The Politics of Lips and Teeth: Reexamining the 1961 Sino-North Korean Alliance Treaty from the Chinese Perspective

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Abstract

Using a historical approach based on declassified diplomatic materials, this article aims to reexamine the formation of the Sino-North Korean alliance treaty in 1961 from the Chinese perspective. The existing literature has explained the formation of the treaty mainly in the given circumstantial context or from the view of North Korea’s diplomatic initiative in the Sino-Soviet dispute. However, this article argues that the treaty was a product of China’s strategic behavior based on its national interest rather than that of Kim Ilsung’s diplomatic ability. In order to overcome the internal and external troubles, the Chinese leadership adjusted its foreign policy more pragmatically in 1960, anticipating the conclusion of the alliance treaty with North Korea. Especially after the Soviet-North Korean treaty came into view, under severe security pressure China hastened to co-opt North Korea by providing more compelling commitments in the treaty. North Korea tactfully jumped on the Chinese bandwagon. This implies that as long as North Korea has strategic value in the Chinese perspective, China would maintain its special relationship with North Korea in the context of the 1961 alliance treaty.

Key words: Sino-North Korean alliance treaty in 1961, Sino-North Korean Relations, Sino-Soviet dispute, Chinese Foreign Policy, China’s National Interest

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I. Introduction

July 11, 2011, marked the 50th anniversary of the Sino-North Korean “Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance” signed in 1961. Without a lavish commemoration parade in Beijing and Pyongyang, Chinese President Hu Jintao and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) leader Kim Jongil vowed to further strengthen ties between the two states in an exchange of letters.1) Of course, since the end of the Cold War, the Sino-North Korean “blood-shared alliance” has been branded as a “relic of a bygone age,” and some Chinese officers even argued for scrapping the treaty and treating North Korea as a “normal” state.2) However, despite many cracks caused by the changing international situation and the conflict of alliance interests between them, China and North Korea have boasted of their unchangeable solidarity in recent years. Especially, China sees its military alliance with the DPRK as important, just as both Premier Zhou Enlai and People’s Liberation Army commander-in-chief Marshal Zhu De used the metaphor of neighbors “as close as lips to teeth” to delineate the strategic importance of North Korea to China.3) An old friend is still a friend.

From the point of view of the stronger ally (China), it is an advantage to leave its commitment somewhat ambiguous in the alliance treaty in order to avoid manipulation by the weaker state (DPRK).4) However, the Sino-North

1) Hu’s letter said that “It is the firm strategic policy of the Chinese party and government to steadily consolidate and develop the Sino-DPRK friendly and cooperative relations.” The Yonhap News, “N. Korea, China Celebrate 50th Anniversary of Friendship Treaty,” North Korea Newsletter, No. 166 (July 14, 2011).

2) This was well-illustrated in that Wang Yi, then Deputy Minister of Chinese Foreign Affairs, suggested the transformation of the Sino-North Korean treaty in the process of reformulating China’s foreign policy. Yoichi Funabashi, The Last Gamble of Kim Jong Il, (in Korean), (Seoul: JoongAng Dainlated Media, 2007), pp.396, 398. Of late, Chu Shulong (Institute of International Strategic and Development Studies, Tsinghua University) asserted that China and DPRK were certainly not allies at all and China would not come to North Korea’s help militarily in any case. Chu Shulong, “The ROK-DPRK-PRC Three-Party Relations,” Manuscript Presented at the 2nd NEAR-Tsinghua Workshop on Korea-China Security and Strategic Dialogue (October 17, 2011).
