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The 65th Anniversary of the North Korea-China
Friendship Treaty: Assessment and Prospects
for Bilateral Relations

Gyubeom Kim
(gbkim@inss.re.kr)

Abstract

The 65th anniversary commemorations of the North Korea-China Friendship Treaty, held in July 2026, represent more than a mere display of the two countries' alliance. They reaffirm the recovery of bilateral relations since September 2025 and give concrete form to the direction of future cooperation. During Premier Pak Thae Song's visit to China, senior Chinese leaders including President Xi Jinping held a series of meetings with the North Korean delegation. The two sides moved beyond emphasizing traditional friendship, putting forward as core agenda items the strategic common understanding on the Korean Peninsula situation and its implementation, together with the expansion of cooperation in the economic and livelihood sectors. Of particular note, denuclearization, an issue that had never been absent from past high-level talks between the two countries, did not come to the fore on this occasion; instead, stabilizing the situation and expanding economic cooperation emerged as the central agenda items. This shift shows that North Korea-China relations have entered a new phase.

Considered together, the series of messages recently conveyed by both countries suggests that they concur on the strategic necessity of keeping the Korean Peninsula situation stable and under control. China seeks to buy time to build its economic and technological competitiveness while managing U.S.-China strategic competition on a stable footing; North Korea pursues economic development and an improved external environment while maintaining its nuclear capabilities. As the two countries' strategic interests converge, the 65th anniversary commemoration carries greater significance than simply emphasizing the value of the traditional alliance. Its deeper meaning lies in repositioning the existing treaty as the institutional foundation for their strategic common understanding, the management of the Korean Peninsula situation, and the expansion of economic cooperation, and in proclaiming this at home and abroad.

Keywords

North Korea-China relations, North Korea-China Friendship Treaty, alliance, Xi Jinping, Pak Thae Song

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On July 11, 2026, North Korea and China marked the 65th anniversary of the DPRK-PRC Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance (hereinafter the North Korea-China Friendship Treaty). North Korea dispatched a party-government delegation headed by Cabinet Premier Pak Thae Song to Beijing, and China responded with an unprecedented level of protocol, arranging a series of meetings with senior leaders including President Xi Jinping.

The North Korea-China Friendship Treaty, concluded on July 11, 1961, is an alliance in name and in substance, stipulating that should either party come under armed attack, the other shall immediately provide military support. It has long served as the symbol of their blood alliance, yet the two countries have not always commemorated it with great ceremony. The scale and form of the commemorative events have varied considerably with the ebb and flow of bilateral relations, each event serving as a barometer of the prevailing mood between them. In 2016 in particular, when North Korea's repeated nuclear tests had pushed bilateral relations to their worst point, the two countries held no commemoration even though the year marked the treaty's 55th anniversary. In the 2010s, Chinese media and academia raised the possibility that the treaty had become a dead letter, that renewal might be discontinued, and even that China might abandon its alliance commitments altogether. In this context, the exceptional grandeur of this year's 65th anniversary ceremonies is itself significant, and may signal a new turning point in North Korea-China relations.

Key Features of Premier Pak Thae Song's Visit to China

Premier Pak paid an official three-day visit to China from July 10 to 12. It was the first solo visit to China by a North Korean premier in fifteen years, since Premier Choe Yong Rim's visit in September 2011. The delegation included foreign policy officials such as Kim Song Nam, Director of the International Department of the Workers' Party of Korea, and Mun Song Hyok, Vice Director of the International Department, as well as close aides to the Premier. On the first day, July 10, President Xi and Zhao Leji, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, received the delegation in

turn. At the commemorative reception, the delegation met with Cai Qi, a member of the Politburo Standing Committee and a close associate of President Xi. On the second day, July 11, Premier Pak held official talks with his counterpart, Premier of the State Council Li Qiang.

The most notable development in this series of meetings was the evolution of bilateral diplomatic rhetoric. The language emphasizing traditional friendship persisted, but new expressions came to the fore on top of it: the "confirmation of a common understanding" on the situation, the "drawing up of a blueprint for the development of relations," and the need to "implement" these commitments. President Xi stated that the two countries should maintain "strategic resolve" and "strategic confidence" regarding the situation and implement the common understanding reached with Chairman Kim Jong Un so as to "create a favorable external environment for socialist construction in each country." Premier Pak echoed this position, conveying Chairman Kim's intent to develop bilateral relations into "the strongest strategic relationship." In the past, the two countries had remained at the level of emphasizing communication itself, calling for stronger "strategic communication and coordination." In recent statements, however, the language has shifted to confirming a common understanding, laying out strategic guidelines for the development of relations, and implementing them without delay. This shift suggests that the two sides have gone beyond mere relationship management to forge a new strategic agreement on the future direction of North Korea-China relations and on how to respond to the situation on the Korean Peninsula.

At the official talks with Premier Li on July 11, discussion focused on practical cooperation measures for implementing the agreements reached at the leaders' level. Premier Li proposed linking the two countries' new five-year economic plans, expanding economic and trade cooperation, strengthening transportation and logistics connectivity, and deepening cooperation in livelihood sectors such as public health, medical services, and education. Premier Pak, for his part, pledged to expand exchanges in the fields of economy, science and technology, and people-to-people relations, and to strengthen cooperation on international issues. In North Korea-China relations, premier-level reciprocal visits have traditionally served as working-level consultations to give concrete form to economic cooperation. The clearest examples are Premier Wen Jiabao's visit to North Korea in 2009 and Premier Choe Yong Rim's visit to China in 2011. On both occasions, the two sides discussed measures to expand economic cooperation on the basis of leaders' agreements. Premier Li's visit to North Korea in October 2025 and Premier Pak's July visit to China follow the same trajectory, serving as follow-up measures that translate those agreements into substantive cooperation in the economic and livelihood sectors.

In sum, Premier Pak's visit displays three distinctive characteristics. First, the level of protocol and the standing of the delegation rose significantly. Unlike the vice-premier-level exchange visits of the past, this was a solo premier-level visit, and China extended the highest level of courtesy, with President Xi and other top leaders (ranked second, third, and fifth) meeting the delegation in succession. Second, the focus of discussion shifted from diplomatic and security issues to substantive cooperation and implementation tasks in the areas of economy, livelihood, and science and technology. Third, the denuclearization agenda disappeared. At the time of Premier Choe's visit in 2011, the major agenda items included "the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula through dialogue and negotiations" and the resumption of the Six-Party Talks; this time, denuclearization appeared in neither side's official statements. Ultimately, the visit sidelined the denuclearization agenda, confirmed a new strategic common understanding and its implementation, and gave concrete shape to the economic cooperation still possible under sanctions.

Reinterpreting the Treaty: The Strategic Common Understanding

Taking the 65th anniversary as an occasion, the two countries appear to be reinterpreting the recently formed strategic common understanding within the framework of the existing treaty. Discussion of the North Korea-China Friendship Treaty has commonly centered on Article 2, which stipulates that should either party come under armed attack, the other shall immediately provide military support. The treaty's full content is, however, considerably more comprehensive than that. Article 1 provides for joint efforts for peace in Asia and the world and for the security of all peoples, and Article 4 stipulates consultation on major international issues related to the common interests of the two countries. Article 5 covers economic and technical assistance as well as cooperation in the scientific and technological, economic, and cultural fields, while Article 6 provides for the peaceful resolution of the Korean Peninsula issue and the maintenance of peace and security in the Far East.

Taken together, the treaty's content and the message China emphasized at the event suggest that the main point of the commemoration lay not in re-highlighting the automatic military intervention clause. Rather, it lay in reinterpreting the treaty in its entirety as the political and legal foundation underpinning strategic communication, management of the Korean Peninsula situation, and economic cooperation. China's characterization of the North Korea-China Friendship Treaty as "the political and legal foundation contributing to regional and global peace and development" can be understood in the same light. In other words, through the 65th anniversary commemoration, the two countries appear to have redefined the North Korea-China Friendship Treaty. No longer merely the symbol of a traditional military alliance, it now

serves as the foundation that institutionally underpins their new strategic common understanding and the expansion of cooperation.

Amid U.S.-China strategic competition, some have interpreted the recent improvement in North Korea-China relations as a move to counter U.S.-ROK-Japan cooperation, Japan in particular. Of course, if U.S.-ROK-Japan security cooperation comes to target China directly and the Taiwan and Korean Peninsula issues become linked, one cannot rule out the possibility of Beijing using cooperation with North Korea as a strategic lever. However, that motive is difficult to regard as the core factor behind the recent improvement in North Korea-China relations. Even during the Biden and Yoon administrations, when U.S.-China strategic competition and U.S.-ROK-Japan security cooperation were considerably more intense than today, China did not actively pursue bloc cohesion with North Korea. At the time, Chairman Kim emphasized a new Cold War framework and sought close strategic alignment with China. Beijing nonetheless kept a certain distance, concerned that Pyongyang's military provocations could invite an expanded U.S. force posture in the region and stronger trilateral security cooperation.

Moreover, since the May 2026 U.S.-China summit, the intensity of U.S. pressure on China has eased somewhat, and Beijing's diplomatic room for maneuver has widened. Under these circumstances, China is unlikely to put the United States and South Korea on alert needlessly. The 65th anniversary commemoration was therefore less a signal of an intent to intensify North Korea-China or North Korea-China-Russia military cooperation in earnest than a political ceremony reaffirming a shared strategy of managing the Korean Peninsula situation in a stable manner. Put differently, it can be seen as an event at which the two sides officially confirmed a strategic agreement: China will support North Korea's regime security and economic development, while North Korea will respect China's core interests and closely coordinate its external moves with China.

Expanding Scope for North Korea-China Cooperation under Sanctions

Moving beyond a simple restoration of trust, North Korea-China relations are likely to develop toward expanding substantive cooperation within the bounds of sanctions on North Korea. Since President Xi's visit to North Korea in June 2019, the two countries have experienced persistent friction between two conflicting demands: implementing sanctions on North Korea and expanding cooperation. Disagreements over issues such as the repatriation of North Korean workers, the resumption of tourism, and border customs clearance were among the primary causes of the cooling of bilateral relations in 2024 and 2025. However, the series of messages recently conveyed by both countries suggests some convergence on the scope of cooperation they can permit or quietly tolerate while sanctions remain in place.

The first change is likely to be the normalization of cross-border transportation and customs clearance. Increased frequency of North Korea-China passenger trains and flights, full normalization of customs clearance in the border areas, and the opening of the New Yalu River Bridge may proceed in sequence. North Korea-China trade should therefore increase incrementally, but as long as UN sanctions on North Korea remain in place, there is little prospect of large-scale resource development or industrial investment seen in the early 2010s.

Instead, the likely focus of new cooperation is livelihood sectors: public health, medical services, education, agriculture, light industry, regional economic development, and disaster management. These sectors carry a relatively lower risk of sanctions violations while contributing both to improvements in the daily lives of North Koreans and to economic revitalization in the three northeastern provinces of China. From Beijing's perspective as well, they are practical areas of cooperation that allow it to maintain influence over North Korea while minimizing criticism from the international community.

People-to-people exchanges centered on students studying abroad and technical trainees are also expected to expand. This is because, while sanctions heavily constrain the direct transfer of advanced equipment or strategic materials, it is comparatively easy to send North Korean personnel to China to acquire technology and expertise. Premier Pak's visit to Tianjin also warrants attention. His meeting with Chen Min'er, an influential political figure, not only helps lay a long-term foundation for bilateral cooperation, but may also be a move to explore new logistics routes linking the port of Tianjin with North Korean ports.

Of course, the expansion of cooperation is subject to clear conditions. China by no means welcomes a rapid expansion of North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities or high-intensity military provocations. Should Pyongyang worsen the situation on the Korean Peninsula through a nuclear test or a large-scale military provocation, and thereby invite U.S. strategic asset deployments and stronger U.S.-ROK-Japan military cooperation, North Korea-China relations could cool again. In the end, North Korea-China relations are likely to take the form of conditional cooperation rather than the unconditional strengthening of the alliance seen in the past. Under such an arrangement, China would expand economic and diplomatic support as long as North Korea keeps the Korean Peninsula situation stable.

Implications

The 65th anniversary commemorative events were not about merely reviving the alliance. They were about announcing, at home and abroad, a strategic agreement between the

North Korean and Chinese leaders to manage the Korean Peninsula situation in a stable manner, and an intent to expand economic cooperation even under sanctions. The North Korea-China Friendship Treaty is once again serving as the political and legal foundation underpinning this strategic agreement.

In South Korea, improvements in North Korea-China relations have long been seen as directly tied to security threats. However, a more realistic approach is now needed. Compared to North Korea deciding on military action without consulting its neighbors, it may in fact be more favorable for peace on the Korean Peninsula if Pyongyang consults closely with China, with Beijing in a position to press for restraint and stable management of the situation.

Naturally, South Korea and China do not hold identical positions on the means of achieving denuclearization or on its place among their priorities. That said, if both sides merely insist on their own positions or do no more than criticize each other's North Korea policies, the Korean Peninsula issue will continue to make little progress. At this stage, rather than pursuing full agreement, Seoul and Beijing should expand cooperation around the minimum common goals of preventing military conflict on the Korean Peninsula, easing tensions, and resuming U.S.-North Korea and inter-Korean dialogue.

To this end, South Korea should further step up high-level strategic dialogue with China in order to keep close track of changes in North Korea-China relations and the direction of North Korea's policies. At the same time, Seoul needs to set out more clearly the positions and messages it wants Beijing to convey to Pyongyang. Rather than viewing the restoration of North Korea-China relations solely as a threat, South Korea should now actively use China's communication channels with North Korea as a diplomatic asset for stability on the Korean Peninsula and the resumption of dialogue.

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