

# The China-North Korea Alliance in an Era of Renewed Strategic Competition

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**Introduction**

The competition to shape the world of the 21st century is a contest of ideas, not just of power. It is a contest of ideas that will determine the future of the world. The competition is a contest of ideas that will determine the future of the world. The competition is a contest of ideas that will determine the future of the world.

**Introduction, RDS, Methodology, Findings, and Implications**

**2018 and 2019: SHUTTING THE DOOR?**

**Table: Change in Economic Statistics over Time**

Variable / Measure	1961	1981	2001	2011
GDP	0	0	0	0
Exports	0	0	0	0
Imports	0	0	0	0

**July 12, 1950: The Alliance Begins**

**US defense pacts, 1947-2014**

Legend: 1947, 1950, 1953, 1954, 1955, 1956, 1957, 1958, 1959, 1960, 1961, 1962, 1963, 1964, 1965, 1966, 1967, 1968, 1969, 1970, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978, 1979, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022.

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**RETHINK, RESTRUCTURE, AND RECONNECT: TOWARDS A POST-PANDEMIC POLITICAL SCIENCE**

## INTRODUCTION

This presentation is about the value of alliances and alliance partners to great powers during periods of strategic competition.

While there are many differences between the strategic competition Beijing was experiencing with the Soviet Union when it initially entered the pact with Pyongyang in July 1961, there are also crucial similarities that may hold analytical value about China's pursuit of allies and partners in its contemporary competition with the United States.

Alliance renewal junctures in 1981 and 2001 have less weight to help understand the current situation.

## JULY 11, 1961: THE ALLIANCE BEGINS



Kim Il-sung (L) shakes hands with Zhou Enlai (R) upon the signing of the Sino-North Korean Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty, Beijing, PRC, July 11, 1961 (photo: The Wilson Center (<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/beijing-bound-to-defend-north-korea-during-war>))

# DEFINITIONS, RQS, METHODOLOGY, FINDINGS, AND IMPLICATIONS

## Definitions

**Strategic competition:** Takes place within the bounds of a **two-state competitive dyad**, along a **continuum of interactions** where competition is not the same as conflict while still containing some elements of cooperation and collaboration. It entails the multifaceted employment of a **vast range of state power** aimed to attain a given state's objectives vis-à-vis another. And its participant states must possess the requisite capabilities, behaviors, and **status attribution** by other states in the international arena. (Lynch, 2020 (<https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2404286/1-introduction/>))

**Grand strategy:** “something that has the characteristics of being **long-term** in scope, related to the **state's highest priorities**, and concerned with all spheres of statecraft (**military, diplomatic, and economic**).” Grand plans, grand principles, grand behavior. (Silove, 2018 (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/09636412.2017.1360073>))

**Critical junctures:** “*relatively* short periods of time during which there is a substantially heightened probability that agents' choices will affect the outcome of interest.” (Capoccia and Kelemen, 2007 (<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/world-politics/article/study-of-critical-junctures-theory-narrative-and-counterfactuals-in-historical-institutionalism/BAAE0860F1F641357C29C9AC72A54758>))

**Role of alliances in competition** (Bosack, 2020 (<https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol73/iss4/5/>)):

- less dependent on the existence of internal or external conflict
- characterized to an increasing extent by security conflict broadening into new domains (presumably including space and cyberspace)
- including, more and more, nonmilitary aspects of state power

## Research Questions

### 1. Chinese grand strategy/grand strategic considerations over time:

Goldstein (2020) (<https://direct.mit.edu/isec/article-abstract/45/1/164/95252/China-s-Grand-Strategy-under-Xi-Jinping?redirectedFrom=fulltext>):

- 1949-1989, “Survival”: cope with existential regime threats: Gain military backing, obtain economic assistance
- 1992-present, “Rejuvenation”: regain standing (status?) as an advanced, great power: Build wealth and power, reduce concerns about China's rise, shape world order for rising China

Khan (2018) (<https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674977099>):

- Mao, 1949: GS of reunification (consolidation?)
- Deng: economic development to remain safe
- Jiang + Hu: fading importance of ideological purity—instead, military modernization, political economy, and diplomatic balancing
- Xi: China's growing international heft has activated the security dilemma among its many neighbors and the concomitant balancing behavior by some (bandwagoning by others); new Silk Road; a bank that can buy friends

### 2. PRC approach to formal alliances over time:

Soviet Union – first alliance (signed 1950), but went sour. Remained in force during/after the Sino-Soviet split, finally ending in 1979.

1961 “flurry” (comparatively) of alliance-forging activity (in the midst of a different, previous era of competition)...but still lagged far behind the amount of A&P the USSR was able to bring onto its side (Warsaw Pact/E. Europe, etc.)

### 3. North Korea's role as China's alliance partner over time:

Prior to the formal alliance: Korean War – embroiled the youthful PRC in a shooting war with a very powerful, post-WWII USA – very bad for a weak, new PRC.

1960s – one of China’s only international partners // agent provocateur (e.g., 1968 USS Pueblo)

1970s – leads ROK in on-peninsula developmental competition // Panmunjom tree incident (<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/06/axe-murder-north-korea-1976/562028/>) (1976)

1980s – rapidly approaching pariah status // ROK hosts Olympics (1988)

1990s – 1st nuclear crisis (1994) + 1st dynastic leadership succession

2000s – 6PT and nuclear breakout // opportunity for PRC to show leadership in the international arena by spearheading ultimately unsuccessful talks

2010s – estrangement after KJU comes to power and purges PRC-friendly interlocutors; only changes come in response to unlikely rapprochement & personal diplomacy between US and DPRK leaders

2020s – TBD, so far looks a lot like 2010s prior to rapprochement

## Methodology

Qualitatively evaluate each of the three research question factors at each juncture (1961, 1981, 2001, 2021)

- Defense ties (military)
- Economic links (trade, investment)
- Diplomatic interactions (meetings, summits, etc.)

## Discussion

### 1961: perhaps the “original” strategic competition (w/ USSR)

*Original intentions of each contracting party*

- China: seeking allies in competition with USSR // Sino-Soviet Split
- North Korea: gain economic and security benefits, post-Korean War//bolster power in competition with South Korea/ROK

*PRC's grand strategic considerations:* survival mode...need partners in ideological realm vs. USSR -- nK was ideologically closer to PRC than USSR; must maintain nK as buffer zone – same rationale as decision to intervene in Korean War

*PRC approach to formal alliances:* seeking, seals its first formal alliance that is not with USSR

*NK role as China's alliance partner:* little of real value to add, but sealing of the pact makes some in the West fear an international communist bloc with real fortitude

## **2021: amidst an era of renewed strategic competition (w/ USA)**

*Enormous changes in PRC grand strategic considerations during this period...from "soft" to "hard" rejuvenation*

- World's 2nd largest economy...#1 population

*PRC's grand strategic considerations:* rejuvenation in full bloom...status/identity to the fore...yet still willing to play the victim card and retain claims to developing nation status when useful

*PRC approach to formal alliances:* not seeking any new ones – instead, using BRI, GSI, GDI, AIDB, SCO, and alternate int'l orgs to exert influence and enjoy alliance-like relationships with many countries without the "strings" associated with a typical/formal alliance. Strategic partnerships with Iran, Russia, etc.

*NK role as China's alliance partner:* moving toward US served as a catalyst for renewed high-level diplomacy between PY and BJ in the late 2010s; heads of state meet. Since DJT left office, KJU regime resumed missile testing (including long-range airframes)...has not yet resumed nuclear testing (last in Sept 2017), but it can't be ruled out

## **Findings**

What does China get? NATIONAL/CORE INTERESTS

NO

- access, basing, and overflight (ABO)
- interoperability
- resilience
- tech cooperation
- trade & investment
- infrastructure

YES

- **buffer zone**
- distraction (+/-)

## **Implications / Areas for further examination**

- PRC approach to formal alliances going forward // alt partnership configurations (BRI / "communities of common destiny" / GDI / GSI / SCO / etc.) Strategic partnerships with Iran...Russia... China in Africa
- Is it plausible that PRC goes into another epoch of relatively robust alliance-forging plenty in the current day? (in the service of competition goals vs. the US and constructivist ideals of image and status – possible construction of a neo-tributary system?)

- Could Beijing get more concerning the so-called south Asia "string of pearls" approach with a more formalized relationship with Pakistan?
- What about Russia – Beijing and Moscow being pushed together by the moves of the US and its allies?

## 2018 AND AFTER: STILL "LIPS AND TEETH"?



Kim (L) and Xi (R) during a March 2018 meeting in Beijing (photo: CNN  
(<https://www.cnn.com/2019/06/19/asia/xi-jinping-north-korea-visit-hnk-intl/index.html>))

[VIDEO] <https://www.youtube.com/embed/G6Oups73zKE?rel=0&fs=1&modestbranding=1&rel=0&showinfo=0>

Chinese President Xi Jinping's July 2019 visit to North Korea (2 min 59 second video from Yonhap News Agency (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G6Oups73zKE&fs=1&modestbranding=1&rel=0&showinfo=0>) of South Korea)

North Korea resumes long-range ballistic missile testing in March 2022, the first such launch since 2017:

[VIDEO] [https://www.youtube.com/embed/vEgE4R\\_6fLU?rel=0&fs=1&modestbranding=1&rel=0&showinfo=0](https://www.youtube.com/embed/vEgE4R_6fLU?rel=0&fs=1&modestbranding=1&rel=0&showinfo=0)

(5 min 10 sec video from Yonhap News Agency ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vEgE4R\\_6fLU&fs=1&modestbranding=1&rel=0&showinfo=0&fs=1&modestbranding=1&rel=0&showinfo=0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vEgE4R_6fLU&fs=1&modestbranding=1&rel=0&showinfo=0&fs=1&modestbranding=1&rel=0&showinfo=0)) of South Korea)



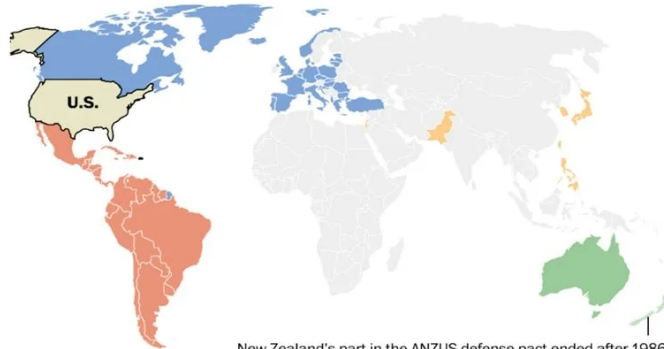
## CHANGE IN EXAMINED VARIABLES

Variable / Measure	Juncture			
	1961	1981	2001	2021
PRC GS considerations	survival			rejuvenation
PRC formal ally approach	seeking			not seeking
NK alliance partner role	weakly bolster			mild irritant

Table 1: Research question factors change over time, 1961-2021

### US defense pacts, 1947–2014

● OAS ● NATO ● ANZUS ● Bilateral



Note: OAS stands for Organization of American States; NATO for North Atlantic Treaty Organization; and ANZUS for Australian, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty.

Source: Belfer Center of Harvard University, CIA

THE WASHINGTON POST

### Military alliances that are active as of 2021 (from Lanoszka, 2022)

#### Involving the United States

Australia, New Zealand, United States Security (ANZUS) Treaty	NATO (29 other countries)
Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (16 other countries)	Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security Between the United States and Japan
Mutual Defense Treaty Between the United States of America and the Republic of Korea	Thai–US Defense Alliance
Mutual Defense Treaty Between the Republic of Philippines and the United States of America	

#### Involving China

Sino-North Korean Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty

#### Involving Russia

Collective Security Treaty Organization (5 other countries)

## DISCLOSURES

All views presented here belong to the author and do not represent those of the Marine Corps, the Department of Defense, or any part of the U.S. government.

## AUTHOR INFO

Gary J. Sampson is a Ph.D. candidate at Tufts University's Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, where his research examines post-Cold War alliance politics in East Asia. He graduated from the University of Nebraska, the Defense Language Institute, National Sun Yat-sen University, and the National Intelligence University.

An intelligence and international affairs officer focused on Northeast Asia in the U.S. Marine Corps, Lieutenant Colonel Sampson is currently a Research Fellow with the Caracristi Institute for Intelligence Research at the National Intelligence University in Bethesda, MD. His previous Pentagon assignments include serving as the principal intelligence briefer to the 38th Commandant of the Marine Corps, Marine Corps plank holder on the Office of the Secretary of Defense Red Team, and special assistant and chief speechwriter to the 19th and 20th Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Earlier in his military career, Gary deployed in support of Operations Southern Watch, Iraqi Freedom, and Enduring Freedom-Philippines.

Gary was an Olmsted Foundation Scholar (Class of 2009) in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, where he earned a Master of Social Science degree from National Sun Yat-sen University's Institute of China and Asia-Pacific Studies, and his master's thesis focused on Chinese conventional military modernization. At the National Intelligence University, his Master of Science of Strategic Intelligence research thesis focused on Chinese nuclear weapons capability modernization through 2030. Gary was also the Commandant of the Marine Corps Fellow in the International Security Studies Program at Tufts University's Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy.

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Gary has taught at Tufts University and George Washington University, and his written work has been published by the International Journal of Korean Studies, Marine Corps History, U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings, the Marine Corps Gazette, Military Review, The Strategy Bridge, Studies in Intelligence, and the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

## ABSTRACT

2021 marked the 60th anniversary of the Sino-North Korean Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty, signed in Beijing on July 11, 1961. Renewed every 20 years, the treaty remains in force today. Moreover, it is the only formal defense treaty Beijing or Pyongyang have with any other country.

This paper examines the initial negotiations and subsequent renewals of this unique agreement. Even in the face of significant changes in the strategic environment for both states over the past six decades, the deal has stood the test of time. Yet, despite this endurance, questions remain. For instance, what were each party's original intentions upon entering this agreement in 1961? How did those approaches change upon each subsequent renewal in 1981, 2001, and 2021? And how does this seemingly legacy formal treaty square with a contemporary view from Beijing that eschews formal treaties in favor of less constraining mechanisms for international diplomacy, commerce, and possibly even defense such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the formation of so-called communities of common destiny?

By examining critical junctures in the PRC-DPRK bilateral relationship, centered on the 1961 establishment and subsequent renewal of the Sino-North Korean Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty in 1981, 2001, and 2021 the paper explores several questions of great relevance to international history and politics. First, how have China's grand strategic considerations changed since 1961? In what ways has North Korea's role as China's ally in Northeast Asia evolved during this period? What significance does Beijing's approach to formal allies have for China's continued rise as a great power in an era of renewed strategic competition?

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