At a time when the confrontation between the United States and China is ongoing, and the nations on the Korean Peninsula are in the process of choosing whose side to take in the approaching conflict, DPRK’s stance appears to be more certain, as evidenced by its political and economic ties during the period in question.

Let us start with politics. On May 8, 2020, the Korean Central News Agency reported that Kim Jong-un sent a recorded message to President Xi Jinping, which commended the latter on successfully combatting the unprecedented pandemic. It also said that the ties between the two parties of DPRK and China had strengthened amid various historical challenges, which had been overcome, and had continued to grow stronger with each passing day.

On May 9, 2020, Xi Jinping replied, noting that China was willing to enhance its joint efforts with the DPRK to fight the pandemic, and to promote the continuous development of PRC-North Korean relations.

On September 9, 2020, in a message congratulating Kim Jong-un with the 72nd Anniversary of DPRK, the Chinese President said he was prepared to continue supporting the development of bilateral ties between Pyongyang and Beijing in order to “promote regional peace, stability and prosperity”.

On October 1, 2020, the North Korean leader congratulated Xi Jinping with the 71st founding anniversary of PRC in a message. In it, Kim Jong-un stressed that he, “the party and the people of DPRK” would “invariably stand by the General Secretary, the CPC (the Chinese Communist Party) and the Chinese people” in their joint cause of “defending and glorifying socialism” paid for with blood, sweat, and tears.

China has continued to support the resumption of inter-Korean dialogue as well as DPRK-US talks on condition that Pyongyang’s demands are taken into account. On May 23, China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi expressed hope that the United States and North Korea would “resume meaningful dialogue and engagement as soon as possible”. He also said that achieving a genuine settlement would require concrete steps. The minister reminded his audience that in the last few years, the DPRK had taken some positive steps “toward de-escalation and denuclearization”, which unfortunately, had “not been reciprocated in a substantive way by the US side”. Wang Yi also called on the US and other parties to take the proposal made by Russia and China “into serious consideration and stop squandering the hard-won outcomes of previous dialogue”.

Amid rising tensions between South Korea and the DPRK in June of this year, Beijing urged the two sides to engage in dialogue in order to resolve the issues plaguing the Korean Peninsula. China’s Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying said that China, as South and North Koreas’ nearest neighbor, hoped the two countries would “improve their bilateral relationship” via talks. Another Spokesperson for PRC’s Foreign Ministry, Zhao Lijian, made a similar statement.

On June 12, RIA Novosti reported that Hua Chunying called on the US to take concrete actions to deliver what had been agreed in Singapore and to acknowledge Pyongyang’s "legitimate concerns". She also said that one of the reasons why the talks between the United States and North Korea reached a deadlock was because DPRK’s legitimate concerns had not been addressed, and the denuclearization measures taken by Pyongyang had not merited a “commensurate US response”.

During a regular press conference on June 17, Zhao Lijian said that the DPRK and ROK shared “the same ethnic
origin”. He added that as “a close neighbor and friend, China always” remained “committed to sustained peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula”.

In turn, the DPRK leadership has often expressed its support for PRC’s Hong Kong policies and criticized Washington for its anti-Chinese rhetoric.

For instance, on May 30, North Korea’s Foreign Ministry Spokesperson backed China’s measures aimed at “safeguarding the sovereignty, security and territorial integrity of the country and achieving stability and prosperity of Hong Kong”. The statement also pointed out that the situation in Hong Kong was PRC’s internal matter and that no other country or force had any right to say anything about it.

On June 3, it was reported that a DPRK official criticized comments made by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who, on May 31, stated that actions by the CPC had suggested it was “intent upon the destruction of Western ideas, Western democracies, Western values”. The spokesperson for the international affairs department of the Workers’ Party of Korea pointed out that it was not the first time Mike Pompeo had said “nonsense about China over the issues of Hong Kong, Taiwan, human rights and trade disputes”. He also noted that it was important not to overlook the fact that the US Secretary of State “slandered the leadership of the Communist Party of China over socialism”.

An article published by the Yonhap News Agency on July 2, stated, citing Rodong Sinmun, that North Korea fully supported China “amid the intensifying rivalry between Washington and Beijing over a series of contentious issues”. It also said that the relationship between the PRC and the United States was deteriorating in an unprecedented manner because the US was pressuring China from all sides, but such efforts were “doomed to fail”.

On July 15, the Yonhap News Agency reported that the DPRK had lashed out at US Secretary of State yet again because two days earlier, Mike Pompeo had said that China’s maritime claims to resources across most of the South China Sea were “unlawful” and had criticized the CPC “for bullying countries in the region”. According to the article, the US official was urged to stop “muddling up public opinion” and making absurd remarks, thus interfering “with affairs of other countries” whenever he wanted to. The report also said that the aim of his attacks on the CPC was “to undermine people's trust in the party, tarnish its international prestige and overpower China with continued harassment”.

A number of South Korean experts view such efforts to strengthen bilateral relations as a means of restoring economic ties between Beijing and Pyongyang. After all, the COVID-19 pandemic has “devastated” the economy of North Korea, mainly due to its border closures with China, as bilateral trade with the PRC “accounts for about 95 percent of the North's total trade value”.

On July 2, the Yonhap News Agency reported, citing data from South Korea’s Ministry of Unification, that the value of goods and services traded between the DPRK and China during the first eight months of 2020 amounted to US$510 million, a sharp decrease in comparison to “US$1.71 billion recorded in the same period in 2019”. According to the article, from January to August of this year, “North Korea exported US$41.9 million worth of goods to China” while the imports from its neighbor were worth US$470 million”. The main items the DPRK bought from the PRC in 2019 included “textiles, soybean oil, rice, watch components and flour”. In addition, North Korea imports knitted garments, medical supplies, ceramic tiles, furniture and tires from China.

On June 26, NK Pro wrote, citing public data released by China’s General Administration of Customs (GAC), that “officially reported food exports to the DPRK” had risen modestly in May of this year, “with total trade more than doubling in value and variety compared to April’s historic lows”.

The figures showed that in May, the “PRC sent 73 kinds of food products over the border” (compared to 14 types of items in April), including “fresh fruits and vegetables, pork, tea and coffee, preserved goods, confectionery and alcohol, which had not been imported for over two months”.

On July 3, 2020, KBS World reported that freight transportation along the railway linking the DPRK, China and Russia had resumed. On June 26, a train with 6 cargo containers left Hunchun, a border city in China’s Jilin province, and, in two days, arrived in the Tumangang station at the North Korea–Russia border. In addition, in a video “obtained by NK Pro”, a Chinese DF5 engine was “shown pulling at least seven wagons of cargo from Dandong to Sinuiju”.

According to South Korean media outlets, the new Tumen River bridge linking the North Korean town of Namyang in the North Hamgyong province and the Chinese city of Tumen in Jilin province was completed late last year. The PRC is accelerating plans to open the bridge and preparing for the completion of a special economic zone in Tumen this
year. The new bridge is expected to replace the old, which is only 6.6 meters wide and was built by the Japanese Empire.

It is believed that aside from official distribution channels, there are also grey markets. On June 29, The Chosun Ilbo reported, citing The Asahi Shimbun (a Japanese newspaper), that a large amount of Chinese private capital was “entering North Korea” in contravention of UN sanctions. Chinese investors parked their money in commercial buildings in Pyongyang and other cities, besides China had invested “more than US$10 million each in the construction of a dozen North Korean fish farms”.

In addition, on October 6, NK Pro wrote that Pyongyang Unbangwan, a DPRK-linked eatery, remained open in Beijing despite UN Security Council sanctions.

At this point, some issues plaguing the relationship between China and North Korea are worth pointing out. On August 27, Forex news reported, citing Radio Free Asia, that the DPRK tightened border controls with China, and ordered military units and the police “to shoot on sight anyone” who approached within one kilometer of the PRC-North Korea border. The measure was “said to be a move to prevent the spread of COVID-19 within” North Korea. According to a number of foreign media outlets, troops from the Korean People's Army Special Operation Force were also sent to ‘assist’ at the border.

While the “shoot on sight” policy concerns primarily the fight against smugglers, the issue of Chinese vessels fishing in North Korean waters poses a much bigger problem. According to Washington DC-based Global Fishing Watch, a website cofounded by Google, China’s incursion was “the largest known case of illegal fishing perpetrated by a single industrial fleet operating in another nation’s waters”. Reportedly, competition from the Chinese trawlers was also “likely displacing the North Korean fishers, pushing them into neighboring Russian [and Japanese] waters”, where they fish illegally.

In conclusion, it is reasonable to state that, on the one hand, Pyongyang has chosen to support Beijing in its confrontation against the United States, while, on the other, the DPRK is behaving in a fairly reasonable manner, with its leadership seemingly comprehending that in the face of future challenges, North Korea will probably be the least of the world’s concerns.

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