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60th Anniversary of China's Involvement in the Korean War

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The recent series of commemorative events in both China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) to mark the 60th anniversary of China's entry into the Korean War could be an elaborate pretext to strengthen bilateral relations in light of changes in regional security. The various events to commemorate October 5, 1950 are also tinged with irony given that over the decades the DPRK has tried to downplay China's wartime contribution. Likewise, China has preferred not to draw too much attention to its pivotal participation in a conflict that has not technically ended, resulting instead in the 1953 armistice.

This sudden revision of historical amnesia is not unique to either country; swift recollection of history often occurs in order to satisfy internal contemporary political expediencies. In Beijing, the 60th anniversary was observed with a flurry of events, including a speech by vice president Xi Jinping who spoke of a revolutionary friendship that was sealed in blood. Even though mainstream Chinese scholars and media have in recent years stated openly that North Korea was responsible for starting the war, Xi maintained that the war was inflicted on the Chinese by "imperialist aggressors." At the same commemorative event, Chinese Korean-War veterans shook hands with President Hu Jintao. In addition, for the first time, Beijing has released figures of Chinese "volunteer soldiers" who died in the war (a total of 183,108).

Other events to commemorate the war known as *kang mei yuan chao* (抗美援朝), or "resist America, assist Korea," included a visit to Pyongyang this October by vice chairman of the Central Military Commission General Guo Boxiong. The visit, it is believed, led both sides to agree to maintain military communications. Other events have included talks and discussions, and the publication of books related to the war. Newspapers and magazines ran countless war-related stories and commentaries, fleshing out heroic deeds of war veterans, many long forgotten but now suddenly remembered for their valiant contributions. Some veterans, known officially as Chinese People's Volunteers, were taken on visits to the border town of Dandong, where they stood on the broken bridge separating North Korea and China, reminiscing tales from a bygone era to Chinese school students bused in for the occasion.

On October 25, commemorating the date that Chinese troops first engaged in military action, Kim Jong-il, accompanied by top officials including heir apparent Kim Jong-un, visited a shrine in Pyongyang paying tribute to Chinese martyrs. The elder Kim paid tribute to China for sending its "finest sons and daughters" to the battlefield, in particular Mao Zedong's son Mao Anying who was killed in the war. Kim added that the "baton of North Korea-China friendship" should be continued and passed on to

Maria Wey-Shen Siow, Visiting Fellow at the East-West Center in Washington and East Asia Bureau Chief of Channel NewsAsia, notes that "This sudden revision of historical amnesia is not unique to either country; swift recollection of history often occurs in order to satisfy internal contemporary political expediencies."



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the next generation. Resurrecting the spirit of the six-decade-old war is part of a concerted effort by both China and North Korea to strengthen ties, especially military ties, in what is perceived to be a hostile and unstable external environment.

The reaffirmation of a relationship that was once described by Mao Zedong “as close as lips and teeth” has come in light of North Korea’s greater reliance and dependence upon China, not only for economic stability, but increasingly for political and military security. The collapse of the Six-Party talks, Pyongyang’s purported sinking of the South Korean warship, the *Cheonan*, and subsequent international isolation have further contributed to the Hermit Kingdom’s reliance on its sole remaining ally. There is a strong likelihood that when Kim Jong-il dies, a less experienced and more unstable North Korean leadership will depend further on China. In addition, it can be argued that the strident reactions from the United States and South Korea in the aftermath of the *Cheonan* sinking were perceived by China as not just directed at Pyongyang, but also at Beijing.

This desire by China and North Korea to rekindle what its leaders call “emotional bonds” is in stark contrast to decades of low-key commemoration, particularly by North Korea. Kim Il-sung was always more enthusiastic in consolidating his leadership and sealing his credentials, both as a revolutionary hero during the Japanese occupation and as a warrior against American imperialism, as opposed to acknowledging Chinese assistance during the Korean War. China, too, has seldom emphasized its role during the war, arguing that it was the Chinese People’s Volunteers, rather than the People’s Liberation Army, that participated. This reticence stems partly from China’s reluctance to officially identify North Korea as the chief instigator of the war, and partly from the conflicting accounts of how China entered the war. Indeed, relations between the two saw varying degrees of ups and downs throughout the decades, such as during the Cultural Revolution when China installed loudspeakers along the Sino-North Korean border mocking North Korean “revisionists” and calling Kim Il-sung a “bourgeois.” Kim, in turn, described the Cultural Revolution as “massive idiocy,” while North Korean officials joked that Mao had turned senile and the only remedy was Korean ginseng.

For China now to resurrect memories of the Korean War is more than just an attempt to play “big brother” in a highly uneven relationship where it does not always have the upper hand. Reviving valiant Chinese war heroics also serves to instill patriotism among its own people, especially the younger generation, who were taught that the war was “righteous,” necessary to maintain and secure China’s future. Furthermore, this doctrine is designed to teach that the weak can prevail against the strong, by suggesting that the Opium War and the Korean War are both respective symbols of China’s decline and rise. Beijing is inculcating the belief that Chinese participation in the Korean War was the start of a rising and prosperous China.

With South Korea hosting the G-20 summit this November, and as Seoul aspires to continue transitioning from rule taker to rule setter, it is anachronistic for China and North Korea to allude to ties sealed in blood during the Korean War. Reviving Sino-DPRK wartime cooperation not only could lead to a new configuration and realignment of relations in Northeast Asia and beyond, it is also likely to delay the final demise of a gasping and weakened North Korea regime.