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China-North Korea Relations:

Is Beijing Truly Dissatisfied with Moscow-Pyongyang Rapprochement?

In our previous analysis, we examined the relationship between China and North Korea in a positive light. However, it is essential to address the widespread claims in the West that Beijing is highly displeased with the strengthening ties between Pyongyang and Moscow. Let us consider the arguments supporting this perspective and assess how the situation appears in reality.

A Decline in Diplomatic Activity

The first argument centres around the notion that China's diplomatic activity has diminished following the signing of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement between Russia and North Korea in the summer of 2024. On the 5th anniversary of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), both sides limited their exchanges to sending floral baskets; the anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations also passed without significant celebrations. Since Zhao Leji's visit, there have been no further high-level Chinese delegations to North Korea, and representatives from China's embassy in Pyongyang have refrained from participating in official ceremonies and celebratory events. Similarly, at receptions hosted by the Chinese side, high-ranking North Korean diplomats and officials are notably absent. For instance, on 11 July, during a reception at the Chinese embassy marking the 63rd anniversary of the bilateral treaty between China and North Korea, the highest-ranking North Korean participant was the rector of Kim Il Sung University. This contrasts with the previous year when the Vice Chairman of the Supreme People's Assembly attended a similar event. Furthermore,

during the 27 July celebrations in Pyongyang marking the anniversary of the 1953 Armistice Agreement, the Chinese ambassador was notably absent from the viewing platform.

China welcomes the development of relations between the DPRK and Russia, which play a constructive role in maintaining peace and stability

On 20 September 2024, the influential publication NK Pro, which specialises in North Korean affairs, released a statistical analysis of indicators suggesting a noticeable cooling of relations between North Korea and China. For instance, in 2022, North Korean media published 12 official announcements, letters, and telegrams exchanged between the leaders of China and North Korea. In 2023, this number dropped to 10. By September 2024, only three such messages had been reported.

Mentions of Xi Jinping in North Korean media have significantly declined, with no references to him in Rodong Sinmun or KCNA publications from May to August. *Moreover, China is now mentioned far less frequently in North Korean media compared to Russia, which was mentioned approximately 1.5 times more often in 2023.* North Korean television has also noticeably reduced its broadcasting of Chinese films, and the KCNA section titled “**Year of Korean-Chinese Friendship – 2024**” has not been updated since June.

Adding to this narrative, reports claim that in May 2024, Chinese authorities dismantled a commemorative plaque in Dalian featuring footprints made during a 2018 stroll by Xi Jinping and Kim Jong Un.

How should this be interpreted? When examining prior trends, the intensification of correspondence between the two leaders tends to occur in the autumn. While these exchanges often focus on routine congratulatory matters, where the absence of a message could signal a severe diplomatic crisis, the tone of these communications continues to indicate a willingness to cooperate.

As for the story of the dismantled footprint plaque, it can be viewed within the context of Chairman Xi’s consolidation of power. Beijing is increasingly removing elements associated with the “cults of foreign personalities”. For instance, the roles of various “solidarity groups” and “friendship associations” are being reduced to ceremonial functions, and Juche propaganda is no longer encouraged.

Demand for Repatriation of Workers

In July 2024, South Korean media reported that China demanded the return of up to 100,000 North Korean workers whose residence permits had already expired or were due to expire soon. Pyongyang proposed a phased repatriation process, but the Chinese side insisted on the

removal of all individuals with expired documents, while expressing readiness to gradually accept new migrant workers.

It was also reported that China has recently strengthened controls over goods exported to North Korea and tightened measures to combat illegal trading operations. Those interpreting this situation as “China effectively issuing an ultimatum to North Korean authorities” may be influenced by the perception that migrant labourers or criminal smugglers are not components of a “parallel economy” but rather “the regime’s currency wallet”. However, China consistently expels all illegal migrants, including those regarded as refugees in South Korea. Both sides are actively combating smuggling.

In accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2397, adopted in 2017, UN member states were obligated to repatriate all North Korean workers by the end of 2019. However, due to the pandemic, a large number of workers remained in China. It seems that, as entry restrictions ease, the issue has resurfaced.

Moreover, if, as South Korean officials claim, North Korea sending its workers abroad constitutes an illegal act that violates UN Security Council resolutions, then why not approve such a step by China?

Secret Instructions from South Korean Intelligence

Finally, South Korea’s National Intelligence Service, which has intensified efforts to gather information on relations between Beijing and Pyongyang, allegedly uncovered data suggesting that North Korean diplomats working in China had received instructions from the Centre to “ignore Beijing”. Setting aside the question of how this information was obtained, it is worth noting that much of the South Korean intelligence material appears aimed at “guessing what the higher-ups want to hear”.

Independent channels confirmed only that in June, North Korea abruptly switched its satellite broadcasts from Chinese to Russian satellites — despite no reported issues with the quality of Chinese broadcasts and the fact that Russian satellites have a smaller coverage area.

Thus, attention should be paid to those who are “rocking the boat”. The trail leads to the U.S. State Department, which appears to be attempting to drive a wedge between China and Russia. For example, during a seminar in Washington, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell stated: “A topic that is becoming increasingly uncomfortable for Chinese counterparts is North Korea’s engagement with Russia... We inform them of things they may not have known regarding North Korea’s intentions. They are concerned that support from Russia could lead to actions or military operations by Pyongyang that are not in China’s interests.” Campbell added that Chinese officials have not openly expressed support for

Russia, but the U.S. believes that the growing cooperation between Pyongyang and Moscow “concerns them”.

Some career defectors echo this sentiment. During the Global Korea Forum 2024 held in Seoul, Lee Il Gyu, a former North Korean political advisor at the country’s embassy in Cuba who defected to South Korea, urged the South Korean authorities to actively exploit tensions and disagreements between China and North Korea arising from strengthened Russian-North Korean relations. He argued that, with adequate effort, this could prompt Beijing to reconsider its position and approach toward Pyongyang. Lee speculates that China seems “uneasy” about the close military ties between North Korea and Russia and believes that Beijing should be persuaded that China could serve as a more realistic partner between the two Koreas.

The Official Position of the PRC

Let us conclude with two quotes. The first comes from Lin Jian, the official spokesperson for China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, during a briefing on 1 August 2024.

“Recently, the media in some countries have periodically exaggerated and hyped the situation, claiming that there is a problem of competition between Moscow and Beijing in their cooperation with Pyongyang... I want to emphasise that both the DPRK and Russia are friendly neighbours of China. China welcomes the development of relations between the DPRK and Russia, which play a constructive role in maintaining peace and stability”.

The second quote comes from Mao Ning, another spokesperson for China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who commented on the visit of Russian Defence Minister Andrey Belousov to the DPRK: “Russia and the DPRK are sovereign and independent countries, and bilateral exchanges between them are their own business”.

The explanation for this is straightforward. While the Moscow-Beijing-Pyongyang triangle is developing reactively in response to actions by Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo — actions aimed at forming a military-political alliance of the three countries — the shared threat from the United States will compel Pyongyang and Beijing to pay less attention to disagreements that will not play a defining role in their relationship.

Konstantin Asmolv, January 02, 2025

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