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"Modernization of the North Korea-China Alliance":
Evolving Trends in the DPRK-PRC Alliance and
Policy Implications of Recent High-Level Exchanges

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Abstract

Around the 65th anniversary of the DPRK-PRC Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance, a series of high-level exchanges took place between North Korea and China. These developments suggest that the DPRK-PRC alliance—once widely assessed as effectively defunct—remains fully operative and is undergoing modernization in a manner that expands both its functions and scope in response to a changing international environment.

Drawing on recent statements by North Korean and Chinese leaders, as well as official reporting, this issue brief identifies four key dimensions of the modernization of the North Korea-China alliance.¹⁾ First, a "comprehensive alliance" that extends beyond mutual military assistance to include economic cooperation, science and technology, infrastructure, sociocultural exchange, and inter-party relations. Second, a "regional alliance" that encompasses not only Korean Peninsula security but also the Taiwan Strait and the broader regional and global strategic order. Third, a "horizontal alliance," in which the relationship is evolving from a historically asymmetric patron-client structure toward a reciprocal form of strategic cooperation, reflecting North Korea's advancing nuclear capabilities and expanding ties with Russia. Fourth, a "values-based alliance" that reaffirms a shared foundation rooted in socialist systems, party leadership, and anti-hegemonism.

The modernization of the DPRK-PRC alliance reflects both a strategic response to the evolving ROK-U.S. alliance and a process of joint adaptation to a shifting strategic environment, including prolonged U.S.-China strategic competition, deepening North Korea-Russia military cooperation, and the continued advancement of North Korea's nuclear capabilities. South Korea must, while sustaining the ROK-U.S. alliance, seek to prevent the entrenchment of bloc confrontation by restoring ROK-China relations, maintaining a differentiated approach to the Taiwan and Korean Peninsula

1) "Modernization of the North Korea-China alliance" refers to a functional realignment of the alliance that, while maintaining the basic principles of the DPRK-PRC Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance, strategically deepens cooperation in the political, diplomatic, economic, security, and science and technology domains in order to respond to the changing international order, U.S.-China strategic competition, and the economic security and advanced technology environment.

issues, promoting regional multilateral security dialogue, and, over the long term, supporting the normalization of DPRK-U.S. and DPRK-Japan relations.

Keywords

DPRK-PRC Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance, North Korea-China relations, alliance modernization, strategic alignment, Korean Peninsula security, Taiwan Strait, North Korea-Russia cooperation

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July 11, 2026 marked the 65th anniversary of the DPRK-PRC Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance, concluded in 1961. Article 2 of the treaty stipulates that if either party comes under armed attack and enters a state of war, the other shall immediately provide military assistance. As such, the treaty has historically served as the core political and legal foundation of North Korea-China relations during the Cold War as a military alliance.

Following the end of the Cold War, however, the strategic interests of the two countries gradually diverged. China increasingly emphasized denuclearization and stability on the Korean Peninsula, while North Korea continued to advance its nuclear weapons and missile programs. As a result, questions emerged regarding the treaty's practical relevance, and numerous assessments suggested that it had effectively become a dead letter, particularly given the low likelihood of unconditional Chinese military support for North Korea.

Nevertheless, a series of high-level exchanges between North Korea and China over approximately one month surrounding the treaty's 65th anniversary demonstrates that the alliance is not merely a Cold War relic but is being endowed with new functions and significance suited to a changing international environment. Xi Jinping paid a state visit to North Korea—his first in seven years—from June 8 to 9, 2026. On July 10, he met with Premier Pak Thae-song, who was visiting Beijing to attend the treaty's 65th anniversary commemorations. Subsequently, Wang Huning, Chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), visited North Korea from July 15 to 17, where he held talks with Jo Yong-won, Secretary of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), and met with Kim Jong Un.

At his meeting with Premier Pak Thae-song, President Xi assessed that the DPRK-PRC Treaty laid "an important political and legal foundation for consolidating the friendship

forged through struggle and bloodshed." He also stated that bilateral relations should be advanced "in step with the times" and developed "in a direction that contributes to each country's socialist endeavors and modernization." These remarks suggest a reinterpretation of the alliance—not as a narrowly defined military arrangement of the past but as a comprehensive, long-term strategic framework governing bilateral relations within a new international environment.

In this light, there is a need to carefully examine how the bilateral alliance is being redesigned, based on a comprehensive review of recent statements by North Korean and Chinese high-level officials, as well as official reporting.

Recent High-Level Exchanges and Modern Reinterpretation of the DPRK-PRC Treaty

President Xi Jinping chose North Korea as his first overseas destination of 2026. According to China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Xi reaffirmed that China's commitment to traditional friendship with North Korea would remain unchanged regardless of shifts in the international environment and expressed firm support for North Korea's socialist endeavors and the two countries' shared interests. Both sides emphasized strategic coordination in defending sovereignty, security, and development interests, while also agreeing to expand cooperation in trade, infrastructure, science and technology, education, cultural exchange, and inter-party exchanges. Chairman Kim Jong Un assessed that "friendly and cooperative DPRK-PRC relations greatly contribute to firmly protecting the sovereignty, security, and development interests of the two countries and defending peace and stability in the region and the rest of the world under the complicated international situation." He reaffirmed support for China's core interests, including the one-China principle.

Wang Huning's subsequent visit to North Korea served to institutionalize summit-level agreements through party-to-party and government-level channels. According to North Korean state media, during his talks with Secretary Jo Yong-won, Wang expressed the determination of the Chinese party and government to faithfully implement the agreements reached by Xi Jinping and Kim Jong Un. Discussions focused on expanding cooperation across political, economic, and cultural domains; strengthening high-level strategic communication; and deepening cooperation in enterprise, livelihoods, culture, and inter-party exchanges. The Chinese delegation visited memorial sites honoring the sacrifices of the Chinese People's Volunteers, a WPK cadre training institution, the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun, and the Wonsan-Kalma Coastal Tourist Zone. This illustrates that North Korea-China relations are not solely dependent on military security or summit diplomacy but are expanding into a multi-layered cooperation framework combining revolutionary history, socialist ideology, inter-party exchanges, tourism, and the livelihood economy.

On July 11, in a congratulatory message sent to Chairman Kim marking the 65th anniversary of the DPRK-PRC Treaty, President Xi stated that the recent summit had "provided strategic guidance and a new blueprint for the development of China-DPRK relations in the new era." He further emphasized that bilateral relations should **"make new contributions to consolidating the socialist cause and advancing the modernization of both countries"** (emphasis added). The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs likewise stated that "maintaining, consolidating, and developing PRC-DPRK relations is the consistent and firm strategic policy of the Chinese party and government."²⁾ Taken together, these statements indicate that both countries are redefining the functions and roles of their alliance not merely in terms of maintaining the 1961 treaty but in response to a changing international order.

Drawing on these developments, the modernization of the North Korea-China alliance can be understood along four key dimensions.

Directions of Modernization in the North Korea-China Alliance

Direction of Modernization	Content	Related Statements	Geopolitical Ripple Effects
Comprehensive Alliance	Expansion from a focus on mutual military assistance to a composite alliance encompassing trade, infrastructure, science and technology, education, culture, tourism, and inter-party exchanges	At the summit, the two leaders emphasized cooperation in trade, infrastructure, science and technology, education, as well as human, cultural, and inter-party exchanges; during Wang Huning's visit to North Korea, discussions included livelihoods, enterprise, and cultural cooperation	Transition from an alliance that operates primarily in military crises to a permanent cooperative framework that supports national development and systemic stability in peacetime
Regional Alliance	Expansion from mutual assistance in the event of a Korean Peninsula contingency to joint responses addressing the Northeast Asian and broader global strategic order	North Korea's support for the one-China principle and China's core interests; joint emphasis on anti-hegemonism, multilateralism, and regional and global peace	Increasing likelihood that the Taiwan issue and the Korean Peninsula issue may become indirectly linked within a single regional security framework shaped by U.S.-China strategic competition
Horizontal Alliance	Shifting from North Korea's one-sided	North Korea characterizes the	China increasingly perceives North Korea

2) Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Xi Jinping Meets with Pak Thae-song, Premier of the Cabinet of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea," July 10, 2026.

	security dependence on China toward more reciprocal strategic cooperation between the two countries	DPRK-PRC Treaty as a legal guarantee of mutual support and the joint pursuit of socialist endeavors, and emphasizes developing bilateral relations into "the most strategic relationship"	not merely as an object of protection but as a strategic asset in its competition with the United States, while North Korea leverages both China and Russia in parallel to expand its strategic autonomy and negotiating power
Values-based Alliance	Reinforcement of solidarity grounded in shared political values and identity, including the socialist system, party leadership, shared revolutionary history, and anti-hegemonism	Reinforcement of solidarity grounded in shared political values and identity, including the socialist system, party leadership, shared revolutionary history, and anti-hegemonism. Kim Jong Un's emphasis on "shared ideals and convictions," Xi Jinping's reference to jointly advancing both countries' socialist endeavors and modernization, and Wang Huning's visits to party cadre institutions and sites of revolutionary significance	Strengthening of an identity-based foundation that sustains the relationship despite shifting interests, with regime security and political stability mutually recognized as core interests

Note: "Horizontal alliance" refers not to parity in national power but to increasingly reciprocal political transaction dynamics within the alliance, in line with North Korea's advancing nuclear capabilities and expanding cooperation with Russia.

First, building on a "comprehensive alliance" framework, the two countries are expanding both the scope and depth of cooperation. Whereas the traditional alliance centered on mutual military assistance, the contemporary agenda encompasses trade, infrastructure, science and technology, education, culture, tourism, livelihoods, and inter-party exchanges. Xi Jinping's statement that bilateral relations should develop "in a direction that contributes to each country's socialist endeavors and modernization" signals a functional shift in the alliance's purpose—from regime survival to national development. Accordingly, the alliance is evolving from a limited arrangement that responds to war or military crises into a comprehensive framework that underpins economic development, systemic stability, and social integration in peacetime. Although UN Security Council sanctions continue to constrain the scale of economic engagement, near-term cooperation is likely to expand first in sanction-tolerant domains, including tourism, transportation, infrastructure, livelihoods, and local and people-to-people exchanges.

Second, under a "regional alliance" logic, the operational scope of the relationship is broadening beyond the Korean Peninsula. The 1961 treaty was primarily oriented toward deterring renewed conflict on the peninsula and countering U.S. military threats. Recent exchanges, however, also address sovereignty, security, and development interests within a wider regional and global order. Kim Jong Un's explicit support for the one-China principle and China's core interests signals North Korea's political alignment on the Taiwan issue. This indicates an expansion of the alliance's strategic horizon from the Korean Peninsula to Northeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific. While direct North Korean military involvement in a Taiwan contingency remains unlikely, the risk of strategic linkage between a Taiwan Strait crisis and a Korean Peninsula contingency may increase, particularly in relation to U.S. force allocation and alliance coordination. For instance, if Pyongyang generates military tensions on the Korean Peninsula during a Taiwan Strait crisis, or if Beijing leverages a Korean Peninsula crisis in the context of strategic competition with Washington, the U.S. regional security burden could rise simultaneously.

Third, through the "horizontal alliance" framework, the two countries appear poised to strengthen mutual strategic cooperation. Historically, the alliance was characterized by an asymmetric patronage relationship in which China supported North Korea's security and economy. However, as North Korea has advanced its nuclear and missile capabilities and strengthened military cooperation with Russia, the distribution of power within the relationship has begun to shift. While asymmetry persists in terms of economic capacity and global influence, North Korea's expanding strategic autonomy and negotiating leverage are rendering alliance dynamics more reciprocal. For China, North Korea's value has also increased as a strategic asset that can diffuse U.S. regional military pressure and alliance networks, rather than merely an object of management and control. Recent exchanges increasingly employ terms such as "strategic coordination," "mutual support," and "defense of shared interests," reflecting a shift toward greater horizontal mutuality.

Fourth, the alliance appears to be reinforcing its character as a "values-based" partnership grounded in solidarity in defense of the socialist system and in opposition to U.S. and broader Western influence. Its modernization is proceeding in a direction that re-emphasizes not only practical interests but also shared ideological foundations. Kim Jong Un highlighted "shared ideals and convictions," while Xi Jinping has emphasized contributing jointly to socialist development and modernization. Wang Huning's visits to WPK cadre training institutions and sites of revolutionary significance, alongside an emphasis on inter-party exchanges, reinforce this trend. Although the two countries continue to hold divergent positions on issues such as North Korea's nuclear program, relations with the United States and Russia, and economic reform, their shared commitment to socialist governance and resistance to Western pressure functions as a political foundation binding the bilateral relationship. In this sense, the values-based

dimension does not eliminate differences in interests, but rather functions as a systemic buffer that inhibits such differences from developing into a full deterioration in bilateral relations.

Assessment and Implications

The modernization of the North Korea-China alliance should be understood both as a strategic response to the evolving ROK-U.S. alliance and as a broader process of joint adaptation to a shifting strategic environment characterized by prolonged U.S.-China strategic competition, deepening North Korea-Russia military cooperation, and the continued advancement of North Korea's nuclear capabilities.

At the core of the Washington-led ROK-U.S. alliance modernization is an effort to expand South Korea's role in deterring North Korea while enhancing the strategic flexibility and regional operational capacity of U.S. Forces Korea. From the perspective of both Pyongyang and Beijing, this evolution is likely to be interpreted as a shift from a peninsula-focused deterrence posture toward a broader regional role aimed at constraining China. In response, Pyongyang and Beijing may seek to expand cooperation across economic, diplomatic, ideological, and regional security domains, thereby increasing the probability that Washington will face concurrent strategic pressures in both Korean Peninsula and Taiwan Strait contingencies.

Within this environment, Beijing confronts a dual strategic challenge: responding to the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy and strengthening alliance networks, while managing a relative erosion of its influence over Pyongyang amid expanding North Korea-Russia ties. Pyongyang, for its part, must maintain stable relations with Beijing to support its external economic needs and long-term regime stability, even as it expands cooperation with Moscow. The modernization of the bilateral alliance is thus best understood as the product of converging—though not identical—strategic imperatives.

The ongoing realignment of the regional alliance structure in Northeast Asia is placing a significant burden on South Korea's security environment. The modernization of the ROK-U.S. alliance, the revival of the North Korea-Russia alliance, and the evolution of the North Korea-China alliance are unfolding simultaneously. As a result, Northeast Asia may be transitioning from a system of relatively discrete bilateral alliances to a more networked and competitive structure of interconnected alliances and strategic partnerships. In this context, the South Korean government must pursue the following policy responses to manage the risks associated with the modernization of the North Korea-China alliance.

First, full-scale restoration of South Korea-China relations and the acceleration of strategic communication are needed. If North Korea-China relations strengthens while South Korea-China ties deteriorate, the likelihood of China perceiving the Korean Peninsula issue as a confrontation between DPRK-China and ROK-U.S. will increase. It is therefore necessary to resolve, as promptly as possible, bilateral frictions arising from issues such as the recent electronic immigration card dispute and to strengthen strategic communication at the summit, senior official, and security levels. Since Seoul and Beijing share a strategic interest in peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, Seoul should manage relations with Beijing in a manner that allows the parallel development of both North Korea-China and South Korea-China relations.

Second, the Taiwan issue and the Korean Peninsula issue must be handled through a clear policy of differentiation. If the “regional alliance” dimension of the North Korea-China relations intersects with the expanding regional role of the ROK-U.S. alliance, there is a risk that the Taiwan Strait and Korean Peninsula issues could become militarily linked. South Korea should maintain its principled position of supporting peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait and opposing any unilateral changes to the status quo, while treating any question of military involvement as a matter to be determined independently in accordance with its security situation, legal framework, and national interests. It is also necessary to ensure that ROK-U.S. alliance modernization does not weaken its core function of deterring North Korea. In negotiating the regional role and strategic flexibility of U.S. Forces Korea, careful assessment is needed regarding potential gaps in the peninsula's defense posture, risks of North Korean miscalculation, and possible Chinese countermeasures.

Third, multilateral security dialogue aimed at mitigating confrontation among regional alliance systems should be actively pursued. As competitive alliance systems in Northeast Asia intensify, so too does the risk of arms races and miscalculation. South Korea should promote multilateral dialogue for crisis management and military confidence-building in coordination with the United States, Japan, China, and Russia. Exploring a Northeast Asian security consultative mechanism based on the Six-Party Talks participants would be a practical starting point. Rather than beginning with denuclearization—an agenda likely to face strong resistance from Pyongyang—a more feasible approach would prioritize crisis management and confidence-building measures aimed at preventing escalation and nuclear conflict. Even if North Korea does not participate initially, a phased approach could begin with enhanced strategic communication among ROK-U.S.-Japan and China-Russia, followed by efforts to bring North Korea into the process.

Fourth, over the long term, the alliance-centric regional order should be transformed into a more cooperative multilateral framework through normalization of North Korea-U.S. and North Korea-Japan relations. As long as North Korea perceives the United States and its regional allies as the primary threat to regime security, incentives to reinforce alignment with China and Russia will persist. While strengthening ROK-U.S.-Japan cooperation may enhance short-term deterrence, it also risks reinforcing a long-term security dilemma. The ultimate objective should therefore be to reduce North Korea's reliance on China and Russia by promoting diplomatic normalization with the U.S. and Japan and by establishing a durable peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.

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