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NEW CHAPTERS, OLD DILEMMAS

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China-ROK relations reached critical junctures across political, security, and economic fields. China-ROK relations had a bad start in 2024 with discord over regional security priorities. The inaugural US-Japan-ROK Indo-Pacific Dialogue in Washington on Jan. 5, a deputy foreign minister-level initiative emerging from the August 2023 Camp David summit, reignited frictions with Beijing. The resulting tensions constrained anticipation about their own trilateral summit with Tokyo. The shifting China-ROK trade structure and Chinese e-commerce practices emerged as central points of economic debate.

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Against a lull in Beijing–Seoul diplomacy, the China–DPRK Friendship Year catalyzed high-level contacts, envisioning a wider and more durable partnership. China and North Korea’s revived economic and cultural exchanges were clouded by global attention to human rights issues in wider violation of UN resolutions. The end to the UN monitoring panel on DPRK sanctions in April heightened unease about the future of North Korea diplomacy amid Pyongyang’s growing partnership with Moscow.

Seoul Balances Disapproval and Reassurance toward Beijing

As a “new chapter” in trilateral partnership, the [January 2024 Dialogue](#) cited “recent dangerous and escalatory behavior supporting unlawful maritime claims by the PRC in the South China Sea,” “opposed any unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force or coercion anywhere in the waters of the Indo–Pacific,” and supported “peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait as indispensable to security and prosperity in the international community.” China’s foreign ministry on Jan. 8 [opposed](#) the joint statement as a move to form “exclusionary groupings” and “interfere in China’s internal affairs.” At a [Council on Foreign Relations event](#) a day later, minister of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) International Department Liu Jianchao reiterated Taiwan’s place at the “very core of the core interests...the red line that mustn’t be crossed.” [Taiwan’s Jan. 13 election](#) of Lai Ching-te, a pro-US, Democratic Progressive Party leader and China’s “trouble-maker,” raised questions for peninsula security. South Korean observers called for “[crisis management](#) with North Korea,” as Taiwan’s leadership transition could [test China–ROK relations](#) given the “need to strike a balance between Beijing and Washington.”

This need arose when Seoul [hosted](#) the [3rd Summit for Democracy](#) on March 18–20 advancing the Biden administration’s [Commitment to Democratic Renewal](#). In a ministerial session themed “AI/Digital Technology and Democracy,” Taiwan’s Minister of Digital Affairs Audrey Tang delivered a video message in a “private capacity.” South Korea’s foreign ministry told the press that the summit was “not aimed at a specific country” and [affirmed](#) Seoul’s “unchanged” position

“respecting the One China policy.” Such signals of reassurance to Beijing balanced Seoul’s earlier disapproval of China’s intervention in the South China Sea. The foreign ministry voiced concerns about Chinese and Philippine coast guard [clashes](#) on March 5, when Chinese water cannon blasts injured at least four Filipino crew.



Figure 1 Fans wait to bid farewell to Fu Bao, who is to be returned to China under an international agreement, on April 3, 2024. Photo: Yonhap

China and South Korea’s own territorial disagreements surfaced later in March. Local complaints of illegal Chinese fishing prompted President Yoon Suk Yeol to order a special crackdown on March 25–31 around the Yellow Sea’s inter-Korean maritime border and southern Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). While the initiative led to the seizure of Chinese vessels, Yoon [ordered](#) tougher responses while inspecting an Incheon Coast Guard station on April 9. China–ROK maritime frictions rose after persistent clashes over competing historical identities. China’s successful push to list “Mount Changbaishan” as a new [UNESCO Global Geopark](#) on March 27 was closely monitored by the ROK foreign ministry, and drew public backlash. As Asan Institute for Policy Studies president Choi Kang warned in an April 25 *Dong-a Ilbo* op-ed on the “[Sinicization of Baekdu Mountain](#),” “foreigners who do not know Korean history will think it belongs to China.” Korean [academics](#) called the initiative China’s “2nd northeast project” extending Chinese regional history narratives from 2002, the source of Beijing and Seoul’s first major diplomatic dispute since normalization.

China-DPRK Friendship Year Boosts Bilateral Exchange

In their [exchange](#) of New Year messages, Xi Jinping and Kim Jong Un launched China-DPRK Friendship Year as a “new chapter” in bilateral relations. Their 75th anniversary of diplomatic ties was the driving theme of state and party exchanges from January. On Jan. 25–26, PRC Vice Foreign Minister Sun Weidong met Foreign Minister Choe Son-hui and DPRK counterpart Pak Myong Ho in Pyongyang, about 10 days after North Korea initiated a series of weapons tests. China’s foreign ministry [called](#) Friendship Year “an opportunity to strengthen strategic communication at all levels, deepen traditional friendship and practical cooperation, strengthen multilateral coordination and cooperation, and push forward the sustained development of China-DPRK relations.” Sun and Choe [agreed](#) to “defend the common core interests” according to the DPRK state media. Days earlier, PRC Vice Premier Liu Guozhong and DPRK Vice Foreign Minister for international organizations Kim Son-kyong met in Uganda on the sidelines of multilateral summits advancing “[collective interests](#)” in Global South development.

Party leaders reinforced the China-DPRK friendship in March. International department director Kim Song-nam led a Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK) delegation to Beijing, kicking off his three-nation tour to China, Vietnam, and Laos. Kim met top CCP leaders including fourth-ranking Politburo Standing Committee member Wang Huning and Chinese counterpart Liu Jianchao on March 21, and Central Commission for Foreign Affairs Director and PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi on March 23. As China’s Foreign Ministry [reported](#), Wang Yi reaffirmed “traditional friendship” and “pragmatic cooperation,” while Kim Song-nam pledged to “also support China’s measures taken on issues related to Taiwan, Xinjiang and Hong Kong, among others.”

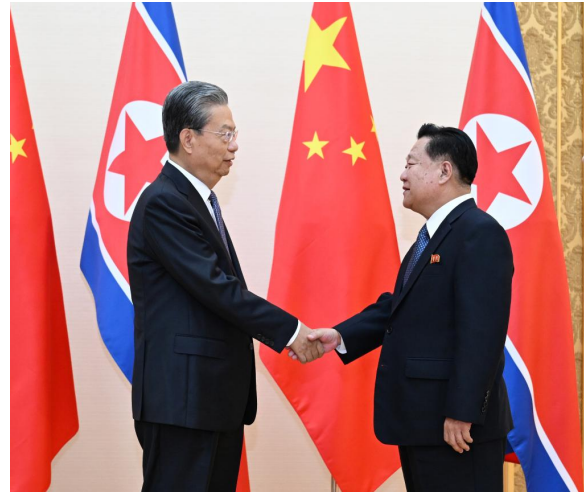


Figure 2 Zhao Leji, a member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and chairman of China's National People's Congress Standing Committee, holds talks with Choe Ryong Hae, a member of the Presidium of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK). Photo: Xinhua

National People’s Congress (NPC) Chairman and third-ranking CCP leader Zhao Leji led China’s participation in 75th diplomatic anniversary events in Pyongyang in April. Zhao was China’s most senior official to visit North Korea since the 2018–2019 Xi-Kim summits and post-pandemic break in bilateral exchanges. He met Kim Jong Un and top legislator Choe Ryong-hae, leading a [delegation](#) of CCP, NPC, foreign affairs, military, commerce, foreign aid, and culture and tourism officials. The state media captured the visit’s significance through images of Choe [greeting](#) Zhao at Pyongyang International Airport on April 11, their joint [opening](#) of [Friendship Year](#) on April 12, and Kim Jong Un’s welcoming embrace and final send-off after a luncheon [meeting](#) on April 12. Kim’s meeting with Zhao emphasized “multi-faceted exchange” and “durable traditions of friendship.” To facilitate such ties, Zhao and Choe signed agreements on April 11 covering diplomatic visa waivers, customs and quarantine, and cultural and media cooperation.

South Korean officials projected a growing [momentum](#) in China-DPRK ties, as seen after the 60th diplomatic anniversary in 2009. Recent exchanges envisioned the partnership’s expansion to broader functional interests, and a more sustainable traditional friendship. They also reflected the consolidation of wider socialist

solidarity, South-South cooperation, and ties with Moscow since the Ukraine war. WPK international department director Kim Song-nam's March visit to Beijing was his first reported trip abroad since appointed in 2021 to oversee party ties with socialist counterparts. Addressing the [19th Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement](#) in Jan. 19-20, DPRK representative Kim Song-kyong [cited](#) threats to "a sovereign country's rights to independence" on the Korean Peninsula. North Korea's Foreign Minister Choe met Minister Sun on Jan. 26 soon after meeting President Putin and Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov in Moscow. The South Korean media framed these meetings through the lens of Pyongyang's tightening alignment with China and Russia, against US-Japan-ROK security cooperation.

Debating Conflict on the Korean Peninsula

While the China-DPRK friendship reached a post-pandemic high, the April 30 end of the UN's enforcement mechanism for DPRK sanctions since 2009 marked a low point in multilateral diplomacy. On March 28, Russia vetoed a draft Security Council resolution renewing the experts panel for monitoring sanctions implementation, while China abstained from voting. South Korea joined the United States, France, Japan, and the UK to condemn Russian actions, [stating](#) the veto "emboldens the DPRK to continue its unlawful activity with a sense of impunity. China, through its abstention, sends a signal too." During US State Secretary Antony Blinken's April 24-26 [China visit](#), satellite imagery of a US-sanctioned Russian ship docked at a Chinese port since February [heightened](#) speculation about Beijing's role in the Ukraine war.



Figure 3 Zhao Leji presents a floral basket to the China-DPRK Friendship Tower in Pyongyang. Photo: Xinhua

Pyongyang's UN sanctions violations from January acted out Kim Jong Un's rhetoric signaling readiness for war, and plans to advance DPRK military capabilities this year. In its latest sanctions violation on April 2, Pyongyang tested a "new-type intermediate-range solid-fueled ballistic missile" carrying maneuverable warheads. Kim [claimed](#) it successfully proved "three principles of building missile armed forces for rapidly, accurately, and powerfully striking any enemy target." [Maritime exercises](#) on April 11-12 showed US-Japan-ROK forces "are ready to respond to any contingency." Pyongyang's Jan. 14 missile launch led to previous joint [naval drills](#) on Jan. 15-17, and another test of a claimed underwater nuclear attack drone on January 18.

The Washington Post asked on Jan. 19, "[Does North Korea want to start a war?](#)" The paper [warned](#) the Biden administration five days later, "ignoring is not working." But as such reports suggest, the debate on the risks and likelihood of conflict remains divided. While Pyongyang has typically relied on military threats as a tool of diplomatic leverage or internal power, the fragmentation of dialogue and sanctions mechanisms drives pessimism. But Kim is more constrained by his domestic development priorities, and Beijing and Moscow's uncertain support. Despite their shows of alignment, as President of the University of North Korean Studies in Seoul Yang Moo-jin [indicated](#) in January, "disrupting stability on the Korean Peninsula is not necessarily in the interest of the North's allies, especially China."

Historic Shifts in China-ROK Trade

Totaling \$268 billion, South Korea's trade with China by the end of 2023 reached three turning points. First, South Korea confronted its first trade deficit with China since diplomatic normalization in 1992, amounting to \$18 billion, [1.8 times greater](#) than South Korea's overall trade deficit. Second, South Korea's share of China's total imports reached the lowest point since 1993, representing 6.3%. Third, in December 2023, the United States replaced China to become South Korea's biggest export market for goods since 2003, led by autos. ROK exports to China in 2022-2023 declined by 20% to \$124.8 billion, narrowing the gap with exports to the United States, which grew by 5% to \$115.7 billion. Semiconductor exports to China fell by 31%, despite recovering global demand by 2024. External structural and policy shifts drive these trends, reinforced by China's domestic innovation drive and competition with the United States.



Figure 4 Zhao Leji and Choe Ryong Hae pose for a group photo with artists of art troupes from both countries after watching their performance in Pyongyang. Photo: Xinhua

In January, Korean public debate on [shifting trade with China](#) traced the record deficit to [“Beijing’s push for local manufacturing,”](#) implying tougher competition in Chinese and global markets where South Korea has traditionally led intermediate goods exports. US technology export and investment restrictions on China magnified attention on the reconfiguration of China-ROK trade. As Industry Minister Ahn Duk-geun [indicated](#) before

meeting US officials and lawmakers in Washington in April, Seoul is “moving in the same direction” as allies while “stabilizing” economic ties with China. The meeting coincided with South Korea's April 10 parliamentary elections, where the semiconductor industry, representing a fifth of ROK exports, was a priority focus of Yoon's ambitious policy plans since January. Marking “a fresh round in the [global chip competition](#),” US-EU supply chain initiatives from April 5 renewed public concern about South Korea's [“vigilant and at times vulnerable”](#) position.

In addition to competitive pressures in high-tech trade, China's rising influence in e-commerce is another point of China-ROK debate. South Korea's Personal Information Protection Commission Vice Chairperson Choi Jang-hyuk met industry representatives in Beijing on April 11 to promote regulatory compliance, amid soaring public complaints about Chinese practices. The [launching](#) of the Korea-China Center for Internet Cooperation during his visit was a step toward enhancing governance mechanisms in data protection. Before the visit, the Korea Fair Trade Commission (FTC) initiated inspections of AliKorea and Temu in March and April for consumer protection violations and unfair business practices. On April 8, the Seoul municipal government also announced the discovery of toxic substances in AliExpress' top-selling childrens products exceeding safety levels.

Since market entry in 2018, AliExpress has become South Korea's second biggest online shopping platform after Coupang in terms of user numbers. While the number of monthly users in South Korea more than [doubled](#) in February 2023-2024 to 8.18 million, consumer dissatisfaction has outpaced this growth. Complaints to the Consumers Union of Korea and FTC against AliExpress [grew](#) five times in 2022-2023. Already South Korea's fourth biggest online marketplace after entering the country in July 2023, Temu has drawn similar criticism over [aggressive marketing](#) strategies. In April, a Korea Chamber of Commerce and Industry [survey](#) of AliExpress, Temu, or Shein users in the past year showed that 81% of customers experienced poor services, citing delivery delay, product quality,

and extreme advertising as the biggest sources of dissatisfaction.

Human Rights Abuses Cloud China-DPRK Economic and Cultural Reengagement

Recent high-level diplomacy projects a wider resumption of China-DPRK trade and cultural exchanges since Pyongyang's partial border reopening in August 2023. In January, China's foreign ministry delegation traveled to Pyongyang via land route linking Dandong and Sinuiju, the hubs of cross-border trade awaiting fuller reactivation. China-DPRK trade this January-March totaled 3% below the level in the first quarter of last year. It more than doubled in 2022-2023 to \$2.3 billion but remained 18% below the 2019 pre-pandemic level. North Korea's widening trade deficit with China and inability to diversify exports constrain trade prospects. As the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy reported, DPRK imports from China in 2023 reflected the "[maximum achievable](#)" without the full reopening of land trade routes. Raw materials, food, agricultural, and construction goods led DPRK imports from China, while wigs and hair products drove 57% of exports. But as the UN experts panel reported last year, North Korea's illicit trade features an expansion in [maritime smuggling](#) in coal exports through the East China Sea and Taiwan Strait, and more sophisticated sanctions evasion tactics in oil imports. The panel's [final report](#) in March 2024 concluded that North Korea's missile advancement [still depends](#) on illicit imports despite increased self-sufficiency for production.

Although tourism remains restricted since Pyongyang's COVID-19 lockdown, the China-DPRK Friendship Year catalyzed official cultural exchanges. DPRK Sports Minister Kim Il Guk led a sports delegation to China in January. A Chinese art ensemble traveled to Pyongyang in April Friendship Year performances, amid preparations for North Korea's Spring Friendship Art Festival that month engaging Russian and Mongolian artists to celebrate Kim Il Sung's 112th birth anniversary.

Official cultural exchanges mask human rights issues in China-DPRK relations, and wider violations of UN resolutions. Ambassador Yun Seong-deok raised ROK concerns in his report for

the UN's [Universal Periodic Review on China](#) in January. A February *New Yorker* article on North Korea's [forced labor](#) program prompted the US Congressional-Executive Commission on China to [call for](#) halting US seafood imports from Chinese firms employing DPRK workers. From January, South Korean sources drew global media attention to a rise in North Korean [labor unrest](#) in northeast China. The protests indicated mounting grievances over unpaid wages and poor working conditions worsened by pandemic lockdowns. Reported cases included worker riots at factories in Helong, Jilin province in January, and walkout in Dandong, Liaoning province in February. Although the incidents prompted DPRK consular intervention according to media reports, China's foreign ministry claimed it was "not aware" of the problem.

The recent outbreak of protests highlights tensions between Pyongyang's reliance on overseas earnings, and China's obligations under a 2017 Security Council resolution requiring the repatriation of DPRK workers by the end of 2019. According to the US State Department's [2023 Trafficking in Persons Report](#), the DPRK government withholds up to 90% of overseas wages, and an estimated 20,000 to 100,000 North Korean workers remain in China.

Conclusion

China-ROK engagement in the first third of 2024 amounted to verbal exchanges balancing reassurance and disapproval, in sharp contrast with Beijing's busy leadership exchanges with Pyongyang. US-China competition and the erosion of multilateral diplomacy will continue to constrain the space for cooperation on key areas of trade and peninsula security.

CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-KOREA RELATIONS

JANUARY - APRIL 2024

Jan. 1, 2024: President Xi Jinping and Kim Jong Un exchange New Year messages.

Jan. 23, 2024: South Korean amusement park Everland announces giant panda Fu Bao's planned return to China in April.

Jan. 24, 2024: PRC Vice Premier Liu Guozhong and DPRK Vice Foreign Minister for international organizations Kim Son-kyong meet on the sidelines of multilateral summits in Uganda.

Jan. 26-27, 2024: PRC Vice Foreign Minister Sun Weidong meets DPRK Vice Foreign Minister Pak Myong Ho and Foreign Minister Choe Son-hui in Pyongyang.

Jan. 29, 2024: A Chinese cultural delegation from Liaoning province arrives in Pyongyang for new year celebrations.

Feb. 6, 2024: PRC and ROK foreign ministers Wang Yi and Cho Tae-yul hold [telephone talks](#).

Feb. 27, 2024: PRC Vice Foreign Minister Sun Weidong delivers a video message [launching](#) ASEAN+3 "Young Ambassador" exchange.

Feb. 29, 2024: South Korea's Korea Consumer Agency announces the finding of illegal preservatives in children's clay products imported from China.

March 12, 2024: PRC and ROK nuclear envoys Liu Xiaoming and Lee Jun-il meet in Switzerland on the sidelines of a Northeast Asia security forum.

March 13, 2024: North Korea's IT Industry Minister Ju Yong-il meets PRC Ambassador to North Korea Wang Yajun in Pyongyang.

March 21-23, 2024: Workers' Party international department director Kim Song-nam leads a party delegation to China.

April 3, 2024: South Korea's Everland amusement park holds a farewell ceremony for giant panda Fu Bao before her departure to China.

Apr. 3-4, 2024: ASEAN+3 Finance and Central Bank Deputies' Meeting is held in Laos.

April 6 and 9, 2024: Chinese art troupes arrive in Pyongyang for a joint performance opening China-DPRK Friendship Year.

April 11-12, 2024: China's top legislator Zhao Leji arrives in Pyongyang to meet Kim Jong Un and DPRK counterpart Choe Ryong Hae, and attend Friendship Year events.

April 18, 2024: South Korea's Personal Information Protection Commission Vice Chairperson Choi Jang-hyuk meets Chinese e-commerce industry leaders in Beijing.

