

What to Make of China's New Special Representative on Korean Peninsula Affairs

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*On April 12, China announced the appointment of its new special representative on Korean Peninsula affairs—**Ambassador Liu Xiaoming**. Amb. Liu's career has been most notable for two things: he was the Chinese Ambassador to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) when North Korea conducted its first two nuclear tests (from 2006 to 2010); and he served the longest single ambassadorial posting (from 2010 to 2021 in the United Kingdom) in the history of People's Republic of China (PRC), skillfully navigating a turbulent ten years of China's foreign policy. The choice for this assignment shows Beijing's desire to entrust this delicate issue to a veteran diplomat with rich experience in Pyongyang. However, what's more interesting is the timing and message this appointment sends, suggesting China sees renewed diplomacy on the horizon.*

History of the Position

The office of the special representative on Korean Peninsula affairs was first set up in 2003 under a slightly different title—ambassador on Korean Peninsula affairs—and tasked with diplomatic engagement with parties related to the Six Party Talks. From 2003 to 2011, the position was kept at a director-general level and filled by **Ambassador Ning Fukui, Li Bin, Chen Naiqing, and Yang Houlan** consecutively.

In early 2010, China elevated the office to the “special representative on Korean Peninsula affairs” and its ranking from the director-general level to the vice-ministerial level. The first special representative was **Ambassador Wu Dawei**, who had been China's vice foreign minister since 2004. He was in the position for seven and a half years until handing the torch over to **Ambassador Kong Xuanyou**, assistant foreign minister, in August 2017. Ambassador Kong was promoted to vice foreign minister in January of 2018 and appointed Chinese ambassador to Japan in May 2019. Since then, the position for the special representative on Korean Peninsula affairs has been vacant. In June 2019, the Chinese Foreign Ministry acknowledged that [“China will select a qualified person for the position of the special envoy and will release information when it becomes available,”](#) although no appointment followed.[1]

Timing of the New Appointment

The fact that the special envoy's position was kept vacant for two years and has been filled only now carries important connotations. After the Hanoi Summit in 2019, US-DPRK bilateral engagement fell into an abysmal stalemate over disagreements about what concrete actions North Korea should take on the denuclearization front and what the US should provide in return. During that period, diplomacy was kept at a bilateral level, and outreach/engagement with other parties, including China, was minimal.

Under those circumstances, there was no pressing need for China to appoint a new special envoy, especially given Beijing's relatively high confidence that the bilateral engagement between the US and North Korea would not render the result Washington desired. This has been particularly true since the outbreak of the pandemic, which completely shifted the attention of both North Korea and the US to domestic affairs.

This context makes China's appointment of a new special envoy particularly important. It signifies the conviction in Beijing that as the Biden administration's North Korea policy review nears completion, the resumption of diplomacy is on the horizon, either bilaterally between the US and China over pressure and incentives needed for the DPRK to return to the negotiation table, or multilaterally with China involved. Early signs suggest that Washington is inclined to reach out to Beijing for assistance and cooperation on North Korea, including US **Secretary of State Antony Blinken's** call last month for China to use its "[tremendous influence](#)" to convince North Korea to denuclearize.

While the US and China still have vastly different visions for the endgame on the Korean Peninsula, making it highly unlikely that the two can reach a consensus at the strategic level on North Korea, working-level cooperation at the technical level remains possible. Beijing is willing to leverage its North Korea card in its bargaining with Washington, and this new assignment appears to be its attempt to prepare for such cooperation. That is perhaps the most essential message embedded in the new appointment.

Personnel Shifts in Sino-DPRK Relations

The appointment of Ambassador Liu coincides with other recent personnel shifts in Sino-DPRK relations. In February, North Korea just replaced 79-year-old **Ji Jae Ryong** with former deputy premier and foreign trade specialist, 60-year-old **Ri Ryong Nam**, as its ambassador to China. The generational change is reportedly to be followed suit by China's replacement of 64-year-old **Ambassador Li Jinjun** with 51-year-old **Wang Yajun**—the youngest vice-ministerial-level official in China's foreign policy apparatus—as its top diplomat in Pyongyang (the news of the appointment has been out although the actual replacement has not happened due to continued COVID-related border restrictions).

These personnel shifts could indicate the different priorities Beijing and Pyongyang are using to gauge bilateral relations. On the one hand, both Li and Wang have been the deputy chief of the International Department of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCID). In fact, the position of Chinese ambassador to North Korea has been consistently occupied by a former deputy chief of the CCID. This illustrates the continued dominance of party-to-party relations, or the theme of political friendship in Sino-DPRK relations. On the other hand, North Korea's appointment of an economic and trade specialist as its top envoy to China highlights the country's desire to enhance economic ties and domestic growth, especially after the hardship imposed by the pandemic over the last year.

Conclusion

This year marks the 60th anniversary of the signing of the Sino-North Korean Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty. The Treaty automatically renews every 20 years. Given that no advanced notice for cancellation has been announced by either side, the Treaty will continue for the foreseeable future. In light of the changes to US-China relations and the conditions in North Korea, China appears to be ramping up its personnel appointments, resources and efforts to prepare for diplomatic engagement over North Korea. The decisions are strategically timed to echo the completion of the Biden administration's North Korea policy review. Beijing may not feel the ball is in its court and could wait for Washington to reach out first, but its interest and posturing are fully panned out.

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Notes

[1] Translation provided by author.

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