

## *Editor's Note*



### *China and Asia: A Journal in Historical Studies* **Special Issue on China and the Korean Peninsula: Past and Future**

This issue of *China and Asia: A Journal in Historical Studies* presents cutting-edge research on the historical interactions between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Korean Peninsula, spanning the period from the PRC's establishment in October 1949 to the diplomatic normalization of Sino-South Korean relations in August 1992.

Since the conservative administration of Yoon Suk-yeol took office in May 2022, South Korean–North Korean and Sino-South Korean relations have deteriorated rapidly. Furthermore, given the context in which the strategic competition between the US and China is escalating daily, there is increasing concern about the emergence of a confrontational framework in Northeast Asia, characterized by “the US–Japan–South Korea” versus “China–Russia–North Korea.” In the light of these developments, Sino-North Korean and Sino-South Korean relations are poised to play crucial roles in shaping the power balance in Northeast Asia in the future. This issue, encompassing contributions by four experts from China and Korea on Sino-Korean Peninsula relations, aims at providing insights into understanding and predicting the future of international relations in Northeast Asia by examining the historical relationship between China and the Korean Peninsula during the Cold War era (1949–1992). Their research is notable for its extensive use of documents and materials that they personally possess.

The first article, by Kim Donggil of Peking University, examines PRC policy toward the Korean Peninsula during the Cold War era. The author contends that, aside from the Korean War period, maintaining a “stable status quo” has been a constant feature of PRC policy toward the Korean Peninsula since its

founding in October 1949. However, the motivations behind this policy have varied over time. Kim argues that this policy was able to incorporate China's opposition to North Korea's military adventurism against South Korea, and it sometimes led to North Korean grievances. Following the Korean War in 1953, under the auspices of the new Soviet leadership's policy of "peaceful coexistence" with the West, China was able to effectively implement its policy on the Korean Peninsula. Furthermore, the hundreds of thousands of Chinese military personnel stationed in North Korea at that time served as a physical means to enforce its policy concerning North Korea. However, with the withdrawal of these forces in 1958, China lost this physical means. During the 1960s, amid the Sino-Soviet split and a shift to extremely radicalized foreign policies in the region, China's pursuit of a stable status quo continued, primarily through providing substantial economic support to North Korea. This attitude was further solidified as US–China relations thawed in the 1970s and China began its reform and opening up in the 1980s. Kim concludes that, throughout the Cold War era, China always prioritized practical interests over ideological ones in Sino-North Korean relations, whenever ideological and practical interests were in conflict.

The second article, authored by Shen Zihua of East China Normal University and titled "Allies in Trouble: The Direction of Sino-Korean Relations amid the US–China Rapprochement, 1971–1976," explores the complexities of Sino-North Korean relations against the backdrop of warming ties between China and United States. Shen argues that the border clashes on Zhenbao Island with the Soviet army in March 1969 compelled Mao Zedong to adjust his foreign policy, prompting the restoration of the damaged Sino-North Korean relationship during the Cultural Revolution and reconciliation with the United States. However, North Korea needed Soviet support against the United States, while China required collaboration with the United States to restrain the Soviet Union. Therefore, this adjustment had the potential to cause dissatisfaction in North Korea. Shen goes on to contend that China and the United States forged a consensus on a shared objective to seek and maintain long-term stability and peace on the Korean Peninsula. This consensus entailed mutual acknowledgment of the legitimate existence of both North Korea and South Korea and an acquiescence to the temporary presence of US forces in South Korea, diametrically countering Kim Il Sung's ambition for the military unification of the Korean Peninsula. Naturally, this caused dissatisfaction for Kim Il Sung, which manifested as opposition to China's anti-Soviet diplomatic strategy and Mao's "Theory of Three Worlds." To mitigate Kim Il Sung's dissatisfaction, China provided North Korea with substantial military, economic, and diplomatic support; this, however, was

unsuccessful. Shen concludes by asserting that the changing dynamics of Sino-US relations in the 1970s led to a state of “harmonious appearance but spiritual division” in Sino-North Korean relations.

The third article, by Lee Jongseok, emeritus fellow of the Sejong Institute and former minister of the Ministry of Unification of the Republic of Korea, analyzes the ups and downs of the Sino-North Korean alliance by examining the onset and demise of the “Northeast Rear Doctrine.” In the early 1960s, amid the escalating Sino-Soviet split, Mao Zedong recommended to Kim Il Sung that he utilized Northeast China as his rear base in the event of a war on the Korean Peninsula. The author has termed this concept the “Northeast Rear Doctrine.” Lee argues that Mao’s proposal implied China’s temporary concession of its sovereignty over China’s northeastern territory to North Korea, symbolizing the apex of the Sino-North Korean alliance. However, the doctrine emerged at a time when China was desperately seeking North Korea’s support in international politics against the backdrop of the Sino-Soviet split, therefore, According to Lee, the doctrine was intended to draw North Korea to China’s side and remained effective until 1984. In September 1983, in a meeting with Deng Xiaoping held in Dalian, Kim Il Sung requested that a North Korean air division scheduled for training in Northeast China be allowed to continue their stationing there, while the Chinese air force took full responsibility for the funding, training, and all other necessary aspects. Deng Xiaoping’s agreement to Kim Il Sung’s request serves as evidence supporting this claim. However, in December 1985, Deng had rescinded the commitment made to Kim in September 1983, labeling it as an “excessive demand and bizarre request,” thereby effectively repudiating the Northeast Rear Doctrine. Furthermore, when China and South Korea established diplomatic relations in 1992, the Northeast Rear Doctrine policy was virtually abolished, severely deepening North Korea’s distrust of China. Lee concludes that the abolishment of the Northeast Rear Doctrine offered North Korea a chance to join the international community as a normal state. Unfortunately, Kim Il Sung failed to seize this opportunity and instead chose a path of isolation.

The fourth article, written by Son Daekwon of Sogang University, delves into Pyongyang’s motivation behind the “Rangoon bombing” that took place on October 9, 1983. In the Asia-Pacific region in the early 1980s, according to Son, leaders in South Korea, the United States, and Japan were enhancing military cooperation based on their shared anti-communist ideology, while the Sino-Soviet split persisted within the Socialist Bloc. Although such a geopolitical landscape was far from satisfactory for Pyongyang, it could at least enjoy limited strategic space thanks to the economic and military support it received from China, which found a heightened strategic value of North Korea amid

the deterioration of its relations with both the Soviet Union and the United States. However, as China gradually improved relations with both the United States and the Soviet Union in 1982 and afterward, Pyongyang's strategic value began to diminish. Against this backdrop, China not only expanded its economic exchanges with South Korea, but also virtually demanded that North Korea acknowledge the South Korean government as a legitimate political entity by proposing to host tripartite talks between two Koreas and the United States. In response, North Korea, while outwardly concurring with China's proposal, sabotaged Beijing's tripartite talk initiative by orchestrating the Rangoon bombing to create tensions in the region. As a result, China found it difficult to reach out to South Korea for a while. Given that it was not until 1992, nine years after the Rangoon bombing, that China was able to formally establish diplomatic relations with South Korea, Son concludes that, on balance, North Korea's "wedge strategy" achieved limited success.

*Kim Donggil*

Director, Center for Korean Peninsula Studies; Professor, Department of History, Peking University, Beijing, China

*dgkim@pku.edu.cn*