Asians.’ President Xi Jinping reminded this statement again in 2014 as in the ‘New Asian Security Concept.’ The realization of such concept is based on the premise that United States’ influence, interference, intervention, and participation within the region be precluded. Second of all, North Korea and China have shared objectives with regard to resolving the nuclear issue. Both countries share the perspective that denuclearization should be achieved in exchange for a peace regime that prescribes to the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the Korean Peninsula and the end of the ROK-U.S. alliance. This is evident in how China has repackaged its adamant position since the first North Korea nuclear crisis by adopting phrases such as “double suspension (simultaneous cease to both ROK-U.S. joint military exercises and North Korean nuclear tests)” and “two-track (denuclearization in tandem with the creation of a peace regime).” Lastly, both countries wish to replace the armistice agreement into a peace treaty, which will lay the groundwork for dismissing U.S. military presence from East Asia. This aligns with North Korea and China’s strategic calculation of initially foregoing the problem of U.S. troops in Japan, and resolving the Taiwan issue as well as U.S. commitment to Taiwan’s defense.

### ***Misunderstandings about ‘Normal Relations’ between North Korea and China***

‘Normal Relations’ refer to state-to-state relations that function accorded to respected national interests. However, the peculiar political system and structure of North Korea and China prevent both countries from enjoying ‘normal relations.’ In so far as the two countries maintain a ‘party-state’ system and a communist form of government, their special relations will prevail. In this case, however, the special relations do not refer to ‘a blood-alliance forged in blood.’ Rather, it signifies a relationship shared by communist states and hence, one that is governed by the rules and principles of the two communist parties.

North Korea and China are not normal countries. They are ‘party-state’ governments in which the party reigns over the state. Therefore, unlike the case of “nation-states,” it is the party that governs and leads the state and its social institutions. Led by the party, the diplomatic relations forged between two communist countries are subject to party-to-party relations. Hence the relationship between the Chinese Communist Party and the Workers’ Party of Korea respectively directs the relationship between China and North Korea at the state and government level. Thus, in the diplomacy of communist countries, party-to-party relations are considered a higher concept than that of inter-government relations or inter-state relations.

However, we have a misconception that North Korea-China relations are evolving into

‘normal relations.’ In 2005, Chinese Premier Wu Yi emphasized that economic cooperation between North Korea and China ‘should be a market economy led by private sector corporations, based on market principles.’ This statement was upheld by Hu Jintao on August 2010 as the principles for North Korean-Chinese economic cooperation, under the slogan that bilateral economic cooperation would be ‘government-led, corporation-centered, market-operated, and mutually beneficial.’ Such principles were laid out with the belief that North Korea-China economic cooperation could not be managed solely by the party, and should be missioned by the government.

China’s independent sanctions against North Korea since 2013 in response to North Korea’s nuclear test also add to the popular misconception that bilateral relations are becoming ‘normal.’ In order to justify its decision, the Chinese Communist Party established in a Global Times editorial that sanctions is an inevitable measure in cases where: 1) Damages have been made to the environmental security of China’s northeastern region, 2) Threats have been placed on its ‘spacial advantage,’ 3) China’s ability to lead has been impaired or it has been averted from being led, and 4) China can no longer carry out the sanction within its own boundaries<sup>1</sup>. China’s actions show how the state attempts to utilize diplomacy to independently control its level of sanctions, in addition to the UN sanctions it already supports.

### ***Why North Korea-China relations cannot be normal relations***

North Korea-China relations cannot be normal due to the following three reasons. First of all, normal bilateral relations prerequisite the collapse of North Korea’s ‘party-state’ system or the separation of powers between the party and the state within China. Neither will happen as long as the communist regimes remain in power. Second of all, a transition to normal relations will mean the opening and reform of North Korea. In other words, it engenders an opportunity for the North’s ‘party-state’ system to transform if opening and reform means political reformation. This change towards a normal state may entail either a transition from a one-party system to a multi-party system, or the displacement of the communist ideology. A fundamental adjustment in North Korea’s diplomatic relations with China will be inevitable. Lastly, normal relations must follow a fundamental change in how North Korea values China as an asset to its geographic security strategy. It will signify North Korea’s rearrangement of its security values, with much implications to the foundation of a ‘peace regime’ on the Korean Peninsula as the transition from an ‘armistice’ to a ‘peace treaty’ will concur. Such a collective security system is bound to downplay China’s

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<sup>1</sup> Editorial (*Sheping*), “*Chaohe, zhongguo xu bu qienuo bu huanxiang bu jizao* (North Korea’s nuclear, China does not need to be timid, fantasize and irritable),” *Huanqiu shibao* (*Global Times*), February 17, 2013.

geographic value to North Korea as it would alter the existing dynamics of the ROK-U.S. alliance and the alliance between North Korea and China. However, these changes seem very unlikely given the current status quo.

### ***Characteristics of North Korea and China's Special Relations***

First of all, 'party-to-party' relations take precedence over 'state-to-state' and 'inter-government relations.' Thus the party's foreign relations, foreign policy and strategy are not under the jurisdiction of the Chinese government nor the state but are instead, dictated by the party's International Liaison Department, especially considering China's relations with North Korea. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs is often found at a loss with regards to communist party-to-party relations. For instance, never has there been a case where the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs was aware beforehand of the North Korean leader's state visit.

Secondly, summit meetings between the two communist countries are seldom defined as official. This is because such visits are considered as visits by party leaders, and not by the head of state. It is confirmed by the listing of their official titles in North Korean and Chinese state documents. These titles are arranged in the order of the party, government, and then the military. The fact that their party title precedes the others signifies that the summit is a party affair and not a state event.

Thirdly, 'party-to-party' diplomacy is free from state protocols. Protocols such as the inspection of the guards or the 21-gun salute do not exist at the party summit. One underlying privilege of the party summit is that it can happen anywhere other than the state capital and at any time by their mutual consent. Another distinctive privilege is they can shy away from informing the world of the content of their discussion as in the form of a joint statement. However, that does not mean there are no protocols at all. Communist leaders have their own special protocols. For example, two thirds of the members of the party standing committee welcome the visitor upon his or her arrival, and partake in the viewing of performances as a tradition.

Fourth, North Korea is the first country for the designated successor of the Communist Party of China. The same goes for North Korea. North Korea and China are sent to accrue a first-hand-experience of and appreciate the values and importance of the alliance. The endeavor is perhaps driven by a growing concern amongst North Korean and Chinese leaders of the possibility that the postwar generation leaders may underappreciate the values of the alliance.

These practices began with Hua Guofeng in May 1978, for example, when the party elected North Korea as his first overseas visit country following his success to Mao Zedong. The same

applies for Hu Yaobang, Hua's successor in 1983. Jiang Zemin, the party's secretary of state, who took power in a rapid fashion due to the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989, may not have visited North Korea prior to taking office, but his first overseas as party leader was also North Korea. Hu Jintao, who officially succeeded Zhang in 2002, made his first overseas trip to North Korea in 1993 after being named successor. Xi Jinping also visited North Korea first in 2003 after being appointed to the central government, and then in 2008. Likewise, the first overseas visit by North Korea's Kim Jong-il after being officially confirmed as the successor was China in June 1983. It is said that Kim Jong-un also visited China in 2010 after being nominated as the new leader.

Finally, diplomatic relations between the two states can only be nullified by the end to party relations. While communist states can announce of suspension of their inter-state and inter-government relations, it does not mean the end of official diplomatic ties. Such ties can only be terminated when the party relationship ends. One salient example was the deterioration of China and Soviet Union relations in the 1960s. Although both China and the Soviet Union suspended diplomatic exchanges at both the national and government levels, they averted the official breakoff of ties. The official termination came at the announcement of the end of communist party ties.

### ***An Unusual Alliance and China's Lack of Influence on North Korea***

The North Korea-China alliance is inherently different from a typical alliance. The difference lies in the fact that neither of the two countries had stationed troops, had practiced a joint military exercise and had engaged in arms trade since the early 1990s. However, a special relationship was instead founded by the common national security goals and experiences as comrades who had fought against imperialism and for socialist internationalism. Their goal is to maintain a protective relationship against the threat of US imperialism till it is completely eradicated.

Since North Korea's first nuclear test in 2006, China's approval of sanctions and reduction of aid, long-term suspension of bilateral visits, and the rising criticism of the Chinese public against North Korea have been considered as reasons behind the rift in North Korea-China relations. As a result, there was a widespread perception that the relationship between the two countries was shifting to a "normal state" relationship. This was also fueled by China's successive failure to show an effective control the North's provocations since the nuclear test. Nevertheless, the neighboring countries still look for China's help should the North's denuclearization talks fall into a stalemate. Fortunately, North Korea has more or less been positive to China's arbitration.

But this does not validate China's influence on North Korea. Beijing is only called upon to mediate the talks between Washington and Pyongyang under two circumstances. One is when

Washington is at a loss of a direct communication channel with Pyongyang. The other is when Washington is preoccupied with more important foreign policy agendas such as the Iraq war in 2003. The reality is that Pyongyang prefers direct negotiations with Washington without Beijing's arbitration. Historically, North Korea has never had a success in talking to the U.S. via China. Hence since its nuclear test, North Korea has focused on direct communications with the U.S. without China as its middle man. It is therefore noteworthy that China has maintained a passive demeanor of acting as a mediator only at the request of the U.S.

### ***When Does China and North Korea's Special Relationship Come into Effect?***

Since the founding of the two countries, prolonged suspension of visits between the leaders of North Korea and China has been frequent. On the other hand, external players have played a role in returning them to dialogue. The Soviet Union was one factor during the Cold War. At the time, China needed North Korea to neutralize Soviet threats and to prevent Soviet influence from spreading throughout the Korean Peninsula. North Korea also needed China to maximize the efficacy of its "tightrope diplomacy" between China and the Soviet Union.

However, the trend has changed since the North Korean nuclear crisis during the post-Cold War period. The special relationship between North Korea and China was especially helpful at the start of high-level talks between the U.S. and North Korea. Although the relationship between North Korea and China had seemed suspended for a while, it was able to be quickly restored. For example, the June 1999 declaration of normalization was facilitated by the rapid progress made in the relationship between North Korea and the U.S. that was epitomized by William Perry's visit to the North in May. The relationship between Beijing and Pyongyang was stalled for 7 years then due to the South Korea-China normalization in 1992 and the death of Kim Il-sung in 1994.

As high-level talks between the U.S. and North Korea resumed following North Korea's first two nuclear tests, Kim Jong-il has visited China three times between 2010 and 2011. Although bilateral talks had been discontinued since 2008, former U.S. President Carter's visit to North Korea in May 2011 reopened North Korea-U.S. high-level talks in July. Additionally, while Kim Jong-un and Xi Jinping did not hold talks for six years since coming into power in 2012, they have held a series of meetings since 2018. For instance, Kim Jong-un visited China three times in 2018 (March, May and June), and visited again in May 2019. Xi Jinping reciprocated it to Pyongyang in June 2019.

The special relationship between North Korea and China also came into effect when the U.S. pressured China with a preemptive strike on North Korea. It succeeded in eliciting China to



accept the host role of the six-party talks in 2003. Moreover, the U.S. utilized the same tactic when it sent Joseph Dunford, the then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to China in August, and then Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, in September to achieve two goals. One was for China to bring North Korea to the negotiating table. The other was to find out China's potential response in the case that dialogues fail to produce a substantive result but a preemptive strike as the only viable option to the U.S. The U.S. strategy of pressuring China with a preemptive strike on North Korea has mostly been successful.

Although China prefers a peaceful resolution to North Korea's nuclear weapons program through dialogue, and welcomes talks between North Korea and the U.S., it still has its own concerns. This is why China often takes on a passive attitude until there is pressure from the U.S. China is concerned about North Korea's arbitrary departure, the unexpected loss of North Korea and unintentionally losing North Korea. North Korea's arbitrary departure refers to North Korea severing its ties with China and joining hands with the U.S.

The unexpected loss of North Korea means that the U.S. and North Korea would join forces as North Korea makes progress in its negotiations with the U.S. This would result in North Korea relying less on China without China's awareness due to its improved relations with the U.S. In other words, North Korea in such a case would become pro-U.S. An unintentional loss of North Korea by China means that North Korea ends up realizing itself having already been siding with the U.S. as a result of progress made in the relationship with the U.S. even without resolving the nuclear issue. In this case, North Korea's nuclear status would be implicitly recognized and security issues between North Korea and the U.S. can be compromised bilaterally regardless of China's intention, allowing the North to fully achieve its "Juche (Self-Reliance)" ideology in terms of national defense and security.

North Korea is attempting to make up for its weaknesses by taking advantage of China's anxiety, and by making it difficult for China to grasp its intentions through the engagement of "tightrope diplomacy" between the U.S. and China. Due to North Korea's "tightrope diplomacy," it is sometimes placed under strong sanctions by both the U.S. and China, while at other times, frequently visited by the U.S. and China. At other times, North Korea has actively sought to grasp the positions of both the U.S. and China through "interference diplomacy," and maximized its interests through "tightrope diplomacy". Thus, as long as the Communist Party of China and the North Korean Workers' Party exist, a special relationship will be maintained until the two communist states achieve their national security goals on the Korean Peninsula. ■

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