

'The Enemies Made this Possible': Sino-North Korean Relations after 1948

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Abstract

This chapter is anchored in the relationship between Kim Il Sung and Mao Zedong, documenting China's support – initially heavy and later ebbing – for unification under Kimist leadership. Mao's government and Kim's remained tied to one another for security even after Chinese troops departed from North Korea in 1958 and the Cultural Revolution opened up its seemingly unlimited rage and chaos in 1966. As China became a more status quo power, North Korea continued to pursue strategies of peaceful reunification toward Seoul mixed in with rhetorical assaults on the US-South Korean alliance. Questions of leadership and personality are examined throughout the chapter, along with themes of Korean unification and China's outlook on North Korean comrades. The chapter concludes by showing how Kim Jong-un has drawn from certain aspects of his grandfather's legacy in order to conduct a foreign policy toward China which has alternated between cold and warm.



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On 5 January 1951, Kim Il Sung stood on an apex. Kim's forces were occupying Seoul, as they had once done the previous summer, but this time his armies were backed by a massive Chinese intervention and Mao Zedong's support. On 5 January 1951, Kim made a statement calling for the expulsion of American and UN troops from the peninsula and for Korean reunification under northern leadership (Li Qingshan, 2008, 213). Because Kim and his successors would go on to adumbrate and reprise this theme so many times, the content of the declaration makes for a familiar refrain today. But this statement is unique in that it took place in a highly kinetic, wartime context as Kim was actively absorbing southern territory, and doing so as the People's Republic of China put its muscle behind the extension of force toward unification. The Chinese support largely stemmed from the resolution of an internal debate within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) during which Mao Zedong's force of personality won out (Chen 2001a; Chen 2001b). Although the attempts to unify Korea with the help of Chinese armies in the winter and spring of 1951 would fall short, at terrible human cost, it was a high point for Kim. But under the strain of logistical and political difficulties, North Korea's Chinese comrades would limit their zeal for reunification after the spring of 1951, even after rejecting UN overtures toward an early cease-fire (Shen and Xia, 2011). Although General Peng Dehuai was preparing a massive general offensive in the summer of 1953, the Armistice forestalled that possibility, and Peng's 1.35 million Chinese troops were left to tend the jagged edges of the new peace in North Korea (Zhang 2001, 107). The CCP would never again push as hard as it did in 1951 to place the entire peninsula under Kim's command. The Chinese People's Volunteers would ultimately leave North Korea in 1958, and the DPRK would sign a mutual security treaty with China in 1961 (Buzo 1999, 65, 69).

For Kim Il Sung, China's intervention in the Korean War inevitably stirred tensions in the Sino-North Korean relationship, spanning from the lowest levels of command to the highest. But crisis also strengthened the alliance, and the scale and goals of the crisis itself indicated that Kim Il Sung's brio would ultimately be supported by his CCP comrades and occurred within a matrix of mutual assistance. Kim operated with a background of confidence and even political capital with respect to China. He not only headed a state that was a year older than the People's Republic of China, he had, for a period of time, routed MacArthur's troops with no Chinese help at all. Moreover, he had previously aided the CCP during their civil war in northeast China, and there could be no doubt that he was unimpeachably anti-Japanese. Some thirty years after the Chinese communist triumph in the civil war in Northeast China, it was for good reason that Mao's successor Hua Guofeng stated in Pyongyang: 'In the years of our revolutionary wars, fine sons and daughters of the Korean people fought shoulder to shoulder with the Chinese people in the Changpai Mountains, on both sides of the Great Wall and on both banks of the Yangtze River' (Hua 1978, 15). Kim probably knew the CCP and China better than Mao Zedong knew North Korea or the Korean Workers' Party. This is not to say that Kim had nothing to learn from Mao; the younger leader had far less experience

than did Mao in command of a political party, and was far less influential as a theorist and writer. Ultimately, mutual enemies rather than personal friendships formed the basis for Sino-North Korean alignment in this period.

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Kim Il Sung had reasonably deep contacts with the CCP beyond Mao and his own view of China was not particularly Mao-centric (Koh, 1978, 133-134). Kim's main point of contact with the CCP during the civil war had been the Party's Northeastern Bureau, particularly Chen Yun and Gao Gang. While Gao would be purged in 1954 (Mehnert 1963, 252-253), Chen went on to help pull the Chinese economy out of the proverbial ditch in 1962, returned to a position next to Deng Xiaoping after being sidelined during the Cultural Revolution. Zhou Baozhong was an old comrade from the anti-Japanese guerrilla struggle but, unlike Chen, he never reached the top levels of the Chinese elite. Kim Il Sung spoke Chinese and had come of age in northeast China, on the fringes of the new Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo. As Han Hongkoo explains, Kim's youth was a very practical advantage in interacting with Chinese comrades, since they did not see him as having roots in older and less loyal factions. Kim demonstrated a clear ability to leverage his relationships with key CCP leaders in the northeast like Wu Ping, and the occasional gamble kept him insulated from the worst of the anti-Korean purges of the peripheral eastern wing of the Manchuria Revolutionary Committee in the mid-1930s (Han 1999, 173, 183-184, 275-276). Kim also knew Chinese; he could converse with Peng Dehuai in *Dongbeihua*, northeast Chinese expressions (Li 2008, 90).

As for Mao's worldview or *Weltanschauung*, scholars focusing on it are equipped with better and more abundant sourcing than Kim's, but it is by no means a settled debate with respect to Korea. Shen Zhihua has put forward a hypothesis called 'Tianchao-ism', which appears to be novel but is in fact an extension of a fairly old idea, that Mao's perspective on Korea was essentially neo-tributary (North 1960; Mehnert 1963, 404, 493). Excavation of Mao's early manuscripts reveals precious little attention to Korea.¹ Certainly he did not appear to see the ethnic Koreans in China as anything other than temporary migrants and placed a greater focus on minority groups like Tibetans and Mongols in inner Asia, and Manchus in the northeast. In the mid-1930s, the CCP committees in Shanghai and Moscow were far more in control of Kim's groups than was Mao, who was in the maelstrom of the Long March, or getting initially set up in Yan'an.²

¹ One of Mao's first explicit encouragements to Korean revolutionaries came with a bit of an insult, in the form of an imprecise translation by Edgar Snow: 'It is the immediate task of China to regain all our lost territories...this means that Manchuria must be regained. We do not, however, include Korea, formerly a Chinese colony, but when we have reestablished the independence of the lost territories of China, and if the Koreans wish to break away from the chains of Japanese imperialism, we will extend them our enthusiastic help in their struggle for independence' (Mao 1936). Mao is mentioned only once in Dae Sook Suh's *Communism in Korea, 1918-1948*, as the target of a note to both himself and Jiang Jieshi from Korean students in North China. Han Hongkoo describes Mao as a negative example of killing purged colleagues in 1930 Jiangxi, but does not connect him at all to the Minsaengdan Incident which was Kim Il Sung's original persecution by the CCP.

² Han Hankoo (1999, 201) explains how Kim learned of the Long March in January or February 1935 from Wu Ping, who had travel experience to Moscow.

Yet Mao appeared open to communication and demonstrations of self-criticism with Korean comrades after their establishment in power. Ultimately, Kim's problem with China after 1951 centered on the question of Mao's romanticism. In short, Mao was not radical and romantic in the areas where Kim needed more romanticism (i.e. risking all to throw the Americans off of the peninsula) and then kindled too hot a fire in areas which were actually dangerous to Kim, particularly the Cultural Revolution in China's border regions with North Korea (Schram 1960). It was not so much Mao's receptivity to action, but his oscillation between radical action and self-defensive non-action, that made Kim Il Sung's drive to unify the peninsula difficult.

For his part, Mao Zedong did not appear to know much about Kim Il Sung until Kim became prominent in the Soviet occupation of Korea. This was remedied when they met several times before and during the Korean War. Mao's engagement with communist resistance in Northeast China had been by necessity not all that deep in the early 1930s, and after settling in arid northwest China, the Korea portfolio was largely left to other cadre and communications were poor between Yan'an and northeast China. Mao's first real intervention into the security and structure of northeast China was to step in to settle a critical debate about base areas in the northeast, rather late in the day in December 1945. Mao looked to the northeast nearly 15 years after a young Kim Il Sung had devoted himself to fighting along the edges of that vast space and four years after he went into exile across the Soviet border with Manchukuo. Theirs was a relationship of convenience, but also one of belief.

In 1949 and early 1950, North Korea still had several advantages over the CCP. The 'return' of ethnic Korean troops into the KPA in 1949 and 1950 is the most obvious manifestation of those connections at local levels. North Koreans carefully watched the CCP's victory in northeast China (Cathcart and Kraus, 2008). The logistical bonds between the two were well-oiled in the years prior to US intervention in the Korean War. After the CCP consolidated control of northeast China in October and November of 1948, Liu Shaoqi and others negotiated with North Korean cadre over power supplies and the Supung Dam along the Yalu River border -- the dam includes a huge jointly-managed water reservoir, and fishing and logging upstream needed to be quantified as both economies began scaling up. Ethnic Koreans in Yanbian travelled to Pyongyang as a kind of Jerusalem for models of socialist higher education.

Bonds at lower levels, however, did not mean that Mao Zedong and Kim Il-Sung saw each other as perfect comrades. Mao had not been deeply invested in the Northeast partisan activity, and Koreans in Yan'an tended to be suspect. The CCP's linkages to the so-called Yan'an Korean faction led by Kim Tubong atrophied or disappeared entirely after 1956. However, purges were not a one-sided affair. Some of Kim's better contacts during the Korean War, like Gao Gang disappeared or were purged during this period.

It is hard to know what Kim's true view of the Chinese leadership was or how it changed over time -- the nationalism vs. internationalism quotient was not necessarily constant. Losing control of his forces to Peng Dehuai in December 1950 was a life-changing and possibly humiliating event for Kim, but it may have been an instructive setback. If Kim was in fact

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diminished by his being harnessed to the Chinese war chariot with Soviet aid, he was doing so in the context of a widening of the maw as the Korean War came to encompass a tripartite alliance fighting UN/US coalition forces.

When North Korea invaded South Korea on June 25, 1950, the United Nations, with 17 countries fighting under American command, readied for war. After initial success, the North Korean army collapsed and was only rescued by a massive Chinese intervention, which left Chinese troops in the country until 1958. 260,000 Chinese troops entered North Korea in October 1950 (Li, 2014, xxviii), and this force expanded to 950,000 by April 1951. As a result, approximately one in seven people in North Korea at this time was Chinese. During the Korean War, when nearly every North Korean city was obliterated by American bombing, North Korean industry -- and in many cases, society -- went underground. Gen. Douglas MacArthur, commander of UN and US forces in the Far East, also brandished an atomic threat in 1951. While the UK helped to push the Americans away from such an approach, and MacArthur was relieved of his command due to insubordination, the enduring lesson for the North Korean leadership and public is readily recalled. Citizens across the communist sphere, in China and Eastern Europe alike, were made regularly aware of the atrocities caused by US bombing.

The Korean War unleashed a large amount of cultural diplomacy and mutually-supporting propaganda between the two countries. Posters of Korea could be found in rural Chinese homes, and film productions like 'Raid' or 'Hit the Invaders' celebrated Sino-North Korean cooperation (Starobin 1955, 140). In both states, the Soviet World War II experience was taken as a model, but such modelling was particularly acute for the North Korean people.³ On May Day, 1953, Kim Il-sung said 'the war we are waging cannot be successfully continued if we do not have the assistance of our allies headed by Russia and China. The enemy is using every means to weaken this friendship, but they cannot separate us from our allies because we firmly adhere to the teaching of Lenin and Stalin.'⁴ Pro-Chinese personages like Pak Chong-ae and Kim Tu-bong remained visible.⁵ There was a great deal of cultural cooperation during this period, expressed by the generally high profile of Chinese revolutionary practices in the DPRK itself. Although Soviet World War II narratives were prevalent in North Korea, in 1955 the North

³ One North Korean was "promoting letter-writing projects to the Soviet Union and giving touring lectures on the subject 'the Struggle of the great Soviet People in Wartime'." See "Association Members Urged to Assist in Victory," *Soviet-Korean Culture*, vol. 16, no. 201, 22 April 1953, summarized in North Korean Press Summary, CIA-RDP80S01540R003000040008-2.

⁴ 'May Day Statement by Kim Il-Sung,' *Chokuk Chonson* [The Fatherland Front], 2 May 1953, No. 174, p.1, a weekly edited by Kang Mun-sok, summarized in North Korean Press Summary, CIA-RDP80S01540R003000040008-2.

⁵ 'May Day Celebration Meeting in Pyongyang,' *Chokuk Chonson* [The Fatherland Front], 2 May 1953, No. 174, p. 3, summarized in North Korean Press Summary, CIA-RDP80S01540R003000040008-2.

Koreans published a variety of pro-China materials, including a Korean version of *White Haired Girl* and histories glorifying the CCP.⁶

Chinese propaganda efforts inside of North Korea during the war existed alongside profligate leaflet dumps from the US in which the narrative of China dominating North Korea was insistent. One intriguing CIA paper asserted that China was helping North Korea to train cadre in the northeastern city of Tonghua for insertion into South Korea.⁷ Mao took particular interest in North Korea's tunnel construction. While Stalin had alarmingly conveyed to the CCP Central Committee that Kim Il Sung could go into China with a government-in-exile (Shen 2012, 175; Cathcart and Kraus 2011, 39-41) in 1950, China's intervention had stabilized his governance and his state as a whole.

The discussion of the five years after the Korean War, especially as concerns Sino-North Korean relations, tends to fall into two patterns: discussion of the 'August Crisis' of 1956 along with the purges that accompanied it, and Chinese participation in the economic reconstruction of North Korea. However, there are other themes worth exploring, and it is possible to conceive of the period from 1950-1959 as one of parallel consolidation. We might consider actions versus landlords, control of the grain sector, and the cultural implications for intellectuals of the regime fending off de-Stalinization. Mutual defense against outsiders enabled all of these processes to unfold.

Both North Korea and China had to deal with Eisenhower's US Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles. Dulles gave a speech to the Council on Foreign Relations on 12 January 1954 in which he stated that stationing US troops permanently around Asia was "not sound military strategy." Building upon recommendations expressed in a December 1953 speech to the National Press Club by Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Admiral Radford), Dulles said: "Local defenses must be further reinforced by a massive military deterrent...The way to deter aggression is for the free community to be willing and able to respond vigorously at places and with means of its own choosing" (Dulles 1954, 108).

⁶ *Oeguk Muryok Kansopkwa Kuknae Conjang Sigie Issoosoui Kongsan Tang* (Communist Party During the Period of Foreign Armed Intervention and Civil War), published in 1955 by Labor Party Publishing House; see also *Soryonui Widaehan Choguk Conjaeng Sigie Issosoui Kongsan Tang* (Communist party and Great Patriotic War of the USSR), same publisher and year. Cited in see CIA-RDP80-00809A000700240139-0, 'North Korean Publications, 1946-1955,'; Choson Kija Tongmaeng Chonguk Wiwonhoe (All-Korea Committee of Korean Journalists League), and histories glorifying the CCP. See *White Haired Girl* (Paek Mo Nyo). Choson Kija Tongmaeng Chonguk Wiwonhoe (All-Korea Committee of Korean Journalists League); Hua Kang, *Chunguk Minjok Haebang Undong Sa* (History of the Liberation Movement of the Chinese People), Vol. 1, translated from Chinese, Pyongyang, Rodong Tang Culpansa, 1955.

⁷ 'North Korean Labor Party Organization, Training and Policy,' 14 November 1952, CIA-RDP82-00457R014800020005-5; According to Pak Tae-hwa, head of school, in January 1951, the Central Party School had retreated from Pyongyang in mid-October 1950, toward Kanggye, with staff and 700 students. Along the way '90% of students' were seconded into Kim Chaek Political Military Officer Academy. They reassembled in Tonghua and reopened in February 1951, by which time 'about half of the students were from South Korea.'

North Korea interpreted this speech as a vocal provocation that was on the ‘borderline of war (*jeonjaeng jupgyeong* 전쟁접경)...with the purpose of repressing the allies and liberation struggles of the colonies in order to conquer the world’ (Heo, 1987, p.415). For all the color of its description of the ‘frantic’ (*balgwangjukin* 발광적인) military expansion, it is clear North Korean analysts in the 1950s kept close watch on US deployments and defense spending (Heo 1987, 419), and took a granular approach to reading US public statements. Meanwhile, South Korea was depicted as the ‘sacrificial offerings of nuclear war’ (*haekjunjaengui jaemul* 핵전쟁의 제물) and an unpatriotic country that let a Western nation take over its land, decisions, and resources (Heo 1987, 423).

Recent writing about why the Chinese People’s Volunteers withdrew from North Korea— in three waves in early 1958 – tends to focus on the documentary interplay. It indicates how the decision to withdraw troops was largely Mao’s doing, and how heavily propaganda questions played into Kim Il-sung’s decision to support the withdrawal (Tian 2014). Foremost among the considerations was how to put pressure on the US at the United Nations; by withdrawing troops from North Korea, the PRC could make the US look like the

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malevolent hegemon in the region since it was understood that the Republic of Korea was not in the least ready for an American retreat from the peninsula. The communist side could call for all foreign troops to leave, then engage in free-fire from a propaganda standpoint against the United States when it did not do so.

1956 continues to be used by North Korean security intellectuals to highlight the moment of exemplary American insincerity when it comes to negotiating a withdrawal from the peninsula or a peace treaty which would prepare such an exit (Ri 2016). The DPRK’s call for foreign troops to depart Korea in 1956 was, ironically, coordinated closely with the leaders of one large group of foreign troops in Korea (i.e. the Chinese), and what appeared to be Kim Il Sung’s moment of nationalistic prickliness was well coordinated with Beijing. Mao and Zhou Enlai were apologetic about perceptions that they had interfered in North Korean internal affairs but were much more interested in diffusing rumours — both domestically and internationally — about a decline in Sino-North Korean relations in late 1956. Thus, amid the tremors of the uprising in Hungary, all the parties agreed to a full withdrawal of Chinese troops from North Korea. It was helpful for Mao who later sources indicate was concerned not to be seen as “great power chauvinist.”⁸

⁸ Mao Zedong, Remarks to a delegation of League of Communists of Yugoslavia, September 1956 (titled by editors as 'Draw Historical Lessons and Oppose Big-Nation Chauvinism') *Mao Zedong On Diplomacy*, Compiled by PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs and CCP Central Committee Party Literature Research Center (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1998), p. 198-99. This talk is also perhaps the only time Mao quoted his mother to his comrades, telling them 'behave with tail between your legs.'

Within North Korea, the withdrawal of Chinese troops from North Korea was described as a glorious ending that opened up a new phase in resolving the issue of the Peninsula peacefully. As the *Minju Chosun* (1958a) put it, 'This main initiative is another expression of the people's constant efforts to resolve the Chosun issue peacefully and consolidate peace in the East, which will be an important step to further promote the peaceful reunification of our motherland.' North Korean editorials argued that the troop withdrawal back to China had removed the rationale for the U.S. military to reside in South Korea, which it regarded henceforth as the stumbling block for peaceful reunification.

As described by a North Korean book published in 1960, North Korea 'proactively' encouraged the Chinese troops to withdraw and 'left no excuses' for Chinese troops to reside further in North Korea (Jeon 1960). By doing so, North Korea positioned itself towards Southern audiences in hopes of achieving peaceful unification, making gestures of economic and social development toward South Korea. As part of the celebration for the birth of Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the North proposed to offer diverse aid to the South including 150,000 *seok* of rice (equivalent to 24 million kilograms), ten thousand tons of seafood, and four million pairs of shoes (Jeon 1960, 98). Perhaps the offer was meant with the understanding that it would never be required, for the United States and South Korean governments 'rejected all the sincere proposals' made through the Supreme People's Assembly and North Korea regarded this step as an outrageous reaction (Jeon 1960, 96).

The introduction of tactical nuclear weapons to South Korea in 1958 by the United States raised the awareness of security challenges in Northeast Asia and set a background for Sino-North Korean strategic relations in the year after. In 1958 the Chinese People's Volunteers returned home through Sinuiju, celebrated for their defense of the Main Line of Resistance and for having reconstructed North Korea's rail network (Li, 2008, 527-537). In the next year, a monument to the Chinese war effort went up in Pyongyang, and in 1961 the DPRK signed what would immediately become a cornerstone of its national defense and diplomatic strategy—the Treaty of Friendship and Mutual Assistance with the People's Republic of China. In some ways, this pact gave the North Koreans more latitude, which they demanded and gladly took as the split between Moscow and Beijing began to widen.

When the Cultural Revolution dawned in northeast China in the summer of 1966, Kim Il-Sung made it clear many times that Red Guard loudspeakers along the border troubled him. Likewise, Kim Jong Il was disturbed by such loudspeakers during a critical 1968 trip to Hyesan. Kim Il Sung was upset that his northern frontier at times caused him more anxiety than the much

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shorter and much more heavily defended border with South Korea. Indeed, Shen and Xia cover fragmentary evidence of armed incursions by Chinese troops along the Tumen River in 1969 (2018, 190-191).

The North Koreans interpreted the loudspeakers as 'interference in internal affairs' and made their dismantling the first precondition of any Sino-North Korean talks in

September 1969 (Shen & Xia 2018, p.193; Mao 1969). Intelligence coming into the DPRK from the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture would further have indicated that anti-Korean nationalism was reaching a fever pitch among Red Guards in 1968. As Dong Jo Shin has demonstrated, the Cultural Revolution in Yanbian was hostile toward any manifestation of Korean culture and led personally by Mao Yuanxin, the Chairman's nephew (Shin 2016). Persecution of ethnic Koreans within China's borders for alleged loyalty to Kim Il Sung was not a core concern for the KWP, but beyond the handshakes and geopolitics in the capitols, the ethnopolitics in China did not appear propitious, and may even have triggered bad memories for Kim and some older cadre.

Kim could not voice public displeasure with the Cultural Revolution; Jonathan Pollack has described Kim Il-Sung's view of the Cultural Revolution as "mass lunacy" (Pollack 2011, 68). Behind closed doors Kim fulminated about it – 'they slander us as revisionists but we stay calm' (Shen & Xia 2018, 179). However, after Zhou Enlai came to North Korea to rebalance relations, Kim moderated his stance somewhat, telling a Soviet comrade that while there was 'still quite a bit of mess in China owing to the Cultural Revolution,' it 'might be beneficial for China, but it was impossible to initiate it in North Korea' (Zakharov 1970, 2). Shen and Xia (2018) describe two supposedly key pieces of evidence that North Korea was being insulted in 1968, but there is no way of ascertaining that the insults ever made it to North Korea. British archives describe some of the potential border clashes between DPRK and China in this period (Foreign and Commonwealth Research Office, 1969). There can be no denying that North Korea felt heavy pressure in its border regions during the height of the Cultural Revolution from 1966-1969. China's ideological belligerence over Maoism resulted in a full breakdown in relations with Pyongyang and the heightening of tensions along the border, but this breach was later assuaged by North Korea's need to balance against excess Soviet influence and the necessity of Chinese support for any moves against South Korea.

What ultimately rescued and revived Sino-North Korean relations in 1970 was a return to focus on shared adversaries. As Zhou Enlai and Kang Sheng told Albanian comrades (Hazbiu 1970), 'it was our enemies' that had revived relations between the two old allies. In April 1970, Zhou Enlai was aware that his authority abroad rested in part on his ability to give voice to both Mao and Lin Biao, the putative successor. He therefore allowed hardliners to control much of the public messaging (Brun, 1978). In resetting relations with North Korea, the focus on Japan-ROK relations seemed to work; it crowded out the need for declarations about Soviet revisionists and the need to attack them, and it mitigated the harms of the Cultural Revolution. Aid packages would flow not long thereafter to Pyongyang, and he set up a communication channel for negotiations with the United States that were to arrive in 1971-72, rendering the Americans reactive. Despite this rapport between Zhou and Kim, it appears that interactions at lower levels proved difficult. North Korean personnel were removed from Chinese military academies, and there was a reduction in Chinese exports of food and goods to North Korea (Pollack 2011, 68). It was not until April 1969 when things rebalanced, and from the higher level. The CCP 9th Party Congress and Zhou Enlai's meetings with Kim in 1970 brought a kind of renewed united front which would last through the early 1970s.

The 1972 Sino-U.S. rapprochement brought changes to the foreign relations atmosphere in East Asia. Both China and the U.S. were aware of the importance of maintaining peace in the Korean Peninsula. Two paragraphs in the Shanghai Communiqué include general clauses about the Korean Peninsula and the peace in the region. Kim Il Sung supported the rapprochement

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decision made by the two countries, calling it a “great victory for the Chinese people and the revolutionary peoples worldwide” (Chen 2001, 273-275). As became perfectly clear, Kim wanted to use this opportunity to achieve unification of the Korean Peninsula through political changes in South Korea rather than armed attacks of subversion. North Korea continued to envision that the unification process necessitated the withdrawal of U.S. troops from the peninsula, a view that China continued to share, although the PRC did not call the Americans ‘vanquished’ as Kim did.⁹ This aspiration was bolstered when U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger stated in 1971 that the U.S. planned to withdraw ‘substantial percentage’ of its forces from South Korea.¹⁰

As the 1980s dawned, it was a period when the DPRK leadership structure had coalesced around hereditary succession, and was still in the process of picking up the requisite endorsements from its largest allies. As Kim Il Sung turned 70-years old in 1982, the ex-guerrilla was focused, at least in part, on obtaining support for his heir apparent from North Korea’s close allies and neighbours. The news of Kim Jong Il’s succession initially received a tepid response and its difficulties were compounded by the transformations in the 1980s socialist world, especially in the Soviet Union and the PRC. A casual appraisal might have held that the somewhat frayed ties between the PRC and the DPRK would have been on the mend in the aftermath of China’s Cultural Revolution, but Deng Xiaoping’s program of economic reform and relatively rapid pivot toward opening to foreign investment only reinforced the divisions in Sino-North Korean relations. By the middle of the 1980s, Northeast Asia’s two largest communist parties found themselves more at odds with each other than ever before, particularly on ideological questions. The heyday of the Chinese-North Korean alliance had long passed, and, in spite of declarations of generational fealty, the relationship faced an uncertain future.

The documents around the Kim Jong-il succession demonstrate that in 1985, western analysts were anticipating, or at the very least were predisposed to hope, that North Korea would embrace an economic model akin to China’s “Opening and Reform” and

⁹ Kim, Il Sung. ‘On Some Problems Concerning the Internal and External Policies of the Workers’ Party of Korea and the Government of the Republic: Interview with the Managing Editor of the Japanese Newspaper *Asahi Shimbun* and the Correspondent of the *Kyodo Press*,’ September 25 and October 8, 1971,’ p. 251.

¹⁰ Memcon Zhou Enlai – Kissinger, Beijing 22 October 1971, 4:15-8:28p.m. *FRUS Vol E-13 Documents on China 1969-1972*, Document #44 <<http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve13/d44>>

transition to a market-style economy under the PRC's oversight.¹¹ At the same time, however, American analysts recognized that North Korea viewed China as an unreliable ally. China's links to the outside world and especially to South Korea under the post-Maoist leadership had clearly softened the PRC's commitment to its old socialist ally in the northeast.

Would China run to the defense of North Korea in the event of a new war on the peninsula? Answers, either historical or contemporary, remain difficult to come by.

In considering the triangular relations between Russia, the PRC, and North Korea, when the DPRK had big things in mind with its China policy, the rhythm and intensity of its interplay with Russia similarly sped up. This was certainly the case in the 1980s, just as it was the case in Kim Jong Il's final months. As the DPRK geared up for succession in the mid-1980s, North Korea was getting closer to Russia to balance apprehensions over China's increasingly "revisionist" ties to the United States. China and the U.S. had been sharing intelligence, developing military-to-military ties, and cooperating on a number of global issues; North Korea was still looking to China for a modicum of support, but Beijing's turn toward its ostensibly existential foe in Washington was both mystifying and aggravating to North Korean leaders.

Soviet aid began to be withdrawn in the 1980s and China officially recognised South Korea in 1992, things truly changed for the worse. Culturally speaking, North Korea weathered the Soviet collapse because the country was already fairly insulated from information from the Eastern Bloc, but they saw the Chinese recognition of South Korea especially as an act of betrayal. Nevertheless, as Kim Il Sung visited China in autumn 1991, he made particular efforts to show solicitude toward China's return to Confucianism and in bonding with Jiang Zemin.¹²

Nevertheless other observers saw things as going poorly. A Hungarian assessment from Pyongyang indicated that the Sino-North Korean relationship was not very smooth, with economic reform in North Korea being a key sticking point. There were also multiple rumors among the diplomatic community in Pyongyang that in his visit, Deng Xiaoping

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'had urged Kim to stand aside and hand over nominal power to somebody else, while remaining in position of influence behind the scenes, as he Deng had done. Kim

¹¹ The following section is adapted from Adam Cathcart and Charles Kraus, "China's 'Measure of Reserve' towards Succession: Sino-North Korean Relations, 1983-1985," *SinoNK.com*, China-North Korea Dossier No. 2 (February 2012).

¹² McLaren in Peking to FCO, 'China/DPRK: Visit of Kim Il Sung,' 25 October 1991. UK National Archives, FCO 21/4803. 'At the MFA briefing, Deputy Director Zhang...[said] that the itinerary was not determined by economic or political considerations but by Kim's wish to see the home of Confucius and Shandong province and to take up a long standing invitation from Jiang Zemin to visit his hometown.'

allegedly responded by saying that he would do so on his 80th birthday, i.e. 15 April 1992.¹³

The 1990s created a number of crises and rebalances in Chinese-North Korean relations. These included, in 1992, the formal recognition of South Korea by China, and the famine from 1994-1997 which created a considerable humanitarian problem in Chinese border areas. The growth of the North Korean nuclear program, and its overt testing since 2006, created another problem for the CCP. However, even amid this environment in which China often finds itself restraining North Korea, party ties have strengthened and China remains firmly committed to keeping North Korea afloat. Kim Jong-Un's emergence in 2010 and his formal accession to power in 2012 has presented a challenge to China, but not an incomprehensible enigma. There was no bilateral meeting between the powers in the first six years of his rule, but since that time, he has developed relations with the CCP that culminated in Xi Jinping's visit in 2019. Unlike his grandfather, Jong-Un does not speak Chinese and lacks a social network in this area, appearing to be culturally more oriented more towards Western Europe than China. Despite this, North Korean business has developed in spite of sanctions, and small things like Chinese language training and scientific exchanges between the two countries appear to be important to him. This includes cultural exchanges, as Kim's wife attended the Chinese musical conservatory and appears to be friends with China's First Lady. Kim Jong-Un's drawing on his grandfather's guerrilla heritage, but largely lost in that is the interaction with China, which both the myth and the reality involves. Kim Jong-Un remains committed to redeveloping the northern border region, with or without cooperation with China's Special Economic Zones along the border. His need to control cross-border crime and migration has much more in common with his father than his grandfather, although movement across the frontier has rarely been entirely within legal limits.

Looking back at the history of China's relationship with North Korea, Mao's romanticism is unlikely to return to Beijing, insofar as support for Korean military intervention. Xi Jinping has portrayed himself as bold and visionary, and the "belt and road" initiative along with Chinese foreign policy in Northeast Asia is <adjective>, but China's desires for the Korean peninsula remain negative in that they are there to negate explicit armed conflict between the two Koreas, or an explosion of hostility between the US and North Korea. For his part, Kim Jong-Un appears keen to maintain elements of his grandfather's inter-Korean policy, but the economic and cultural relationship between the two Koreas has largely been inverted since the 1960s and 1970s. Kim Il-Sung's actions in 1972 – including advocating free travel and communication between the two Koreas, as well as praise for the warming in US-China relations – are unlikely to be repeated or recapitulated by Kim Jong-Un. Without massive economic strength, Kim Jong-Un can still impress Xi Jinping through his ability to engage in powerful

¹³ The assessment further concludes that 'Hungarians have separately concluded on the basis of Chinese and Russian assessments that without either substantial amounts of external aid or thoroughgoing economic reform, North Korea cannot survive for more than 2 more years.' M.D. Reilly, Seoul to I. Davies, head of Far East Division, "'Visit of Kim Il-Sung to China', 5 November 1991, UK National Archives, FCO 21/4803.

anticorruption campaigns, to control his citizens effectively, and through the centrality of political education even amid something that resembles economic reform. Unlike Xi Jinping, Kim Jong-Un need not modify his national constitution in order to be considered a leader for life. What remains to be seen is how he will approach China's growing role in shaping North Korea's response to ongoing Korean division and the form of international trade and socialism that the two states share along with their border.

[footnotes on pp. 137-138]

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