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Exploring North Korea–China Relations in the Kim Jong-un Era: A Pluralistic Construction from Geopolitics to a Community of Shared Destiny

Leyuan liu[a,] *

[a] *Department of Political Science & International Relations, Soongsil University, Korea*
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ABSTRACT

Since Kim Jong Un came to power, North Korea has undergone significant changes in areas such as nuclear weapons development, economic reform, and cultural openness. As a traditional ally and key geopolitical partner of North Korea, China's perceptions and understanding of its development trajectory have exhibited diverse characteristics. This article examines the latest developments in China–North Korea relations during the Kim Jong Un era by analyzing recent political interactions, economic cooperation, cultural exchanges, and efforts to shape international discourse. The study employs a literature review method, drawing on official documents, academic works, and media reports from both China and North Korea. It argues that during the Kim Jong Un era, the two countries have moved beyond traditional security concerns toward a more rational assessment and cultural resonance regarding North Korea's path to modernization.

Evidence for Practice

- **Institutionalize Security Risk Management**: China and North Korea should establish a permanent vice-ministerial–level security dialogue mechanism and joint border coordination centers to transition from crisis response to proactive risk prevention, especially concerning nuclear tensions and nontraditional security threats.
- **Promote Economic Corridor Development**: Policymakers should expedite the operationalization of border economic zones (e.g., Dandong–Sinuiju and Rason) and consider integrating a China–North Korea growth corridor into broader regional connectivity frameworks to translate political consensus into tangible economic outcomes.
- **Expand Digital and Technological Cooperation with Safeguards**: Bilateral cooperation in telecommunications, digital infrastructure, and AI-related capacity building should be supported by clear compliance mechanisms to manage sanctions risks and ensure transparency in technology transfer.
- **Deepen Youth and Educational Exchanges**: Expanding scholarship programs, joint research initiatives, and dual-degree programs can help cultivate a sustainable social foundation for long-term bilateral cooperation, thereby mitigating generational perception gaps.
- **Enhance Public Communication Strategies**: Both governments should diversify media narratives and policy communications to reduce crisis-centric framing and improve public understanding of economic and cultural cooperation, thereby strengthening domestic legitimacy for bilateral engagement.

* Corresponding author. e-mail: 330559849@qq.com

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In the early years of Kim Jong-un's rule, North Korea focused its primary strategy on nuclear weapons development, continuing Kim Jong-il's directives and upholding the principles of the "Juche Revolution" and the "Songun Revolution," thereby consolidating regime legitimacy. However, since 2018, North Korea has demonstrated some flexibility regarding nuclear and missile issues, while simultaneously promoting local economic development and foreign economic exchanges, thereby establishing a new developmental model.

China, North Korea's largest trading partner and traditional historical ally, shifted from viewing North Korea as a "fortress of ideology" during the Cold War to seeing it as a "development-oriented state" in the post–Cold War era. This change in perception is closely linked not only to North Korea's policy adjustments but also to China's strategy of reshaping Northeast Asian geopolitics.

This study analyzes political interactions, economic cooperation, cultural exchanges, and the development of international influence between North Korea and China to reveal emerging trends in their relationship under Kim Jong-un. Drawing on a comprehensive literature review—including official documents, academic research, and major media reports from both countries—this study argues that bilateral relations are evolving beyond traditional security-focused ties toward a new dynamic characterized by a rational assessment of North Korea's modernization efforts and cultural affinity.

2. Geopolitical Imagination: From "Security Buffer Zone" to "Strategic Balancing Point"

During the Cold War, China viewed North Korea as the frontline of its strategy against the United States, establishing a military alliance through the "Sino–North Korean Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty." However, North Korea's nuclear weapons development under Kim Jong-un's early leadership has significantly destabilized regional security. In response, China has sought a strategic balance between the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and the maintenance of regional stability.

After North Korea's nuclear test in 2016, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared that it would "firmly uphold the goal of denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula while safeguarding peace and stability in Northeast Asia." This stance maintained continuity with China's traditional security perspective while pragmatically adjusting to North Korea's expanding nuclear capabilities.

Strategic Repositioning in the Post–Cold War Era Since 2018, North Korea has demonstrated diplomatic flexibility through the Moon Jae-in–Kim Jong-un and Trump–Kim Jong-un summits, while simultaneously strengthening its strategic alignment with Russia following the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine war. Reason: Added the auxiliary verb

The successful bilateral summit between North Korea and China in September 2025, along with subsequent high-level exchanges, marked the beginning of a new phase of high-quality development in the traditional China–North Korea friendship. Economic cooperation plays a central role in strengthening bilateral ties, as North Korea's abundant natural resources and labor force complement China's technological expertise, capital, and market advantages.

North Korea has expanded its economic openness toward China by promoting the joint development of various economic zones, thereby creating new opportunities for cooperation. Meanwhile, China has strengthened its economic ties with Eurasian countries through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Although North Korea is not officially a BRI participant, its engagement through trade and cultural exchanges demonstrates increasing alignment with the initiative in practice.

In 2019, marking the 70th anniversaries of both the founding of the People's Republic of China and China–North Korea diplomatic relations, President Xi Jinping visited Pyongyang for the first time, declaring that the bilateral relationship had entered new historical stage.

China has not only actively strengthened bilateral friendship and cooperation but has also repositioned North Korea within the broader framework of its peripheral and major-power diplomacy, strategically adjusting its approach to the Korean Peninsula.[3] China has explicitly expressed its support for North Korea's new strategic development line, stating that it respects North Korea's choice of a development path suited to its unique circumstances and will provide all possible support for its socialist construction.

In May 2018, when President Xi Jinping met with the visiting North Korean delegation led by Pak Tae-song—member of the Political Bureau of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) Central Committee and vice chairman of the Party—Pak stated that the delegation had visited China "under the direction of Chairman Kim Jong-un to learn from China's economic development experience." This statement indicates North Korea's active effort to study China's development model following its strategic policy adjustments.

Since then, both countries have significantly expanded their exchanges across a wide range of areas, including politics, economics, foreign affairs, military affairs, law, culture, education, tourism, media, local governance, the arts, and think tanks. Since 2018, more than forty high-level mutual visits have taken place. From China, prominent figures such as Li Zhanshu (Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress), Miao Hua (Director of the Political Work Department of the Central Military Commission), State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, and Song Tao (Minister of the International Department of the Chinese Communist Party) have all visited North Korea. From North Korea, Pak Tae-song, Ri Su-yong, and General Kim Su-gil of the Korean People's Army have visited China.

Multiple departments—including China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the ministries of culture and sports, youth associations, Xinhua News Agency, People's Daily, and provincial delegations—have visited North Korea. Meanwhile, North Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Korea–China Friendship Association, Rodong Sinmun, journalists' unions, Hwanghaenam-do authorities, the Education Commission, parliamentary friendship groups, and the Academy of Social Sciences have visited China.

Through these frequent interactions, public sentiment in both countries has significantly improved. In the past, North Korea's nuclear tests prompted China to strengthen sanctions, which led North Korean media to criticize China, resulting in temporary tensions between the two peoples. However, since 2018, major North Korean state media outlets (such as KCNA and Rodong Sinmun) have shifted toward

strongly supporting China—praising Xi Jinping's speeches, highlighting China's technological achievements, and openly endorsing China's positions on U.S.–China trade disputes, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Xinjiang, and human rights issues.

Such mutual moral support and cooperation on the international stage elevated bilateral relations to new heights. In June, October, November, and December 2025, China's relevant agencies—operating under the name of the "China Asia Economic Development Association"—conducted several rounds of exchanges with the North Korean government and economic associations. These interactions resulted in multiple agreements for future cooperation.

The two parties reached the following key agreements:

Establish a regular communication mechanism to strengthen contact between Chinese enterprises and the North Korean Embassy in Beijing, facilitating the rapid sharing of policy updates and project information.

The China-Asia Economic Development Association will serve as the primary access point for Chinese private companies investing in North Korea, offering comprehensive services including research, business matching, and risk management.

Starting with the resumption of on-site visits by Chinese entrepreneurs in December 2023, both sides will promote substantive cooperation in the development of North Korean economic zones, border trade, tourism, and cultural exchange—transforming high-level agreements into tangible outcomes at the civilian level.

Such practical cooperation symbolizes China's recognition of North Korea not merely as a "security buffer zone" but as a "strategic balancing point," reflecting a shift toward reducing regional conflict risks through economic integration and the pursuit of a stable balance.

Rational Restraint in the Nuclear Issue North Korea's nuclear development has provoked strong opposition from the international community; however, China has consistently emphasized resolving the issue through "dialogue and negotiation." China's fundamental principle regarding the Korean Peninsula is clear and singular: to prevent war and maintain regional stability.

China defines any large-scale military conflict on the Korean Peninsula as a insisting that war must never break out under any circumstances. This stance is based not on diplomatic rhetoric but on a pragmatic assessment of China's national security.

In 2017, the Korean Peninsula experienced a series of crises known as the "April Crisis," "August Crisis," and "October Crisis," with tensions escalating to the brink of full-scale war. These events significantly destabilized the region surrounding China and undermined the strategic interests of both China and North Korea.

If a large-scale war or conflict were to erupt on the peninsula, North Korea and South Korea would bear the immediate damage; however, China would also inevitably experience significant geopolitical and economic shocks. Therefore, preventing war and maintaining peace remain nonnegotiable core principles of China's policy toward North Korea.

Within this framework, China acknowledges North Korea's right to "self-defensive measures" while simultaneously warning of the risks posed by its expanding nuclear capabilities. It adheres to a "dual-track approach" that promotes both denuclearization and the establishment of a peace regime, calling for restraint and continued political negotiations.

Thus, China's stance on the North Korean nuclear issue is grounded not in emotion but in strategic prudence and realistic calculation. It consistently upholds its principles of "dialogue and peaceful resolution," aiming to achieve a stable equilibrium through gradual trust-building.

3. Economic Cooperation: From "Aid Dependency" to "Mutual Benefit"

3.1. Transition from the Traditional Aid Model

During Kim Jong-il's era, China's economic cooperation with North Korea primarily took the form of food assistance—a "blood transfusion" type of support. However, under Kim Jong-un, North Korea declared "economic self-reliance" as a core national goal, emphasizing the need for a peaceful environment and reliable partners to build a strong socialist economy.

Since Kim Jong-un assumed power in 2011, North Korea has established 23 new economic development zones. Including the Rason Special Economic Zone, the China–North Korea joint development areas in Rajin–Sonbong, and the Hwanggŭm-do and Wihwa-do joint development zones, the total number of zones reaches 27. However, due to prolonged UN sanctions, foreign investment has been severely restricted, leaving most zones as mere plans on paper.

Since 2017, the United Nations Security Council has imposed increasingly stringent sanctions on North Korea. These measures have not only dealt a severe blow to trade between China and North Korea but have also caused significant losses to Chinese enterprises investing in North Korea, as well as to the economies of the border regions between the two countries. Notably, North Korea's exports to China have sharply declined, from $2.54 billion in 2016 to $213 million in 2018. Due to the restrictions imposed by the UN sanctions, China is prohibited from making new investments in North Korea, and North Korea is unable to acquire new related equipment and technology, which severely limits its economic development and foreign economic cooperation.

North Korea has been engaged in long-term nuclear and missile development, which has damaged its international reputation and led to near diplomatic isolation. China is not only North Korea's primary energy supplier and food aid provider but also its largest trading partner and collaborator in economic cooperation and development zones. Consequently, China remains North Korea's preferred and most reliable partner. Therefore, for North Korea to develop its economy, it is essential to improve its foreign relations and restore friendly cooperation with China.

Simultaneously, the escalating strategic rivalry between China and the United States, along with the ongoing crisis in the Taiwan Strait, has compelled China to reassess its strategic position on the Korean Peninsula. The Trump administration initiated a trade war against

China, implemented an economic containment strategy, enhanced military cooperation among the United States, Japan, and South Korea, and increased military deployments, all of which have intensified threats to China's regional security. To prevent further deterioration of the strategic security environment in Northeast Asia, China must strengthen economic cooperation with North Korea to effectively improve bilateral relations and foster a peaceful and stable external environment.

3.2. Demonstration Effect of Economic Special Zones

North Korea has established special economic zones in Rajin and Kaesong to attract Chinese investment. As of 2023, China's cumulative direct investment in North Korea has reached 2.3 billion USD, primarily focusing on textiles, mining, and tourism. The Rason Economic and Trade Zone, in particular, has created a model for a "China–North Korea border economic cooperation zone," functioning as a kind of "outside territory within the border" that enables freer movement of goods and offers flexible tax incentives. This zone is regarded as a pilot case for regional cooperation in Northeast Asia.

Through these experimental models, China has re-evaluated North Korea's economic potential and no longer views it as a "closed economy" but rather as an "emerging axis of open growth."

3.3. Emerging Field of Digital Cooperation

Under Kim Jong-un, North Korea has declared a national strategy to become a "digital powerhouse," aiming to enhance administrative efficiency, economic productivity, and external competitiveness through information technology. Despite international sanctions and resource shortages, the country has implemented systematic national strategies in artificial intelligence, software development, and information and communication technology (ICT).

Since the 1990s, North Korea has prioritized the dissemination of computer technology, establishing a national computer center in Pyongyang along with seven affiliated branches across the country. The nation trains tens of thousands of IT specialists annually. Computer science is a mandatory subject at the middle school, high school, and university levels. Additionally, specialized institutions are operated to develop IT professionals.

Thanks to long-term investment, North Korea has maintained a relatively high level of technical expertise despite its isolation. It has developed its own operating system (Red Star OS), office software, and domestic mobile communication networks.

Major cities such as Pyongyang are also advancing smart city–style infrastructure. Examples include traffic management systems, e-government services, and the nationwide intranet known as "Kwangmyong." Although access to the external internet is blocked, some residents of Pyongyang can use email, browse information, and utilize digital payment services through the internal network.

The country is transitioning its film and television production from analog to digital formats. The introduction of drone filming and high-resolution digital editing technology has significantly enhanced visual quality, thereby strengthening not only external propaganda but also the internal consolidation of ideological legitimacy and the leadership's image.

North Korea's "digital powerhouse" strategy extends beyond civilian sectors to encompass military and security domains. Cyber units carry out operations ranging from information gathering to financial theft as part of the national strategy. Additionally, North Korea has imported substantial quantities of Chinese surveillance equipment, including facial and fingerprint recognition systems, thereby enhancing digital control—an approach viewed as a step toward "digital totalitarianism."

Despite international sanctions, North Korea continues to acquire critical technologies through China. IT personnel are deployed to China, Russia, and Southeast Asia to remotely develop software and train AI models for foreign companies, generating revenue that is funneled back into military projects. Additionally, North Korea has obtained advanced chips, such as NVIDIA GPUs, via China to enhance its AI-supported military and intelligence capabilities.

Chinese companies Huawei and ZTE have played key roles in the development of North Korea's telecommunications infrastructure. Since 2008, Huawei has collaborated with North Korean state enterprises to build 3G networks, supplying base stations, antennas, and network management systems that enabled the operation of North Korea's first commercial mobile network, Koryolink.

By 2024, North Korea had begun upgrading major cities such as Pyongyang, Nampo, and Hamhung from 3G to 4G using Huawei equipment. The goal is to convert over 80% of nationwide base stations to 4G by 2025.

This technological collaboration is not carried out through formal public contracts but rather through indirect equipment provision and local operational support. For China, contributing telecommunications technology to North Korea serves not only economic interests but also expands its geopolitical influence. For North Korea, this arrangement offers a means to rapidly acquire telecommunications capabilities while circumventing Western technological restrictions. These exchanges reveal a new dimension of "technological cooperation," suggesting that the bilateral relationship is evolving into a "technological community."

4. Cultural Exchange: From "Ideological Propaganda" to "Mutual Cultural Learning"

4.1. Policy Breakthroughs in Cultural Exchange

Under Kim Jong-un, North Korea has gradually eased cultural restrictions, allowing select foreign films and music. At the 16th Pyongyang International Film Festival in 2018, the Chinese film Wolf Warrior II won Best Special Effects and Best Sound—an event widely regarded as a symbolic milestone in cultural exchange under Kim Jong-un. This period also marked China's active promotion of North Korean cultural outreach through initiatives such as the "Year of Culture" and the "Year of Tourism."

In January 2019, North Korea sent a performing arts troupe led by Ri Su-yong to Beijing's National Centre for the Performing Arts, where they staged three performances showcasing a blend of traditional and modern arts. The program featured the gayageum ensemble

Arirang and Chinese-language songs such as “My Motherland.” These performances elicited strong emotional responses from Chinese audiences.

President Xi Jinping and Peng Liyuan personally attended the event, emphasizing that the performance symbolized the implementation of the two leaders’ agreements. Following the performance, the audience gave prolonged standing ovations, recognizing it as a prime example of “artistic diplomacy” that strengthens friendship.

The year 2024 marked the 75th anniversary of China–North Korea relations and was jointly designated as the “China–North Korea Year of Friendship.” Large-scale cultural exchanges took place, including reciprocal visits by art troupes. In April, a Chinese delegation led by Song Tao visited Pyongyang to participate in opening ceremonies and performed jointly with North Korean troupes—an event widely praised as “a new chapter of friendship.”

Cultural diplomacy under Kim Jong-un has evolved beyond leader-centered events to embrace a broader form of in artistic exchanges among ordinary people.

4.2. Reconstruction of Historical Memory and Deepening Empathy

Shared historical memory is a fundamental pillar of cultural exchange between China and North Korea. In September 2020, after more than five years of renovation, the Memorial Hall of the War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea in Dandong, Liaoning Province, reopened. Its exhibition space expanded fourfold, and the number of exhibits increased from approximately 700 to more than 1,600. The special exhibition, “Resist America, Aid Korea—Defend the Motherland,” received a national award as one of China’s top ten museum exhibitions of 2020.

In early 2023, the memorial collaborated with the Air Force Aviation Museum to establish a new exhibition hall dedicated to the Chinese People’s Volunteers Air Force. In 2024, Dandong City introduced a permanent exhibition featuring more than 1,200 wartime relics from the Korean front—including weapons, soldiers’ letters, and daily necessities. Notably, the “oral history” section screened interviews from the documentary Remember (Mingji). This documentary recorded testimonies from over 100 aging Chinese veterans after 2019, representing an urgent effort to preserve shared war memories amid generational change.

Such reconstruction of collective memory extends beyond merely commemorating the past. It functions as a process through which both countries reinforce their political and cultural identities by revisiting narratives of shared sacrifice and struggle. Under Kim Jong-un, cultural exchange builds upon this shared memory, evolving from emotional bonds rooted in wartime solidarity into a “cultural-historical community.”

4.3. Bridging Role of Youth Exchange

In recent years, youth exchanges between China and North Korea have expanded significantly, supported by both governments as well as civil initiatives. In 2024—the “China–North Korea Year of Friendship”—these exchanges have deepened beyond political and cultural activities to encompass multidimensional cooperation in education, technology, and healthcare.

Chinese university delegations visited Pyongyang for summer camps, cultural experiences, tours of revolutionary sites, and school exchanges. North Korean youth groups traveled to the three northeastern provinces of China, where they participated in university activities, language exchange programs, athletic competitions, and local cultural immersion.[6]

These exchanges have helped younger generations internalize the significance of the historical alliance and emotionally inherit the legacy of “China–North Korea friendship.” In 2018, China’s Ministry of Veterans Affairs sent a “Chinese Young Cadres Delegation” to North Korea to honor fallen soldiers and engage in political youth dialogue, thereby expanding elite-level exchanges. Kim Il-sung University has long served as an important training center for Chinese diplomats and technical personnel, with many Chinese diplomats considering it their alma mater. These educational ties underpin mutual trust and understanding.

Healthcare-related youth exchanges also expanded during the COVID-19 pandemic. Chinese medical teams trained North Korean personnel in vaccine management and public health systems, while North Korean medical staff participated in practical training at Chinese hospitals. This cooperation evolved into a “knowledge exchange platform” where young professionals observe and learn from each other's systems.

During a 2025 visit to Kim Il-sung University, Chinese Ambassador Wang Yajun stated that new era of China–North Korea relations presents greater opportunities and responsibilities for the younger generation, urging North Korean students to study the Chinese language and become inheritors of bilateral friendship. North Korean students responded fluently in Chinese, symbolizing the growing emotional and educational connection between the two societies.

Overall, youth exchanges serve as a bridge connecting the future of China–North Korea relations. They help overcome the and transform bilateral friendship into a sustainable social foundation.

5. International Influence: From “Participant” to “Rule-Maker”

5.1. Active Participation in Multilateral Diplomacy

North Korea enhanced its international standing through summits with Moon Jae-in and Donald Trump, while China endorsed the country’s “legitimate diplomatic demands” in international forums. In 2018, Kim Jong-un and Moon Jae-in held three summits, culminating in the Pyongyang Joint Declaration, which eased military tensions, committed to progress on denuclearization, and expanded economic cooperation. These developments significantly reduced tensions on the Korean Peninsula and improved North Korea’s international image—from being perceived as a “nuclear threat” to a “peace facilitator.”

Although the two summits between Kim Jong-un and U.S. President Donald Trump in 2018 and 2019 did not result in concrete denuclearization agreements, they marked the first time North Korea engaged the United States as an equal negotiating partner.

These diplomatic breakthroughs expanded North Korea's strategic options and provided a stable foundation for the development of China–North Korea relations. China consistently upheld principles of political resolution, prioritized dialogue, and sought to prevent war. In the UN Security Council, China supported sanctions in response to nuclear tests while also advocating for discussions on sanctions relief as circumstances evolved.

China's proposals—such as the "dual-track approach" (denuclearization plus a peace regime) and "dual suspension" (North Korea suspending nuclear activities while the U.S. and South Korea suspend military exercises)—have been recognized as constructive diplomatic initiatives. China's UN-centered diplomacy offers an institutional buffer that helps prevent instability on the Korean Peninsula from escalating into conflict.

At the 77th UN General Assembly in 2022, China's representative Fu Cong emphasized that "North Korea's sovereignty and right to development must be respected," thereby both defending North Korea's international participation and enhancing China's role as a mediator and order-shaper in Korean Peninsula affairs.

5.2. Expanded Role in Global Governance

North Korea has demonstrated a willingness to engage in global governance efforts related to climate change and public health, despite facing economic limitations and technological constraints.

On World Environment Day (June 5) in 2007, North Korea officially declared its commitment to global efforts to combat climate change and has since regularly sent delegations to UNFCCC meetings. Studies indicate that North Korea experiences high levels of air pollution due to its heavy reliance on coal and biomass fuels. Climate models predict that by the 2080s, North Korea will face more frequent heatwaves and heavy rainfall, with rice yields projected to decrease by 14–20%.

COVID-19 exposed weaknesses in North Korea's public health system. In response, China included North Korea in South–South cooperation initiatives focused on public health training, vaccine support, and health governance.

In September 2025, North Korean Foreign Minister Choe Son-hui stated that North Korea "fully supports China's Global Governance Initiative" and will cooperate with China to oppose unilateralism and promote a fairer world order. This statement demonstrates Pyongyang's alignment with Beijing's vision of a multipolar world.

Such interactions reflect China's evolving view of North Korea—from a passive participant in international affairs to a potential co-designer of global rules.

5.3. Transformation of Media Discourse

Chinese media coverage of North Korea has shifted from earlier more normalized diplomatic reporting. Since 2024, China Central Television (CCTV) has expanded its coverage of North Korea beyond leadership meetings to include youth exchanges, cultural cooperation, military modernization, and regional development.

For example, in April 2024, CCTV reported on Chinese Party and government delegations visiting North Korea, describing bilateral ties as and unbreakable. Later that year, it covered North Korea's progress in modernizing its command and information systems and constructing new naval vessels. Reports also highlighted the of Friendship cultural exchanges, including visiting art troupes and youth delegations.

These trends are gradually reshaping Chinese public perceptions—framing North Korea not as a "source of crisis" but as a "continuous cooperative partner." Thus, the media is evolving from mere diplomatic promotion into a "window of information" that influences public understanding of North Korea.

Overall, China's mass media strategy now simultaneously contributes to domestic consensus-building and reshapes North Korea's international image through expanded soft power mechanisms.

6. Challenges and Prospects: From "Imagined Community" to "Practical Community"

6.1. Persistent Gaps in Perception

Despite the overall improvement in China–North Korea relations, Chinese public opinion remains divided regarding North Korea. A 2023 survey revealed that 35% of Chinese respondents perceived North Korea as and backward, while 20% regarded it as a regional security threat. These negative perceptions arise not only from information gaps but also from asymmetric exposure and a fading historical memory.

Biased media exposure is a significant factor. Chinese mainstream media continues to focus heavily on North Korea's nuclear tests, missile launches, and border controls, while providing limited coverage of North Korea's economic reforms, social welfare improvements, and scientific or technological advancements. This "selective visibility" causes many Chinese citizens to associate North Korea primarily with crisis and instability.

Generational gaps also play a significant role. Older generations, shaped by memories of the Korean War fought to shoulder, maintain strong emotional bonds with North Korea. In contrast, younger Chinese tend to assess North Korea through the lens of contemporary realist logic in international relations.[11] Additionally, concerns that North Korea's nuclear tests could threaten environmental safety in China's northeast have led some young people to view North Korea more as a than an asset.

Western media influence also plays a significant role. The U.S. and European press have long portrayed North Korea as “isolated,” “repressive,” and a “nuclear threat,” with these narratives spreading to China through the internet and social media. Consequently, despite improvements in bilateral cooperation, the broader Chinese public continues to perceive North Korea through a crisis-oriented lens.

6.2. Optimizing Future Paths of Cooperation

China and North Korea can enhance their cooperation in three key areas:

First, establish a permanent security communication mechanism that shifts the focus from crisis response to risk prevention.

Currently, security cooperation depends largely on high-level meetings and ad hoc responses. A more institutionalized “security dialogue mechanism” is necessary.[12] Proposals include:

• Annual vice-ministerial-level security talks

• Joint border management centers in Dandong–Sinuiju for rapid information sharing and crisis response.

• Expanded cooperation in nontraditional security areas, such as humanitarian relief and cybersecurity.

This would elevate cooperation from mere crisis management to proactive peacebuilding.

Second, expanding cooperation in economic special zones by constructing a “China–North Korea Growth Corridor.”

Infrastructure between the two countries forms the foundation for a regional industrial cooperation belt.[13] The nearly completed New Amnokgang Bridge is expected to handle over 8 million tons of cargo annually. China is developing bonded logistics centers and processing zones within the Dandong Free Trade Zone, while North Korea is enhancing infrastructure in the Rason Special Economic Zone.

Drawing lessons from the China–Laos Economic Corridor, China and North Korea are considering incorporating a Korea Economic Corridor into the Belt and Road Initiative. This corridor could integrate sectors such as energy, agriculture, tourism, and digital industries.

Third, strengthen youth exchanges to cultivate a core generation of “China-friendly North Koreans.”

6.3. Youth represent the future of bilateral relations

In 2024, China resumed its government scholarship programs in North Korea, sending 41 Chinese students—the first such exchange since the COVID-19 pandemic. Kim Il-sung University continues to serve as a significant hub for cultivating diplomatic, political, and technological talent with expertise in China.

North Korean students demonstrate high proficiency in Chinese and a strong interest in deeper cultural exchange. Future programs could include expanded scholarships, dual-degree programs, and youth entrepreneurship camps, fostering a next-generation community grounded in practical collaboration rather than symbolic sentiment.

6.4. Theoretical Implications and Academic Contributions

This study examines China’s evolving perception of North Korea during the Kim Jong-un era, proposing a new theoretical framework for understanding their bilateral relations. Previously, the relationship was characterized by an “ideological-security alliance.” Currently, it is transitioning into a “pragmatic-development partnership.”

China’s perception of North Korea has shifted from:

• buffer zone → strategic balancing point.

• "Aid dependency → mutual-benefit model."

• "Ideological exchange → civilizational mutual learning."

• "Participant → co-designer of the international order."

Such transformations offer both theoretical insights and practical policy implications for understanding cooperation among developing countries.

7. Conclusion: A China–North Korea Community of Shared Destiny in a Pluralistic Imagination

North Korea, under Kim Jong-un, is redefining its national image through nuclear development, economic reforms, and increased cultural openness.[16] China has developed a new, multilayered perception of North Korea—not merely as a traditional ally but as a partner across multiple dimensions.

Geopolitically, North Korea is viewed not as a but as a balancing point.

Economically, not as an but as a beneficial partner.

Culturally, not as a target of ideological export but as a partner in

Internationally, not as a passive participant, but as a of regional and global rules.

These shifts result not only from North Korea's policy adjustments but also from China's strategic reassessment of Northeast Asia. Therefore, both countries must deepen cooperation in security, economic development, and cultural exchange to transform from an "imagined community" into a "practical community."

In doing so, China–North Korea relations have the potential to serve as a new model of cooperation among developing nations.

Author Contribution

The author was responsible for the conceptualization of the study, literature review, data collection and analysis, and the writing and revision of the manuscript. The author confirms that the manuscript has been read and approved in its final form.

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The author declare that, to their knowledge, they have no financial, personal, or professional relationships that could be construed as a potential competing interest regarding the work described in this manuscript.

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