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The 2026 North Korea-China Summit:
Strategic Implications for the Korean Peninsula

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Abstract

The June 2026 North Korea-China summit marked a shift in bilateral relations, moving beyond traditional friendly relations toward a new strategic partnership. The two countries reaffirmed the historical significance of PRC-DPRK friendship while emphasizing socialist solidarity, strategic cooperation, and mutual respect for each other's core interests and political line. Notably, Beijing did not publicly object either to North Korea's nuclear program or to its two-state doctrine. Denuclearization, meanwhile, was effectively absent from the summit agenda. Both before and after the summit, North Korea underscored its nuclear resolve by showcasing its nuclear and missile production facilities—a reality Beijing tacitly accepted by avoiding the nuclear issue. Taken together, these developments indicate that while China stops short of formally recognizing North Korea as a nuclear-armed state, it is adopting an increasingly realist approach to Pyongyang's capabilities.

President Xi Jinping also raised the prospect of expanding political, economic, social, and security cooperation, including military-to-military exchanges. Although a full-fledged military alliance remains unlikely, Beijing retains this option as a strategic lever to check North Korea-Russia military cooperation and to counter the deepening South Korea-U.S.-Japan trilateral security architecture. Moving forward, three variables are expected to shape the future of the Korean Peninsula: North Korea-China-Russia development initiatives around the Tumen River estuary, the scale of North Korea-China economic engagement, and Beijing's management of its relations with Washington and Seoul. Ultimately, the summit reaffirmed that China remains a core actor in Korean Peninsula affairs, meaning that future regional forecasts must account not only for North Korea-China relations, but also for shifts across the South Korea-China and U.S.-China diplomatic tracks.

Keywords

Kim Jong Un, Xi Jinping, North Korea-China Summit, Sino-North Korean Alliance, PRC-DPRK Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance

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The North Korea-China summit was held in Pyongyang from June 8 to 9, 2026. Ahead of the 65th anniversary of the PRC-DPRK Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance (the Sino-North Korean alliance), President Xi Jinping visited Pyongyang for the first time since 2019. Chairman Kim Jong Un extended extraordinary diplomatic courtesies, personally greeting Xi Jinping at Pyongyang International Airport, escorting him to his accommodations, and seeing him off upon departure. Kim's constant accompaniment throughout Xi's visit underscored the closeness of bilateral ties for both domestic and international audiences.

The summit represented more than a symbolic display of goodwill, serving instead to affirm the strategic interests of Pyongyang and Beijing amid a shifting Northeast Asian security landscape. Its significance is heightened by the fact that it unfolded against the backdrop of North Korea's expanding nuclear architecture, deepening military cooperation between Pyongyang and Moscow, and prolonged U.S.-China strategic competition. Moreover, it was the first bilateral summit since North Korea formally redefined inter-Korean relations as a "hostile two-state relationship." It therefore served as a key indicator of how China perceives both North Korea's new policy line toward the South and its possession of nuclear weapons. This issue brief evaluates the core outcomes of the summit and assesses prospective changes in North Korea-China relations, along with their implications for the Korean Peninsula.

A New Strategic Partnership Built on Traditional Friendly Cooperation

North Korea-China relations have historically been described as a "traditional relationship of friendly cooperation" and a "friendship forged in blood." Such fraternal expressions remained salient at this summit as well. Before addressing the future direction of the bilateral relationship, both Kim Jong Un and Xi Jinping paid their respects at the

Sino-Korean Friendship Tower, reaffirming the historical legitimacy and special character of their friendship. The summit, however, did not merely honor the legacy of the past; it also reflected a determination to build on that foundation and advance bilateral ties to a new stage.

On June 9, *Rodong Sinmun* likewise described the summit as "a new milestone in developing the strategic and cooperative relationship between the two parties and two countries," while also emphasizing Sino-Korean friendship. This framing suggests that both sides intend to build on their traditional relationship of friendly cooperation and elevate bilateral ties into a more pragmatic and strategic partnership tailored to a changing global order.

The summit also placed particular emphasis on socialist ideological solidarity. Xi Jinping described the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) as "Marxist ruling parties," and characterized the two countries as "fellow travelers on the socialist path." Kim Jong Un echoed this sentiment, framing bilateral ties as a "model of cooperation between socialist states." These characterizations move beyond the earlier emphasis on blood alliance and revolutionary tradition, foregrounding instead a shared socialist identity as the foundation of bilateral relations.

In this context, the two leaders' joint visit to the Workers' Party Central Cadre School is also significant. Kim Jong Un had visited the school a week earlier, on June 1, to deliver a congratulatory speech on its 80th anniversary. The school had drawn attention during its 2024 relocation, when massive portraits of Marx and Lenin were prominently installed. This visual shift was significant because North Korea, which had formally institutionalized *Juche* as its guiding doctrine, was once again foregrounding a socialist ideological identity. This renewed emphasis, together with the joint visit, underscored that both regimes are political partners bound by a shared socialist system, with ideological solidarity serving as a key foundation for future bilateral relations.

Mutual Respect for Core Interests and Strategic Convergence

The Pyongyang summit is best understood as part of a broader diplomatic sequence following recent U.S.-China and China-Russia summits. Through successive summit meetings with Washington, Moscow, and Pyongyang, Beijing expanded both its diplomatic influence and its strategic room for maneuver. In doing so, China pursued two objectives: reasserting its primacy in Korean Peninsula affairs and, to some extent, managing North Korea's rapidly expanding relationship with Russia. The summit also demonstrated that China regards North Korea not merely as a traditional friendly state, but as a strategic partner for navigating an era of prolonged U.S.-China strategic competition.

Furthermore, the summit solidified “mutual respect for core interests” as a guiding principle for developing bilateral relations. Conspicuously absent from official communications were the terms “Joseon Peninsula” or “Korean Peninsula,” which the two countries had frequently invoked when articulating shared positions on Peninsula issues. Instead, in a June 8 editorial in *Rodong Sinmun*, Xi Jinping emphasized that both nations must “firmly safeguard each other’s political security by supporting advancement along a socialist path tailored to national conditions.” This statement can be read as an expression of North Korea and China’s shared willingness to respect and support each other’s core interests and domestic political line.

For China, “political security” can be understood in terms of the Taiwan issue and the One China principle. For North Korea, it may correspond to the so-called “two-state doctrine,” which abandons reunification as a national goal and instead defines South and North Korea as separate states. Viewed in this light, just as Pyongyang has consistently supported the One China principle—one of Beijing’s core interests—China has signaled that, while it will not formally endorse the two-state doctrine, it will refrain from public disagreement or criticism for the time being.

Sidestepping the Denuclearization Agenda

Neither leader raised the issue of denuclearization during the summit, as North Korea had made clear that its nuclear status could not be a subject of negotiation. Coinciding with the June 5 state announcement of Xi’s visit by the Korean Central News Agency, Kim Jong Un carried out a series of military inspections designed to signal Pyongyang’s confidence in its nuclear forces and its refusal to abandon its nuclear program. On June 3, he inspected a new nuclear materials production facility; on June 4, he observed the sea trials of the 5,000-ton-class destroyer *Kang Kon* alongside his daughter, Kim Ju Ae; and on June 6, he toured a ballistic missile manufacturing plant. In addition, Kim Yo Jong’s June 7 statement declared that the country’s national defense capabilities and sovereignty were entirely exempt from diplomatic compromise, reaffirming North Korea’s firm rejection of denuclearization demands.

This sequence also reveals a subtle divergence between China’s reluctance to formally recognize North Korea’s possession of nuclear weapons and Pyongyang’s interest in cementing its nuclear status as a *fait accompli*. Had China been genuinely prepared to acknowledge North Korea as a nuclear state, Pyongyang would have had little need to stage such demonstrations ahead of the summit.

Accordingly, the summit’s joint press releases avoided any mention of the nuclear issue or denuclearization. Unable to openly legitimize North Korea’s nuclear status, China

chose to bypass the issue entirely, treating it as an intractable problem. While Beijing's decision to sidestep the matter risks being interpreted as tacit acquiescence, Xi Jinping's editorial invoked the United Nations and an international order anchored in international law. This wording suggests that, although China's approach has become decidedly realist, it remains constrained by UN sanctions and cannot openly endorse a nuclear-armed North Korea.

The Emerging Possibility of North Korea-China Military Cooperation

At the summit, President Xi Jinping articulated four pillars for developing North Korea-China relations: establishing a foundation of mutual trust, elevating the level of substantive cooperation, expanding people-to-people exchanges, and deepening the substance of strategic cooperation. Together, these four pillars outline the future direction of bilateral relations.

First, "establishing a foundation of mutual trust" can be understood as strengthening political trust and strategic communication between Pyongyang and Beijing despite the recent deepening of North Korea-Russia ties. Second, "elevating the level of substantive cooperation" points to expanded cooperation in areas such as the economy, trade, and agriculture. Third, "expanding people-to-people exchanges" appears aimed at consolidating the social foundation of the traditional friendly relationship through more active contact. Finally, "deepening the substance of strategic cooperation" signals an intention to strengthen diplomatic and security coordination in response to South Korea-U.S.-Japan security cooperation and the evolving regional security environment.

The fourth pillar carries significant security implications. By explicitly calling for expanded interactions across the two parties, governments, and militaries, Xi opened the door to enhanced bilateral cooperation in the security and military domains. Delivered on the 65th anniversary of the Sino-North Korean alliance, Xi's overt proposal to "strengthen communication, exchanges, and interactions across multiple sectors and levels between the two parties, governments, and militaries," signals a shift toward North Korea-China military cooperation.

It remains difficult, however, to conclude that this will culminate in a full-scale operational military alliance. It is still uncertain whether the two countries will activate the mutual-assistance clause (Article 2) of their 1961 treaty, or whether North Korea will join China-Russia joint military exercises in response to ROK-U.S.-Japan security cooperation. Beijing's strategic incentive for large-scale military cooperation with Pyongyang remains constrained by its aversion to regional instability and its desire to prevent an unchecked security dilemma that could raise the costs of strategic competition with Washington.

Nevertheless, China appears to keep the possibility of North Korea-China military cooperation open for two reasons: to check North Korea-Russia military cooperation to some degree, and to exert pressure on South Korea and the United States. In particular, should Seoul and Washington deepen trilateral ROK-U.S.-Japan security cooperation while effectively condoning Tokyo's rearmament, Beijing may threaten to activate its military relationship with Pyongyang as a geopolitical counterweight.

Outlook for the Korean Peninsula

The summit reaffirmed that China remains an important actor in Korean Peninsula affairs and a key strategic partner for North Korea. Over the course of the meeting, the two countries went beyond reaffirming their traditional friendly relationship, emphasizing socialist solidarity, strategic communication, and cooperation. China, moreover, did not publicly object to North Korea's nuclear program or its two-state doctrine. This suggests that should China move in earnest to improve bilateral relations, the effects on the Korean Peninsula and across Northeast Asia could be substantial.

At the same time, the summit should also be read within the context of a sequence of recent summit meetings. This trip marked Xi Jinping's first foreign travel of 2026, in contrast to his first overseas trip of 2025, which was to South Korea for the APEC summit. Although that was a multilateral engagement, the fact that Xi visited South Korea before North Korea after the start of his third term may well have disappointed Pyongyang. To be sure, China's avoidance of the North Korea nuclear issue at the summit, together with its elevation of North Korea to a strategic partner in regional affairs, is concerning from South Korea's standpoint. It should be noted, however, that China has not yet recognized North Korea's nuclear weapons—as evidenced by Pyongyang's continued need to stage nuclear demonstrations ahead of the summit.

Following the summit, exchanges and cooperation between Pyongyang and Beijing are expected to expand across a range of areas and levels. First, trilateral coordination among North Korea, China, and Russia regarding the development of the Tumen River estuary warrants close monitoring. While it is unclear how deeply the issue was discussed at the summit, China's strong interest in securing access to the East Sea means that it is likely to emerge, sooner or later, as a shared agenda item for the three countries. The pace of North Korea-China-Russia cooperation can be gauged by two factors: whether North Korea is willing to concede what amounts to nearly its only source of policy leverage over China, and what concessions it demands in return.

Second, the scope and content of North Korea-China economic cooperation also merit close attention. Given the tenor of the summit, an expansion of bilateral economic

cooperation appears likely, but its composition will depend on whether Beijing adjusts the scope and pace of exchange in response to sanctions, whether it concentrates primarily on non-sanctioned sectors such as tourism, and whether it broadens people-to-people exchanges.

Third, Beijing's future course of action—which will still require managing its relations with Washington and Seoul—should likewise be monitored closely. Should China fully commit to improving North Korea-China relations and advancing North Korea-China-Russia cooperation, it would accelerate Cold War-style bloc dynamics in Northeast Asia and deepen the region's security dilemma. In this regard, it is worth noting that South Korea and China are currently the only countries in East Asia actively resisting Cold War-style bloc formation or geopolitical deadlock. If the summit reaffirmed China's influence over Korean Peninsula affairs, then managing the South Korea-China relationship is likely to become the next major task.

The views and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official position of INSS.