AN UNEASY BUT DURABLE BROTHERHOOD?:
Revisiting China’s Alliance Strategy and North Korea

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Abstract
This article aims to reexamine the formation of the 1961 Sino-North Korean alliance treaty from the Chinese perspective. The existing literature has explained the formation of the treaty mainly in the given circumstantial context or from the view of North Korea’s diplomatic initiative in the Sino-Soviet dispute. However, this article argues that the treaty was a product of China’s strategic behavior based on its national interest rather than that of Kim Il-sung’s diplomatic ability. In order to overcome the internal and external troubles, the Chinese leadership adjusted its foreign policy more pragmatically in 1960, anticipating the conclusion of the alliance treaty with North Korea. Especially after the Soviet-North Korean treaty came into view, under severe security pressure China hastened to co-opt North Korea by heightening its level of commitment to the treaty. In this way, North Korea tactfully jumped on the Chinese bandwagon. This implies that as long as North Korea has strategic value in the Chinese perspective, China would maintain its special relationship with North Korea in the context of the 1961 alliance treaty. Although recently the Sino-North Korean alliance looks like a one-sided alliance for ensuring North Korea’s regime survival, China tends to secure significant collateral benefits by maintaining that alliance with North Korea.

KEY WORDS
Sino-North Korean alliance treaty in 1961, Sino-North Korean Relations, Sino-Soviet dispute, China’s Foreign Policy, China’s National Interest.

I. Introduction
July 11, 2011 marked the 50th anniversary of the Sino-North Korean “Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance” signed in 1961. Without a lavish commemoration parade in Beijing and Pyongyang, Chinese President Hu Jintao and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) leader Kim Jong-il vowed to further strengthen ties between the two states in an exchange of letters. Of course, since the end of Cold War, the Sino-North Korean “blood-shared alliance” has been branded as a “relic of a bygone age,” and some Chinese officers even argued for scrapping the treaty and treating North Korea as a “normal” state. However, despite many
unforeseen challenges caused by the changing international structure and the conflict of alliance interests between them, China and North Korea have retained their unchanged solidarity in recent years. Considering that since 1994 China has annually provided large amounts of fuel and food aid, which served as a lifeline to North Korea, the relationship is not one of minor significance. After Kim Jong-il’s sudden death in December 2011, China has behaved as expected, trying to prop up the regime in order to ensure stability in its nuclear-armed neighbor. China’s foreign ministry sent a message of strong support for Kim Jong-un, Kim Jong-il’s successor and encouraged North Koreans to unite under the new leader. China sees its alliance with the DPRK as crucial, just as both Premier Zhou Enlai and People’s Liberation Army commander-in-chief Marshal Zhu De used the metaphor, “as close as lips to teeth,” to delineate the strategic importance of North Korea to China.

An old friend is still a friend.

From the viewpoint of the stronger ally (China), it is an advantage to leave its commitment somewhat ambiguous in the alliance treaty in order to avoid manipulation by the weaker state (North Korea). However, the Sino-North Korean alliance treaty was seen as a very special one in that China explicitly pledged its support to the defense of the DPRK, including automatically sending troops if the DPRK was attacked by third state(s). This treaty is the only military one that China signed formally with a weaker state.

Then, why did China conclude the alliance treaty with DPRK? How does the 1961 alliance treaty figure into Beijing’s continuing support for North Korea politically, economically and militarily? The purpose of this article is to reexamine the origin of the Sino-North Korean alliance treaty from the Chinese perspective, which would shed light on the contemporary Sino-North Korean relations, given that the basic features of the bilateral relationship stemmed from the Chinese strategic thinking of the 1961 treaty.

The formation of the Sino-North Korean alliance treaty has been explained so far mainly as a response to the threat of the American “imperialists,” or from the view of North Korea’s diplomatic initiative in the politics of the DPRK-China-Soviet triangle. China’s role as a driving force, however, has largely gone unnoticed. The main argument in this article is that the Sino-North Korean alliance treaty was concluded by China’s strategic calculations based on its national interest rather than by Kim Il-Sung’s diplomatic leadership. Contrary to popular belief, China wanted to conclude that treaty first, while North Korea showed more interest in the signing of an alliance treaty with the Soviet Union than that with China. This assessment is derived from the historical analysis of newly declassified materials as well as specific policies enacted by Beijing and Pyongyang.

In the same vein, this article contends that as long as North Korea has strategic value in the Chinese perspective, China would retain its special relationship with North Korea and make best use of its historical and geopolitical position in the Korean Peninsula. Numerous studies have predicted that the Sino-North Korean treaty does not serve as a security alliance any more, mainly due to the change of security environment. However, Beijing still has a number of reasons to maintain its alliance with Pyongyang. In lieu of a conclusion, this article briefly refers to the implications of the Sino-North Korean alliance treaty from the view of today’s international politics.
II. Alliance Theories and the Sino-North Korean Relation

Analyzing the Sino-North Korean relationship is always a challenging task. As socialist brethrens and divided states, both China and North Korea, at least in principle, still pursue the benefits of preventing an uncontrolled leak of information on their own relations. In addition, existing alliance theories, based on the perceived threats from adversaries and the shifting international structure, cannot adequately explain the realities of the Sino-North Korean alliance.

1. Power or Threat Based Theory

When it comes to alliance, realists agree that alliance formation is caused by an unequal distribution and shifting constellation of power in the international system. Given the desire to survive and prosper in the international system, known as anarchy, every state strives to increase its own power independently or in combination with other like-minded states. Because other states may cause potential threats and there is no higher authority to come to its rescue, each state tends to maintain the balance of power for its survival. "Balancing" refers to an act of deterring a state from securing a dominant position.

On the other hand, bandwagoning is to align with the threatening state or coalition. By doing so, the bandwagoner may hope to avoid an attack on itself by diverting threats elsewhere. Stephen M. Walt argues that balancing is more common than bandwagoning, when states are more secure, because aggressors will face combined opposition. Therefore, it is safer to balance against potential threats than to hope that strong states will remain benevolent.

There is another additional argument related to alliance formation. Walt said that "although power is an important part of the equation, it is not the only part. It is more accurate to say that states tend to ally with or against the foreign power that poses the greatest threat." Namely, the immediate threat that offensive capabilities pose may create a strong incentive for others to balance. In this so-called "threat-based theory," balancing and bandwagoning are more accurately viewed as a response to threats. It is important to consider other factors that will affect the level of threat that states may pose.

Kenneth N. Waltz also argues that the alliance choices are decided by a degree of potential threat, which is evaluated by the opposition’s "aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive capability, and the perceived intentions." In this context, Waltz redefines balancing as "allying in opposition to the principal source of danger," and bandwagoning as "allying with the state that poses the major threat." In other words, alliances are formed when states perceive threats from their common enemies.

Other significant assertions regarding a balance of power in alliance formation are found in John J. Mearsheimer’s The Tragedy of Great Power Politics and Hans J. Morgenthau’s Politics Among Nations. In these books, the authors argue that alliances are often formed based on the “function of preserving the status quo,” and balance of power logic often causes great powers to form alliances and cooperate against common enemies. For this reason, when power is unbalanced, such circumstance stimulates states to form alliances to restore a balance. That is, as Barry Hughes explains, when opposition power weakens, old disagreements among alliance partners will resurface, causing either dissension in the alliance or coalition breakdown as in case of
However, power or threat based theory does not explain why China and North Korea form and maintain their alliance. First, the fact that the Sino-North Korean alliance continues to be evaluated as a firm alliance—even though no other power threatens both allies and there is no common foe opposing them—shows the limitations of the power or threat based theory. In actuality, the Sino-North Korean alliance was created not only by the need to defend the DPRK, but also by the need to defend China in a “lips and teeth” relationship. Second, this is because Beijing’s motive for forming and maintaining the alliance with the DPRK is not just threats from the U.S.-South Korean alliance, but the desire to create a stable security environment for China.

2. Self-Interest-Based Theory

Realists posit that states are the key actors in world politics. They further argue that states pursue key interests; realists claim that those interests provide the only legitimate basis for state action. Balance of power and balance of threat theories are criticized because these theories fail to provide appropriate explanation for a state’s self-interests.

George Liska proposes that alliances aim at maximizing gains and sharing liabilities and all association depends on the existence of identical interests. Therefore, in terms of internal and international security interests, states are directly acting based on their self-interests when they form alliances. In addition, states choose alignment in order to accomplish specific security goals more easily. In other words, the aim of balancing is self-preservation and the protection of values already possessed, while the goal of bandwagoning is usually self-extension: to obtain values coveted. Simply put, “balancing is driven by the desire to avoid losses; bandwagoning by the opportunity for gain,” as Randall L. Schweller noted.

The distribution of benefits is likely to reflect the distribution of power within an alliance, as does the determination of policies. A great power has a good chance to have its way with a weak ally as concerns benefits and policies. A weak nation may be able to exploit its relations with a strong ally by persuading the latter making a commitment to the support of its vital interests, which may mean nothing to the strong ally or may even run counter to its interests. The relationship between the U.S. and South Korea exemplifies this situation. Namely, some states are willing to give up their sovereignty to preserve security by allying with a strong state, while other states are willing to give up security to preserve sovereignty by allying with weak state.

Meanwhile, Michael Barnett and Jack Levy find that realism is “relatively silent concerning the Third World alliances in general or how state-society relations in particular might give rise to distinctive patterns of alignment behavior.” They stress the resource-providing function of alliances and the impact on the domestic political economy. They conclude that Third World leaders form alliances “to secure urgently needed economic and military resources to promote domestic goals.”

Glenn H. Snyder also argues that states form or join alliances if the benefits of doing so are greater than the costs. The benefits are counted chiefly in terms of the increased security resulting from the partner’s commitment, and the costs largely in terms of the autonomy sacrificed in the commitment to the partner. Snyder suggests security benefits of alliance, including deterrence of attack, capability for defense against attack, deterrence of attack on the ally, preclusion of alliance or alignment between the partner and the opponent, and increased control or influence over the allied state. Snyder refers to the risk of
having to come to the aid of the ally, the risk of entrapment in war by the ally, the risk of a counter-alliance, and foreclosure of alternative alliance options, and general constraints on freedom of action, as the principal costs of alliance. In interest-based theories, alliance is decided by how allies increase their interests more than the costs they pay. Therefore, allies make an effort to keep the alliance valid by increasing their self-interests in the context of alliance.

In short, in the interest-based theory, states could transform their alliance policy depending on national interests. Thus, a typical alliance is imbedded in a dynamic field of diverse interests and purposes. Namely, the value and the chances of an alliance must be considered in the context of the overall policies within which it is expected to operate.

This article assesses the utility of these international relations theories in explaining the formation and continuing value of the Sino-North Korean security alliance for the Chinese perspective. This article hypothesizes that the Sino-North Korean alliance is based not solely on the traditional relationship of two states, but also more centrally on the Chinese national security objectives to expand its external influence. In particular, this article will focus on the China’s foreign policy as a key variable to explain the formation of the alliance treaty with North Korea.

III. China’s Foreign Policy Adjustment of 1960

Despite Sino-North Korean strong military relationship, including the China’s massive intervention in the Korean War, China had not signed a military treaty with the DPRK for more than 10 years after the war. Mao Zedong said clearly to the North Korean side in 1949 that “We have a negative stance against the conclusion of the military alliance, because it could provoke America.” Then, why did China conclude the alliance treaty with DPRK in 1961? To understand the historical context of the Sino-North Korean alliance treaty from the Chinese perspective, it is first necessary to examine the basic contours of Chinese foreign policy in those days, especially in 1960.

As recent studies emphasize, Chinese foreign policy was revised more pragmatically in 1960 before the sharp left turn in 1962. The reasons for a shift in foreign policy embarked in 1960 are two-fold. First, China faced serious economic recession and the Chinese leadership even differed over how to assess the Great Leap Forward unfolding in the summer of 1959. Internal regime insecurity demanded an adjustment of foreign policy in the direction of securing more stability. Second, the decay of the Sino-Soviet alliance and the aggravation of the border issues, such as the Sino-Indian conflict, forced the Chinese leadership to revise its foreign policy. While labeling such deteriorating strategic environment as “the rising international anti-China tide,” Beijing sought to overcome these crises in a more pragmatic way. Wu Lengxi, then editor of *Renmin Ribao* recalled that the Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee (CC) presided over by Mao from 7 to 17 January 1960 reached the conclusion that “new initiatives should be adopted vigorously in order to create a new situation in diplomacy.” Guided by this new principle, pragmatism emerged in the Chinese diplomacy.

In terms of Sino-Soviet relations, the Chinese leadership was determined not only to avoid a split, but also to try to “reach unity based on new foundations,” even “to reach unity with him (Nikita
Khrushchev) and not split shamelessly. This is why even after several months of disputes with the Soviet Union, including the severe clash at the Romanian Workers Party Congress in Bucharest in June 1960 and the withdrawal of all Soviet experts from China in July 1960, China still reached an understanding with its Soviet ally at the Moscow Conference of 81 Communist and Workers’ Parties in December 1960, where they agreed “to confer together on anything that may come up so as to avoid conflict." Bilateral relations further improved after Chairman Liu Shaoqi made a follow-up state visit to the Soviet Union in December 1960. By 1961 Moscow had again decided to transfer to China advanced military technology, such as equipment for producing the MiG-21 jet fighter. Of course, as is well known, the momentum for this direction did not last long and the Sino-Soviet relations had been worsening beyond recall thereafter.

At the Standing Committee meeting of the CCPCC in January 1960, the leadership also outlined its guideline for handling the Sino-American relations as “to talk but not in haste, to talk but not break off.” In other words, Beijing wanted to negotiate with the Americans and not to break off the talks, but also not establish a diplomatic relationship with the U.S. too hastily. Mao Zedong himself showed interest in a report of January 1960 that suggested a possible change in Washington’s China policy. The report concluded that the U.S. might increase contacts with China in the future, and use the Warsaw talks to make further probes.

Another key adjustment in Chinese foreign policy was the effort to defuse tensions on the border. With the rebellion in Tibet and the rise of border skirmishes, the Sino-Indian relations had deteriorated dramatically during 1959. Chinese leaders believed that Indian policy had severely suppressed the China’s security itself and that New Delhi was using the border conflicts to coordinate its policy with the West’s “anti-China tide.” Under these assumptions Beijing decided to strike back firmly in August 1959. However, after this border clash, the Chinese leadership did not want its relations with India to deteriorate further, nor did it allow the Sino-Indian border conflict to become the focal point of the policy agenda. The Chinese leadership decided in September 1960 to try to resolve the conflict through negotiation.

As an extension, at the same meeting of the CCPCC in January 1960, the Chinese leadership established a guideline to resolve another border issues with neighboring states: North Korea and Mongolia, Burma (Myanmar), Nepal, and Laos. The rough order was to try to settle through step-by-step negotiations, but as quickly as possible. For example, previously, in the early 1950s, China had declined North Korean attempts to discuss their disputed border. However, in the early 1960s it moved to hold negotiations with North Korea. In June 1962, Zhou Enlai met with the North Korean ambassador to discuss their border dispute.

In short, Chinese leaders decided to promote a moderate foreign policy in 1960 for creating a “new situation in diplomacy.” Its alliance policy was also adjusted in this direction, which was also based on its national interest. The Chinese leadership made a decision to construct the alliance system with neighboring socialist states, including the DPRK. It was a big shift of the strategic thinking on alliance policy since the establishment of People’s Republic of China (PRC) in October 1949. In other words, it also suggests that the strategic environment China faced in those days was serious enough to overhaul the foreign policy line.
China’s initiative to open out the alliance network was carried out one by one. Concluding an alliance treaty with the DPRK was also a part of efforts to improve the strategic environment in a mentioned more pragmatic way. As a first step, China signed the treaty of friendship with the Burma in 28 January 1960, and pushed ahead with the conclusion of a treaty with Mongolia. After the Mongolian Government consented to Chinese suggestion of signing the “Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation,” Mao Zedong ordered CCPCC on March 21, 1960 to examine thoroughly the possibility of signing the alliance treaty with North Korea and Vietnam, saying that “If North Korea and Vietnam want to conclude alliance treaty, including an article about Chinese military aid, I think that it will be practicable.” This is the origin of the idea of concluding the military alliance with North Korea, which had been carefully pushed forward afterward.

On May 30, just before signing the treaty with Mongolia, then Chinese Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs, Luo Guibo, sent a draft of the treaty to ambassadors of Soviet Union and North Korea, North Vietnam in Beijing, and explained the purpose of it. At the same time, Chinese Foreign Ministry ordered its ambassador to DPRK and Vietnam that “If they voluntarily mention this issue, take a chance and say that if DPRK (and Vietnam) want to conclude a treaty, we also highly approve of it and immediately prepare to exchange opinions on it.”

Furthermore, China made a significant increase in economic aid to North Korea, apparently for the purpose of winning the DPRK’s favor. For example, the aid agreement concluded in Beijing on October 13 1960, under which China extended credits of 105 million dollars to DPRK for use over the 1961-64 period, raised the total of Chinese economic aid to DPRK since the end of the Korean War slightly above the level of that granted by the Soviet Union. Given that millions of Chinese died of hunger resulting from the disastrous aftermath of the Great Leap Forward, it suggests that China had proactively pursued the formal establishment of an alliance with North Korea.

Interestingly, however, China’s conciliatory gesture was not well received by the DPRK for a fairly long time. According to the diplomatic archives declassified so far, despite the Chinese active love call, the North Korean leader had not shown any interest in the alliance treaty. On the contrary, by 1960, Kim Il-sung concluded that Mao’s commitment to the “people’s commune” seemed too adventurous and the Chinese-style socialism would fail. Actually the Great Leap Forward was a catastrophic failure, forcing some Korean-Chinese to flee to the DPRK illegally to escape a famine in China.

The declassified documents reveal that North Korea put the conclusion of an alliance treaty with Soviet Union as a top priority rather than that with China. As mentioned below, North Korea narrowly accepted the Chinese request to sign the treaty after the schedule for signing a treaty with the Soviet Union was fixed. Unlike the Sino-North Korean treaty, the Soviet-North Korean treaty was a long-standing desire for the DPRK. Between 1958 and 1961, Kim Il-sung’s three visits to Moscow always preceded his visits to Beijing. Apparently this was motivated by Kim’s calculated behavior to invite Khrushchev to Pyongyang and win the alliance treaty from the Soviet Union.

However, Soviet leaders had been skeptical of any alliance treaty with North Korea, despite
the fact that the U.S. had concluded the Mutual
Defense Treaty with South Korea in October 1953. Khrushchev might have an optimistic view of the
viability of "peaceful coexistence" in this region. Nevertheless, he did not at least answer negatively to
the conclusion of a Soviet-North Korean joint
defense treaty against a South Korea's "surprise
attack." According to Vadim Tkachenko, an
officer of the Communist Party of the Soviet
Union (CPSU) in charge of the DPRK, when Kim
requested the signing of an alliance treaty during
his visit to Moscow in January 1959, Khrushchev
was positively disposed toward it and promised
his visit to Pyongyang the next year. However,
the expected visit of Khrushchev to Pyongyang
had been canceled by the Soviet side referring to
the change of an "international situation." Later
in 1963, Kim Il-sung confided to the Romanian
ambassador that he twice invited Khrushchev to
Pyongyang, but the Soviet leader never came.
Thus, Kim took Khrushchev's unwillingness
to come to Pyongyang as a sign that Moscow's
attitude toward the alliance treaty was insincere.

Yet, North Korea still put a priority on the
conclusion of the treaty with the Soviet Union
while practically disregarding China's proposal.
The reasons could be considered largely at two
levels. First, from Kim's point of view, it was the
Soviet Union rather than China that guaranteed the
security of DPRK (especially in the aspect of the
provision of a nuclear umbrella). Kim's leaning
toward Moscow was also necessitated by North
Korea's need for Soviet economic assistance.
Despite his Juche campaign, Kim Il-sung definitely
needed Soviet technology and resources as he
pursued his Five-Year Plan (1957-61). Second,
despite the Sino-Soviet split having changed the
rules of the game in the socialist bloc, North Korea
could not ignore the Soviet's leading position in the
inter-socialist state hierarchy, while maintaining
equal distance between Beijing and Moscow. For
Kim Il-sung, it was next to impossible to conclude
an alliance treaty with China preceding that with
Soviet, because it was a kind of political suicide to
disrupt the order of ranks in the socialist bloc.

Nevertheless, as the Sino-Soviet rivalry for
leadership continued to grow, but before it had
turned into an open split, the DPRK enjoyed the
comfortable position of being politically wooed
by both socialist neighbors. While Khrushchev's
visit to Pyongyang had not been made yet, Beijing
never missed a chance to take the initiative to
shore up the Sino-North Korean relationship.
In October 1960, on the tenth anniversary of
the intervention of the Chinese volunteer army
in the Korean War, Beijing sent a high-ranking
delegation to Pyongyang, headed by Marshal
and Vice Premier He Long. DPRK began to drift
slightly toward China. Kim did not go to Moscow
and did not even come to the Soviet Embassy in
Pyongyang to commemorate the anniversary of
the 1917 Revolution on pretense of "sickness."
Furthermore, Vice Prime Minister Cheon Il-young,
who attended the October Revolution anniversary
event, harshly criticized the "revisionist tendency"
within the socialist movement. These changes
influenced Soviet's stance toward the pending
alliance treaty with DPRK. To appease Kim
Il-sung and repair the damage done to their
relationship, the Soviet delegation headed by
Aleksei Kosygin, then Deputy Prime Minister,
visited Pyongyang on May 5, 1961 and formally
invited Kim to visit Moscow to sign an alliance
treaty.
V. Snap Decision: The Establishment of Sino-North Korean Treaty in 1961

Despite receiving the assurance from the Soviet Union, North Korea had kept it secret from China and even displayed indifference toward a Chinese proposal to conclude an alliance treaty. According to Chinese materials, the Chinese embassy in Pyongyang could not grasp the precise intention of Kosygin’s visit to Pyongyang. It was just before Kim Il-sung’s departure for Moscow that China noticed the evolution of the Soviet-North Korean treaty.

On June 26, 1961, taking the opportunity to say farewell, Qiao Xiaoguang, Chinese Ambassador to Pyongyang, seriously questioned Park Sung-chul, then DPRK foreign minister, about the conclusion of the treaty with China. Chinese diplomatic materials reveal that this suggestion was performed based on “the plan on the signing the treaty of friendship and mutual assistance with DPRK in 1961 and asking North Korea’s intention of it.” Considering the fact that the Chinese Embassy in Pyongyang did not get a hint of the real purpose of Kosygin’s visit to DPRK one month ago, it appears that China hastened to conclude the treaty after grasping somehow the information about the Soviet-North Korean treaty thereafter.

Anyway, the negotiation between them was going smoothly without a hitch afterwards. On June 28, a day before his departure for Moscow, Kim Il-sung met with Ambassador Qiao and agreed to sign the treaty with China, while this time Aleksandr Puzanov, the Soviet ambassador to North Korea, was totally uninformed of these negotiations. Verifying the plan of signing the treaty with Soviet for the first time, Kim Il-sung told Qiao as follows.

If Chinese Government brought up this issue, we will highly approve of it—the sooner the better. As we will conclude a treaty with Soviet Union, there is no reason not to make a treaty with China who had fought together shoulder to shoulder. Concluding treaties with China and the Soviet Union simultaneously would be a blow to the war preparation of the American imperialists and South Koreans, and would give our Korean people opportunities to have self-confidence for focusing harder on its construction. Therefore it is very good to conclude the treaty of friendship and mutual assistance together.

Additionally, about the signing timing of the Sino-North Korean treaty, Kim said that “It will be adequate to sign on it immediately after signing the treaty with Soviet.” The details of China’s response to it are not yet known, but China was likely to be somewhat annoyed about Kim’s condescending attitude. On the contrary, China expedited the process of finalizing a treaty with the DPRK. Therefore, in appearance, Kim Il-sung was likely to take advantage of the Chinese nervousness and managed to fish in troubled waters. On the other hand, it also suggests that although Kim had wanted an alliance treaty with China, he had maintained a facade of indifference to it, giving priority to the conclusion of the alliance treaty with the Soviet Union.

There seems to be no heated dispute over the text of the treaty between China and North Korea. On June 29, the following day of Kim-Qiao meeting, the Chinese side accepted Kim’s suggestion at face value, saying that “Our Party and Government will welcome Prime Minister
Kim Il-Sung’s July 10 visit to China after his visit to Soviet Union and the signing of the Sino-North Korean treaty of friendship and mutual assistance. Furthermore, on the same day the Chinese side requested North Korea to hand over the draft of the Soviet-North Korean alliance treaty, and began to discuss it at the CCPCC. This suggests that the Sino-North Korean treaty was prepared mainly by Chinese side, based on the draft of the Soviet-North Korean treaty.

More interestingly, not knowing that Kim Il-sung secretly negotiated with Beijing, Khrushchev signed the alliance treaty with DPRK on July 6. According to Tkachenko’s reminiscence, Khrushchev bluntly told Kim that once U.S.-Soviet relations improved, the Soviet-North Korean treaty might be annulled. On the other hand, Kim did not give any hint about his planned visit to China and signing another alliance treaty with China to Khrushchev. On July 7, the next day of the signing of the Soviet-North Korean alliance treaty, China made a public statement about Kim’s visit to China. However, Ambassador Puzanov, accompanying Kim’s Soviet visit, was not likely to know this fact. According to Puzanov’s report, Kim’s original schedule was to visit Moscow and Kiev from June 29 through July 12, but Kim notified him only on July 10 in Kiev that he would go directly to Beijing, without saying overtly that he had planned to sign the alliance treaty with China.

Anyway, Kim finished his Soviet visit two days earlier than scheduled, and arrived in Beijing. It seems that there were also no serious negotiations on the treaty itself during Kim’s visit to Beijing from July 10 to July 15. According to Chinese materials, Kim engaged in totally four meetings with Chinese leaders: 1) Sino-North Korean Party-Governmental delegation meeting (on the afternoon of July 10); 2) Zhou-Kim meeting (on the morning of July 11); 3) Mao-Kim meeting (in Hangzhou on the morning of July 13); and 4) Mao-Kim meeting (on July 14). The treaty was signed in the afternoon of July 11 after a Zhou-Kim meeting in that morning. In short, the negotiation on the Sino-North Korean alliance treaty had been finalized only two weeks after North Korea agreed on it.

China gave a North Korean delegation a red-carpet welcome. It was the first time for Kim to visit China in the capacity of the head of the joint Party-Governmental delegation, while he had visited China just in the capacity of the Government delegation till then. Furthermore, Mao paid a reciprocal visit to Kim’s accommodations in Hangzhou on July 14. It was also the first time for Mao himself to visit Kim till then. The Chinese leadership and media began to pay compliments openly, such as “the Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK) centered on Kim Il-sung”.

China’s active stance for the alliance treaty was also expressed in the treaty itself. First, while the Soviet-North Korean treaty advocated only the Marx-Leninism and the principle of proletarian internationalism, the Sino-North Korean treaty added the “fraternal” cooperation between two states additionally to it. The major source of the Sino-North Korean military alliance included an automatic military intervention clause to defend each other, just if one of them was subject to an armed attack by a state or allied states (Article II). Both China and North Korea committed themselves to immediate assistance by all means at their disposal, which had been evaluated as “a more direct and categorical commitment” than that of the Soviet-North Korean treaty and that of the U.S.-South Korean treaty. Moreover, China’s successful insertion of the “consult on all international question” clause (Article IV) and “amendment by mutual agreement” clause (Article VII) in the treaty enabled China to promote a greater sense of stability and permanency in its
military and political relations with North Korea. Needless to say, this was the result of China’s strategic decisions.

VI. Reconsidering the Motivations for the Sino-North Korean Alliance Treaty

Then, what were the driving forces that had pushed China to conclude an alliance treaty with North Korea? Most scholars, despite some disagreement, have emphasized mainly two points as the major motivations for the conclusion of the Sino-North Korean treaty: 1) sharing the “common threat,” especially against the American “imperialists,” 2) a series of disruptive events in South Korea, in particular the anti-government student uprising in April 1960 and Park Chung Hee’s military coup in May 1961. However, these factors would be insufficient to explain the formation of the Sino-North Korean alliance treaty.

First, although China and North Korea had regarded the U.S.-Japan-South Korea military triangle as a primary security threat, there were some discrepancies in the threat perception between them. For example, as mentioned above, the Chinese leadership sought reconciliation with the U.S. in 1960, while criticizing the U.S. offensive policy in Indochina. On the other hand, Kim Il-sung also proposed to South Korea at the fifteenth anniversary of the liberation of the Korean Peninsula on August 15, 1960 that a “confederation” should become the model for unification, which was interpreted as an extension of Soviet’s “peaceful coexistence” strategy with the U.S. Of course, considering the fact that North Korea was vigorously campaigning against the revision of the U.S.-Japanese security treaty in 1960, Kim’s proposal for a confederation was intended to pay a lip service to the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, it was also true that North Korea emphasized the slogans of “peace” and refrained from military provocations in those days. Anyway, in short, sharing the “common threat” perception against the American “imperialists” could not be a decisive variable for explaining the formation of the Sino-North Korean alliance treaty, because China and North Korea also put more emphasis on stability rather than on the change of the status quo.

Second, in the same vein, the political instabilities in South Korea could also not explain sufficiently the reason of the formation of the Sino-North Korean Treaty in 1961. As mentioned above, at that time, North Korea had supported the Soviet Union’s “peaceful coexistence” strategy, albeit nominally, and assumed a strong peace offensive against South Korea. According to Szalontai’s research, North Korea even attempted to be seated with South Korea simultaneously in the UN in 1960 and early in 196167. This suggests that North Korea admitted the reality of the “two Koreas.” Furthermore, North Korea had taken secret talks with South Korea’s military agent eight times from October 1960 to August of the next year68. In brief, political instability in South Korea could not be a persuasive factor in explaining the formation of the Sino-North Korean treaty, because North Korea itself did not regard it as a threat.

However, from the then Chinese perspective, the Sino-North Korean treaty was an important strategic choice to overcome the aforementioned internal and external troubles and to create a “new situation in diplomacy.” From the viewpoint of the Chinese external environment, the formation of an alliance relationship with North Korea was
an essential matter. First, the Chinese leadership thought that North Korea’s diplomatic support was the strategic necessity to create a “new situation in diplomacy,” especially for its Soviet policy. Therefore, Mao changed his way of thinking about alliance and decided to conclude a military alliance treaty with North Korea in March 1960. The greater Sino-Soviet conflicts intensified, the more Beijing wanted to draw North Korea into its camp. After all, as mentioned above, just after the Soviet-North Korean treaty came into view, under severe pressure China hastened to co-opt North Korea to its side by providing more compelling commitments than the Soviet-North Korean treaty.

Secondly, in the view of its security situation, China could no longer leave the relationship with North Korea unsettled. The full withdrawal of Chinese volunteer army in November 1958 meant the loss of the Chinese leverage over the DPRK, which contributed to Kim Il-sung’s greater autonomy vis-à-vis China and leaning to the Soviet Union. Furthermore, as is well known, emotional strains of the “Factionalists Incident in August 1956” when China had intervened in North Korea’s internal affairs and failed, remained just beneath the surface. For China, an uneasy relationship with North Korea was the same one that made a new enemy of an old brother, which of course would not be in its security interest. The Sino-North Korean alliance was more tightened in 1960 by the Chinese pro-active initiative, based on its national objectives.

VII. Conclusion: Durability of the Sino-North Korean Alliance

This article argued that the Sino-North Korean alliance treaty in 1961 was a product of the China’s strategic behavior based on its national interest rather than North Korea’s leadership. Of course, this conclusion is not to underestimate North Korea’s “calculated behavior” demonstrated in the Sino-Soviet rift. The treaty could be concluded because North Korea also had a national interest in it. Nonetheless, reexamining the process of the treaty formation, it is clear that the treaty reflects the Chinese strategic thinking more strongly. It suggests that China’s perspective on North Korea’s strategic value according to transitions in international environment and China’s national interests could be a key barometer of the durability of their alliance.

Over the years since the end of the Cold War, however, China has adjusted its foreign policy to new domestic and international conditions, and as a result the Sino-North Korean alliance has been evaluated to lose its original strategic importance in the implementation of security commitment. Especially, the latest round of North Korea’s provocations made Beijing’s balancing act between supporting a traditional ally and responding to its dangerous brinkmanship more difficult.

Nonetheless, it is also true that the Sino-North Korean alliance still remains legally binding as a symbol for the continuity of the bilateral relationship. Moreover, Beijing’s economic and political support for Pyongyang appears to have waved little, in spite of increasingly provocative and risky actions taken by Pyongyang. This means that Beijing still has a wide variety of reasons to maintain its alliance with Pyongyang.

There could be all kinds of explanations, but the Sino-North Korean alliance based on their treaty are expected to last for quite a long time. First, in view of treaty itself, it would be not easy for China to revise or terminate the treaty. According to Article VII of the treaty, China cannot legally...
amend or abolish the treaty without prior mutual agreement. Furthermore, China should "continue to consult with each other on all important international questions of common interest to the two states" in accordance with the provision of Article Ⅳ.

Second, what’s more important is that as China contemplates the future, North Korea’s strategic value has increased. Even though economic aid to North Korea is a burden for China, and political support for North Korea places China in challenging circumstances, China seeks greater influence beyond simply a patron’s role; it has become an active player in a wide variety of diplomatic and economic areas and holds a strategic stake in the Korean Peninsula. China knows that its severance or at least modification of the bilateral alliance could undermine its diplomatic leverage vis-à-vis North Korea, which could destabilize the delicate balance of power in Northeast Asia. Furthermore, According to Shen Dingli, North Korea acts as a guard post for China, keeping at bay the tens of thousands of U.S. troops stationed in South Korea. This allows China to reduce its military deployment in Northeast China and focus more directly on the issue of Taiwanese independence71.

On the other hand, China also knows that a conflict on the peninsula is problematic for its economic growth. Beijing thus wants desperately to maintain stability in North Korea, and has adopted a proactive posture with a foreign policy wish list of five “no’s”: No instability, no collapse, no nuclear weapons, no refugees, and no conflict escalation72. By doing so, China is able to formulate its own favorable security environment to achieve its national objective.

In brief, although the Sino-North Korean alliance looks like a unilateral alliance for ensuring North Korea’s regime survival, China gets significant collateral benefits by maintaining it. Therefore, when it comes to security issues on the Korean Peninsula, China will continue to seek to act as the most important player to guarantee its interests. As long as North Korea has strategic values in Northeast Asia, China will maintain its special relationship based on the Sino-North Korean alliance treaty.

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Notes
1 Hu’s letter said that “It is the firm strategic policy of the Chinese party and government to steadily consolidate and develop the Sino-DPRK friendly and cooperative relations.” The Yonhap News, “N. Korea, China Celebrate 50th Anniversary of Friendship Treaty,” North Korea Newsletter, No. 166 (July 14, 2011).
2 This was well-illustrated in that Wang Yi, then Deputy Minister of Chinese Foreign Affairs, suggested the transformation of the Sino-North Korean treaty in the process of reformulating China’s foreign policy. Yoichi Funabashi, The Last Gamble of Kim Jong Il, (in Korean), (Seoul: JoongAng Dailynews Media, 2007), pp. 396, 398. Not only that, some scholars have speculated that Beijing may ignore its commitments to Pyongyang by entering a “grand bargain” with Washington in the Korean problems and so break the Sino-DPRK alliance. Of late, Chu Shulong (Tsinghua University) asserted that China and DPRK were certainly not allies at all and China would not come to North Korea’s help militarily in any case. Chu Shulong, “The ROK-DPRK-PRC Three-Party Relations,” Manuscript Presented at the 2nd NEAR-Tsinghua Workshop on Korea-China Security and Strategic Dialogue (October 17, 2011).
5 The Sino-North Korean alliance treaty was extended in 1981 and 2001. The current treaty runs through 2021.


Ibid., p. 44.

In November 1953, China and North Korea concluded the “Agreement on Economic and Cultural Cooperation,” not a military alliance treaty.


The Great Leap Forward was a campaign that used mass mobilization techniques, including the collectivization of agriculture, to achieve rapid economic growth.


From November 1959 through the first half of 1960, the Chinese leadership spent a lot of energy and time in discussing international issues. The details of these discussions are still declassified, but some contents were disclosed. For instance see, The Document Research Institute of the CCCCP (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China) ed., Zhou Enlai nianpu 1949-1976 (The Chronology of Zhou Enlai 1949-1976), Vol. 2, (in Chinese), (Beijing: Central Party Literature Press, 1998).


Ibid., 278.

Shimotomai, “Kim Il Sung’s Balancing Act between Moscow and Beijing, 1956-1972,” p. 134. Moscow’s negative stance against the alliance treaty with North Korea was repeated after signing the treaty. For example, North Korea demanded the reinforcement of the alliance treaty in 1970, but Leonid Brezhnev turned down it, saying that “We must not overstate the crisis.” It seemed that unable to control the actions of its trigger-happy ally, the Kremlin was unwilling to hold to the letter of the 1961 treaty. “Memorandum: Embassy of Hungary in North Korea to the Hungarian Foreign Ministry, Jan. 27, 1970,” Digital Archive, Collection: Cold War in Asia, CWIH. Available at http://www.wilsoncenter.org/digital-archive (accessed on October 20, 2011). For Stalin’s apprehensions about the prospects of a direct Soviet-U. S. clash on the Korean peninsula, see Kathryn Weathersby, “Should We Fear This?”: Stalin and the Danger of War with America,” CWIH Working Paper, No. 39 (July 2002); Alexandre Mansurov, “Stalin, Mao, Kim, and China’s Decision to Enter the Korean War, Sept. 16-Oct. 15, 1950: New Evidence from the Russian Archives,” CWIH Bulletin, Issues 6-7 (Winter 1995/96), p. 94.


“Prime Minister Kim Il-sung’s Visit to China and the Conclusion of the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance between China and North Korea, 1961. 5. 26-7. 7,” declassified diplomatic files, Archives of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, File No. 204-00765-03.

Ibid.

Ibid.

“The Request to hand over the draft of the Soviet-North
6, 29–6, 29,” declassified diplomatic files, Archives of
Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, File No. 106-01359-05.
59 Tkachenko, Koreiskii Poluostrov i Interesy Rossii, p. 20.
60 Shimotomai, “Kim Il Sung’s Balancing Act between
61 Tkachenko, Koreiskii Poluostrov i Interesy Rossii, pp. 19-
20.
Liu Chin-chih and Yang Huai-Sheng ed., Zhongguo dui
Chaoxian he Hanguo zhengce wenjian huibian 1949-
1994 (The Collection of the China’s North and South
(Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 1994), pp. 1271-
1295.
63 Kim visited China in 1953 and 54, 58, 59 (1960 visit was a
secret visit), which was all in the capacity of government
delegate. Choi, The Sino-North Korean Alliance Relations,
p. 164. Meanwhile, Kim told Puzanov how hot the weather
was in Beijing and that he “signed the treaty with Mao
Ze-dong at the airport.” Shimotomai, “Kim Il Sung’s
Balancing Act between Moscow and Beijing, 1956-1972,”
p. 136.
64 For a full text of the Sino-North Korean Treaty and the
Soviet-North Korean Treaty, refer to Peking Review,
Vol. 4, No. 28 (July 1961), p. 5; Yong-hyong Lee ed. The
Collection of the Principal Diplomatic Materials: Between
Chosun/North/ South Korea and Soviet/Russia, (in Korean
and Russian), (Seoul: M-Ad, 2003), pp. 208-211.
65 Article II said that “The Contracting Parties undertake
jointly to adopt all measures to prevent aggression against
either of the Contracting Parties by any state. In the event
of one of the Contracting Parties being subjected to the
armed attack by any state or several states jointly and thus
being involved in a state of war, the other Contracting Party
shall immediately render military and other assistance by
all means at its disposal.” Peking Review, Vol. 4, No. 28
(July 1961), p. 5.
67 Balazs Szalontai, Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era
68 Vadim P. Tkachenko, “Secret North-South Korean
Negotiation after the May 16 coup d’etat,” (in Korean),
69 Refer to Jong-Seok Lee, The Study on the Workers’
Party of Korea (WPK), (in Korean), (Seoul: Yuksa-wa-
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70 For example, in May 2010, Cui Tiankai, Chinese Deputy
Foreign Minister, called the sinking of the South Korean
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North Korea’s responsibility. Jonathan Adams, “All Eyes
on China in North Korea Torpedo Case,” AOL News, May
18, 2010, http://www.aolnews.com/world/article/all-eyes-
AN UNEASY BUT DURABLE BROTHERHOOD?