

# THE SINO-DPRK SPLIT AND ORIGINS OF US-DPRK BILATERALISM

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## Abstract

North Korea has identified its official foreign policy as being focused on ‘self-reliance’ since the mid-1906s. Kim Il Sung (Kim Il-sŏng) had been long preoccupied with external interference in internal affairs, so the escalation of the Sino-Soviet schism created an environment in which to eliminate foreign influence in domestic politics and strengthen his control. North Korea did not only try to balance between the two giant socialist countries, but also expand its diplomatic sphere outside the communist bloc such as with Third World and European countries. In addition, it pursued direct contact with the US to achieve its longstanding goals, the removal of US troops stationed in the South and the replacement of the 1953 armistice with a permanent peace treaty. Since then demands for bilateral talks have become the most distinctive feature of North Korea’s foreign policy. With the advent of *détente* in the early 1970s, discontent with their Chinese comrades also led Kim to seek US-DPRK talks. Despite a mutual hostility generated during the era of the Cultural Revolution, Kim Il Sung’s first response to China’s rapprochement with the US was not negative, anticipating the potential for Chinese assistance in accomplishing North Korean diplomatic objectives in its relations with the US. At odds with Kim’s expectation, however, Chinese behavior did not meet North Korea’s demands. China, as well as the US, preferred the status quo to a rapid change in the region, even though they fully supported the beginnings of inter-Korean dialogue that culminated in the conclusion of the Joint Communiqué. Also, Kim Il Sung felt that, in the UN, China was more interested in seeking compromise with the US than asserting North Korea’s requests. Kim Il Sung’s dissatisfaction with China’s half-hearted stance during the *détente* strengthened his mistrust that Beijing did not consider North Korea’s national interests. As a result, North Korea deliberately excluded China in its offer of negotiations to the US such as the Tripartite Talks between the US and two Koreas, insisting on bilateral meetings with the US.

Key words: North Korea, Foreign Policy, Self-reliance, Sino-DPRK relation, US-DPRK relation, *Détente*

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### **The Birth of North Korea's 'Self-Reliant' Foreign Policy**

While the North Korean regime is frequently labelled as erratic and irrational,<sup>1</sup> Pyongyang's policy in its quest to acquire nuclear weapons has been consistent in one essential regard: the goal of direct negotiations with the US rather than participation in any form of multilateral talks including South Korea, China, Japan, Russia or anyone else. North Korea's government identified its foreign policy as focused on 'self-reliance' in the 1960s,<sup>2</sup> and bilateral negotiations with the US have since been seen as the essential means to achieve this.

North Korea's preoccupation with bilateral negotiation has a much longer history than the Six-Party Talks. Pyongyang began its push to build bilateral relations with the US when Sino-US détente of 1972 brought change to the Northeast Asian geostrategic environment.<sup>3</sup> Before this, Kim Il Sung and his partisans had struggled for independence against Japanese colonization and tackled the process of state-building following the Korean War. Even though Beijing professed a 'hands-off' approach to North Korean internal affairs after the Korean War, the country was still full of Chinese troops. Therefore, conditions were not sufficient for Kim to take autonomous action in domestic and foreign policy. It is undeniable that Pyongyang had to rely on its two giant neighbours, China and the USSR, for economic and political purposes. North Korea overflowed with anti-American slogans and propaganda, but it did not have enough diplomatic capacity nor capability to stand face to face with the US.

From the late 1960s, however, the DPRK started promoting an independent foreign policy. While the common experiences of the anti-Japanese movement and fight against imperialism and common ideology that they shared helped the Soviet Union, People's Republic of China and the DPRK consolidate relations, North Korea, a small and newly born country, was exposed to the powerful influence of the two larger countries. In particular, an August 1956 failed coup attempt focused on the removal of Kim Il Sung and his political clique only intensified Kim Il Sung's belief that Beijing and Moscow would intervene in North Korea's domestic politics on behalf of their own interests.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, its longstanding concerns about external interference in domestic politics and regime survival crystallised into a

strong sense of self-reliance and anti-‘great power chauvinism’. In the wake of the worsening Sino-Soviet split, Kim Il Sung tried to expand his space for movement in domestic and foreign affairs by taking advantage of the antagonism between the two countries.<sup>5</sup> Conflict in the communist bloc served as an opportunity for North Korea because escalation made China and the Soviet Union reconsider North Korea’s strategic value, and both countries tried to curry favour. Along with rapid economic development, these courtships provided Kim Il Sung with an opportunity to launch his measures focused on self-reliance.

In order to implement this independent foreign policy, Pyongyang deliberately changed its stance toward the two neighbouring countries and, as a result, maintained the balance between them during the whole period of the Sino-Soviet split.<sup>6</sup> For instance, when Khrushchev maintained a position of peaceful coexistence vis-à-vis the West and de-Stalinisation in his foreign and domestic politics, Kim Il Sung was more attached to the Chinese than to the Soviets.<sup>7</sup> Yet as the Great Cultural Revolution swept through China, he restored closer ties with the Soviet Union. In this



Figure 1. On July 4, 1972, the South and North Korean governments announced a joint agreement, the first of its kind since the division of the peninsula. Image: The Academy of Korean Studies (AKS)

way, Kim removed both pro-Chinese and pro-Soviet groups from the high-ranking officials of the party and kept his distance from the two neighbours.

Along with a policy of balanced relations with Beijing and Moscow, Pyongyang made an effort to enhance relations with what was then called the 'Third World' as part of its pursuit of an independent foreign policy. By 1968, the number of the NAM (Non-Aligned Movement) countries with which North Korea had established diplomatic relations was almost two times higher than the number of communist countries. After Kim Il Sung consolidated favourable diplomatic relations with the Soviet bloc and the Third World, Pyongyang made a plan to extend its diplomatic influence into Japan and some European countries, which had hitherto been hostile to North Korea. Consequently, in 1966, those efforts led Kim Il Sung to declare the foreign policy of North Korea to be one of self-reliance, a policy that put emphasis on national self-determination and resistance to external influence in internal affairs.<sup>8</sup>

### **Détente and Pyongyang's Calculation for Survival**

For Kim Il Sung, the push for a self-reliant foreign policy was linked to the presence of the US forces on the Korean Peninsula. This was because US troops, stationed only a few miles away from the DMZ, posed a serious threat to Kim's regime. In this sense, Kim had taken into account the measures required to complete the withdrawal of the US troops from South Korea and conclude a peace treaty with the US.<sup>9</sup>

North Korea's attempts to diplomatically court the US intensified following the Sino-American rapprochement in 1972. For example, North Korea asked some Eastern European countries such as Romania to deliver its messages to Washington.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, in May 1974, it issued an official proposal for the face-to-face negotiations with the US to Gerald Ford (the US Vice President and President of the Senate) in the name of Hwang Jang-yop, the Chairman of Supreme People's Assembly (SPA).<sup>11</sup> In a letter to the US Congress, North Korea proposed the following: a pledge not to invade the other side; mutual arms reductions; withdrawal of UN forces from South Korea; military neutrality; and, as a final step, replacement of the Armistice Agreement with a peace treaty. In other words, what North Korea is seeking today is not all that different from what Kim Il Sung desired several decades ago, with the obvious difference being an existent rather than prospective nuclear capability in Pyongyang.

In addition to concerns about security, it is noteworthy that Kim's discontent with Chinese ambivalence towards North Korea was another motivation behind attempts at direct contact with Washington. Sino-DPRK relations had deteriorated rapidly because of the eruption of the Cultural Revolution in Chinese cities and the border region of Yanbian, and both governments publicized harsh criticism of the other.<sup>12</sup> When the Sino-American rapprochement came to the fore in the early 1970s,

however, North Korea unexpectedly described Nixon's visit to Beijing as 'the march of the defeated or a great victory of the Chinese people and revolutionary peoples worldwide' and expressed a more enthusiastic response to Sino-US détente than other communist countries.

Kim Il Sung confessed to a Polish delegation in 1973, 'If we provide hints about bad relations with our socialist neighbours in the North, it weakens our position vis-à-vis the enemy in the South.'<sup>13</sup> Clearly, the sudden thaw between China and the US had triggered a North Korean security dilemma, and pushed Kim to sympathise with the Chinese approach to the US. However, there are strategic reasons behind Kim Il Sung's unexpected response to the détente. First of all, with the advent of Nixon administration, the US sought to diminish its military commitment to the Vietnam War (Vietnamisation) and planned to withdraw substantial numbers of troops from its Asian allies, South Korea and Japan.<sup>14</sup> It is likely that Kim calculated that a similar US decision would be possible on the Korean Peninsula. His confidence was further strengthened by developments in New York. After the People's Republic of China assumed a permanent seat on the UN Security Council in 1971, North Korea believed that the Chinese would take an active role in representing its interests regarding



Figure 2. When Nixon paid a visit to Beijing in 1972, North Korea thought that the withdrawal of US forces from South Korea could be negotiated with the help of the Chinese. Image: Wikicommons.

Korean affairs.<sup>15</sup> In return for his assent to the process for détente in the region, therefore, Kim expected the Chinese to facilitate bilateral talks with the US and create a more favourable environment for the withdrawal of US troops and a peace treaty. In accordance with the Sino-American rapprochement, North Korea decided to open inter-Korean dialogue, resulting in the first official inter-Korean agreement, the 7.4 Joint Communiqué.

### **The Slide from Great Anticipation to Disappointment**

However, the Chinese did not meet North Korea's expectations. A report by a GDR delegation after a conversation with a Soviet diplomat, Kurbatov (1st Secretary of the USSR embassy to China), in Beijing clearly revealed the different calculations between Beijing and Pyongyang.<sup>16</sup> Kurbatov was convinced that, based on China's national interest, the Chinese only half-heartedly supported Korean unification and the withdrawal of the US forces from South Korea. First, a reunified Korea with a population of 50 million would possess and exert significant political influence in the region, which might be more disadvantageous to China. In addition, China could be willing to negotiate with the US about the withdrawal of United States Forces Korea (USFK) to the extent that North Korea did not stand against the Chinese positions and policies. Kim Il Sung expected the Chinese to push their American counterparts to accept his terms for the reunification and USFK withdrawal. However, the Chinese 'were said not to have insisted enough on the withdrawal of US troops from South Korea.'<sup>17</sup>

Even though conflicting relations between China and the USSR might have affected Soviet perceptions, it is evident that China did indeed hesitate to fully support North Korea's policy objectives. To some extent, China articulated North Korea's policies on Korea such as the peace treaty, the withdrawal of US troops, and developing a unification process on North Korea's terms.<sup>18</sup> During détente, however, both the US and China dealt with their respective allies and the Korean issues in a pragmatic manner so as not to disrupt the negotiation process between them.<sup>19</sup> China, as well as the US, prevented the two Koreas from influencing the talks in such a way that their demands might jeopardise Sino-American rapprochement. Accordingly, for the US and China, stability (or the status quo) in the Northeast Asian region was put ahead of drastic change. China, and even the USSR, changed their perceptions when détente came into effect. The presence of the US forces in South Korea was seen to serve an integral role in the preservation of regional stability.<sup>20</sup> In this sense, it is likely that China and the USSR calculated that US forces on the Korean Peninsula contributed to deterring any adventurist or provocative action that North or South Korea may take against the other. Despite a fraternal relationship born in the experiences of war, China was unwilling to support all North Korea's demands.

North Korea's complaints about China's reluctance intensified at the UN General Assembly, where the two Koreas competed to pass resolutions in favour of each other. In 1972, North Korea tried to push a comprehensive UN resolution on Korean issues, such as the dissolution of UNCURK (UN Commissions for the Unification and Rehabilitation of Korea and UNC (UN Command) in South Korea, the withdrawal of US troops from the peninsula, and the conclusion of a peace treaty. To this end, it coordinated with the Chinese representatives to the UN because North Korea was not an official member, either. On the contrary, South Korea, with the help of the US, preferred a step-by-step solution to the issues. Although North Korea reluctantly agreed to a compromise resolution, which focused only on the dissolution of UNCURK, upon the request of the Chinese, they felt betrayed by their ally.<sup>21</sup> From this time on, North Korea directly approached the US with its key concerns. Indeed, at the 29th UN General Assembly in 1974, North Korea unilaterally laid a bill demanding the immediate breakup of UNC, the conclusion of the peace treaty and withdrawal of the UN forces from South Korea at the same time.

Tripartite talks proposed by the DPRK in the late 1970s are another example of North Korea's willingness to act without China. After it became evident that the DPRK had failed to achieve its objectives at the UN, and the US rejected any form of bilateral negotiations with the DPRK, Kim Il Sung officially proposed tripartite talks between the US, ROK, and DPRK. China was not invited as a negotiating member. Since China was one of the four signatories to the Armistice Agreement, the deliberate exclusion of China showed the degree of North Korea's mistrust of Beijing.

Kim's disappointment with China is illustrated in the conversation between him and the Polish delegation to Pyongyang in 1973. According to the report from Polish delegation, Kim Il Sung 'explained that the DPRK and KWP had, and [still] have arguments with the PRC and the CCP .... The PRC applied pressure on the DPRK but we did not bend. They called us revisionists. Along the border the Chinese installed loudspeakers calling on our people to abandon the revisionist regime of Kim Il Sung.'<sup>22</sup> Kim believed that China wanted to fold North Korea into its sphere of influence, and did not care for his country's national interests. As a result, Kim decided that the normalisation of diplomatic relations with the US was the best means of getting a peace treaty and the removal of US forces from the peninsula.

## Notes

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