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OLD TREATY, NEW ORDER:
THE STRATEGIC LOGIC BEHIND
XI JINPING'S VISIT TO PYONGYANG

BY JIHWAN HWANG



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구(舊)조약과 신(新)질서: 시진핑 평양 방문의 전략적 논리

JIHWAN HWANG

UNIVERSITY OF SEOUL

AUGUST 2026

Xi Jinping's state visit to Pyongyang in June 2026—his first overseas trip of the year and his first visit to North Korea in seven years—was never meant to be merely a bilateral courtesy call. Coming on the occasion of the 65th anniversary of the 1961 Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance, and preceded by an unusually personal congratulatory essay from Xi published in the Rodong Sinmun, the visit signaled a deliberate elevation of China–DPRK relations at a moment when the broader regional order is being reshaped by intensifying U.S.–

**2026년 6월, 시진핑 중국 국가주석은
평양을 국빈 방문했다**

**이는 미·중 전략경쟁의 심화, 북·러 관계의
재편, 그리고 트럼프 행정부의 인도·태평양
우선순위를 둘러싼 불확실성으로 역내 질서가
재편되는 시점에서, 중국이 북·중 관계를
의도적으로 한 단계 격상하려는 움직임을
보여준 것이었다**

China strategic competition, the reconfiguration of Russia–DPRK ties, and uncertainty surrounding the Trump administration's Indo-Pacific priorities. To understand what this “new chapter” actually means for the Korean Peninsula, the exchange should be interpreted not as an isolated expression of socialist solidarity, but as a calculated move within the renovated architecture of great-power competition.

Beijing's Reassurance, Pyongyang's Balancing

Xi's essay and the subsequent talks at the Kumsusan Guesthouse were carefully constructed around four key themes: [consolidating the foundation of political mutual trust through high-level exchanges; elevating the level of practical cooperation; strengthening the bonds between the two sides' peoples; and upholding fairness and justice as a guiding principle to enrich the substance of strategic coordination](#). Reading between the lines of the diplomatic language, the message to Washington and Seoul is unmistakable: Beijing and Pyongyang are positioning themselves as joint defenders of a multipolar order in opposition to what they characterize as U.S.-led power politics.

**중국과 북한은 자신들이 미국 주도의
강권정치라고 규정하는 질서에 맞서, 다극적
국제질서를 공동으로 수호하는 주체로
자리매김하고 있다**

The rhetorical emphasis on continuity—namely, that China's party and government will maintain their steadfast support regardless of changes in the international environment—is itself significant. It suggests Beijing is seeking to reassure Pyongyang [after a period during which bilateral ties and visibly cooled](#), particularly following North Korea's rapid rapprochement with Moscow after 2022. Kim Jong Un's six meetings with Xi since the resumption of summit diplomacy, together with his emphatic expression of gratitude for China's encouragement, indicate that [Pyongyang likewise has an interest in demonstrating that its embrace of Russia has not come at the expense of its indispensable relationship with China](#).

China's Enduring Primacy in Pyongyang's Multipolar Strategy

**이러한 북·중 관계의 격상은 김정은이 자신이
인식하는 새로운 다극질서 속에서 북한의
위상을 전반적으로 재조정하려는 전략의
 일환으로 이해할 필요가 있다**

the premise of continued U.S. primacy in a unipolar world, Kim now operates on the assumption that U.S. hegemony has effectively ended and that North Korea can expand its strategic space by playing Washington, Beijing, and Moscow off against one another. The [2024 Russia-DPRK treaty](#) and North Korea's deployment of troops to support Russia's war in Ukraine demonstrated Pyongyang's willingness to capitalize on wartime opportunism. Yet Russia's utility to North Korea is inherently time-bound: once the war ends, Moscow's incentive to invest heavily in Pyongyang is likely to diminish, while [North Korea's structural dependence on China for food, fuel, and fertilizer](#) will reassert itself. Beijing understands this

This elevation of China-DPRK ties should be understood as part of Kim Jong Un's broader recalibration of North Korea's position within [what he perceives to be an emerging multipolar order](#). Unlike in 2018–2019, when Pyongyang briefly explored a negotiated settlement with Washington on

**김정은은 이제 미국의 패권이 사실상
종식되었다는 인식 아래,
워싱턴·베이징·모스크바 사이의 경쟁을
활용함으로써 북한의 전략적 공간을 확대할 수
있다고 판단하고 있다**

dynamic well, and the timing of Xi's visit appears less coincidental than indicative of an effort to ensure that any subsequent recalibration of Russia–DPRK relations takes place on terms favorable to China's continued status as Pyongyang's indispensable main patron.

This interpretation is reinforced by recent scholarship. [As Jung H. Pak has argued](#), Kim Jong Un has, in important respects, achieved strategic gains by diversifying North Korea's great-power patrons and normalizing its nuclear status without incurring significant costs. [Oriana Skylar Mastro, meanwhile, has warned](#) that North Korea's deepening and increasingly consequential ties with both Russia and China substantially raises the stakes for U.S. regional strategy. Even if a formal and fully coordinated DPRK–China–Russia trilateral bloc remains more aspirational than real—given [Beijing's notable reluctance to endorse Moscow's war unequivocally and its unease with North Korea's high-profile alignment with Russia](#)—the mere perception of a consolidating axis complicates deterrence calculations. Washington and its allies must now contemplate a scenario in which containing North Korea implicitly requires managing two additional nuclear powers simultaneously—a qualitatively heavier burden than the North Korea policy challenge they faced a decade ago.

워싱턴과 그 동맹국들은 이제 북한을 억제하는 과정에서 사실상 두 개의 추가 핵보유국까지 동시에 관리해야 하는 상황을 고려해야 한다

Why Washington Cannot Manage North Korea Without Beijing

[The clearest lesson of the 2018–2019 summit-diplomacy era](#) is that no serious U.S. approach to North Korea can succeed without China's active engagement. The failure of the Hanoi summit occurred at a time when Beijing, alarmed by the prospect of being sidelined by direct U.S.–DPRK diplomacy, was simultaneously relaxing its enforcement of sanctions and intensifying its own summit diplomacy with Kim Jong Un. [Five Xi–Kim meetings took place in the aftermath of the 2018–2019 Trump–Kim summits](#). That episode should have permanently disabused Washington of the notion that North Korea policy can be conducted in a bilateral vacuum. Xi's 2026

2018~2019 년 정상외교 시기가 남긴 가장 분명한 교훈은, 중국의 적극적인 관여 없이는 미국의 어떠한 진지한 대북 접근도 성공하기 어렵다는 점이다

중국은 미국의 대북 접근을 촉진하거나 좌절시킬 수 있는 충분한 영향력을 여전히 보유하고 있다

visit only reinforces this reality. China retains sufficient leverage to facilitate or frustrate any U.S. opening toward Pyongyang, and any American strategy that fails to account for this fact will likely encounter the same structural ceiling that undermined the earlier maximalist approach.

This is precisely why proactive management of U.S.–DPRK relations—undertaken before another nuclear crisis emerges—is so important. If Washington waits until a provocation or diplomatic surprise forces its hand, it will be compelled to negotiate reactively, with diminished leverage and with China and North Korea having already coordinated their positions. [The May 2026 Trump–Xi summit](#), at which President Trump reportedly went out of his way to reassure Beijing that Washington had no intention of provoking a conflict over Taiwan,

offers an instructive template. If a similar reassurance framework could be extended to the North Korea issue—clarifying that Washington’s regional posture is not intended to destabilize China’s periphery—it would reduce Beijing’s incentive to treat the DPRK issue solely as leverage in the broader U.S.–China rivalry and create space for more constructive Chinese engagement on the North Korean issue.

The deeper danger is that the North Korea issue becomes fully subsumed into U.S.–China strategic competition rather than being addressed on its own terms. Once that happens, Pyongyang’s behavior—whether missile tests, nuclear advances, or provocations along the DMZ—risks being interpreted primarily through the prism of “who benefits, Washington or Beijing?” This would make it far more difficult to formulate measured and tailored responses. More ominously, if a crisis on the Korean Peninsula were to erupt while U.S.–China relations were already strained, Washington and Beijing could find themselves drawn into a confrontation that neither side initially sought, with North Korea serving as an accelerant rather than as a variable to be managed. Beijing would have little interest in such an outcome. For China, North Korea is not only a strategic asset, but also a strategic liability. This provides an especially compelling rationale for U.S. policy makers to pursue the careful, forward-looking management of U.S.–DPRK relations while the situation remains relatively stable, rather than allowing mounting pressures to culminate in high-stakes diplomacy.

**더 근본적인 위험은 북한 문제가 그 자체의
고유한 맥락에서 다뤄지기보다 미·중
전략경쟁에 완전히 종속되어 버리는 것이다**

Implications for Washington and Seoul

For the United States and South Korea, the elevation of China–DPRK ties is a double-edged development. On the one hand, it confirms that [Beijing retains a stake in North Korea’s stability](#)—one that Washington and Seoul

**미국과 한국의 입장에서 북·중 관계의 격상은
양날의 검과 같은 변화이다**

could potentially leverage. China’s stated policy objectives, including peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, have not disappeared, even though [Beijing has largely ceased to emphasize denuclearization](#). In practice, however, intensifying

U.S.–China rivalry has made coordinated action toward these objectives more difficult. On the other hand, deepening China–DPRK solidarity, layered on top of North Korea’s alignment with Russia, narrows Washington and Seoul’s room for maneuver as an independent interlocutor. It also increases the likelihood that any future opening toward Pyongyang will run through Beijing rather than through direct inter-Korean channels.

This calls for a two-track strategy on the Korean Peninsula: continuing to strengthen the U.S.–ROK alliance as the foundation of deterrence, even as the Trump administration has recently scaled back joint military exercises, while simultaneously cultivating a substantive, crisis-management channel with Beijing—one that frames stability on the Peninsula as a shared interest rather than as a zero-sum contest. Given China’s continued

**이는 한반도에서 두 가지 축의 전략(two-track strategy)을 요구한다. 즉, 역지력의
기반으로서 한미동맹을 지속적으로 강화하는
것이다**

동시에 중국과는 실질적인 위기관리 채널을 구축해야 한다

including the risk that such cooperation could accelerate Japanese and U.S. security buildups and, in turn, exacerbate China's own security dilemma—there remains a plausible, albeit narrow, basis for Washington, Seoul, and Beijing to have [“their shared goal to denuclearize North Korea,”](#) and maintain [“peace and stability in the region,”](#) even as their positions on denuclearization continue to diverge.

Even if Trump wishes to meet Kim Jong Un again this year, he cannot do so without Chinese involvement. Xi Jinping's 2026 visit to Pyongyang should be understood as a signal that Beijing intends to reassert its primacy as North Korea's indispensable patron—precisely as [Pyongyang's wartime partnership with Moscow faces long-term uncertainty](#) and U.S.–China competition intensifies across multiple theaters. For Washington and Seoul, the lesson is not that China–DPRK solidarity forecloses diplomatic options, but that any credible North Korea strategy must explicitly account for Beijing's structural role—engaging it early, calibrating policy carefully, and insulating the North Korea issue as much as possible from becoming merely another front in the broader U.S.–China rivalry.

economic leverage over North Korea through its provision of essential commodities, as well as [its evident unease about the destabilizing effects of deepening DPRK–Russia military cooperation](#)—

워싱턴과 서울이 얻어야 할 교훈은 북·중 연대가 외교적 선택지를 차단한다는 것이 아니라, 실효성 있는 대북 전략이라면 반드시 중국의 구조적 역할을 명시적으로 고려해야 한다는 점이다

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