

# SUNGKYUN CHINA INSIGHT

## On the Resilience of the Sino-DPRK Relations



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## 1. Sino-DPRK Relations: From Sabre-Rattling to High-Stakes Summitry

After Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-un took power in the People's Republic of China (hereafter China) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (hereafter DPRK or North Korea) in 2012, the two countries' relationship deteriorated precipitately. Pyongyang ceaselessly flexed its military muscles, to which Beijing responded with active support to and draconian enforcement of the US Security Council sanctions against North Korea. Beijing's hardline position caused irascible reactions from its traditional ally, or recalcitrant neighbor, as Pyongyang circuitously but vehemently criticized Beijing by saying that a "big country that is supposed to take an initiative in building a fair world order ... is out of its mind and gave away the fundamental principle under the pressure of the US diktat." Pyongyang's acrimonious remarks, of course, were thrown together with additional nuclear provocations, which escalated the US-DPRK tensions to a hair-trigger point. Needless to say that Beijing, whose foreign strategy priority has long been known to be building a stable external environment favorable to its domestic modernization encapsulated by the "Chinese Dream," was in an unenviable position amidst the ever-intensifying tension. Against this backdrop, some Chinese began to cautiously envisage Beijing abandoning Pyongyang. For instance, Shen Dingli, director of the Center for American Studies at Fudan University in Shanghai, sharply pointed out that "The loss of

this ‘ally [North Korea]’ would be little felt in Beijing,” since “North Korea’s value as a security buffer has much diminished.” Shen’s biting analysis was buttressed by another vanguardist, Deng Yuwen. As a deputy editor of a journal of the Central Party School of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Deng wrote in *Foreign Affairs* that “basing China’s strategic security on North Korea’s value as a geopolitical ally is outdated. Even if North Korea was a useful friend during the Cold War, its usefulness today is doubtful.” Since then, many North Korea watchers in China, such as Yang Junfeng and Wang Hongguang, with the connivance of Beijing, have advocated that China should jettison North Korea, which, to their eyes, was no longer deemed a strategic asset, but a strategic liability. The two countries’ fraternity appeared further enervated when the *Rodong Sinmun*—the mouthpiece of North Korea’s ruling party—openly criticized their arguments as “a wanton violation of the independent and legitimate rights, dignity and supreme interests of the DPRK.” The *Rodong Sinmun* article, published under a pseudonym, Kim Chol, revealed the North’s pent-up rage, vociferously saying that Pyongyang’s “strategic interests have been repeatedly violated due to insincerity and betrayal [of Beijing],” and that China’s policy toward North Korea “is no more than an extremely ego-driven theory based on big-power chauvinism that not only the strategic interests but also the dignity and vital rights of the DPRK should be sacrificed for the interests of China.” The article, in all seriousness, admonished that, “China should no longer try to test the limits of the DPRK’s patience.”

The volte-face came in 2018, however. In that year, the Sino-DPRK relationship was restored as sharply as it had deteriorated, epitomized by five summits between Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-un. The abrupt reinvigoration of the two countries’ relations raises an intriguing question. Why did China suddenly change its previous attitude and decide to improve its relations with North Korea in 2018? This article argues that behind Beijing’s about-face existed its apprehension that Pyongyang might break away from Beijing’s sphere of influence and seek to improve its relations with the United States. To this end, this article, instead of delving into events that directly brought about the Sino-DPRK rapprochement in 2018, extrapolates Beijing’s strategic calculation from its experiences during the Cultural Revolution—a period in which Sino-DPRK bilateral relationship plummeted sharply but was soon restored.

## 2. Deterioration of the Sino-DPRK Relations during the Cultural Revolution

China and North Korea have undergone many vicissitudes. As Zhu Liang, a former head of the CCP's International Liaison Department, pointed out, one of the lowest points of the bilateral relations came during the Cultural Revolution in the mid-1960s. Nevertheless, the two countries' relations recovered quickly in the later 1960s, showing a remarkable degree of resilience. Why did Sino-DPRK relations deteriorate in the mid-1960s? Why did Beijing decide to resume Sino-DPRK relations? How did the changes in China's external environment influence Beijing's decision? The answers to these questions may provide us with clues to better understand Beijing's decision to mend fences with Pyongyang in 2018. In this regard, this article explores the Sino-DPRK relations in the 1960s, with a special focus on their resilience.

After the so-called August Factional Incident in 1956, Sino-DPRK relations recovered in 1957 and gradually entered a honeymoon period. In July 1961, the two countries signed the Sino-DPRK Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance. The two countries' relations improved greatly as Pyongyang aligned itself with Beijing in the context of ever-intensifying Sino-Soviet split; Pyongyang condemned Khrushchev's pursuit of peaceful coexistence with the United States and supported Beijing's belligerent foreign policy direction. However, since late 1964, Sino-DPRK relations began to deteriorate. In October 1964, Khrushchev stepped down, while the Soviet Union established a new leadership led by Brezhnev. In the face of Sino-Soviet rivalry, the new leadership of the Soviet Union sought to win the support of other socialist countries. Needless to say, North Korea was one of its primary targets. Moscow immediately improved its relations with Pyongyang by expanding financial and military assistance. Due to the self-imposed economic hardship triggered by Mao's murderous Great Leap Forward, China at that time was unable to provide sufficient aid to North Korea, which rendered Moscow's approach to Pyongyang particularly attractive. In May 1966, Brezhnev met with Kim Il Sung and promised to provide economic and military assistance to North Korea, which was materialized with various assistance agreements signed between the two countries in the following year. North Korea re-adjusted its position amid the Sino-Soviet split and supported the foreign policy direction of the Soviet Union. On the contrary, Beijing believed that the new leadership of the

Soviet Union would not be much different from Khrushchev and was highly likely to continue to follow the “revisionist line.” This judgment further strengthened Mao Zedong’s radical thinking, which ushered China into the extreme left ideology. Upon meeting foreign communist party leaders, Mao Zedong repeatedly encouraged them to carry out armed struggles against their governments. For Mao Zedong, the revisionism of the Soviet Union was as dangerous as the imperialism of the United States, precluding any possibility of Sino-Soviet reconciliation. Under these circumstances, China was unable to cooperate with the Soviet Union even on the Vietnam issue. Being a divided country seeking national unification like North Vietnam, North Korea felt frustrated by China’s tepidity toward the socialist united front, which further estranged Pyongyang from Beijing.

The already-strained Sino-DPRK relations completely broke down with the onset of the Cultural Revolution in 1966. With this extreme leftist sociopolitical movement, China’s foreign policy direction also shifted greatly toward the left. As a consequence, Beijing suffered from diplomatic disputes with more than 30 countries out of the 53 countries that it had established diplomatic or quasi-diplomatic relations. Some countries even terminated diplomatic relations with China. In Mao Zedong’s own words, at that time, China was in a state of a “complete civil war,” while “the Ministry of Foreign Affairs ... had lost control.” Against this backdrop, it was no wonder that North Korea aligned more closely with the Soviet Union. For example, despite pressure from China, North Korea sent a delegation to the 23rd Party Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Pyongyang had little choice but to strengthen relations with the Soviet Union when China could not provide sufficient assistance. However, the Red Guards, encouraged by the propaganda that China was the center of the world revolution, wanted to export Chinese-style revolution and attacked the North Korean leadership as a revisionist. As a result, conflicts between the Red Guards and North Koreans frequently occurred along the Sino-DPRK border. The Chinese Embassy in Pyongyang also propagated China’s radical ideology in North Korea, deepening the cleavage between the two countries. Kim Il Sung expressed his concern about the Chinese radical policy line at the Workers’ Party of Korea meeting, saying that “while opposing modern revisionism, we must also oppose leftist opportunism... If leftist opportunism develops, it may become a huge danger no less than modern revisionism.” At the same time, North Korea did not recognize the leadership role of the CCP.

### 3. Sino-DPRK Relations Restored

However, China abruptly changed its policy toward the North and began to restore Sino-DPRK relations around the autumn of 1969. The following year, Kim Il Sung visited China and held a summit with Mao Zedong. Why did China decide to improve its relations with North Korea? Behind China's North Korean U-turn were changes in China's external environment. In May 1968, reformist Alexander Dubček was elected as the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, bringing a wind of liberalization to Prague. His reform policies, in combination with an economic downturn, triggered the "Prague Spring," in which massive protests called for political liberalization and economic decentralization. Moscow, however, responded with the so-called "Brezhnev Doctrine," a notion designed to affirm the "limited sovereignty" of each socialist country for the sake of the interests of the world of socialism. Based on this unique doctrine, Moscow not only invaded Czechoslovakia to brutally crack down on the Prague Spring, but also justified its military intervention. China's leaders, of course, regarded the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia as a strong manifestation of Moscow's bellicosity and felt greatly threatened. China strongly condemned the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, and Sino-Soviet relations further deteriorated. In addition, the relationship between China and Vietnam was also increasingly alienated. In March 1968, the Chinese leadership expressed strong opposition to Vietnam's acceptance of peace negotiation proposals by the United States. However, after a series of heated debates with Beijing, Hanoi eventually began to negotiate a peace treaty with Washington in spite of Beijing's rancorous protestation. Vietnam was increasingly aligned with the Soviet Union while keeping distance from China. China felt growing pressure on its southern border. Having said that, the bigger problem came along China's northern border. In January 1966, the Soviet Union signed an alliance treaty with the People's Republic of Mongolia, and continuously expanded its military influence in Mongolia. Under these circumstances, a military clash broke out near Zhenbao (Damansky) Island on the Ussuri River, the poorly demarcated border between China and the Soviet Union in March 1969. It was followed by other Sino-Soviet clashes in China's northwestern Uyghur region of Xinjiang. Moscow not only immediately transferred large numbers of troops to the Far East but also actively considered a nuclear strike against China. In the face of a "one million" Soviet army deployed along its northern border and the danger of nuclear attack, China issued an order to "prepare for war" to the whole country.

With the deterioration of the external environment, China recalibrated its policy towards North Korea. If North Korea further aligned with the Soviet Union, the security of Northeast China might be threatened. At that time, China had already come under pressure from its northern and southern borders. It appeared that China could no longer delay the improvement of relations with North Korea. On September 30, 1969, one day before the celebration of the 20th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Chinese government urgently sent an invitation to the North to participate in the ceremony. Pyongyang quickly accepted China's olive branch and sent a North Korean delegation headed by Choe Yong-gon, chairman of the Standing Committee of the Supreme People's Assembly of North Korea. Mao Zedong met with Choe at the Tiananmen podium and stressed that "our two countries should be closer ... our relations should be improved." This was clearly a signal of Beijing's conciliatory gesture. Meeting Premier Zhou Enlai, Choe Yong-gon also expressed Kim Il Sung's willingness to improve Sino-DPRK relations. In April 1970, Premier Zhou Enlai paid a return visit to North Korea and held talks with Kim Il Sung. Taking this as an opportunity, the relations between the two countries recovered quickly. In June and July 1970, a North Korean government delegation and the military delegation visited China in turn. Upon meeting the North Korean delegation, Mao Zedong opined, "Comrade Kim Il Sung and I have been friends for many years. There are no major problems and no insurmountable difficulties between us." The denouement of the restoration of the Sino-DPRK relations was Kim Il Sung's informal visit to Beijing in October 1970, during which Kim held talks with Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, and others. During his meeting with Kim, Mao Zedong acknowledged that China had displayed "great power chauvinism" during the Cultural Revolution. Kim Il Sung expressed his willingness to accept China's admission of fault by making self-criticism: "We did not have a correct understanding of the Cultural Revolution" and "we did have fantasies about the Soviet Union in the past.". Mao Zedong agreed with Kim Il Sung's request for military and economic assistance. Chinese assistance was immediately resumed, in spite of the country's dire economic predicament, and the two countries' relations were fully restored.



#### 4. Extrapolation from Experiences of the Cultural Revolution

When Xi Jinping took power in 2012, many China experts anticipated that Xi was likely to follow the path laid by Deng Xiaoping by strengthening its soft power and by continuing its peace offensive to soften the perception of the China threat. The voice advocating a peaceful rise of China, much emphasized by Xi's predecessor, Hu Jintao, was still reverberating in the international community. Some even euphorically envisioned that there might be gradual political liberation of China under Xi's initiative. In other words, it was widely anticipated that Xi would follow Deng's dictum of *tao guang yang hui*. However, it turned out, as his rule unfolded, that Xi deviated greatly from his predecessors and was in effect more like Mao Zedong than Deng Xiaoping. And by 2018, China's external environment has been much exasperated. President Trump played the "Taiwan card" to put pressure on China from the beginning of his term of office. In December 2016, Trump made a post-election phone call to Tsai Ing-wen, President of Taiwan, which was a grave violation of long-held Sino-US diplomatic protocol. In January 2018, Trump also imposed tariffs on Chinese imports, declaring a "trade war" with China. The maritime dispute between China and the Philippines over the South China Sea not only remained unresolved but also became aggravated as China rejected a ruling by a tribunal at the Permanent Court of Arbitration on the dispute in July 2016. The honeymoon period between South Korea and China finished with Seoul's decision to install the THAAD system. As China's external environment continued to deteriorate, Pyongyang's strategic value to China looked increasingly accentuated to Beijing's eyes; should Beijing further lose its traditional influence on North Korea, China might be directly exposed to anti-China powers without a buffer in between. Under these circumstances, Pyongyang was signaling its willingness to mend fences with Washington. In combination with Trump's personal unpredictability, China felt greatly unnerved by the possibility that North Korea would join the U.S.-led anti-China united front. At that time, Pyongyang has already sternly warned Beijing that "China should know that ... North Korea, possessing strong nuclear power, has several pathways to take." Ultimately, China hurriedly adjusted its foreign policy direction and restored the traditional fraternity between Beijing and Pyongyang.

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