



China-Russia Security Cooperation in the 2020s:

THE NATURE OF THE SINO-NORTH KOREAN ALLIANCE

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What was the nature of DPRK-China-Soviet alignment during the early Cold War (1949-1969)?

A growing number of historians are arguing that Cold War relations between Beijing and Pyongyang were friendly on the surface but, beneath it, simmered mutual suspicion and tension. For instance, Patrick McEachern has [argued](#) that the two “feigned something of a special relationship since their founding,” when in reality it had “been fraught from the beginning.” I believe that these kinds of arguments exaggerate the level of friction between China and North Korea. Although the Soviet Union played an important role in brokering cooperation between China and North Korea before the war, for much of the Cold War—and especially after 1960—Beijing and Pyongyang were generally closer to each other than they were to Moscow, which made repeated blunders in handling its Asian allies.

Relations were by no means always harmonious, but the two countries supported each other militarily, economically, and politically more often than they quarreled through much of the period between 1949 and 1969. Forms of mutual support included everything from the dispatch of troops to aid in civil wars and to repel invasions, to massive grants and loans, to propagandizing for each other when they faced diplomatic challenges.

How did the China-North Korea relationship change over time?

Military cooperation between the Korean Workers’ Party and the Chinese Communist Party began before the Korean War. During World War II, Korean guerrilla units, including one led by Kim Il Sung, fought alongside Chinese communists and carried out raids against Japanese forces. During the Chinese Civil War, ethnic Korean units were integrated into the People’s Liberation Army. The CCP repatriated these units, which were schooled in PLA tactics, to North Korea in 1949, and they went on to exert a [powerful influence](#) on the fledgling North Korean military. Although both China and North Korea relied heavily on the Soviets for weapons and material support during the early 1950s, historians such as Bruce Cumings and Heungyu Kim have noted that Chinese influence surpassed Soviet influence on the organization and tactics of the Korean People’s Army by 1949.

North Korea and China had some [strategic disagreements](#) during the Korean War, and Stalin needed to twist Kim Il Sung’s arm to get him to accept Chinese operational control over the joint forces. But

the war effort was also based on joint ideals and interests, and there was never a serious threat that the alliance would splinter. In fact, the war cemented a durable ideological and strategic affinity between China and North Korea and that friendship became an important part of the legitimacy narratives of both states. State-run media and cultural productions in both countries constantly emphasized the alliance, celebrated the war as a shared heroic enterprise, and portrayed each other in a heroic light, even if both subtly emphasized their own role.

China also gave as much as three percent of its GDP in economic aid to North Korea during the two years after the war and kept Chinese volunteers stationed there. North Korea, meanwhile, often supported China's diplomacy and foreign policy choices when the rest of the world—including Communist Bloc countries—did not. During the Sino-Soviet split, for example, the Warsaw Pact countries sided with the Soviets, but the DPRK remained closer to China. It also cheered China's successful nuclear test in 1964, and emulated China's diplomacy in the Afro-Asian world. Ultimately, the China-North Korea alliance was characterized by mutual diplomatic support, economic and cultural exchange, and strategic cooperation.

What explains the nature and evolution of the relationship?

When frictions did arise between Beijing and Pyongyang, they were most often caused by ideological shifts in either the CCP or the KWP. When this occurred, ideological divergence caused the two parties to become more critical of each other, and this rankled nationalist sensitivities. Before 1969 there were two major episodes of discord; the first occurred in 1956 and was precipitated by de-Stalinization and the second was a result of the Cultural Revolution.

Historians have long focused on the events of 1956, especially Nikita Khrushchev's famous 1956 Secret Speech, and how they influenced North Korea's relations with the Communist Bloc. Khrushchev's decision to denounce Stalin and call for an end to "cults of personality" sent shockwaves through the communist world and had a temporary liberalizing effect on the internal politics of bloc countries. It directly influenced Mao's "Hundred Flowers Campaign," which encouraged intellectuals, students, and workers to voice any criticisms that they had of the CCP.

While Mao temporarily permitted this degree of liberalization, Kim Il Sung did the opposite. When members of the party with close ties to Beijing and Moscow challenged his authority during the August Faction Incident, Kim purged them and consolidated his own rule. Disturbed by the elimination of officials with whom they had close ties, Beijing and Moscow dispatched a joint delegation tasked with the objective of halting the purges. Kim resented what he saw as unwarranted meddling in North Korea's affairs and the way Beijing and Moscow had criticized North Korean officials in meetings. While Chinese and Soviet actions brought the dissenters a temporary reprieve, Kim eventually resumed the purges.



Tensions over this incident were not permanent. By 1957, Mao was apologizing to Kim for intervening in North Korea's internal affairs. He had likely concluded that Kim's approach to de-Stalinization had been right after all. In China, the "Hundred Flowers Campaign" was followed by the Anti-Rightist Movement, which purged critics of the CCP in a manner not dissimilar to how Kim handled dissent. After Mao's apology, Beijing ratcheted up its aid to the DPRK and invited Kim to visit the PRC again in 1958.

The Cultural Revolution, however, and its attendant shift to a more fanatical version of Maoism alienated China from many of its former friends and North Korea was no exception. Believing that North Korea was not sufficiently sympathetic toward China's growing radicalism, the Red Guards stirred incidents on the border and attacked ethnic Koreans living in China. North Koreans found the Cultural Revolution difficult to comprehend. In 1966, Kim Il Sung explained to the Soviet ambassador that the Cultural Revolution "has seriously alarmed us" while some KWP officials called it a "great madness." This was undoubtedly a difficult period in the relationship, but some of the more moderate members of the CCP, such as Zhou Enlai who visited the DPRK in 1970, worked to limit the damage being done by the Red Guards.

The Sino-North Korean relationship did not change significantly until the mid-1970s and 1980s as both countries veered away from socialist internationalism albeit in very different ways. The "Monolithic Ideological System," which established Kimilsungism as the core philosophy of North Korea and paved the way for Kim Jong Il to succeed his father, became more deeply entrenched. China, on the other hand, experimented with market reforms and dramatically improved its relations with the United States and Western Europe. As the guiding ideals of the CCP and KWP changed, both attached less importance to the friendship. Nonetheless, neither party was ever willing to completely abandon the other; their shared history as allies continued to inform the relationship.

To what extent did the DPRK-China-Soviet alliance enhance the military effectiveness, deterrence posture, or overall security of its members during the Cold War?

Sino-North Korean strategic cooperation and command integration unquestionably enhanced the deterrence posture and overall security of North Korea and, to a lesser degree, China during the Cold War. At the most basic level, North Korea would likely not exist today if Chinese volunteers had not aided it during the Korean War. The bludgeoning that UN forces received when the volunteers crossed the Yalu River during the winter of 1950 factored into the Truman administration's decision not to follow General Douglas MacArthur's advice to expand the war. The integration of Chinese and North Korean forces did not always function smoothly, but it was successful enough to hold the vastly better equipped UN Command to a stalemate.

During the years after the war, strategic cooperation remained important. South Korean President Syngman Rhee remained belligerent for much of his tenure in power (1948–1960) and never gave up his dream of unifying the peninsula. He continued to propose that the United States support him in a “march north,” but the continued presence of several hundred thousand volunteers in North Korea until 1958 likely had a sobering effect on Rhee. The alliance improved China’s overall security situation as well. While China became involved in conflicts along its border with India and the Soviet Union, its border with North Korea was generally not a source of significant concern.

Aid from China and the Soviet Union also greatly accelerated North Korean military capacity. The North Koreans were masters of reverse engineering, and during the early Cold War, the DPRK began reverse engineering small arms and other weapons that it received from its communist allies. By the 1970s and 1980s the North Koreans were manufacturing their own tanks, missiles, and personnel carriers. While these weapons were not used in an actual wartime scenario, the CIA often took note and believed DPRK capabilities were improving. These technology transfers made a resumption of hostilities between the two Koreas too costly for South Korea or its allies to contemplate.

The flow of military technology was not entirely one-way. Documents from China’s provincial archives demonstrate that when Mao launched the Third Front and relocated military and industrial facilities to the interior, Chinese officials studied North Korea’s tunnels and underground networks closely and may have been trying to emulate some aspects of them in constructing the underground “816” nuclear weapons facility.

Methods and Sources:

Archival access in China enjoyed a brief golden age between 2009 and 2014 when the Foreign Ministry made a significant number of Cold War-era foreign policy documents available. Since 2014, many documents have been reclassified or made unavailable to researchers, though some can still be accessed through connections to scholars who copied or transcribed documents.

The best North Korean source materials are generally newspapers and magazines. The Library of Congress holds complete or near complete runs of many North Korean journals and newspapers from the Cold War era. The best available sources for learning about North Korean military and security policies are former Eastern Bloc archives and materials in the CIA database. South Korean archives have also been increasingly open in recent years with more significant materials becoming available.

PRC Foreign Ministry Archive: Although this archive has reclassified most of its holdings, it included high-level meetings and discussions though the collection was not as strong when it came to materials about the PLA. Some of the materials in the collection are available from the Cold War



International History Project website but most need to be requested at the archive or acquired through connections with relevant scholars.

[Selected Military Writings of Mao Zedong](#): These writings are widely translated and available online. While they do not include technical information about PLA forces, they offer insights into North Korean strategic thinking.

[Library of Congress North Korean Serial Collection](#): The Library of Congress houses a unique collection of hundreds of different North Korean serials from 1948 to the present. They cover a wide variety of themes and issues with some shedding insight into military/industrial themes. Many of the journals have been scanned and can be read online, but some need to be viewed in the library.

[Republic of Korea Foreign Ministry Research Institute](#): A collection of materials declassified by the South Korean Foreign Ministry. The materials on the 1950s are quite weak, but the quality of materials for more recently declassified years (now into the 1990s) is better. The South Koreans monitored and discussed developments in North Korea often and the materials contain some useful intelligence. The vast majority of these materials need to be viewed on site, but small parts of the collection have been posted online.