

How “Eternal” Is the Sino-DPRK Alliance?

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Declaring its firm intent to respect and protect each other’s “state sovereignty” and “territorial integrity,” the historical [Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance](#) (July 11, 1961) between the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) has been the foundation of the relationship between these two states. As one of the main alliances in Northeast Asia—along with the US alliances with Korea and Japan—their partnership has become a permanent fixture in the geopolitical landscape of the region. China’s emergence as a great power and North Korea’s accelerated buildup of its nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities has, however, made the alliance more significant as well as more complicated.

As the date for the treaty’s renewal draws close, how will this partnership evolve? What will the treaty’s extension mean for the future of the Northeast Asian peace and security architecture? Both countries may not entirely agree on clauses related to their mutual obligations, and Beijing will seek to redraw those provisions in its favor. While the value of the treaty is too important to both parties to let their differences significantly weaken it, this time around, the alliance is likely to face enormous challenges going forward.

How Relevant Is the Treaty of Friendship Today?

The critical axis between Northeast Asia, China and North Korea has undergone a turbulent period in bilateral relations over the past two decades. Tensions have appeared in the relationship from time to time—with debate on whether the treaty is “[outdated](#)” having emerged in Chinese media and strategic circles—as the two worked to manage changing geopolitical circumstances and deteriorating ties with the United States. Nonetheless, on May 27, 2021, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met North Korea’s new ambassador to China to reaffirm their “[traditional friendship](#),” continued “high-level strategic communication,” and joint cause of promoting socialism, as both states gear up to celebrate the 60th anniversary of their alliance.

Critically, Article II of the treaty codifies a China-DPRK collective defense commitment, explicitly [obligating](#) both states to take all measures (including military assistance) to prevent any “armed attack” by a state or an alliance of states. To this end, Article III

restricts both countries from participating in a bloc or action directed against the other; simultaneously, the first clause of the treaty [stipulates](#) that the two countries will strive to “safeguard the peace of Asia and the world and the security of all peoples.”

Under the current circumstances, these clauses have become inherently contradictory. For instance, to ensure peace in Asia and the security of all peoples (Article I), Beijing has been forced to participate in actions against Pyongyang—such as [imposing](#) sanctions on the North through the United Nations (UN) Security Council. Chinese diplomatic and military analysts have, over time, also [contended](#) that Beijing is “not obliged” to help shield Pyongyang in the event of conflict, as its development of nuclear weapons has put Beijing’s national security in jeopardy, thus breaching the common defense commitment.

Since its last renewal, North Korea’s nuclear ambitions have tested the relationship over and over again. A key turning point in China-DPRK relations was October 2006, when the North tested its first nuclear weapon. This compelled China to sponsor [UN Security Council Resolution 1718](#), which imposed sanctions on North Korea for this action. This resolution signaled a change in Beijing’s tone towards North Korea—from discreet political aid and diplomatic humanitarian aid to one of restraint. As Pyongyang continued to develop nuclear weapons and ballistic missile technologies, further rifts have emerged. This was especially evident in 2017, when the DPRK’s aggressive nuclear and missile testing coincided with key Chinese events like the [inauguration](#) of Xi Jinping’s flagship Belt and Road Forum in May 2017, the Xi-Trump [Mar-a-Lago Summit](#) in July 2017 and the September 2017 [Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa \(BRICS\) Summit in Xiamen](#). This was a [particularly strained](#) time in China-DPRK relations, and these actions pushed them closer to a “[tipping point](#).”

However, despite such tensions, the importance of strengthening the China-DPRK alliance has become secondary to their existing pragmatic economic and security ties. Nevertheless, the legacy of their shared roots in “Marxism-Leninism” and the principle of “proletarian internationalism” have continued to underpin their [interactions](#), as the two countries promoted inter-party relations alongside inter-state ties. Moreover, both states have deepened their commitment to regular consultations on matters of mutual interest under Article IV of the treaty. Both formal and informal China-DPRK meetings at various diplomatic levels have strengthened the narrative that despite differences, the two sides are [focused](#) on “carrying forward [their] traditional friendship.” While the 2018 informal summit between Kim Jong Un and Xi Jinping highlighted Beijing’s wish to play a “constructive role” in the future of the Korean Peninsula, the 2019 state visit by Xi to North Korea reassured Pyongyang of the “[eternal friendship](#)” the two states share.

Furthermore, shared tensions with the US have tended to drive continued engagement between China and North Korea despite bilateral frictions. Their shared worldview—primarily opposition to US efforts at regime change and promotion of human rights and democracy—have been critical aspects of China-DPRK friendship, validating the relevance of the treaty in the years ahead. The American strategy to [influence the geopolitics](#) of Northeast Asia through the security landscape and its dominant position in strategic institutions also encourages China and North Korea to stay united and achieve the goals of their partnership. For instance, the May 2021 reaffirmation of their bilateral ties came after the US decision to lift a [42-year-old ban](#) on South Korea’s development of ballistic missiles that can reach beyond the Korean Peninsula, which poses security challenges to both China and the DPRK.

For China, the treaty remains indispensable as an instrument enabling Beijing to sustain its engagement with North Korea and play an influential role in the affairs of the Korean Peninsula. China believes that South Korea and the US expect to dominate the politics and (perhaps) unification processes of the Korean Peninsula, excluding Chinese participation. Under such conditions, the treaty's Article VI notably provides a legal avenue for China's involvement in devising a solution to the Korean question by [committing](#) both states to a Korean unification solution "along peaceful and democratic lines," in "national interests of the Korean people," and that sustains "peace in the Far East."

The Treaty in US-China Rivalry

With its delicate security balance, Northeast Asia is a critical region of interest to both China (as its backyard) and the US (as home to its Indo-Pacific Command and its alliances with Japan and South Korea.) The China-DPRK treaty has been a long-standing pillar of such regional dynamics, and its importance to China emerges from Beijing's interest in maintaining its influence in this crucial region.

The [historic](#) meeting between South Korea's Moon Jae-in and North Korea's Kim Jong Un in April 2018 and the signing of the [Panmunjom Declaration](#) for Peace, Prosperity and Unification of the Korean Peninsula provided a diplomatic win in advance of US-DPRK talks but left China out in the cold. The declaration itself only mentioned China in passing in a quadrilateral format and focused instead on trilateral ROK-DPRK-US arrangements to shape the Korean Peninsula's future, making it a matter of strategic [concern](#) for China. A subsequent [historic](#) meeting between US President Donald Trump and Chairman Kim Jong Un in June 2018 further solidified the Chinese belief that the inter-Korean peace process would unfold with the US at the helm, reducing China's long-held and well-established political power in Northeast Asia.

Under US President Joseph Biden, Washington has [deepened](#) its engagement with Seoul. By settling the military cost-sharing issue, ending restrictions on Republic of Korea (ROK) ballistic missile development and holding a [successful](#) Biden-Moon [summit](#), the Biden administration has worked to repair damage inflicted on the alliance by the Trump administration, reset the bilateral relationship and shift the focus to [bolster](#) the alliance to confront challenges posed by China and North Korea. The US has also completed its North Korea [policy review](#) and announced a new "[calibrated, practical approach](#)" to denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, with an openness to [diplomacy](#) with North Korea. It also made a surprise appointment of veteran diplomat Sung Kim as a new special representative for the DPRK at the Biden-Moon summit despite early indications the post would remain vacant for the near future.

In this political climate, with the renewed US focus on alliances in the region, the China-DPRK treaty becomes fundamentally vital for China to maintain its influence and regional stability. As long as the US-ROK alliance remains strong, and the US continues its presence on the peninsula, the treaty will act as a counterweight to US and ROK influence in the region—making its renewal a foregone conclusion.

Challenges to the China-DPRK Treaty

In evaluating how the treaty has held up since its last renewal in 2001, it is evident that, while the agreement is critical for both states, its renewal will present challenges. For instance, in the context of Article II on military assistance, it remains to be seen whether

China is willing to commit itself to the defense of North Korea, based on the conclusion that the North's nuclear development has rendered the clause invalid. Moreover, according to the terms of the treaty, China is only obligated to come to North Korea's aid if Pyongyang is attacked first; thus, Kim Jong Un could find himself without Chinese military assistance should he repeat the [events](#) of the Korean War when the North was the aggressor. It is unlikely, however, that North Korea would support the treaty's renewal without the military protection clause.

Beijing considers stability on the Korean Peninsula an essential interest. Its support to North Korea guarantees a buffer between China, the South and US forces on the peninsula. Hence, even though the Chinese are inclined towards a North Korea without nuclear weapons, their biggest [fear](#) remains a collapse of the Kim regime, which raises serious concerns over the potential unification of the Korean Peninsula under South Korean control, the security of the North's nuclear weapons stockpile, and a massive influx of refugees across the border (China is already the first destination for North Korean refugees).

Therefore, peace on the Korean Peninsula (and, by extension, East Asia) has become [central](#) to Xi's Korea policy. A war emanating from the region could pit the US and China directly against each other. While China has a rapidly expanding and modernizing military, it currently remains far behind the US in terms of both capabilities and, crucially, experience. Beijing's foremost priority would thus be to avoid an unwanted full-scale war and may seek to amend or nullify Article II accordingly. Beijing has [reportedly](#) sought to revoke this clause to no avail, and has [conveyed](#) to Pyongyang not to count on Chinese military aid.

For North Korea, the treaty's importance is based not only on China's position as its largest trade partner—accounting for [95 percent](#) of the North's total merchandise trade—but also as a source of leverage in its negotiations with South Korea and the US. In recalibrating the language in the treaty, North Korea's aim will be to reaffirm its currently asymmetric relationship with China as the [Biden administration amps up coordinated efforts](#) with allies on North Korea.

Conclusion

For both China and the DPRK, their Treaty of Friendship remains vital as a tool for engaging with the US and ROK on more favorable terms, and its renewal is inevitable. While it is unlikely for significant changes to emerge from this year's renewal, it will likely face major challenges over the next 20 years owing to changed political realities, opening the door to its amendment. Although China will not allow outside pressure to destabilize the regime in North Korea, it is an increasingly reluctant ally to the DPRK. Moving forward, Beijing will seek to redraw the treaty in its favor. How the alliance evolves under this agreement over the next two decades will be critical for both Xi and Kim's leadership.

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Featured image: Zhou Enlai and Kim Il Sung, signing the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance, July 11, 1961. (Wikimedia)

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