

**Zhihua Shen and Yafeng Xia,
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Kim Il-sung, and Sino-North Korean
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The Sino-North Korean relationship has perhaps been one of the most important yet significantly misunderstood relationships in Northeast Asia. The ties between the two countries have been surrounded in myth and symbolism. Outsiders have long viewed the relationship between China and North Korea as one between a smaller power supporting a major power. Particularly in the United States, policymakers have frequently cited China's immense influence over North Korea and have frequently called on China to "rein in" North Korea. This perception was particularly common in the years before the US and North Korea began direct talks in 2017, but even the Trump administration's direct meetings with North Korea have not precluded the importance placed on China's role in "reining in" North Korea. But has China ever had such control over North Korea given the two country's historical relationship?

Surprisingly, given the intense media and growing scholarly interest in North Korea and in China, there have been very few books focused on the history of

the Sino-North Korean relationship. North Korea and China are both opaque authoritarian regimes that allow outsiders few glimpses into the realities behind foreign policy decisions. North Korea has never made public much in the way of foreign policy documents and many North Korea scholars conducting historical research on the country have, in acknowledging the dearth of sources, simply said that many of the puzzles surrounding North Korean policy may only be solved once the “archives in Pyongyang” are opened. China, for its part, has only released foreign policy-related documents selectively, almost all of which fail to really provide a real sense of the disagreements that were likely involved in foreign policy in the country. Over the last number of years, newly-released documents from the former Eastern bloc, however, have provided new insight into relations between members of the communist bloc, including that of North Korea and China.

A Misunderstood Friendship: Mao Zedong, Kim-Sung and Sino-North Korean Relations, 1949-1976 by esteemed Chinese diplomatic historians Zhihua Shen and Yafeng Xia strives to fill the gap in serious academic historical research into the relations between North Korea and China during the Cold War. The book bases its research off of many of the aforementioned documents from the Eastern bloc, newly uncovered Chinese language documents from regional and local entities in the country, and interviews with both Chinese and North Koreans with knowledge of the relationship. The authors note at the outset that “there was not one academic book [in China] on the history of Sino-North Korean relations” (p. 2) and that the history of Sino-North Korean relations has been a site of little scholarly attention; indeed, as the authors point out, many scholars in South Korea have taken up the mantle to analyze and predict contemporaneous Sino-North Korean relations and future trends (p. 3). The most important work on Sino-NK relations identified by the authors is by Lee Jong-seok (a former South Korean unification minister and a senior research fellow at the Sejong Institute), entitled *The Sino-North Korean Relationship: 1945-2000*. The authors praise it for providing insight analysis of relationship before the end of the Korean War, but criticize the rest for being “rather weak.” about the Sino-North Korean relationship in only a piecemeal fashion.

Spread over six chapters, *A Misunderstood Friendship* provides a chronological narrative of Sino-North Korean relations stretching from the two country's tense relationship during and following the Korean War, the creation of the "special relationship" in the late 1950s and 1960s, to the cooling of the relationship in the 1970s. This book is primarily focused on highlighting the nature of the relationship during the Cold War, although in its "Epilogue" the authors provide a commentary on the implications of their research for understanding modern-day Sino-North Korean relations.

Chapter two of the book focuses on the tensions between the two allies during the Korean War. While avid followers of the latest research on the Korean War may find little new in this chapter, it nonetheless provides a thorough breakdown of the issues that erupted between China and North Korea during that conflict. China and North Korea were not on the same page in the run-up to the start of the Korean War following Kim Il Sung's invasion of South Korea. Mao Ze-dong was not enthusiastic about armed conflict and Kim clearly viewed his relationship with Soviet leader Joseph Stalin as more important to the conduct of the war. Mao, in fact, was not even informed of the start of the North Korean invasion until after it had begun. Once Chinese troops entered the conflict, arguments over the command of the war continued to create ill-will between the two sides. Kim Il Sung, for his part, was, perhaps understandably, unhappy about China's participation in the war and balked at any attempt to cede control to the Chinese, whether it be the control of railways or other strategic and tactical decisions concerning the conduct of the war. Perhaps most serious of all, Kim differed in opinion about when to end the war, which he soon came to believe was no longer winnable. The Chinese and the Soviet Union, moreover, had different aims for the war in mind: Mao came to see the war as a way to bolster China's revolutionary credentials for defending the communist world from the capitalists, while Stalin looked to tie down American troops in Asia for reasons related to Soviet strategy in Europe. Both of these calculations went far beyond Kim's simple desire to unify the peninsula. Ultimately, the Korean War did not create friendly relations between the Chinese and the North Koreans.

Chapter three provides a detailed look into the relationship between the two countries following the end of the Korean War. While China provided a great deal of aid to North Korea after the end of the war, the Sino-North Korean relationship remained rocky. One of the major incidents of the period was purges of China-friendly faction in North Korea by Kim Il Sung, which culminated in the so-called “1956 incident.” Interestingly, while some scholars have argued that China and the Soviets may have tried to get rid of Kim, the authors have a different argument: the Soviets and Chinese “wanted to support Kim and to help him correct his mistakes” (p. 103) and “their only purpose was to stabilize the situation in North Korea.” (p. 103) That being said Mao reportedly told the Russians that “You promoted Kim Il-sung. Just like a small tree, you planted it. The Americans pulled it up. We planted it in the same place. It is now extremely pompous.” (p. 104) The Russians thought troubles with Kim were over, while Mao thought the troubles had just begun. The Chinese were concerned that Kim would go “rogue.” Mao was recorded saying that “He [Kim] might follow Tito’s road, or even that of Nagy.” (p. 106) All of this shows the depth into which Mao believed Kim was a loose cannon. Ultimately, Pyongyang remained closer to Moscow than Beijing during this period and Kim Il-sung was particularly sensitive to Chinese and Soviet meddling in North Korean internal affairs. Mao and Krushchev were not on the exact same plane when dealing with North Korea, however, which allowed Kim wiggle room between the two countries.

From the late 1950s, however, China and North Korean relations made an about-face. Chapter four of the book delves into how China drastically modified its policies toward North Korea and moved forward with the withdrawal of Chinese troops. This is an immensely important period in Sino-North Korean relations given the backdrop of intensifying conflict between the Soviets and the Chinese. The era marked the real beginning of the “special relationship” between the two sides when Kim moved closer to China than Moscow. In short, Mao believed that North Korea would “break away from the socialist camp” and shifted China’s stance toward North Korea when it became clear that China needed North Korea’s support not just regionally but also on the international stage. Mao began with

apologizing for the 1956 “interference in North Korea’s internal affairs” and proposed to remove Chinese troops from North Korea to placate Kim further.

International concerns may have been a part of Mao’s reasoning for the shift in policy toward North Korea, but domestic concerns also clearly played a role: The protests among intellectuals and peasants in the run up to China’s Anti-Rightist Campaign in the summer of 1957 created worries that a Hungarian type counterrevolutionary incident could occur in China and this required support from fraternal parties. In chronicling the improvement in bilateral relations, the authors point out changes in how Chinese officialdom treated North Koreans who fled to China in 1956. Kim had tried to purge the Ya’nan faction from power during the August incident - some fled to China where they were, at first, treated as dignitaries. By 1957, China’s relationship with North Korea had improved a great deal and members of the faction in China were soon treated as “defectors” or “Korean antiparty factionalist” instead of “Korean runaway cadres,” and were even banished to areas far from the North Korean border (p. 123).

Mao’s withdrawal of Chinese troops in 1958 underlines the shift in Chinese relations with North Korea in this period. Chinese forces had been stationed in North Korea since the start of the Korean War, but Chinese People’s Volunteer Army (CPVA) forces were not viewed very positively because of illegal CPVA detentions and interrogations of high-ranking Korean officials, and even the rape of North Korean women. The North Korean people and government came to view the CPVA as an occupation force (p. 117). The publicly stated reasons for the withdrawal were to force an American withdrawal from South Korea “so as to promote peace on the peninsula and relax tensions in the Far East.” The withdrawal surprised even the US government, which simply viewed the withdrawal as a way to “assist Moscow in its propaganda campaign,” demonstrate China’s peaceful posture,” and “influence elections in South Korea” (p. 118). Ultimately, as the CPVA returned home, it left all its camps, arms, and equipment to the Korean People’s Army.

From the Chinese perspective, the warming of relations with North Korea had some payoffs. Chinese leaders had suffered blows to their international status after harsh crackdowns in Tibet and border clashes with India. North Korea, however, stood in support of China (p. 135). While Kim upped his support of Chinese domestic and foreign policies, he nonetheless showed that North Korea would act independently of the Chinese. For example, Kim Tu-bong, chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly and nominal head of state, was purged at the March 1958 First Party Conference; his downfall was a sign that Kim Il Sung had no qualms in getting rid of those he thought were too close to China.

Chapter four concludes with a discussion on the Cheollima Movement. Scholars have long pointed out the similarities of North Korea's Cheollima Movement and China's Great Leap Forward, and the authors add further evidence to the close relationship between the two movements while linking it with broader trends in North Korean-Chinese relations. In 1958, Kim instructed a Korean government delegation to "Carefully learn and study the Chinese experiences and bring them back to Korea." (p. 127) North Korea's campaign fed off the campaign in China, from merging cooperatives to creating Red Guards in every city, factory, mine and rural area. In fact, Kim's support of the Great Leap Forward, which failed to elicit much support from other parts of the socialist bloc, helped further strengthen Sino-North Korean relations. Kim's support led to even more aid to North Korea by the Chinese.

The Sino-North Korean relationship reached new highs in the 1960s as Sino-Soviet relations faltered badly and increased efforts were made by both communist powers to entreaty North Korea. Chapter five provides evidence about how North Korea's standing to China became ever more important from both a regional and international perspective. This new relationship led China to make concessions for North Korea, including the settling of border disputes and allowed Koreans to cross without issue into North Korea during that period. China took pains not to upset the North Korean government. This was particularly made clear

when China confronted the issue of Koreans who wanted to return to China. (p. 157) Moreover, Mao himself made clear that the Northeast part of China was Kim's "great hinterland" as part of an effort to gain support from North Korea. Part of the background to this was the increasing conflict between China and the Soviets; Mao was considering making Northeastern China into a strategic buffer zone in case of future conflict. But it also demonstrated trust in Kim as an ally. (p. 167) According to the authors, North Korea by the early 1960s was one of China's few remaining international partners, and China had such a large population that it was open to being flexible on border issues. That all being said, despite intense Chinese efforts to bring North Korea completely on their side, they failed to completely wean North Korea off of the Soviet Union. Kim knew that the Soviets had more resources to give and continued to move between the two major powers to gain what benefits he could.

Chapter six dives into the troubled period of China's Cultural Revolution. Scholars have long deemed the Cultural Revolution period, stretching from 1965 to 1969, as a "low-ebb" in the history of North Korean and Chinese relations. The authors, however, argue that relations between the two countries were strained even before the Cultural Revolution began. Broadly, Kim was interested in beefing up his military and found the Soviet Union more willing to provide needed equipment and aid than the Chinese. Indeed, by early 1966, North Korea had begun receiving aid from the Soviet Union, including loans and technical aid, all of which had stopped back in 1962. Moreover, Pyongyang had numerous differences in foreign policy with China during this period, stretching from Sino-Cuban relations to the Vietnam War. There is little doubt that the Cultural Revolution exacerbated these tensions. Third-parties observing the relationship, including Romanian diplomats in Pyongyang, noted that North Korea conducted veiled attacks through its newspapers against the Chinese. China, for its part, severely curtailed its press coverage of North Korea-related news. Perhaps most ominously, there were no high-level delegations between the two countries from 1965-1969. (p. 179)

The authors, however, argue that while Red Guard publications in China and

other fronts of the Cultural Revolution openly criticized the North Korean leadership for “revisionism,” the views of China’s central leadership underwent little change during the period. Importantly, Mao and Zhou Enlai never said anything publicly against Kim Il Sung. Meanwhile, despite open criticism by the Red Guard toward the North Korean government, North Korea’s leadership took pains to avoid provoking China. By 1967, there were clear signs that China was trying to mend ties with North Korea when Zhou asked a visiting Mauritanian former head of state to convey a message to Kim, who sent a return message conveying the profound friendship he had with Chinese leaders. Moreover, there is ample evidence provided by the authors to show that the Chinese in fact placed a high priority on maintaining North Korea’s relationship and continued to provide economic aid. While Chinese economic aid to North Korea was halted in mid-1966, Sino-North Korean bilateral trade nonetheless continued. China even suspended construction of its subway in Beijing to assist North Korea to build its own in Pyongyang, which was a huge drag on the Chinese economy. (p. 187) All in all, Pyongyang tried to maintain neutrality in the Sino-Soviet dispute but was actually closer to Moscow than Beijing during this period. (p. 188)

The last major section of the book focuses on the North Korea-Chinese relationship during US-China rapprochement from the early 1970s. Broadly, it delves into China’s foreign policy priorities during the period, the country’s aid to North Korea and Kim Il Sung’s attempt to follow in the footsteps of Mao as a global leader of the socialist revolution. China’s reasons for moving to detente with the US were based on its deepening rivalry with the Soviet Union, which reached a breaking point in 1969 with bloody conflicts on Zhenbao Island. Chinese leaders “mended fences” with North Korea before moving forward with rapprochement with the US. (p. 200) In contrast to the North Vietnamese, which viewed China’s new move as “betrayal,” Kim viewed the talks as a way to get US troops out of South Korea.

While the “Korea issue” was brought up in talks between Chinese and American officials, there was clear dissonance in aims between North Korea and China.

North Korea was initially positive about the effects of the talks. China also increased military aid to North Korea as part of its efforts to ensure the country would not feel left out. The Chinese made efforts to speak for North Korean objectives during Sino-US talks, handing over requests and other documents with demands by the North Korean government. (p. 204) It became clear, however, that Chinese leaders were not as enthusiastic about the exit of US troops as North Korea, at least on the same rapid timeline the North Koreans wanted, and more or less accepted the status quo on the Korean Peninsula for the time being. North Korea praised the Shanghai Communique, but, as the authors argue, were likely unhappy that the document did not include any mention of the exit of US troops from South Korea. Later, in 1974, North Korea proposed a peace treaty with the US, reflecting North Korea's belief that working through China would not achieve the goals it wanted. North Korean attempts to establish direct contact with the US, however, failed. Ultimately, China's reconciliation with the US led to a waning in its "revolutionary vigor" and Kim Il Sung aspired for a time to replace Mao by trying to popularize North Korea's homegrown Juche idea and Kimilsungism. While China moved to a more pro-American stance, this was juxtaposed by North Korea's continued anti-American stance.

A Misunderstood Friendship is at its core a work of diplomatic history that both confirms and adds new details to broader understanding of the historical Sino-North Korean relationship. The book also provides an important narrative to help improve understanding of the two country's relationship today. As during the Cold War, outside observers have very little insight into the decision-making made at the highest levels in China and North Korea. This void in information has made it difficult for scholars, not to mention policymakers, to understand the state of relations between the two countries and one of the reasons why analysis on the two country's relationship can sometimes veer off into the extremes. Some observers suggest that China uses North Korea as its "attack dog" to keep the US off guard in East Asia, implying almost that China has minute control over North Korean foreign policy. An analysis grounded in the history of the bilateral relationship, however, would find this view an over exaggeration, particularly

given North Korea's well-recorded disdain for interference in its internal affairs. Successive US administrations also seem to have over exaggerated Chinese influence over North Korea. To be sure, North Korea today is extremely dependent on China from an economic perspective; however, the country has long been dependent on its neighbors, regardless of its claims of "self-sufficiency." *A Misunderstood Friendship* provides a nuanced narrative of the two country's bilateral history during the Cold War and will serve as a foundational text for students, scholars and policymakers wanting a broader understanding of the relationship.