



## Defining DPRK-China Relations in the Era of Kim Jong-un and Xi Jinping

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Amid a protracted deadlock in the nuclear talks between the U.S. and North Korea, U.S. President Donald Trump has sent a letter to North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, indicating his willingness to aid North Korea in battling the coronavirus. If Kim were to accept the offer, that would put China in an awkward position. China is North Korea's closest ally and benefactor. China may want to help, but it would be diplomatically incorrect for China to propose so, as long as North Korea officially maintains that there is no case for COVID-19. When the COVID-19 cases soared in China, North Korea also took a preemptive "full border blockade" of the land, sea and air with China in late January.

North Korea's Kim Jong-un and Chinese leader Xi Jinping (習近平) have held five rounds of summits since March 2018. The rush of summits in such a short period of time is surprising by itself. But what is also surprising was that the March-2018 summit was their first ever meeting since Kim took power in 2011 and Xi in 2012. Now, a question can be posed as to how close are North Korea and China under Kim and Xi? This is both a policy question and an academic inquiry. Without resorting to intelligence, we can probe the question by carefully perusing through open source documents.

There is a view that North Korea and China have now entered a "new blood-alliance period (신혈맹관계)." In a reference to the historical ties between Kim Il-sung and Mao Zedong (毛澤東), it underscores the significance of the renewed relationship under Kim Jr. and Xi. There are three pieces of evidence that support this theory. We can, for instance, compare the official words used between North Korea and China, in their characterization of their relationship during the Cold War and the present day.

First is the term, “blood alliance (혈맹).” That is the Korean translation of the original Chinese expression “sealed in blood (鮮血凝成的, “선혈로 응고된” in Korean).” At the summit banquet in March 2018, in Beijing, Xi characterized the two socialist countries’ relationship as “sealed in blood.” It was Xi’s first meeting with Kim. And Xi cut the chase and went straight to use the iconic vocabulary from the Cold War era.

Interestingly, the records on the Chinese foreign ministry website omit Xi’s use of the expression. However, one can discover it from reports of the summit at North Korea’s state-run news agency, Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), that Xi, indeed, used the term. Naturally, it is curious to know why the Chinese side chose not to include the important word from Xi’s remarks, while the North Korean side duly publicized it.

At least, we can see that Chinese officials use the term publicly. For instance, Li Jinjun (李進軍), the Chinese ambassador to North Korea, used the term in October 2016 at a ceremony marking the 66th anniversary of the Chinese People’s Volunteer Army’s participation in the Korean War. Li said that the friendship between China and North Korea “is our common precious fortune, which was “sealed in blood” by the sacrifice of soldiers and civilians of the two nations.”<sup>1)</sup> North Koreans in Pyongyang also used this expression as they welcomed Xi during his visit there in June 2019. Perhaps, Chinese thought that the quintessential term “sealed in blood” by China’s top leader could invite controversy.

Second is the term, “lips and teeth (脣齒).” During their second meeting in the Chinese port city of Dalian, Xi said that China and North Korea were a community of “shared destiny” and “a relationship of lips and teeth (순치의 관계).” Xi continued, “No matter how the situation flows, this is the firm line by the parties and the governments of the two nations. It is also the only correct choice.” Xi’s remarks were widely noted because it was the occasion for Xi to use the term “lips and teeth,” a signature Cold War expression for the China-North Korea relationship, for the first time since Kim took power in late 2011.

Third is the term, the “same command camp (한 참모부).” During his third meeting with Xi in Beijing, June, 2018, Kim remarked that North Korea and China supported each other “like a family.” Kim also stated that North Korea would “closely cooperate” with China in the “same command camp” to safeguard socialism and herald a new future for the Korean Peninsula.

During the Korean War, when the battle between the U.S. and China became fierce, the Chinese military formed a combined forces command (조중연합사령부) with the North Korean army to enhance combat coordination and efficiency against the U.S.

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1) “China and the DPRK commemorates the 66th anniversary of the Chinese People’s Volunteer Army’s participation in the DPRK war [中朝双方举行纪念中国人民志愿军入朝作战66周年活动],” Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea [中华人民共和国驻朝鲜民主主义人民共和国大使馆], Oct 26, 2016, <http://kp.china-embassy.org/chn/zcwj/t1408857.htm>.

and its allied forces. Kim resurrected the Cold War vocabulary from his grandfather's era.

It is too early to speculate what all this usage of terms mean in the “evolution” of the Sino-North Korean relationship. We can, at least, see that three iconic vocabularies that were used during the Cold War to signify the intimate relationship between Pyongyang and Beijing are back in the geopolitical sphere in East Asia. ♣

※ *Translator's note: This is a summarized unofficial translation of the original paper which was written in Korean. All references should be made to the original paper.*

※ *This article is written based on the author's personal opinions and does not reflect the views of the Sejong Institute.*