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The Future of Soviet – North Korean Relations

Harry Gelman, Norman D. Levin

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PROJECT AIR FORCE

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United States Air Force



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PREFACE

This report examines factors that have influenced the Soviet relationship with North Korea to the present time, and evaluates the prospects for this relationship over the next decade. It attempts, in particular, to isolate and weigh those factors that could make for significant change, particularly those that could contribute to greater instability on the Korean peninsula.

The report is one of a series produced by a Project AIR FORCE research effort that seeks to explore and assess "U.S. Security Policy in East Asia and the Implications for the Sino-Soviet-U.S. Triangle in the 1980s." Earlier studies completed under this project include:

Harry Gelman, *The Soviet Far East Buildup and Soviet Risk-Taking Against China*, R-2943-AF, August 1982.

Jonathan D. Pollack, *The Lessons of Coalition Politics: Sino-American Security Relations*, R-3133-AF, February 1984.

This work should be of interest to Air Force planners concerned with prospects for Soviet strategic policy in the Far East and with the strategic environment that may confront the Air Force in East Asia over the next decade. It should also be of interest to a wide spectrum of readers concerned with the security problems of Northeast Asia, particularly as they relate to Soviet policy in Asia.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The objective of this report is to isolate and weigh the factors that could significantly alter the nature of the Soviet-North Korean relationship, particularly those that could contribute to greater instability on the Korean peninsula.

From the perspectives of both the Soviet Union and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), the bilateral relationship has for many years been difficult and cool. From North Korea's perspective, the Soviet Union demonstrates small concern for the DPRK's four fundamental interests:

- Preserving the ruling (Kim Il-song) regime
- Maintaining North Korean independence
- Generating support for the objective of reunification on North Korean terms
- Developing support for other North Korean policy objectives, especially economic development and military modernization

Among these interests, North Korea's aspiration for independence is particularly important, with the Soviets perceived by Pyongyang as being more interested in its subservience than in its national independence. The cautious and conditional nature of Soviet support for these fundamental interests, particularly when compared with China's orientation, imputes a certain strategic logic to North Korea's relations with its two Communist neighbors: the "swing" toward China is both historic and "strategic" in nature; occasional "tilts" toward the Soviet Union are more "tactical" and temporary, and are generally designed to express momentary North Korean displeasure with particular policies of the People's Republic of China (PRC). This is not meant to suggest that the North Korean-PRC relationship is trouble-free, only that it is qualitatively different from that between North Korea and the Soviet Union.

From the Soviet perspective, the strain in the bilateral relationship stems from a complex mixture of Soviet attitudes concerning the North Korean regime. These include:

- A long-standing and deep resentment of many aspects of Kim Il-song's past and present behavior toward the Soviet Union
- An extreme wariness of what the USSR sees as Kim Il-song's propensity for adventurist risk-taking

- Very modest near-term expectations regarding what the Soviet Union can get from Kim's regime
- A moderate appraisal of the extent of Soviet vital interests in North Korea
- A clear view of the minimum that the USSR must do to safeguard its basic interests in Pyongyang
- Considerable confidence that, given this minimum Soviet input, those basic interests are reasonably secure
- Determination to do what is necessary to safeguard those basic interests but no more

As a result of these attitudes, the Soviets have adopted over the past ten to fifteen years a policy selectively limiting the extent of their new commitments to Pyongyang, while simultaneously lowering their expectations regarding the concessions they might hope to elicit from North Korea in the near future. At the same time, they have provided enough input into the North Korean economy to encourage Kim's regime to maintain at least minimally correct relations with the Soviet Union, to limit North Korean political offenses against the USSR, and to hold open options for the future. In effect, the Soviets have pursued a holding action against a day when different personalities and attitudes might come to prevail in Pyongyang.

Despite this basic, historical pattern, the nature of Soviet-North Korean relations could be significantly altered by several new factors that are gradually growing in importance. From the North Korean perspective, any major alteration will require changes in either North Korea's identification of its fundamental national interests or in its perceptions of trends and developments affecting these interests. Among the possible changes, those concerning Pyongyang's commitment to reunification on North Korean terms have the greatest potential for affecting its policies toward the Soviet Union. From the Soviet perspective, the chances of significant change will be governed by three main interwoven and interacting factors: the evolution of the North Korean succession process; gradual shifts in the balance between North and South Korea that may affect the behavior of the DPRK; and the evolution of the Soviet strategic position in Northeast Asia vis-à-vis China, Japan, and the United States. Among these, the latter has the greatest potential for altering Soviet policies toward North Korea.

The evidence reviewed in this report suggests that, from both the Soviet and North Korean perspectives, continuation of a basically cool and reserved relationship between the USSR and the DPRK remains the most likely prospect for the coming decade. The kinds of concessions on either side that would probably be required to produce

noteworthy changes in this relationship conflict in important ways with the view that each has consistently taken of its fundamental interests. Some minor improvements in the tone of the relationship have recently occurred, and this trend may continue. However, in the absence of major changes in North Korea's definition of national interest or perceptions of trends as they affect these interests—neither of which at the present time seems probable—or in Soviet policies toward the DPRK without such North Korean changes, it is unlikely that there will be a major modification in the Soviet-North Korean relationship that would engender significantly enhanced Soviet support of destabilizing actions in the 1980s.

Nevertheless, there is reason to believe that we are entering a rather fluid and dynamic period that might present Moscow and Pyongyang with both new dangers and new opportunities. Among the important dynamic elements are the Korean leadership succession, secular changes in the relative political, military, economic, and international positions of South and North Korea, evolution of the Japanese and Chinese postures toward the Soviet Union and the United States, and evolution of the strategic competition between the United States and USSR in the East Asia/Pacific region. In this environment, a number of factors could alter the forecast offered above.

From the North Korean perspective, the most volatile factor concerns perpetuation of the ruling regime. If active and expanded Soviet support became essential to the regime's basic existence, North Korean policies might indeed dramatically change. At this point, however, the prospects for such a state of affairs developing must be judged to be minimal.

The area with the most practical potential for change from North Korea's perspective concerns the objective of reunification on North Korean terms. The key question here is whether or not Pyongyang's past perception of itself as superior to South Korea undergoes major alteration. Should the conviction develop that it had lost its superiority and with it the prospect for ultimately reunifying Korea under its control, North Korea, particularly after Kim Il-song's demise, could well be inclined to modify its policies in an effort to enlist greater Soviet assistance. Such an inclination would be heightened by clear indications on the part of the Soviet Union of a willingness to assume greater risks in support of North Korea's version of reunification. Among the factors influencing North Korea's perception of the prospects for reunification, three seem likely to be particularly important: the nature of USSR and PRC policies toward South Korea; the state of Soviet and Chinese relations with the United States; and the evolution of South Korea's internal political, economic, and military situation.

On the Soviet side, there are two factors that could impel the Soviet leadership to consider important changes in policy toward Pyongyang which might involve the acceptance of risks hitherto considered unjustified. One would be the possibility of obtaining concrete security benefits—in the form of naval or air facilities in North Korea—that have thus far been ruled out by the DPRK's unwillingness to jeopardize its independence. Although it appears unlikely that the attitude of North Korea's present or prospective leadership will change sufficiently to make such radical concessions to the USSR possible, there is a modest possibility of such a change if North Korean anxieties over secular trends become sufficiently severe. The other factor would be a decision by the United States to use South Korea as a platform for long-range theater nuclear weapons directed at the Soviet Union. Such a decision could alter the Soviet evaluation of costs and risks enough to lead the USSR to restore the flow of advanced military hardware to North Korea even without policy changes in Pyongyang, and to take a much more supportive posture toward North Korean efforts to undermine the Republic of Korea. The analysis in this report suggests the need for careful attention to these issues.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In preparing this report we benefited enormously from the opportunity to exchange views with a range of scholars, officials, and analysts in Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the People's Republic of China. Although these individuals are too numerous to identify here, they made important contributions to our own understanding of Soviet-North Korean relations, which we gratefully acknowledge.

We also want to express our gratitude to two Rand colleagues, Frank Fukuyama and John Van Oudenaren, for their thoughtful and expeditious reviews of an initial draft of the report. Although we may not have addressed all of their points fully, we found their comments and suggestions uniformly helpful.

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I. THE CURRENT SOVIET-NORTH KOREAN RELATIONSHIP

THE NORTH KOREAN PERSPECTIVE

Introduction

The literature available concerning the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (DPRK) relations with the Soviet Union is dominated by three broad characteristics: first, it is sparse; second, it tends to focus on *Soviet* policies and perceptions; and third, when it does approach the subject from North Korea's perspective, it concerns itself principally with North Korean maneuverings in the Sino-Soviet dispute.¹ As a result, relations between North Korea and the Soviet Union have tended to be described in triangular (USSR-PRC-DPRK) terms, with few systematic efforts made to assess the nature and dynamics of the bilateral relationship itself.

The dominant theme emerging from this literature portrays a willful, skillful North Korea successfully manipulating the Sino-Soviet rivalry to its own advantage. By requiring each of the Communist rivals to "court" North Korea for its support, the rivalry has enabled Pyongyang to play one off against the other by "tilting" first in one and then the other direction. The result, according to this general portrayal, has been bolstered independence for North Korea and enhanced North Korean leverage vis-à-vis China and the Soviet Union.

Whatever the general utility of viewing North Korean policies in the context of the Sino-Soviet rivalry, there are several problems with such an approach for any attempt to assess the dynamics and future prospects of Soviet-North Korean relations. One is a tendency to exaggerate North Korea's skill in playing off one of its Communist neighbors against the other. To be sure, the Sino-Soviet rivalry may have helped prevent the two powers from uniting in such a way as to be able to dictate North Korean behavior. There is some doubt, however,

¹For representative examples, see Chin O. Chung, *Pyongyang Between Peking and Moscow: North Korea's Involvement in the Sino-Soviet Dispute, 1958-1975* (University, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1978); Wayne S. Kiyosaki, *North Korea's Foreign Relations—The Politics of Accommodation, 1945-75* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1976); and Asiatic Research Center (ed.), *The Triangular Relations of Mainland China, the Soviet Union and North Korea* (Seoul: Asiatic Research Center, Korea University, 1977).

whether such an ability ever existed and, if so, whether it could ever be reproduced.² More notable have been the negative consequences: North Korea has not been able to acquire the economic and military assistance it has desired (e.g., Mig-23s) by allegedly “tilting” first one way and then the other, and at times has suffered serious damage (examples include complete cutoff of Soviet aid and border conflicts with China). On balance, North Korea has not been able to use the rivalry to much of its own benefit.

A second and related problem is that such an approach overstates the amount of leverage North Korea derives as a result of the Communist competition. In fact, Pyongyang is in a fundamentally weak and disadvantageous position vis-à-vis its powerful neighbors. It needs much from them but has little to offer in return. Although the DPRK’s geostrategic importance affords it a certain amount of influence, North Korea has not been able to translate this importance into anything more than very cautious and *conditional* support from its two principal patrons. This is particularly true concerning matters touching directly upon great power interests. Far from a North Korean tail wagging the Russian or Chinese dog, therefore, North Korea has constantly had to scramble to adjust to policies of the USSR or the PRC which are often adopted for reasons having nothing to do with Pyongyang but which have an important effect upon it. The actual leverage of the DPRK has been extremely limited.

The major problem, however, is that such an approach tends to obscure the *basic* nature of North Korea’s relations with China and the Soviet Union and the underlying dynamics of the respective bilateral relationships. By overemphasizing the “tilts” and “swings” in North Korean policies, this approach suggests an equidistance which simply does not exist. In the process, it masks an important reality: it is “normal” for North Korea to have basically good relations with China; it is “normal” to have bad, or at least strained and difficult relations, with the Soviet Union. Changes in such matters as rhetorical support, media coverage, and personnel exchange reflect relatively marginal variations. To understand why this has been the case, it is necessary to look at Soviet-North Korean relations in terms of North Korea’s definition of national interest.

²The classic example cited concerns Soviet-Chinese collusion in August and September of 1956 to force Kim Il-song to reinstate certain Party members whom Kim had purged. If this indeed happened as described, it constituted crass intervention in North Korea’s internal affairs. On the other hand, however, Kim shortly thereafter reversed this reinstatement and again purged his opponents, obliterating their influence within the Party. This neither China nor the Soviet Union was able to prevent. For details on the intervention, see Robert Scalapino and Chong Sik Lee, *Communism in Korea* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 510-524.

North Korean Interests

As seen from the North Korean perspective, these interests are four-fold in nature. In order of importance, they are the following:

- Preserving the ruling (Kim Il-song) regime
- Maintaining North Korean independence
- Generating support for the objective of reunification on North Korean terms
- Developing support for other North Korean policy objectives, especially economic development and military modernization

These interests apply to both the USSR and the PRC and go a long way toward explaining why the characterization suggested above holds.

From North Korea's perspective, the Soviets have never shown much concern for these fundamental interests. Although they installed Kim Il-song and a few of his "Kapsan" faction (Manchurian-Korean) followers in important positions—along with a group of Soviet-Korean emigres—when they occupied North Korea at the end of World War II, the Soviets have demonstrated little enthusiasm for the Kim Il-song regime since the mid-to-late 1950s when it purged the other competing factions and consolidated its political power. They have been unsympathetic to North Korea's official ideology of *chuche* ("self-reliance") upon which the legitimacy of the Kim regime has heavily rested.³ They have been critical of the cult of Kim Il-song, which Kim has relied upon to sustain his virtually total political dominance. And they have been publicly silent and privately disdainful of Kim's intention to have his son, Chong-il, succeed him, a plan for political succession which Kim apparently sees as critical to the prospects for continuation of his "revolutionary tradition."⁴ Clear Soviet apprehension over some of the regime's more extreme actions (e.g., the capture of the *Pueblo*, the shooting down of a U.S. EC-121 reconnaissance plane, the raid on the South Korean Presidential mansion) has reinforced awareness in North Korea of the limited Soviet enthusiasm for the ruling regime.

³*Chuche* is a sort of catch-all body of doctrine emphasizing the importance of making indigenous needs and objectives the central standard in pursuing national policies. First mentioned in 1955, *chuche* was established as the central governing principle in the early 1960s. By 1972 it was officially canonized and codified in Article 4 of the constitution. Over the last decade it has been directly linked to the process of political succession.

⁴On January 18, 1984, Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) reported that Chong-il had received personal New Year's cards from two members of the Soviet leadership, Politburo party member Grishin and Secretary Rusakov. This report was testimony mainly to the North Korean thirst for Soviet recognition of the succession arrangement, which was still not forthcoming. On January 27, an unconfirmed Japanese press report quoted "diplomatic sources" as alleging that Chong-il had paid an unpublicized visit to Moscow in early January. If this report were eventually to be confirmed, it would signal a considerable shift in Soviet policy.

North Korean leaders similarly see little Soviet enthusiasm for their fundamental interest in national independence. Although the Soviets frequently lay claim to having liberated North Korea from Japanese colonial rule, much more salient from the North Korean perspective were their pervasive efforts in the early postwar years to establish North Korea as a satellite state. These efforts included not only attempts to secure political control through an elaborate network of Soviet "advisors" and, until 1948, the presence of Soviet military forces, but also to acquire control over the North Korean economy in an effort to subordinate it to Soviet economic needs and priorities.⁵ They also included de facto efforts to "Russify" North Korea through extensive programs of cultural penetration.⁶ Designed to form a Soviet satellite regime that would be "voluntarily" responsive to its dictates," such efforts by the Soviet Union resulted by 1950 in a North Korea that was "already well advanced toward becoming a republic of the USSR."⁷ Thereafter, the Soviets intervened on a number of occasions in North Korean internal politics, while manipulating economic and military assistance in an effort to compel certain kinds of North Korean behavior. In the process, North Korea came to see the Soviets as more interested in its subservience than in its aspiration for independence.

Among the four fundamental North Korean interests, this aspiration for independence has been particularly important. Indeed, except for the preservation of the Kim Il-song regime itself—which, until the problem of succession arose in the 1970s, had not been basically in question since Kim solidified his power—North Korea has had no higher national priority. This priority is rooted in Korea's historical experience. At one time or another in its modern history, Korea has been dominated or coveted by virtually all the great powers: it was a tributary of China, a target of Russia, and a colony of Japan. In the immediate postwar years, Korea was physically divided and occupied by the respective great powers on both sides of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). As described above, North Korea was thereafter subjected to

⁵The best account of these early years remains the account of the U.S. mission sent to Korea shortly after the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950 to study how the North Korean regime operated before the outbreak of hostilities. For details, see U.S. Department of State, *North Korea: A Case Study in the Techniques of Takeover* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1961). On the role of Soviet "advisors," see Chong Sik Lee and Ki Wan Oh, "The Russian Faction in North Korea," *Asian Survey*, April 1968, pp. 270–288.

⁶In a practice reminiscent of Japanese colonialism, the Russian language was made compulsory in North Korean middle schools, and Soviet advisors sought to oversee the choice and direct the education of those selected to study in Soviet schools.

⁷U.S. Department of State, pp. 119–120.

sustained Soviet efforts at de facto integration. In this context, Soviet insensitivities to North Korea's desire for independence and denigration of its emphasis upon "self-reliance" evoke a visceral response in Pyongyang. This contributes more than any single element to the character of DPRK-USSR relations.⁸

Also a factor, however, has been the limited Soviet support for the other fundamental North Korean interests. Although the Soviets have paid lip-service to the DPRK's consistent objective of reunification on North Korean terms, for example, Pyongyang is acutely aware of the limits to this support. The Soviets refused to participate directly in the Korean War despite North Korean hopes for Soviet infantry divisions and air strikes in retaliation for U.S. attacks upon the North.⁹ Moreover, after initially encouraging Kim Il-song in his effort to unify Korea militarily, the Soviets then pressured him to end the conflict far short of realizing his objective. Since then, they have carefully avoided any actions that involve a risk of being drawn into a conflict with the United States. Coupled with Soviet actions in the Cuban missile crisis and its "peaceful co-existence" and detente policies thereafter, such behavior has convinced North Korea of the cautious and conditional quality of Soviet support for Pyongyang's reunification objective. The refusal of the USSR to endorse the DPRK as the sole legitimate sovereign state on the Korean peninsula has undoubtedly driven this point home further.¹⁰

From the North Korean perspective, Soviet support of other North Korean policy objectives has been similarly qualified. Clearly, the USSR has provided North Korea a substantial amount of economic assistance, particularly during the first two decades of the DPRK's

⁸The Soviets remind North Korea both directly and indirectly of its indebtedness—and indeed dependence—on the "socialist community." The following retort to Pyongyang's emphasis on "self-reliance" is one of the more subtle reminders: "As before, the socialist countries feature prominently in the Republic's [North Korea's] foreign economic relations, supply it with products it badly needs, help it build several enterprises and maintain scientific and technological cooperation with it. The implementation of the economic programme adopted by the 6th WPK (Workers' Party of Korea) Congress will largely depend on the further development of contacts with socialist countries. . . ." M. Glebova and V. Mikheyev, "Some Aspects of Economic Development of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea," *Far Eastern Affairs*, January-March 1983, pp. 88-97. This journal is an English language translation of the Russian journal *Problemy Dal'nego Vostoka*, published by the Far East Institute of the Soviet Academy of Sciences.

⁹Glenn Paige and Dong Jun Lee, "The Post-War Politics of Communist Korea," in Robert Scalapino (ed.), *North Korea Today* (New York: Praeger, 1963), pp. 18-19.

¹⁰The Soviets have publicly referred to "both Korean states" and alluded to the precedent of the German experience. For this and other useful points, see Ralph N. Clough, "The Soviet Union and the Two Koreas," in Donald Zagoria (ed.), *Soviet Policy in East Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 180.

existence, including credits, grant-in-aid funds, and supplementary economic and technical assistance.¹¹ It has also canceled or deferred payment on certain loan obligations. Moreover, North Korean leaders are aware that throughout the DPRK's history the Soviet Union has been the primary foreign supplier of military equipment, although such assistance has declined greatly since the early 1970s.

From the North Korean perspective, however, the value of this assistance has been tempered by the fact that the Soviets drive a hard bargain. North Korea has criticized the USSR, for example, for never providing all it requested, and for limiting much of what it did provide to second-rate and outdated equipment. It has also criticized the Soviets for "having sold equipment for a much higher price than the international market price, while acquiring gold and other materials for a much cheaper price."¹² The implication that the Soviets have required North Korea to use its gold reserves to cover shortfalls in their bilateral economic dealings suggests a considerably less benign approach than the sheer magnitude of Soviet assistance might imply.

In addition, North Korea sees the Soviets as having sought to use their economic and military assistance as a means for exerting political pressure on Pyongyang. They have delayed and temporarily embargoed exports of contracted equipment to express displeasure with particular North Korean policies, going so far as to cut off aid completely for several years in the mid-1960s when Soviet-North Korean relations plunged to their lowest level. The Soviets also refused to bail North Korea out a decade later when it became the first Communist country ever to default on its debts.¹³ They have also refused for more than a decade to provide Pyongyang with the advanced airplanes and missiles it feels it badly needs—much of which the Soviets have long ago provided to other, seemingly less important allies. Such experiences clearly rankle the North Koreans and feed their general image of the Soviet Union as a "big, threatening neighbor that would like to dominate North Korea as it does Mongolia."¹⁴

¹¹For a detailed summary of this assistance, see George Ginsburgs, "Soviet Development Grants and Aid to North Korea, 1945-1980," *Asia Pacific Community*, Fall 1982, pp. 42-63. For a representative Soviet account, see V. Andreyev and V. Osipov, "Relations of the USSR and the European Socialist Countries with the DPRK in the 1970s," *Far Eastern Affairs*, January-March 1982, pp. 52-62.

¹²*Rodong Shinmun*, September 7, 1963, cited in Ginsburgs, p. 51.

¹³Ralph Clough quotes a senior Soviet specialist on Northeast Asia as having told him that when the North Koreans asked the Soviets for hard currency to help them pay off these debts, they were turned down with the advice: "You're always talking about self-reliance, why don't you practice it?" Clough, footnote 16, p. 184.

¹⁴Clough, p. 187.

In contrast, the Chinese have been far more supportive of North Korea's fundamental national interests. With the exception of a brief period during the Cultural Revolution, they have been highly sensitive to and solicitous of the Kim Il-song regime in Pyongyang, as indicated by the extraordinary reception given Kim on his September 1982 trip to the People's Republic of China (PRC). They have also given their de facto endorsement of Kim's plan to have his son, Chong-il, succeed him, an endorsement which has apparently been a key element in the further strengthening of DPRK-PRC ties in the past couple of years.¹⁵

The Chinese have also endorsed Kim's emphasis on "self-reliance" and carefully avoided anything that would smack of interference in North Korean internal affairs. A good recent example concerns the October 1983 bombing attempt on the life of South Korean President Chun in Rangoon, which the Chinese managed to tiptoe around while still making clear their disapprobation.¹⁶ As a vital buffer to Soviet expansion, North Korean independence is clearly of greater utility to the PRC than it is to the Soviet Union. This fact is not lost on the North Koreans.

Similarly, China has maintained throughout the postwar period a firm commitment to North Korea's position on reunification. Unlike the Soviets, the Chinese backed up their commitment with the direct participation of combat forces in the Korean War. Also unlike the Soviets, they have publicly endorsed the view that North Korea is the only legitimate sovereign state on the peninsula.¹⁷ Despite recent evidence of Chinese interest in stability on the peninsula, the PRC has sustained its rhetorical support of North Korean policies.

¹⁵According to reports, China agonized over the decision to endorse Chong-il for almost a year because of its own efforts to eliminate "feudal" practices and personality cults before deciding to throw in its support. See, for example, the *Far East Economic Review*, December 15, 1983, p. 17.

¹⁶A KCNA report quoted Chinese Communist Party leader Hu Yaobang, after implying China's opposition to all such activities, as having disposed of the issue with the statement that "relations between us are those of trusting and learning from each other and supporting and respecting each other." *Far East Economic Review*, December 15, 1983, p. 17.

¹⁷This endorsement came in the joint communique issued at the end of Kim Il-song's visit to China in April 1975. The relevant part of the communique reads as follows: "More and more countries in the world have established diplomatic relations with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. As the sole legal sovereign state of the Korean nation, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is enjoying an ever higher international prestige and playing an ever greater role in international affairs" (italics added). For the full text of the joint communique, see Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), *People's Republic of China*, April 28, 1975, pp. A15-A20. Some scholars see this endorsement as an implicit promise on the part of the PRC not to recognize the Republic of Korea. For this interpretation, see Harold C. Hinton, "China and the Korea Question," *Journal of Northeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, March 1982, p. 96.

The 1975 DPRK-PRC joint communique exemplifies this Chinese tendency to defer—much more than does the Soviet Union—to both North Korea’s sensitivities concerning independence and its policy propensities concerning the Korean peninsula. After first stressing how Kim’s visit “is a major event of historic significance,” the communique goes on to laud the North Korean leader personally;¹⁸ to support Kim’s emphasis upon independence and “self-reliance”;¹⁹ and, having endorsed North Korea as the “sole legal sovereign state of the Korean nation,” to support unreservedly its position on reunification.²⁰ The communique further condemns “U.S. imperialism” and calls for both the dissolution of the United Nations Command and withdrawal of “all the armed forces of the United States. . . .” It is on the basis of such treatment that the communique can boast that “completely identical views were reached on all the questions discussed,” and that “the friendship and revolutionary unity” of the two sides is “indestructible.”

The Chinese have backed up this strong rhetorical support, moreover, with impressive amounts of economic aid, including free grants and concessionary trade terms, as well as military assistance. Given its limited economic capabilities, such assistance attests to the open identification by the PRC with the stabilization and perpetuation of the North Korean regime.²¹

¹⁸“The warm welcome and reception the Chinese people accorded to the party and government delegation . . . is a manifestation of the Chinese people’s high respect for and trust in Comrade Kim Il-song, the Korean people’s respected and beloved leader. . . .”

¹⁹“The Chinese side pays high tribute to the Workers’ Party of Korea headed by Comrade Kim Il-song, which has applied the universal truth of Marxism-Leninism to the concrete practice of the Korean revolution . . . [and has] adhered to the socialist road, implemented the revolutionary line of independence, self-reliance and self-defense . . . thus building the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea into a socialist country with a solid and self-reliant national economy. . . .”

²⁰“The Chinese side reaffirms its resolute support to the Korean people in their just struggle for the independent and peaceful reunification of their fatherland. . . . The Government of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea has repeatedly put forward correct propositions and reasonable proposals for the reunification of the fatherland. In particular, the three principles for the independent and peaceful reunification of the fatherland and the five-point proposition for preventing national division and reunifying the fatherland, put forward by President Kim Il-song, have charted the correct way for settling the question of the reunification of Korea, and they enjoy the resolute backing of the entire Korean people and extensive international support. . . .”

²¹For this point and further details, see Chin-Wee Chung, “North Korea’s Foreign Relations—A Study of Pyongyang’s Attitude in the Sino-Soviet Dispute,” in Chong-Shik Chung and Gahb-Chol Kim (eds.), *North Korean Communism* (Seoul: Research Center for Peace and Unification, 1980), p. 351 *et passim*.

Strategic Logic

In this context, it is not surprising that basically good relations with China and basically bad, or at least difficult, relations with the Soviet Union should be the "normal" pattern. This is not to suggest that the DPRK-PRC relationship is trouble-free. Indeed, there is considerable evidence that the Chinese find Pyongyang a difficult ally. Seen from the North Korean perspective, however, the PRC is an essential counterweight to a big and threatening neighbor. It is this perspective that imparts a strategic logic to North Korea's relations with its Communist neighbors: the "swing" toward China is both historic and "strategic" in nature; "tilts" toward the Soviet Union are more "tactical" and temporary, and are generally designed to express North Korean displeasure with particular policies of the PRC.

This strategic logic exists independently of other considerations. It is bolstered further by a host of historical and cultural factors. To North Koreans, images of the Soviets stripping watches from the wrists of men and raping women when they occupied the northern part of the country after World War II remain vivid. So too do memories of the Soviets demanding factories and internal political change in exchange for Soviet largesse. Such memories are solidified by Soviet arrogance and condescension in their personal interactions with North Koreans. Together with their behavior in the Cuban missile crisis, the war in Vietnam, and the invasion of Afghanistan, these factors have contributed to a North Korean perception of the Soviets as not only big and threatening but as unreliable, self-centered, and crass. Such perceptions suggest that any *fundamental* changes in Soviet-North Korean relations will be difficult to achieve.

Recent North Korean commentaries on the twenty-second anniversaries of Pyongyang's respective friendship treaties with the USSR and the PRC highlight the fundamentally differing perceptions of North Korea concerning these two relationships. A signed article in the *Rodong Sinmun* of July 6, 1983, entitled "Daily Developing Korean-Soviet Friendship" makes the DPRK-USSR treaty sound almost like a pact between antagonists. After defining the treaty's importance in the general terms of "the struggle of the Korean and Soviet peoples against imperialism and for the victory of the cause of socialism and communism," the article describes the bilateral relationship as having developed "on the principles of complete equality, mutual respect for sovereignty, non-interference in each other's internal affairs and comradely cooperation. . . ." The article concludes rather blandly with the hope that the "friendship and solidarity with the Soviet people will further

strengthen and develop” on the basis of Marxism-Leninism and proletarian internationalism.

The comparable article in the July 11, 1983, *Rodong Sinmun* commemorating the treaty with China, in contrast, was entitled “*Everlasting* Korea-China Friendship” (italics added) and was considerably more effusive. “The Korean and Chinese peoples have waged the joint struggle against Japanese and American imperialist aggressors for a long time,” the article noted, “during which they have always valued their friendship as revolutionary comrades-in-arms and their obligation as class brothers, going through thick and thin together. . . . Our people will staunchly fight for the victory of the common cause of socialism in firm unity with the fraternal Chinese people in any storm and stress.” In an obvious allusion to the question of political succession, the article concluded with the observation that “The great Korea-China friendship which was sealed in blood and has withstood all trials of history will consolidate and develop *generation after generation*” (italics added). This allusion was totally lacking from the article concerning relations with the Soviet Union.

The differing North Korean perceptions of these two relationships are also reflected in changes over time in the respective bilateral trade relationships. As indicated in Table 1, the percentage of North Korea’s total trade which the Soviet Union represents declined from nearly 85 percent in 1955, when Kim Il-song began to consolidate his power, to roughly 25 percent in 1978. Over the same period, trade with the PRC rose from 9 to 20 percent of North Korea’s total transactions. As indicated in Table 2, the North Korean share of total Soviet trade today is less than one-third the figure of the early 1970s, declining from 1.5 and 1.9 percent in 1970 and 1971 to less than 0.5 percent in 1983. Although the size of Soviet-North Korean trade has gradually grown and the Soviet Union is still North Korea’s largest trading partner, bilateral trade remains small in absolute terms and a generally declining percentage of each nation’s total trade transactions.

THE SOVIET PERSPECTIVE

Introduction

The Soviet perspective on North Korea is a complex mixture, the cumulative result of several decades of experience with the Pyongyang regime, compounded by both hopes and concerns about the future. Some of the key elements in this mixture of Soviet attitudes are:

- A long-standing, deep resentment of many aspects of Kim Il-song’s past and present behavior toward the Soviet Union.

Table 1
 NORTH KOREA'S TRADE WITH USSR AND PRC, 1955-1978
 (Millions of U.S. dollars)

Year	Total Trade	Trade with USSR	Percent of Total	Trade with PRC	Percent of Total
1955	105.3	84.9	80.6	9.5	9.0
1956	140.3	105.0	74.8	14.5	10.3
1957	214.8	122.5	57.0	58.6	27.2
1958	290.0	105.1	36.2		
1959	348.0	125.7	36.1		
1960	320.0	114.1	35.7		
1961	326.4	156.1	47.8		
1962	352.5	168.9	47.9	92.4	26.2
1963	420.8	170.2	40.4		
1964	415.6	163.6	39.4		
1965	441.1	178.1	40.4		
1966	463.4	177.9	38.4		
1967	500.0	218.3	43.7		
1968	N.A.	293.1	N.A.		
1969	696.1	328.2	47.1	110 ^a	15.9
1970	761	373	49	100	13.1
1971	909	503	55.3	135	14.9
1972	1022	461	45.1	200	19.6
1973	1377	482	35	250	18.2
1974	2005	454	22.6	282	14.1
1975	1927	467	24.2	298	15.5
1976	1552	400	25.7	218	14.0
1977	1644	447	27.2	300	18.2
1978	2204	555	25.2	440	20.0

SOURCES: Frederica M. Bunge (ed.), *North Korea: A Country Study* (Washington D.C.: Headquarters, Department of Army, PAM 550-81, 1981), pp. 255-256, and Joseph Chung, *The North Korean Economy*, (Stanford, California: Hoover Institution Press, 1974), pp. 110-111.

^aEstimate

- Considerable wariness of Kim, on several specific grounds.
- Fairly modest near-term expectations regarding what the Soviet Union can get from Kim's regime.
- A moderate appraisal of the extent of Soviet vital interests in North Korea.
- A fairly clear view of the minimum that the Soviet Union must do to safeguard basic Soviet interests in Pyongyang.
- Considerable confidence that given this minimum Soviet input, those hard-core Soviet interests are reasonably secure.

Table 2

SOVIET-NORTH KOREAN TRADE, 1969-1983

Year	DPRK-USSR Trade (millions of rubles)			DPRI as Percent of Total USSR Foreign Trade		
	Total	USSR Exports	USSR Imports	Total	Exports	Imports
1983	587.4	262.4	325.0	0.46		
1982	681	318	363	0.6	.5	.6
1981	529	279	250	0.5	.5	.4
1980	572.1	287.9	284.2	0.6	.6	.7
1979	491.8	235.4	256.4	0.6		
1978	378.1	176.5	201.6	0.5		
1977	328.7	164.7	164.0	0.5		
1976	300.5	181.8	118.7	0.5		
1975	338.2	186.8	151.4	0.6		
1974	343.2	194.3	148.9	0.9		
1973	357.3	224.0	133.3	1.1		
1972	380.0	251.6	128.4	1.5		
1971	452.3	330.1	122.2	1.9		
1970	329.3	207.0	122.3	1.5		
1970	335.9	207.0	128.9	1.5		
1969	295.3	181.4	113.9	1.5		

SOURCES: The 1983 data are taken from the monthly *Vneshniaia torgovlia* (Foreign Trade), No. 3, March 1984, Supplement. The 1980-1982 data appear in the statistical yearbook *Narodnoe khoziaistvo SSSR* (USSR National Economy), published annually by the USSR Central Statistical Administration. The 1969-1979 data are taken from the annual volumes of *Vneshniaia torgovlia SSSR* (USSR Foreign Trade), published by the USSR Foreign Trade Ministry.

- Determination to do what is necessary to safeguard those modest basic interests, but no more. Throughout the last decade, this determination was based on a firm conviction that Soviet steps to satisfy Kim's larger demands on the USSR—discussed below—would not bring subsequent rewards from Kim commensurate with the attendant costs or dangers.
- Finally, a vague sense that changes in this long-established calculus of Soviet interests may now be in the making, as a result of dynamic factors at work that might eventually confront the USSR with both new dangers and new opportunities. Among the most important of these factors are the Korean leadership succession, secular changes in the relative political, military, economic, and international positions of South and North Korea, the evolution of the Japanese and Chinese postures

toward the Soviet Union and the United States, and the evolution of the strategic competition between the Soviet Union and the United States in East Asia.

In the discussion to follow, each of these considerations is reviewed in turn.

Soviet Resentment of North Korean Independence

Underlying all else in the traditional Soviet attitude toward the Pyongyang regime has been a sense of simmering outrage over a lost patrimony, over the impudent behavior of a former protege and subordinate. The Soviets have never forgotten that it was they who placed Kim Il-song in power at the close of World War II.²² The constant Soviet public reiteration to North Korea that it was the Soviet armed forces, and not Kim Il-song, who "liberated" the country from the Japanese is therefore intended not only to reassert a claim to Korean gratitude, but also to remind Kim that the USSR was the original source of his personal authority and legitimacy. Just as the Soviet leaders have never fully reconciled themselves to their loss of authority, mostly since Stalin's death, over other portions of Stalin's empire—Yugoslavia, China, Albania, and to some extent, Romania—so they continue to regard North Korea as an outpost in temporary revolt. The fact that they have known for many years that there was little that they could prudently do to restore Kim to Eastern European-style obedience has not made his defiance of his original sponsors more acceptable.

²²From the Soviet perspective, Kim was only one of a whole series of exiled and sometimes obscure Communist leaders whom Stalin arbitrarily selected—from among other Communist alternatives—to install in power more or less simultaneously in a variety of countries in the wake of Soviet military advances beyond Soviet borders toward the close of World War II. It may be presumed that Kim, like his Eastern European counterparts, was picked as a result of an appraisal in Moscow that he would remain a pliable instrument who would display lasting obedience to the Soviet Union. Such obedience has subsequently been enforced in most of Eastern Europe, primarily as a result of the continuing Soviet military presence that has made it possible to bring defiant leaders and populations to heel. On the other hand, where Soviet bayonets have been lacking, in Yugoslavia, Albania, and Romania, local regimes have successfully asserted their independence or autonomy. The evolution of the North Korean protege regime has followed an analogous pattern. The Soviet leaders today undoubtedly regard Stalin's withdrawal of Soviet troops from North Korea in 1948 as the initial key error that made possible Kim's consolidation of his personal power and his eventual assertion of independence, a decade later, from Stalin's heirs.

Kim's Ingratitude for Soviet Help

Superimposed on this basic Soviet grievance against Kim has been a series of other grievances. First, the Soviets see North Korea, like China, as profoundly ungrateful for past Soviet assistance. Whereas Pyongyang may remember Soviet behavior during the Korean War largely in terms of what the USSR did not do—the Soviet failure to match the “blood sacrifice” provided by China²³—the Soviets have a different perspective: they remember what they regard as the large material sacrifice they made to supply the North Korean war effort in support of Kim Il-song's ambition to conquer the South, which is now seen in retrospect as having been a hare-brained scheme. Similarly, the Soviets see the major inputs they have made over the years to North Korean industrialization as having been poorly repaid, in either economic or political terms. They remember the Soviet economic assistance furnished Pyongyang before and immediately after the Korean war, followed over the next decade by Kim's violent rejection of Khrushchev's effort to preserve the authority over Pyongyang bequeathed by Stalin to his heirs. They remember the second round of economic assistance launched by Khrushchev's successors in 1965, followed in turn by what the Soviets regard as fresh displays of North Korean ingratitude during the 1970s, considered below.

In sum, although the Soviet leaders probably regard the help furnished Pyongyang as having brought the USSR some modest political benefits—by preserving a minimal Soviet stake in the peninsula—this political payoff has been only marginal and probably not commensurate, in Soviet eyes, with the scope of the cumulative Soviet investment in the DPRK regime. This Soviet perception, as we also shall see below, colors the Soviet view of the kinds of help now appropriate for North Korea.

²³Soviet propaganda today is eloquent in advancing the claim that the Soviet Union showed itself “true to its internationalist duty” during the Korean war by supplying “material, moral and diplomatic support.” The Soviets list aid “with weapons, ammunition, transport equipment, fuel, commodities, foodstuffs and medicines” as having been “of paramount importance” to Pyongyang's war effort. Nevertheless, the Soviets are obviously sensitive to the fact that they, unlike the Chinese, were unwilling to accept the risks inherent in overt participation in the war. They therefore point to the fact that “Soviet air force divisions were stationed in Chinese provinces bordering on Korea, to cover the Korean People's Army's rear, and veteran Soviet pilots took part in operations.” Kim almost certainly knows this to be true. Not content with this list of claimed services, however, they claim in addition that “the Soviet Union was ready to send five armored divisions to Korea if the situation worsened.” Kim may be much more dubious about this. See, for example, B. Mikhailov, “Thirty-five Years of Soviet-Korean Cooperation,” *Far Eastern Affairs*, No. 4, Fall 1980, p. 73.

North Korea's Orientation Toward China

Second, the Soviet sense of Kim's ingratitude has been closely bound up with his behavior toward China. Although most vividly displayed in the early 1960s, when Kim openly sided with Beijing in rejecting Khrushchev's efforts to coerce China, some degree of North Korean partiality for China over the Soviet Union has been displayed at all times in the last twenty-five years, except for four Cultural Revolution years (1966-1969) when all of Chinese foreign policy was distorted by Maoist fanaticism. As earlier noted, North Korean behavior toward both Moscow and Beijing has oscillated somewhat over the years, but these fluctuations have generally occurred within a fairly narrow range, around a norm of predominant inclination toward the Chinese. The Soviets are aware that although the warmth of Sino-Korean relations has varied, Pyongyang has rarely been truly neutral, and has *never* shown preference for Moscow except for those four aberrant years of the late 1960s, when it was in effect driven away by the Maoists. It seems clear that over the past twenty-five years, Soviet diplomatic representatives in Pyongyang have become accustomed to finding themselves severely isolated in a cold and rather hostile environment; and over most of that period, Chinese dealings with the North Koreans have been at least somewhat less constrained. In sum, looking back over the panorama of the past, the Soviet leaders are likely to believe that they labor under a permanent, built-in disadvantage in geopolitical competition with the PRC for predominant influence in Korea.

The Soviets are probably well aware of the underlying reasons. Leaving aside all policy issues at stake among the three states, the North Koreans are normally oriented more toward China than toward the Soviet Union because of greater cultural affinity, because of the Chinese role in the Korean war, and, as suggested above, because Beijing is perceived as much less of a threat to Pyongyang's independence and authority. China is much weaker than the Soviet Union. The Soviet leaders are the heirs of the Stalinist empire from which Kim Il-song seceded, and the North Koreans regard them as having irridentist longings for their lost control over Pyongyang. Indeed, it is the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), far more than the Chinese party, that continues to harbor pretensions of universal authority in the Communist world, and whose ideological claims are affronted by Kim Il-song's ideological pretensions. It is the Soviets, much more than the Chinese, who have repeatedly sought to coerce Pyongyang, and who have also used their military power to dominate other Communist states. The Soviets are therefore necessarily the primary,

although by no means the only, targets of Kim's frequent attacks against what he terms "dominationism." The underlying "normal" North Korean preference for China is thus rooted in geopolitical realities, but this fact has not made Kim's behavior any more palatable to the Soviet leaders.

Obstruction of Soviet Interests

Third, the Soviets have perceived Kim's conduct in the broader international arena as sometimes offensive to Soviet interests. It is true that even in the worst periods of Soviet-North Korean relations there have always been many issues on which the views and interests of the two states coincided, as is the case today. It is this coincidence of views that enables the USSR and DPRK to sometimes work in parallel, albeit separately, in certain Third World countries.²⁴ On other issues, however, the Soviets have periodically found North Korea's behavior obstructionist and annoying. Within the Communist world, North Korean conduct has repeatedly contributed to Soviet defeats in the Soviet party's recurrent efforts to shore up its international authority. The North Koreans not only opposed Soviet attempts to coerce China at the world Communist meeting of 1960, but refused to attend the subsequent such meeting Moscow organized in 1969. Pyongyang also sided with China in opposing Khrushchev's sporadic efforts to reach agreements with the United States between 1959 and 1964. More recently, the Soviets have found the North Koreans active behind the scenes in obstructing Cuban efforts to promote Soviet influence within the Non-Aligned Movement. Finally, the Soviets have found particularly annoying Pyongyang's 1979 condemnation of Vietnam's Soviet-backed attack on Cambodia, and the consistent North Korean refusal to support Soviet policy in Indochina.

²⁴North Korean military aid to the Third World affects Soviet interests and presents an ambiguous and variegated picture. The two most important North Korean motives for aid activities appear to be a desire to obtain hard-currency earnings and a desire to strengthen the DPRK's relative position in its international rivalry with the Republic of Korea. Most North Korean sales and services furnished for these two reasons seem to be undertaken without regard for Soviet interests, and may sometimes reinforce, sometimes obstruct Soviet policy, depending upon circumstances. At the same time, Pyongyang also appears impelled by its long-term confrontation with the United States in the Korean peninsula, as well as by its ideological assumptions, to render occasional help to radical states or groups hostile to U.S. policy in different parts of the world. Such activities often run in parallel with Soviet policy and are probably somewhat useful to the USSR, particularly in Latin America. Even in these cases, however, North Korean coordination with the Soviet Union appears fragmentary at best, and sometimes nonexistent. In no case does North Korea, like East Germany, act at Soviet behest or regard itself as a Soviet proxy.

Most recently, as one consequence of the further improvement of Sino-Korean relations since 1982, the Soviets have apparently found themselves excluded from some North Korean tactical decisions—to which the Chinese are obviously privy—over diplomatic strategy regarding the Korean peninsula. Soviet leaders are likely to be particularly annoyed at the Sino-Korean coordination—evidently without Moscow—that preceded Pyongyang's shift of position in early 1984 to accept, for the first time, the notion of Pyongyang-Seoul-Washington talks with all three parties as full participants. Regardless of North Korea's motives in making this shift—to be considered later—the Soviets are likely to be chagrined over the contrast between Beijing's role in Pyongyang's diplomatic maneuvers and their own.

Against this background, the U.S. suggestion that China—but not the USSR—be included in any such talks is likely to further exasperate the Soviets, and Moscow would undoubtedly be incensed if North Korea ever consented to any such proposal. To be sure, the Soviets were probably reasonably confident—even before Pyongyang announced its rejection of the U.S. suggestion—that North Korea would not give consent, both because of reluctance to provoke the Soviets that far and, more fundamentally, because of unwillingness to sanction the step toward cross-recognition of the two Koreas that would be implicit in Chinese participation in four-power talks. Moreover, the Soviets are aware of North Korea's extreme wariness of great power involvement and the possibility of losing control over reunification matters. For this reason alone, North Korea is not likely to readily allow a major and direct role for any of the great powers. Nevertheless, given the fact that China enjoys better relations with both Pyongyang and Washington than does the USSR, the Soviets are likely to remain intensely suspicious over the possibility that China may play an ongoing role as intermediary between North Korea and the United States.

Soviet Concern Over Kim's Adventurism

In addition to all these grievances, the Soviets have long regarded Kim Il-song as a dangerous man.²⁵ They see his overriding preoccupation with attaining control of South Korea as at best peripheral to Soviet interests, and at worst capable of leading the USSR into grave risks for the sake of marginal benefit. They perceive Kim as having a

²⁵Although the Soviets surely recognize that the attitudes attributed to Kim are widespread in the North Korean elite, it is characteristic of their thinking to personalize their judgments and resentments, focusing on the individual at the top of the power structure.

proven record of adventurist provocation of the United States. The seizure of the *Pueblo* in January 1968, the downing of the U.S. EC-121 reconnaissance aircraft in April 1969, and the North Korean murder of two U.S. officers at Panmunjom in 1976 have cumulatively fixed in the Soviet mind an image of Kim as a leader whose behavior is not predictable and who could at any moment plunge the USSR into unforeseen military confrontation with America. This Soviet sense of latent danger in Kim's proclivities is reinforced on the one hand by the existence of a Soviet-North Korean mutual defense treaty, and on the other hand by the presence in South Korea of U.S. forces armed with advanced weapons. The Soviet leaders, who place great store in advance calculation of the costs, risks, and potential payoff of any Soviet venture, are reluctant to allow their choices—and the possibility of nuclear war with America—to be unilaterally shaped by Kim Il-song.

In addition to Kim's occasional risk-taking regarding the United States, the Soviets probably see the cumulative record of North Korean behavior toward the South over the last two decades as disturbing in view of the U.S. military presence in South Korea. The attack on the South Korean Presidential residence, the periodic dispatch of sabotage and bombing teams, the construction of tunnels in the Demilitarized Zone, and, most recently, the bombing attack against visiting South Korean officials in Rangoon have periodically reinforced this Soviet perception of North Korean policy. It seems clear that the Soviets do not trust Pyongyang's judgment in an environment they consider permanently risky, particularly since they are apparently given no voice in North Korean decisions or warning about new North Korean adventures.

It should be stressed that this Soviet concern about North Korean behavior toward the South arises primarily because of the U.S. presence with advanced weapons in South Korea and the attendant risk that the Soviet Union could be dragged into nuclear war with the United States. In the absence of such an American presence, Soviet reservations about an assertive North Korean posture toward the South would be greatly diminished. Consequently, should there ever be a radical reduction of the U.S. military presence in South Korea, perhaps as a result of diversion of U.S. forces in response to a crisis elsewhere, it can be anticipated that the Soviets might sense significantly less risk for themselves in encouraging North Korean behavior they had previously considered adventurist.²⁶

²⁶There is, in the background, a second factor which might give the Soviets pause: the prospect that Japanese rearmament might be considerably spurred by a significant growth in instability in the Korean peninsula, and even more so by an outbreak of actual fighting. Nevertheless, this factor is probably a less powerful constraint on Moscow than

The Contraction of Soviet Commitments and Expectations

As a cumulative result of all aspects of the Soviet experience with Kim Il-song's North Korea, the Soviets during the 1970s appear to have adopted a policy selectively limiting the extent of their new commitments to Pyongyang—economic, military, and political—while simultaneously lowering their expectations regarding the concessions they might hope to elicit from North Korea in the near future in return for Soviet benefits. At the same time, they have considered it necessary to continue providing sufficient input into the North Korean economy to furnish incentive for Kim's regime to maintain at least minimally correct relations with the Soviet Union, to limit the extent of North Korean political offenses against the USSR, and to hold open options for the future. In effect, the Soviets have pursued a holding action against a day when different personalities—and a better attitude—might come to prevail in Pyongyang. This conservative, minimalist strategy has constrained the net outflow of Soviet resources to North Korea and also minimized Kim Il-song's potential for dragging the Soviet Union into unwanted dangers in the Korean peninsula. On the other hand, the strategy has satisfied the minimum Soviet requirement of ensuring that North Korea was not left entirely to the Chinese, and that Chinese influence did not become so predominant in North Korea as to endanger Soviet security interests. Meanwhile, it has rebuffed North Korean efforts to use Soviet competition with Beijing as a lever with which to extract larger Soviet concessions.

The Economic Side. As in the case of Soviet economic dealings with other developing states from whom the Soviets have sought to extract strategic and political benefits (Cuba, Vietnam, Ethiopia), much of the Soviet input to North Korea has historically been funded through credits that have involuntarily become quasi-permanent capital transfers. In each decade since the formation of Kim's regime, the Soviets signed large credit agreements with Pyongyang to finance Soviet deliveries and assistance, creating huge debts, a large portion of which were customarily never repaid. Again and again, old debts were either forgiven or rolled over, while new ones were nevertheless added, eventually to receive the same treatment in their turn.²⁷ The Soviet experience with the North Korean attitude toward debt thus long antedated the similar Western and Japanese experience of the late 1970s.

the sense of the risk of war with the United States inherent in the U.S. presence in South Korea.

²⁷See Ginsburgs, 1982.

Viewed in historical perspective, it is striking that the Soviets so long persisted in this behavior in view of the meager political return; this persistence was itself testimony to the strategic importance which geography imparts to North Korea in Soviet eyes. To be sure, after the 1950s such Soviet capital transfers became a decreasing factor in the growth of the expanding North Korean GNP, and trade turnover with the Soviet Union a declining fraction of North Korean foreign trade. Indeed, in the middle 1960s, Khrushchev, infuriated at Kim's defiance and his behavior regarding Beijing, attempted to turn off the spigot; but this decision was soon reversed by Khrushchev's successors, who were unwilling to write off North Korea, and who proceeded to sign large new aid agreements in the old style in the second half of the 1960s.

The North Korean difficulties with China that emerged between 1966 and 1969 may also have been a factor that influenced the new Brezhnev regime's decision to make one final major effort to propitiate Kim Il-song with Soviet largesse. If so, Brezhnev was surely deeply disappointed at the warmth which North Korea began again to display toward China as soon as the Chinese began to show a more conciliatory face toward Kim Il-song in 1969.

During the 1970s, the Soviets seem to have tried increasingly to tie new commitments to North Korea to mechanisms designed to improve the chances that such commitments might be repaid, and also to tie them to fresh paper promises by North Korea to repay some of the old debts. Aid to specific projects was now linked to elaborate timetables for Korean repayment through deliveries of the output of the factories concerned as they went into production. In the first half of the decade, this strategy appears to have brought meager results; the new enterprises in question were delayed in completion, North Korea remained in arrears on the old debt, and the gap between North Korean imports from the USSR and exports to the Soviet Union steadily widened. In the second half of the 1970s, however, the Soviets—perhaps alarmed by awareness that they were now competing for repayment with major Western and Japanese creditors—brought heavy pressure on Pyongyang to begin to live up to its agreements with the USSR. There are reports of acrimonious exchanges on the subject between the Soviet ambassador and Kim during this period. Although the Soviets were forced in 1976 to roll over the accumulated old debt once again, they apparently did succeed, late in the decade, in compelling North Korea to reduce and for a time even to eliminate the trade deficit, curtailing the net outflow of new Soviet subsidies to Pyongyang. Meanwhile, as mentioned above, the Soviets are alleged to have flatly refused a North Korean request for a hard-currency loan to stave off North Korea's non-Communist creditors.

In sum, the Soviets seem well aware that they cannot entirely cut off the flow of some Soviet resources into North Korea—whatever the likelihood of repayment—without sacrificing the stake in the future, however meager, which their past subventions have bought them. Although they no longer overwhelmingly dominate North Korea's trade as they did in earlier decades, they are still Pyongyang's largest single trade partner. This economic relationship, and the Soviet potential to supply North Korea with technology which China cannot match, remain an important source of Soviet hope for increased influence in the country after Kim has left the scene. Although they thus cannot entirely avoid the necessity of continuing to throw some good money after the bad, however, they have seemed determined to hold this hemorrhage to the lowest level consistent with preservation of their present modest relationship.²⁸

The Military Side. On the military side, the Soviets over the last decade have been considerably tougher toward Pyongyang, and it is here that they have created the largest question marks for the future. Early in the 1970s, the Soviets apparently reached the decision to deny advanced, new-generation military technology to Kim Il-song. In contrast to their willingness to sign new (albeit more parsimonious) economic aid agreements, they do not appear to have signed a new military assistance agreement with North Korea since the late 1960s. Although a flow of some military hardware apparently stipulated under the last agreement continued in the 1970s, the Soviets have effectively halted the process of modernizing North Korean weapon systems in certain key areas where Pyongyang can neither produce advanced technology itself nor procure it from other sources such as China.

Three such areas are particularly noteworthy: fighter aircraft (Kim has long coveted the Mig-23 and later models); surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) more advanced than the SA-2; and antitank weapons (ATGMs) more advanced than the Sagger. Despite North Korea's growing capability to satisfy its own military requirements in areas of increasing sophistication, it cannot fill the gaps cited. These deficiencies partially offset those major military advantages North Korea does enjoy over the Republic of Korea, and probably constitute one restraining influence (along with others) on Pyongyang's inclination to consider military adventures.

The Soviets appear to have behaved in this manner for four main reasons.

²⁸As discussed below, Kim Il-song's May 1984 visit to Moscow may presage some increase in the Soviet economic input into North Korea over the second half of this decade.

- First, these denials have served as a sanction—the most important single sanction—in response to Kim’s offenses against the Soviet Union discussed earlier. The USSR has thus employed both a carrot—in the form of some continued economic help—and a stick—in the denial of advanced military technology—in its ongoing efforts to lever North Korean policy.
- Second, the Soviets probably have seen these denials as placing a leash upon Kim Il-song, albeit, from the Soviet perspective, an inadequate one. As earlier suggested, the Soviets have almost certainly regarded a number of Kim’s actions since the late 1960s toward both the United States and South Korea as inexpedient and adventurist. By placing some constraints upon Kim’s military capabilities, the Soviets probably have hoped to limit the potential risks for themselves.
- Third, the USSR may also wish to eliminate the risk, already alluded to, that advanced military technology furnished to North Korea might find its way into Chinese hands. Ever since the 1969 Sino-Soviet border crisis brought, as one side effect, a Chinese decision to mend fences with North Korea, the Soviets are likely to have been concerned at the possibility of such technology transfer. The Soviets are well aware that the Chinese, in their Far East matchup with the Soviet Union, are handicapped by the lack of many of the same categories of advanced hardware (fighters, SAMs, ATGMs) which Kim Il-song desires. The Soviet leaders have no wish to find Chinese military capabilities strengthened as an indirect result of Soviet assistance to North Korea.
- Finally, the Soviets may have hoped that by withholding key weapon systems, they might possibly stimulate recriminations within the North Korean elite, and particularly within the North Korean military leadership. The Soviets may have interpreted articles written by some North Korean military leaders, particularly in the mid-1970s, as reflecting a longing for modern weapons that are in practice obtainable only from the Soviet Union.²⁹

²⁹One such article, authored by then First Deputy Chief of Staff Colonel General Kim Chol-man in August 1976, said that “the quality and standards of armament and military technology are the important criteria for determining the characteristics of a war,” and lauded a “highly modernized mechanized war with the application of the latest military science and technology.” The Soviets will recall that some analogous sentiments—implicitly favoring the conciliation of the Soviet Union to assure continued Soviet advanced weapons supply—had briefly surfaced in the Chinese leadership in the spring of 1958 during a similar debate over the question of reliance on modern weapons obtainable only from the Soviet Union at a political cost. See Raymond L. Garthoff (ed.), *Sino-Soviet Military Relations* (Praeger: New York, 1966), pp. 90–91.

If sentiments favoring conciliation of the USSR for the sake of securing denied Soviet military hardware have indeed existed in the North Korean elite over the last decade, they have been effectively suppressed. Nevertheless, the Soviets may hope that such views will grow stronger as the years go on and the North Korean equipment in question grows more obsolete, and may resurface after Kim Il-song's passing.

II. FACTORS AFFECTING THE LIKELIHOOD OF CHANGE

THE NORTH KOREAN PERSPECTIVE

Introduction

Despite its historical pattern, the nature of Soviet-North Korean relations could be significantly altered by any number of developments. Indeed, there is reason to believe that we are entering a rather fluid and dynamic period that might confront Moscow and Pyongyang with both new dangers and new opportunities. In such a period, the possibility of important changes in Soviet-North Korean relations is likely to increase. Any major alteration will require changes, however, in either North Korea's identification of its fundamental national interests or in its perceptions of trends and developments as they affect these interests. To assess the likely evolution of Soviet-North Korean relations, therefore, it is first necessary to identify the factors that could alter Pyongyang's perceptions concerning these interests.

Preservation of Ruling Regime

As suggested above, with the exception of marginal variations and a brief period during the Cultural Revolution, the only major North Korean turn toward the Soviets was in the early postwar period. During this period, Kim Il-song had no alternative. Installed by the Soviets and largely dependent upon them for his political survival, Kim had to rely on the USSR to guarantee the stabilization of his regime. From the time Kim eliminated his rivals and solidified his rule in the mid-to-late 1950s, however, North Korea began to distance itself from the Soviet Union. In the absence of a viable challenge to the Kim regime, independence, "self-reliance," and opposition to (Soviet) "dominationism" became the touchstone for virtually all North Korean policies. In turn, adherence to this posture became linked to the basic legitimacy of the ruling regime.

Two factors could alter this orientation. One would be a serious domestic political challenge to the Kim Il-song regime. It is conceivable that in such a challenge either Kim or his challengers could turn to the Soviets for assistance, offering in exchange certain concessions giving the USSR greater control over DPRK policy decisions. Given

the paramount importance of preserving the North Korean regime, a domestic political challenge represents the most potentially volatile factor affecting Pyongyang's policies toward the Soviet Union.

As far as can be told, however, the likelihood of such a development must be judged to be extremely low. Not only has Kim been successful at eliminating his old rivals, he has also been successful, by all measurements, at preventing new ones from emerging. Indeed, given the god-like status he has been given in North Korea, a status not dissimilar, perhaps, to that of the Emperor Meiji in prewar Japan but with far more actual power, such a challenge seems almost inconceivable. At the present time, Kim's task seems less to prevent any direct political challenges to his continued rule than to ensure the continuation of his policies once he has passed from the scene.

This raises the second factor: political succession. In the past few years, North Korea has entered a period of transition. Kim Il-song has made clear his intention of passing the baton to his son, Chong-il, and a number of people allegedly close to the younger Kim have begun to appear in key positions. Chong-il himself appears to have taken on many of the day-to-day responsibilities of running the Party and the country including, according to some reports, military affairs.¹ In the North Korean media, Chong-il is portrayed as a great theoretician and leader in the fields of economic production, education, and national arts and culture, and attributed with making virtually all of North Korea's plans and decisions. In the words of one report, "*The guidance of Comrade Kim Chong-il, the dear leader, who is making the great leader's plan of communist construction fully blossom on this earth, has become the prime mover and the decisive factor in bringing about, today, the grand golden age of the Republic*" (italics added).²

It appears that Kim Il-song has two primary motivations in trying to effect a hereditary succession: to avert a potentially serious struggle for succession that could undermine stability in the North and endanger North Korean independence, and to forestall the possibility of "de-Kimization" and guarantee the continuation of Kim's policies after he dies. Whether he will succeed in this effort is at this point

¹Among other reports, a recent North Korean defector remarked that the North Korean military is under Chong-il's control. For a summary of his remarks, see Naewae Press, *North Korea News*, May 23, 1983, pp. 1-2.

²"The Fatherland of Chuche, Flourishes and Prospers Forever Following the Guidance of the Party!" *Nodong Ch'ongnyon*, translated in Joint Press Research Service (JPRS), *Korean Affairs*, November 16, 1983, p. 24. A radio commentary broadcast by the North Korean Central Broadcasting Station on October 10, 1983, was one of many asserting that North Korea has already "resolved the problem of succession and is now ready to carry on the revolutionary task initiated by great leader Kim Il-song under the leadership of his successor." Naewae Press, *Vantage Point*, October 1983, pp. 19-20.

problematic. Key questions include: how long a time the succession process takes; whether during this time Kim will cede actual political power to Chong-il and allow him to establish his own leadership credentials apart from his illustrious parentage; whether Chong-il is able through this effort to gain and maintain control over the Party; and whether he can prevent the military, perhaps in cooperation with the technocrats, from siding with a more acceptable figure.

Although the experience of other Communist states suggests great caution concerning the prospects for a smooth succession, it is probably a mistake to dismiss this possibility too quickly. By all accounts, the process of leadership succession is well-advanced in North Korea and, given sufficient time, could be effectively accomplished even before Kim Il-song leaves the scene. Moreover, the small size of North Korea, its isolation, and its extreme regimentation all increase the prospects for controlling the succession process, as do the possibilities for foreign meddling or intervention should the process break down. Most important, there are good historical precedents in Korea for such a succession. In the Yi Dynasty (1392–1910), an heir-apparent was designated in advance from among the king's sons and prepared, on the basis of Confucian principles stressing filial piety and the demonstration of "boundless loyalty" to the king, to be an ideal ruler. In some ways, as Kwon-sang Park has pointed out, "Kim Il-song seems to be seeking to reinstate this tradition."³ This could counteract the fact that monarchical succession is contrary to the Communist tradition.

Should succession succeed, it would suggest the continuation of a regime in North Korea committed to Kim's "revolutionary tradition." This intention, and the motivation underlying it, are openly acknowledged by Pyongyang. As one recent discussion of the "decisive role of the leader's successor in connection with the question of the revolutionary tradition" put it:

Only the leader's successor can thoroughly defend, inherit, and develop the revolutionary tradition—one of the most important questions in inheriting the leader's revolutionary cause. The leader's successor, above all, thoroughly safeguards and defends the revolutionary tradition from the maneuvers of the betrayers of the revolution and all kinds of opportunists and he firmly ensures its purity. He also brilliantly inherits and develops the revolutionary tradition by embodying it into all fields of state and social life. As in the above, the leader's successor plays a decisive role in inheriting the already provided revolutionary tradition.⁴

³For this point and other useful information, see his article "North Korea Under Kim Chong-il," in the *Journal of Northeast Asian Studies*, June 1982, pp. 61–62.

⁴"Correctly Solving the Question of Inheriting the Revolutionary Cause Is a Basic Issue in the Revolution," a (clandestine) Voice of the RPR (Revolutionary Party for

A regime led by such a successor would presumably be at least equally inclined to identify North Korea's fundamental national interests along the lines laid out by Kim Il-song, perhaps even more so given its lack of demonstrable revolutionary credentials. The apparent absence of any "line struggle" in North Korea associated with the question of succession further heightens this possibility.

A smooth transition to Chong-il is not the only potential outcome, however. At least four other possibilities must also be considered: a coalition government including Kim Chong-il; an agreement between the Party and the military on someone else; dictation, in the absence of an agreement, by the military; and turmoil, including, perhaps, outside intervention. Although the first three of these possibilities vary somewhat in their general outcomes depending on the scenario envisioned, they share in common one crucial characteristic: each would appear likely to result in a regime dependent on the power centers—the military and the Party—most committed to North Korea's traditional definition of national interest.

In the absence of a direct threat to North Korean security, the military seems unlikely to tamper with the objective of independence since the attainment of this objective is its principal *raison d'être*. For its part, the Party seems unlikely to jettison the objectives of either "self-reliance" or "reunification" given the manner in which these objectives have become linked over the years to the basic legitimacy of the ruling regime. This possibility is further diminished by the apparent absence of a North Korean Deng Xiaoping—a leader with genuine revolutionary credentials and a strong personal power base in the Party and bureaucracy who could more or less unilaterally redefine North Korean interests—which has resulted from Kim Il-song's long dominance and conscious and systematic effort to eliminate all potential rivals. Each of these possible outcomes would thus seem likely to result in a regime generally adhering to North Korea's traditional definition of national interest.

A possible exception to this estimation would be if a regime dominated by the military came to power at a time of serious instability and/or political crisis in South Korea. If this were accompanied by a greater willingness on the part of the Soviet Union to take risks on the Korean peninsula, it is conceivable that such a regime might be willing to make certain political concessions to the Soviets in exchange for

Reunification) "roundtable discussion" in FBIS, *Daily Report—Asia and Pacific*, December 1, 1983, p. D9. The RPR, supported by North Korea, claims to be an organization of Southern revolutionaries who follow Kim Il-song's principles.

significantly increased military support. This presumes, however, a major change in Soviet inclinations, as well as changes perhaps in North Korea's estimation of the likely role of the United States. Although such a scenario is certainly conceivable, it does not at the present time seem very likely.

What would happen in the event of the fourth possibility, turmoil, is unpredictable. Clearly, however, it contains the potential for a major alteration of Soviet-North Korean relations. The most dramatic, if at this point highly unlikely, scenario would involve direct Soviet intervention in the succession process—perhaps in response to “requests” for assistance from a particular North Korean faction—and the establishment of an actual or de facto satellite regime. Even short of this, however, the potential for important changes would be substantial given the near certainty of widespread anxieties concerning South Korean intentions. This would particularly be the case if such turmoil occurred in conjunction with a serious economic crisis and/or actual external security threat. From all perspectives, this would be the most unpredictable, and potentially dangerous, situation.

Maintenance of Independence

North Korea has demonstrated a fierce commitment to unity, “self-reliance,” and national independence ever since Kim Il-song solidified his position in the mid-to-late 1950s. This commitment stems from Korea's historical experience with the great powers, as well as its actual situation as a small, weak, and divided nation. It is bolstered further by the traditional fractiousness of politics in Korea which make the art of governing a particularly difficult one on both sides of the 38th parallel.⁵ From this perspective, the extraordinary cult of personality in the North may be seen not merely as a manifestation of one man's megalomania, which at least in part it undoubtedly is, but of a more general awareness of the need for absolute unity to safeguard the country's independence.

Assuming that political succession results in any of the above alternatives other than turmoil, it seems highly unlikely that North Korea will significantly modify either its identification of independence as a fundamental national interest or the priority it assigns to its achievement. At a minimum, it is unlikely that such a modification will occur as long as the succession process proceeds along the course presently intended. Not only is maintaining independence continually trumpeted

⁵On the nature and dynamics of Korea's traditionally opportunistic factional groupings, see Gregory Henderson, *Korea—The Politics of the Vortex* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968).

in the North Korean media as a fundamental national requirement, it is directly linked to the person of Kim Chong-il. In the words of one representative sample:

In his treatise "Let Us Advance Under the Banner of Marxism-Leninism and the Chuche Idea," Comrade Kim Chong-il . . . while comprehensively illuminating the greatness, truth, and vitality of the chuche idea, elucidated the idea that the independent stand must be maintained for the people to defend their position as masters of the revolutionary struggle and construction work. The idea of maintaining the independent stand, which was elucidated in the treatise, is a significant guiding principle for embodying the chuche idea in the revolution and construction. . . . Only when the independent stand is maintained can the people firmly struggle against the imperialists and all class enemies trying to encroach upon the sovereignty of the nation and the interests of the people and settle problems in accordance with their own judgments and decisions. At the same time, they can by their strength and wisdom do away with incorrect views and attitudes of skepticism about one's own ability and trying to rely on others, and can pioneer the future of the revolution and construction. . . . If any of the chuche principles— independence, self-reliance, and self-defense—is not well-embodied, the independent stand cannot be maintained and the independent development of the revolution and construction cannot be guaranteed.⁶

Among these *chuche* principles, North Korea has been giving particular emphasis to self-defense. As one article in the Party journal, *Kul-loja*, put it in connection with another thesis allegedly written by Kim Chong-il entitled "On the Chuche Ideology," "to realize self-reliant defense in national defense is the basic principle of independent sovereign state construction." The article continues:

A country which, deprived of its independent stand and attitude, moves according to another's baton, cannot be said to be a country possessing sovereign rights. If each country is to implement independent politics in accordance with its own convictions and establish relations with other countries on the principle of complete equality and reciprocity, it must establish chuche in thought and have a self-supporting economy and at the same time, necessarily realize self-reliant defense in national defense. . . . They cannot entrust the task of national defense bearing on their fate to others and again, relying on the strength of others, they can neither defend their country. If one tried to entrust the task of national defense to others or resolve it by the aid of others, that would be evading the responsibility as the master or going back on it and in the end, one would fall by the wayside and ruin the country. . . . The basics in the national defense task are one's own strength through and through, and no matter how

⁶"Maintaining the Independent Stand Is a Fundamental Requirement To Defend the Position of the People," *Rodong Sinmun*, July 31, 1983.

much others help one, that help is no more than a secondary one. Going forward to solve the question of national defense relying on one's own strength, taking responsibility on the principle of self-reliance is where the most correct road . . . lies. . . . By more deeply studying and mastering the thought on the principle of self-reliant defense in national defense enunciated in the thesis "On the Chuche Ideology" and by continuing to thoroughly carry it through, we shall thoroughly defend the sovereign rights of the nation and go forward to energetically hasten the conversion of the whole society to the chuche ideology.⁷

The thesis "On the Chuche Ideology" and others like it, incidentally, also address the methods by which the principles of independence and "self-reliance" in national defense are to be attained. These include continuing North Korea's military buildup, turning "the whole country into a fortress," and placing priority upon ideological and political fervor rather than upon weapons or technology.⁸ Such emphases and the direct linkage to Kim Chong-il have important implications for future North Korean policies transcending the question of Soviet-North Korean relations.

Between the two, the Soviet Union is clearly more of a threat to North Korea's independence than is the People's Republic of China. In this sense, it is hard to see how North Korea's aspiration can be furthered by turning to the Soviet Union. There are, however, three possible developments that could induce the DPRK to at least modify its emphasis. One is if North Korea were to genuinely perceive a direct military threat to its security. Such a perception, in turn, could develop in three main ways.

⁷"To Realize Self-Reliant Defense in National Defense is the Basic Principle of Independent Sovereign State Construction," *Kulloja*, January 1983, in JPRS, October 6, 1983, pp. 39-48.

⁸As the *Kulloja* article cited above asserts:
 "it is imperative to go forward to ceaselessly strengthen the self-reliant national defense force so as to be able to cope with war at any time. . . . It is imperative to convert and modernize the entire army into a cadre army and at the same time, arm all of the people and turn the whole country into a fortress. Arming all of the people and turning the whole country into a fortress is the most powerful defense system in terms of military strategy which makes it possible to defend the country with our own strength. . . . The decisive factor influencing the victory or defeat of war lies not in weapons or technology but in the intense political fervor and revolutionary dedication of the army and the masses of people, who are convinced of the correctness of their cause. . . . The reason a revolutionary army is ever victorious in its fight against the enemy lies not in the superiority of its weapons or technology but in its politico-ideological superiority. As the history of revolutionary wars bears witness, a revolutionary army thoroughly prepared politico-ideologically is quite capable of winning victory in the fight against the enemy equipped with the latest weapons. . . ."

First would be the actual or prospective attainment of military superiority by the Republic of Korea. This is not a prospect about which North Korea has appeared to be genuinely concerned. Perceiving itself as militarily superior to the ROK, it has concerned itself not with establishing defensive military and diplomatic arrangements but with developing offensive capabilities for creating and exploiting opportunities to achieve reunification on North Korean terms. Should the North come to perceive South Korea as militarily superior, however, it could turn to the Soviets as the only available source for the required assistance. The fact that South Korea should be able to attain this position by the early 1990s, if present trends continue, makes this potentially a particularly dangerous period.

Second would be changes in U.S. policies that signaled an intention to support an unprovoked effort by South Korea to bring the entire peninsula under its control. Such changes could involve modifications of U.S. declaratory policy as well as major increases in the U.S. military presence and capabilities in South Korea. Such changes are no more than a theoretical possibility. Given the rather distorted ideological prisms through which Pyongyang views the world, however, it is important to be sensitive to the possible development of such a perception. Should this occur, alterations in North Korean policies that enabled a major turn toward the Soviets would be quite conceivable.

Third would be a major Japanese military presence in South Korea and a direct military role on the peninsula. To North Korea, such a development would not only seriously hinder realization of its long-term objective of reunification on North Korean terms but would also represent a potential threat to Pyongyang. Korea's historical experience with Japan and Pyongyang's ideological conviction that the Japanese will inevitably seek to reestablish their "co-prosperity sphere," are concerns to which North Korea is extremely sensitive. Although the prospects for major Japanese military moves in Korea in the short-to-mid term seem virtually nonexistent, such a development if it occurred could easily incline Pyongyang to turn toward the Soviet Union.

The second possible development that could induce North Korea to at least modify its emphasis on independence would be a major economic crisis. Many in the West see this as the principal possibility for a moderation of North Korea's behavior. There is some reason to believe that the Soviets see this in similar terms, albeit from the other perspective, and are waiting until the North Koreans "need" them enough to make certain concessions before agreeing to adopt more forthcoming policies. Both sides may be disappointed. Although there is no question that North Korea is experiencing economic difficulties,

there is little evidence of a looming crisis. Indeed, independent studies of the North Korean economy suggest that Pyongyang may very well be able to maintain its policy priorities in general, and its huge military buildup in particular, throughout this decade. This would not seem to incline North Korean leaders to make the concessions necessary to allow a major change in Soviet-North Korean relations.

Even if this were not the case, economic difficulties may be perceived differently by North Korea than by others. Despite the acknowledgment of ongoing problems, media reports continue to be rather optimistic. In the words of one recent editorial:

The task set forth in the eighth plenum is very weighty and vast. We are equipped, however, with all the conditions we need to ably implement the assigned task, tiding over any difficulties. We possess the wise leadership of the party and leader, the invincible cohesion and unity of the party and people, and the self-reliant national economy with limitless potential and the mighty technological capability. The situation of our country's economy today is very good, and a broader prospect awaits the economy. . . .⁹

Moreover, the consequences of even acknowledged difficulties for other North Korean policies may be very different from what one might normally expect. As a general statement, North Korea has tended to respond to economic difficulties not by looking outward for assistance—although at different times and in different ways it has done this as well—but by placing greater emphasis upon “unconditional unity,” national sacrifice, and political mobilization. The expansion of ideological campaigns, intensification of “party guidance,” and heightening of the priority given to “political and moral incentives” tend to be North Korea’s preferred response.¹⁰ Economic difficulties in and of themselves do not necessarily translate into a willingness to make important concessions to the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, it is certainly possible that a genuine economic *crisis* threatening the viability of the ruling regime could encourage North Korea to modify at least certain of its policy orientations which cause problems for Moscow in an effort to garner greater Soviet support. This would seem particu-

⁹“Let All of Us Vigorously Rise in Implementing the Decisions of the Eighth Plenum of the Sixth WPK Central Committee,” *Rodong Sinmun*, December 5, 1983.

¹⁰For a good example, see “Let Us Accelerate Even Faster the March Speed of Socialist Economic Construction,” *Kulloja*, March 1983, pp. 2-7. “The enormous task which has come up in the area of socialist economic construction in the 1980s,” the article suggests, “calls for energetically accelerating the march speed of economic construction more than at any time.” For a recent representative example from the press, see “Applying the Great Leader’s Work Method is a Firm Guarantee for Hastening the March of the Eighties,” *Rodong Sinmun*, November 24, 1983.

larly to be the case if such a crisis coincided with other major adverse trends affecting North Korea's pursuit of reunification.

The third possible development is direct Chinese intervention in North Korea's internal politics. Although this has been neither China's inclination nor style in most of the postwar period, it is not inconceivable that Beijing might move in this direction, perhaps in the context of Chinese or North Korean leadership changes, perhaps because of China's strong interest in lowering tension on the Korean peninsula in connection with its ambitious plans for economic development. Should such a change take place, North Korea could attempt to turn to the Soviets as a counterweight to Chinese pressure.

Achievement of Reunification

North Korea's third fundamental national interest has been reunification on North Korean terms—that is, extension of North Korean Communist control over South Korea. As suggested above, Pyongyang has maintained an unflinching commitment to the attainment of this interest throughout the postwar period.¹¹ The strength of this commitment stems, as in the case of North Korea's emphasis upon independence, from the virulence of North Korean nationalism and the way in which reunification has become linked over the years to the basic legitimacy of the ruling regime. For this reason, it is very difficult to imagine Kim Il-song fundamentally altering this commitment.¹² To the extent that his successors will need to draw for their own legitimacy

¹¹For the seriousness of North Korean attitudes and policies regarding the commitment to reunification, see Young C. Kim, "North Korea's Reunification Policy: A Magnificent Obsession?" in Young Hoon Kang and Yong Soon Yim (eds.), *Politics of Korean Unification* (Seoul: Research Center for Peace and Unification, 1978), pp. 127-157. Also see Congressman Solarz's report "The Korean Conundrum, A Conversation with Kim Il Sung," *Report of a Study Mission to South Korea, Japan, The People's Republic of China, and North Korea* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, August 1981), in which Solarz notes, after talks in Pyongyang with Kim Il-song and Kim Yong-nam, that "the commitment on the part of both Kims to reunification was not just verbal but visceral."

¹²"The great leader's thoughts and activities are linked to the question of national reunification all the time," a recent VRPR broadcast suggested. "When he opens his mouth, he speaks for the national reunification. When he is sorry or happy, it is all because of the question of the nation's reunification. When he builds a plant he always envisions the unified fatherland and he thinks of the living together of the separated brothers in the North and South when he builds a dwelling house. . . . The nation's pain suffered by the country's division was his greatest pain. It is his unyielding will to heal the masses' deep wound of national division and to turn all the misfortunes in the divided land of the fatherland into happiness. Truly, the respected and beloved leader is the matchless patriot of our nation and the great loadstar of reunification who devotes everything to realize the nation's long-cherished desire for reunification." See "General Kim Il-song, the Sun of the Nation, Devotes Himself to Hastening the Day of Fatherland's Reunification," in FBIS, *Daily Report—Asia and Pacific*, January 4, 1984, pp. D12-13.

upon North Korean nationalism, if not also upon Kim's "revolutionary tradition," it is also difficult to expect political succession to lead to any fundamental change in this commitment. If it did, perhaps through the emergence of a leadership more committed to bureaucratic and technical objectives, the effect would presumably be the opposite of that which is the concern of this study: namely, a *decreased* opportunity for Soviet support of destabilizing actions. Assuming this does not occur, it is in the commitment to reunification on North Korean terms that the greatest potential for changes in Soviet-North Korean relations would seem to lie.

These chances for change, in turn, rest upon North Korean perceptions of trends in five separate but related areas. First is that concerning South Korea's relations with the United States and Japan. The sensitivity of this element stems from North Korean perceptions of Seoul's close ties with the United States and Japan as constituting the principal barrier to reunification on North Korean terms. For this reason, the removal of the U.S. military presence and undermining or weakening South Korea's alliance relationships have been priority North Korean policy objectives throughout the postwar period.

The chances for South Korea's relationships with the United States and Japan inducing major changes in Soviet-North Korean relations hinge on Soviet willingness to support an adventurist policy vis-à-vis the Republic of Korea. Given such a willingness, it is possible that North Korea might turn toward the Soviets as a result of dramatic changes in either direction: a major rupture in the ROK's alliance relationships perceived by Pyongyang as providing the opportunity for reunifying Korea militarily under its control without U.S. intervention; or a dramatic expansion of the U.S. and Japanese presence in South Korea—especially that of Japan—perceived by the North as effectively ending any prospect for reunification. Because of the implications for South Korea, a fundamental rupture or termination of the U.S.-Japan alliance could have a similar effect.

These possibilities, however, must be strongly qualified. First, the basic requirement for each is a willingness on the part of the Soviet Union to support an adventurist policy vis-à-vis the ROK. This is something the USSR has carefully and consistently avoided since its experience in the Korean War. Second, given such a Soviet willingness, the state of ROK-U.S., ROK-Japan, and U.S.-Japan relations would be at best a contributing factor in North Korean policy decisions. Even in the absence of dramatic change in these relationships, North Korea could be induced to turn toward the Soviet Union if by

doing so it felt it could successfully reunify Korea under its control.¹³ Finally, as suggested above, there are many reasons to believe that North Korea has perceived itself as militarily superior to the Republic of Korea. As long as it sees the prospect for reunifying Korea under its control through its own efforts, it is unlikely that Pyongyang would make the kinds of concessions necessary to the Soviets to enable a dramatic change in Soviet-North Korean relations. For these reasons, the state of South Korea's alliance relationships, while an important factor, is also a dependent one.

The second area concerns USSR and PRC relations with South Korea. As suggested above, the refusal of the Soviet Union to endorse Pyongyang as the sole legitimate sovereign state on the peninsula and its occasional flirtations with the possibility of a "German solution" to the problem of Korea's division have contributed to North Korean distrust of the Soviets and to Pyongyang's historic "tilt" toward the PRC. The increasing quantity and quality of Soviet-South Korean exchanges over the last several years have undoubtedly bolstered this orientation. The Soviets have also, however, sought to take advantage of China's opening to the West, criticizing the PRC for paying only lip-service to North Korea's aspiration for reunification and portraying itself as Pyongyang's true supporter. After describing a host of Soviet efforts over the years to support the DPRK and detailing the USSR's "unswerving solidarity" in its "struggle" for reunification, for example, one commentary goes on:

In this context mention should be made of Peking's position which is hostile to the Korean people. China is ostentatiously interested in the 40,000 American soldiers remaining on the Peninsula. Now that Peking has stepped up its anti-socialist hegemonistic activity, the major problem of the DPRK's foreign policy is increasingly becoming a target of Maoist political machinations and small change in the Chinese leaders' flirtations with the US and Japanese imperialists. Sino-Japanese and Sino-American contacts in 1979 and 1980 have again shown to the Korean people that Peking is utterly indifferent to the destiny of the divided country.¹⁴

¹³In the absence of such changes in South Korea's alliance relationships, of course, there are no realistic prospects for North Korean success in such an effort *assuming Korea is the only show in town*. North Korean perceptions and policy inclinations must also be considered, however, from a more global perspective. From this perspective, it is possible to conceive of circumstances under which North Korea could come to feel it could achieve its "reunification" objective even in the absence of dramatic changes in South Korea's alliance relations.

¹⁴B. Mikhailov, "Thirty-five Years of Soviet-Korean Cooperation," *Far Eastern Affairs*, Fall 1980, p. 77.

Criticizing Hua Guofeng's agreement in his talks with Japanese Prime Minister Ohira that "instability' on the Korean Peninsula was undesirable," the article pointedly concludes that "both leaders were equally worried about developments on the Peninsula. In other words, Peking, true to its policy in favor of a divided Korea and of maintaining US military presence on the Korean Peninsula, expressed support in the Seoul puppet regime."¹⁵

Although China has until recently lagged behind the USSR in official and semi-official dealings with South Korea, it is clear that North Korea is extremely sensitive to Chinese openings toward the ROK. Unofficial trade between China and South Korea, which had risen to somewhere around \$300 million in 1979-1980, fell off precipitately in 1981-1982 as a result of strong DPRK protests to the PRC before beginning to rise again more quietly in 1983. In the post-Korean Airlines shooting incident environment, it is conceivable that China's relations with South Korea—abetted perhaps by China's strong interest in stability on the Korean peninsula—could develop more rapidly than those of the Soviet Union. Should this be unaccompanied by comparable developments between Washington and Pyongyang supportive of its quest for reunification, North Korea's incentive for modifying some of its policies vis-à-vis the Soviet Union as a means for expressing its disapproval of Peking's policies would be strengthened. By increasing this incentive through more forthcoming policies toward Pyongyang, the Soviets might be able to improve Soviet-North Korean relations substantially.

The third area concerns USSR and PRC relations with the United States. There is good historical evidence for considerable North Korean sensitivity in this area. As suggested above, Soviet actions during the Cuban missile crisis and its "peaceful co-existence" and detente policies thereafter were major factors contributing to North Korea's historic "tilt" toward China. Although the evidence is somewhat less solid, Chinese emphasis upon a "united front" and opening toward the United States in the late 1970s may have precipitated some effort by North Korea and the Soviet Union at the turn of the decade to improve their troubled relations.¹⁶ Indeed, one analyst has gone so far

¹⁵Mikhailov, p. 77. Also see Yu Ognev, "The Problem of Strengthening Peace in the Korean Peninsula," *Far Eastern Affairs*, No. 1, 1980, pp. 13-25. After arguing that China, like Japan, "would not like to see a united independent Korea either," Ognev suggests that "the only concern of the Chinese leaders is to see to it that the events in Korea do not impede the process of China's rapprochement with the USA and Japan. The Chinese leaders have displayed utter indifference to the problem of national reunification of the Korean people. . . ." (p. 22).

¹⁶For this argument, see Robert A. Scalapino, "The Current Attitudes of the Major Communist States Toward Korean Reunification," in *Korea Observer*, Winter 1980, pp. 353-370, and Donald Zagoria, "North Korea—Another Afghanistan?" a paper written for

as to suggest that the single major factor behind North Korea's policies toward its Communist neighbors concerns their policies toward the United States.¹⁷ Undoubtedly, this is overstated. North Korea's relations with the USSR and the PRC are complex and multifaceted. Each has a dynamic of its own. Moreover, in an era where *both* Communist powers have strong incentives for improving their relationship with the United States, the potential leverage of North Korea is even further diminished. Nevertheless, the nature of Soviet and Chinese policies toward the United States do play an important role. Should North Korea come to perceive China as going too far in its opening to the West and effectively removing or disassociating itself from Pyongyang's quest for reunification, it could well turn to the Soviets in the hope of gaining greater support for this central interest. This possibility would be heightened by continued fridity in U.S.-USSR relations and greater Soviet efforts to exploit this division between North Korea and the PRC. Given recent and prospective trends in Soviet-American relations, this is a possibility that bears particularly close watching.

The fourth area concerns trends in South Korea's internal political, economic, and military situation. Because of the sharp ideological prisms through which Pyongyang views all developments south of the 38th parallel and the extravagance of its rhetoric, real North Korean perceptions are particularly difficult to know in this area. North Korean pronouncements describe life in South Korea as a "living hell" resulting from the "oppressive" rule of its "reactionary" dictators. South Korea's status as a "semi-feudal colonial society" exacerbates this situation by allowing the introduction of decadent bourgeois foreign culture and the perpetuation of "fascist" rule. The fragility of its economy, built on foreign capital and sustained by foreign assistance, and gross social and economic inequalities guarantee only abject poverty and the enslavement of the masses. In this situation, if North Korean propaganda is to be believed, revolt is inevitable.¹⁸ The task for

the Conference on North Korea co-sponsored by the Asiatic Research Center, Korea University, and the Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, February 24-27, 1981.

¹⁷Helen-Louise Hunter, "North Korea Between Moscow and Peking," a paper prepared for the International Studies Association meeting in Los Angeles, March 22, 1980. Hunter argues that this factor is the "key to the future. In the end, North Korea will side with the country whose policy toward the US is more in keeping with its own" (pp. 18-19).

¹⁸Focusing on South Korea's foreign debts, alleged export problems, and financial and monetary difficulties, recent articles in the North Korean media have denounced the notion of stable growth in the ROK and derided its economic prospects. "It is an elementary principle," one recently asserted, "that the South cannot guarantee stable operation of existing enterprises because it cannot direct foreign loans to current produc-

North Korea, therefore, is not to make the concessions required to bolster its alliance relations but to develop on its own the "base" for reunification and to be prepared when the "inevitable" sets in.

Although the extent to which these views are genuinely held is at best uncertain, it is clear that North Korean leaders have been disdainful of South Korea's system in the past and genuinely preferred their own. Even allowing for rhetorical excess, they have made clear their belief that North Korea is superior to the Republic of Korea and their conviction that trends are moving generally in their direction. As Kim Il-song has said as recently as in this year's New Year's address to the nation, 1983 was a year in which North Korea "demonstrated the unconquerable strength of our people . . . as well as the genuine superiority of our socialist system. . . . Although the present world situation is very complicated and tense, the general trend is changing still more in favor of our revolution."¹⁹

To an objective North Korean observer, however, the actual trends must look more ominous. In fact, its rhetoric notwithstanding, there are some signs that North Korea's confidence may have been considerably shaken. Most striking is the recent move by Pyongyang to what appears to be a more militant posture, a move that may be motivated by a desire to set back South Korea's continuing economic and military progress. Also striking are the strong denunciations of Japanese economic aid to South Korea and the clear concern with U.S. measures to bolster the ROK's indigenous self-defense capability. Reflecting an awareness of such adverse trends, perhaps, as well as Pyongyang's ongoing political and economic difficulties, North Korean media reports allude more openly to the "very complicated and tense" situation facing the DPRK, and call for aggressive efforts to "overcome the rising difficulties" with an awareness on the part of the people that "they face a heavier revolutionary task and more complicated situa-

tion, and that it cannot expect growth because it cannot invest in facilities. . . . This indicates that the South Korean economy is being ruined because of foreign debts, not to speak of ability to expand." Coupled with the "sluggishness in exports" associated with the economic recession in the West and the "financial and monetary disorders" associated with several financial scandals in the ROK, such developments in 1983 "drove the South Korean economy to irreversible bankruptcy." "Behind the curtain of propaganda of growth on the basis of stability," the article concluded, "the economic crisis in South Korea will deepen this year, and the people's dissatisfaction will increase. This will serve as a timebomb to destroy the puppet regime." See the "special article" entitled "The Theory of Growth on the Basis of Stability Is a Fantasy That Cannot Be Realized," in *Rodong Sinmun*, January 8, 1984.

¹⁹For the full text of the address, see FBIS, *Daily Report—Asia and Pacific*, January 3, 1984, pp. D15-20.

tion."²⁰ Whether such trends have fundamentally altered *basic* North Korean perceptions of the situation in the South or not, however, remains to be determined. Should such an alteration occur, it could contribute to a North Korean turn toward the Soviet Union in the context of more forthcoming Soviet policies.

The fifth and final area concerns trends in the North-South diplomatic competition. Here too, North Korea has traditionally been quite optimistic. Even today there are frequent allusions to how the North's international relations are "expanding and developing with each passing day" and its external authority is "rising higher than ever." There are clear indications, however, that this traditional optimism has been dealt a blow by South Korea's success in expanding its foreign relations. This is evident in Pyongyang's increasingly shrill denunciations of Seoul's successful diplomatic offensive. Describing this offensive as "aimed at forming an international foundation for opposing the country's reunification and for fabrication of two Koreas by following the U.S. imperialists' two-Koreas policy," such denunciations warn "anyone or any country that respects the national interests of the Korean people and genuinely hopes for the peace and reunification of Korea . . . not [to] be entangled in or made a fool of by the U.S. imperialist and the Chon Tu-hwan ring's political intrigues for fabricating two Koreas."²¹ It is also evident in the extent to which North Korea has gone to try and counter South Korea's gains abroad; North Korean efforts to blunt the South's diplomatic offensive have ranged from the bribery of foreign officials to the threatening and actual initiation of terrorist attacks. The recent dismissal of long-time North Korean Foreign Minister Ho Tam may signify further recognition of the increasingly unfavorable prospects. Although such a recognition is not likely in and of itself to precipitate a major change in North Korean policies toward the Soviet Union, it could contribute to such a development in combination with other adverse trends.

²⁰"The Entire People Vigorously Accelerate Socialist Construction in Firm Unity Around the Party," *Rodong Sinmun*, January 2, 1984. "The main tasks of the socialist economic construction and other related tasks which we must accomplish this year are very heavy and difficult. . . . If demanded by the party and the revolution, all tasks must be swiftly and unconditionally accomplished without any excuse and condition, and the intent of the party and the leader implemented not in words but through the struggle of deeds."

²¹"This is the unanimous demand of the Korean nation, which aspires for reunification," such denunciations add, "and the urgent demand of the times." "The Parliamentary Diplomacy Aimed at Two Koreas," *Rodong Sinmun*, August 5, 1983.

Generation of Support for Other Policy Objectives

North Korea's fourth and final fundamental interest has been the generation of support for other priority policy objectives, in particular those concerning economic development and military modernization. The Soviet Union here has a natural advantage over China in competing for North Korea's favor given the disparities in their political, economic, and military capabilities. That it has not been able to capitalize on this "natural" advantage is due as much to the higher priority North Korea has given its other fundamental interests as to the USSR's general lack of inclination to compete. This has been bolstered by the DPRK's traditional view of itself as superior to South Korea, and its general confidence that trends were moving favorably in its direction. Given this view, North Korea has not generally felt it necessary to make the kinds of concessions required to elicit greater Soviet support. As a result, the Soviets have been unable to translate their superior capabilities into expanded influence.

Two factors could alter this situation. One would be a redefinition of North Korean priorities and a heightening of the importance of these additional objectives relative to other North Korean interests. Although such a redefinition is conceivable, it does not seem very likely so long as the touchstone for North Korean policies remains the "revolutionary tradition" of Kim Il-song. This seems particularly the case in regard to Pyongyang's desire to avoid being turned into a Soviet satellite, although it is probably also true of its aspiration for reunification as well. The other factor would be a major change in Pyongyang's perceptions of past and prospective trends. This would not necessarily require a redefinition of North Korean priorities but merely an awareness of greatly increased needs for military aid, economic assistance, and/or diplomatic support. Although this too seems at this point unlikely, as suggested above, it is a possible development that bears careful watching.

In either event, the ability of the Soviets to benefit from such developments would hinge on the extent of their generosity. North Korea has extremely limited hard currency available. Were this not the case, it would do its shopping elsewhere. North Korea also has much higher debt priorities. In this context, the Soviets could be a major option only if the assistance they were willing to provide were truly generous. The Soviets would have to pay, moreover, in more than pecuniary terms. In the absence of dramatic changes in North Korea's definition of national interest, they would also have to provide direct and tangible evidence of support for Pyongyang's reunification objective. This would require a greater willingness to take risks than

the Soviets have thus far been inclined to demonstrate. For all these reasons, the potential for significant change in Soviet-North Korean relations stemming from the DPRK's need for assistance—while clearly a possibility—should probably not be overrated.

THE SOVIET PERSPECTIVE

Introduction

As seen from Moscow, the chances of significant change in the Soviet relationship with North Korea over the remainder of the 1980s will probably be governed by three main interwoven and interacting factors.

One will be the evolution of the North Korean succession process already in train, particularly if Kim Il-song dies in this period. At issue will be the question of whether men are likely to come to fore in the North Korean elite who will wish to assign a higher priority, when weighed against Pyongyang's traditional primary concerns, to securing what the Soviet Union has to offer, economically and militarily.

The second factor will concern how much political cohesion, economic and military strength, and international standing South Korea may attain in relation to the North, and what effect changes in each of these areas may eventually have on Pyongyang's behavior.

The third and perhaps most important factor will be the evolution of the Soviet strategic position in Northeast Asia vis-à-vis the United States, Japan, and China, and the question of whether developments in the Soviet-American strategic rivalry in the area could bring changes in the Soviet attitude toward Korea.

Alternative Soviet Calculations About North Korean Succession

The Soviets are likely to see two possible avenues to increased Soviet influence in a post-Kim Il-song DPRK. One would entail little change in existing Soviet policies and little risk for the Soviet Union, but seems unlikely to produce results except over a very long period of time, if at all. The other would involve major shifts in Soviet policy and assumption of somewhat greater risks, but under some circumstances could produce significant changes in the Soviet status in North Korea that would enhance the Soviet strategic position in Northeast Asia.

1. Hopes for a More Pragmatic Pyongyang: The first alternative for the Soviet leaders is to stand pat, to maintain their present

reserve toward Pyongyang, to adhere to the modest priority assigned over the last decade to Soviet interests in Korea, and to await favorable changes in North Korean attitudes to emerge in the fullness of time. Some Soviets may argue that a fundamental and lasting improvement in their relationship with Pyongyang will not be possible, even after the demise of Kim Il-song, until there is a profound transformation of the North Korean ruling elite in the direction of pragmatism. Such a change would involve a gradual cooling of the elite's revolutionary elan, an ebbing of its assumption that legitimacy requires unceasing pursuit of reunification on North Korean terms, emergence of a tacit acceptance of the permanent division of Korea, and a growth in the priority given to economic development. Such a metamorphosis would provide greater importance to one area in which the Soviets have a major advantage over China: the ability of Soviet technology to render substantial help to North Korean development.

Given such a drastically altered atmosphere in Pyongyang, some Soviets may contend, the chances that Soviet economic assistance would bring better political returns might be significantly enhanced. It is noteworthy that the Soviet Union since 1982 has been applying exactly such an approach toward China, seeking to take advantage of the replacement of Chinese radicals by a more pragmatic leadership to strive to improve the Soviet relationship with the PRC through the maximum possible expansion of economic and other dealings. It is plausible to suppose that an analogous Soviet effort toward North Korea would be undertaken *if* there were an analogous transformation of the North Korean leadership.

Nevertheless, the Soviets are unlikely to be very sanguine about the chances of such a transformation except over a very long period of time. For the reasons mentioned earlier, the North Korean political and military leadership shaped and purged by Kim Il-song seems polarized in the opposite direction, and does not seem likely to undergo a radical change in its basic assumptions except, at best, through a slow and painful evolution. Confirmation of this pessimistic judgment could eventually begin to impel the Soviets reluctantly toward recognition of the Kim Chong-il succession.

Up to now, there have been several reasons for this reluctance. One has been the discomfort of the post-Brezhnev leaders, who have made an issue of nepotism in the Soviet Union, at the prospect of granting a seal of legitimacy to so flagrant a display of the principle of "Communist monarchy." More important, the Soviets, who might have willingly taken such an embarrassing step for the sake of a valued and loyal ally, probably were unhappy at the necessity to do so for the sake of Kim Il-song in view of his past behavior toward Moscow.

Most important, the Soviets have probably been reluctant to prejudge the outcome of the North Korean succession in Kim Chong-il's favor. Although the Soviets can have little certainty regarding the policies that Chong-il will follow after his father's death, they may agree with the many observers who think him more likely than not to emulate those aspects of Kim Il-song's behavior which the Soviets have found most obnoxious: the dangerous adventurism, the aggressive insistence upon North Korean independence and North Korean interests to the detriment of Soviet interests, and the inclination toward China. The Rangoon bombing episode in October 1983, which many rumors, rightly or wrongly, have tied to Kim Chong-il's initiative, can only have strengthened such Soviet suspicions of him. Consequently, long after the Chinese gave their tacit endorsement of Kim Chong-il, the Soviets continued to delay such endorsement, apparently believing that it was in their interest to wait as long as there was any chance, however modest, that leaders with a view of North Korean interests more congenial to the USSR might ultimately emerge from the succession struggle in his place.

Notwithstanding these reasons for continued reserve, however, it is possible that the USSR will gradually move to reach a personal accommodation with Kim Chong-il over the next few years. If so, this will probably result from Soviet calculations of a different kind about the factors that may improve their leverage in North Korea.

2. The Issue of Soviet Military Aid After Kim's Death: Aside from any vague, long-term hopes the USSR may have for a more pragmatic, moderate North Korean leadership, there is a second completely different shorter-term consideration which some Soviets may find more encouraging. This concerns the possible political effects within the North Korean military leadership, particularly in a period of succession, as those weapon systems which the Soviets have refused to replace—and which the Chinese cannot replace—inevitably grow increasingly obsolete. The Soviets may believe that under these circumstances, a post-Kim Il-song North Korea could well see increased internal pressures to conciliate the Soviet Union in order to obtain the coveted weapons. North Korean leaders would then face an increasing conflict between their *chuche* principle—their disinclination to bend to Soviet wishes—and their felt need to achieve reunification of Korea on their terms at any cost. Paradoxically, this dilemma would be felt most severely by those North Korean leaders—such as, perhaps, Kim Chong-il—whose general attitudes are not congenial to the Soviet Union but who are also most fervently devoted to achieving control of the South.

The Effects of South Korea's Growing Strength

Many Soviets may already calculate that such a dilemma will be further sharpened over the next decade if the North Korean leadership comes to perceive the prospect of dominating the South as slipping further and further away because of the increased capabilities and the heightened standing of the Republic of Korea. As already suggested, there are grounds for suspecting that despite the long-held and loudly proclaimed belief of the North Korean elite in the superiority of its system and the innate vulnerability of South Korea's, secular trends of the last decade have recently begun to implant doubts that time is working in Pyongyang's favor. The Soviets are almost certainly aware of this erosion of North Korean confidence.²² Such doubts have been fostered by the superior growth rate of the South Korean economy, the advances made by Seoul in fortifying its international position, and the expectation that further advances will flow from the holding of a succession of international gatherings in South Korea in the 1980s. The North Korean leadership probably regards the softening of the Chinese posture toward Seoul and the equivocal Soviet gestures toward South Korea as having both been influenced, at least in part, by these objective trends.²³

The Soviets probably calculate that over the next decade these perceptions may foster an increased desire in the North Korean leadership, whether or not Kim Il-song remains on the scene, to seize whatever opportunities fate may provide before it is too late—that is, before the consolidation of the position of the Republic of Korea has gone too far ever to be overcome. One consequence is likely to be a heightened readiness in Pyongyang to try to take advantage of major political instability in South Korea, should it occur. At the same time, another consequence the USSR may foresee is increased anxiety in Pyongyang to maintain North Korean overall military advantages over South

²²In private conversation with the authors, one knowledgeable Chinese official confirmed that he also perceives a growing North Korean concern that time is working against Pyongyang.

²³To be sure, this secular improvement in South Korea's position not only increases Moscow's potential leverage over North Korea, but also tends to give the Soviet Union some new incentive to establish a relationship with Seoul. Nevertheless, this second effect is likely to remain less important to the Soviet leadership than the first. For strategic reasons, the DPRK, bordering on the USSR and China, is likely to remain for the indefinite future more important to Soviet interests than is the Republic of Korea. In addition, the Soviet leaders are likely to be quite pessimistic about the position they could attain in dealings with South Korea in the best of circumstances. Even under hypothetical conditions of a permanently divided Korea and openly acknowledged cross-recognition, the USSR for the foreseeable future would almost certainly have much less influence in South Korea than any of the three other major powers (the United States, Japan, and China) whose interests intersect in the peninsula.

Korea in the face of South Korean force improvement programs. In particular, the expected South Korean acquisition of F-16s will create a point of North Korean military inferiority that will partly offset the large North Korean advantage in armor and some other military categories.²⁴ This event will therefore dramatize to the North Korean leadership—in a manner not seen to date—the grave consequences of a continuation of the Soviet refusal to upgrade North Korea's Mig-21s with Mig-23s and other new-generation aircraft.

To sum up thus far: from the Soviet perspective, it would, in principle, be desirable if the ultimate outcome of a North Korean succession struggle were the emergence of a more moderate and pragmatic North Korean leadership oriented primarily toward development of the North Korean economy. The chances that this will occur in the next decade, however, are at best highly problematical. Some Soviets may see a better and near-term chance to improve Soviet influence in North Korea in the possibility that radical successors to Kim will be driven by converging circumstances—growing military obsolescence and South Korean strengthening—to approach Moscow with a much more conciliatory attitude.

Evolution of the Soviet Strategic Position in Northeast Asia

The Soviet reluctance over the last decade to supply Pyongyang with advanced military hardware has stemmed not only from dissatisfaction with North Korean behavior toward the Soviet Union. In addition, as earlier noted, the Soviets have probably had two other reasons: concern that such weapons technology might be passed to China,²⁵ and concern that acquisition of such weapons might embolden the North Koreans to undertake dangerous and adventurist military actions that might involve the USSR in a clash with the United States. These concerns will probably continue to be important to Moscow over the next decade, regardless of the North Korean demeanor toward the USSR. A central issue for Soviet decisionmakers, therefore, will be whether any other factors exist that may come to outweigh these considerations

²⁴It can be argued that this change will have only modest practical military significance, in view of the fact that F-16s are already present in Korea, manned by U.S. personnel. This contention, however, probably underestimates the significance Pyongyang assigns to the ratio of strength between itself and the South Korean armed forces. The incessant North Korean campaign to secure U.S. withdrawal from South Korea is based, at least in part, on an assumption that in the absence of U.S. support, the Republic of Korea would be and would remain highly vulnerable to North Korea. Pyongyang would be extremely reluctant to see any narrowing of this potential advantage.

²⁵The aforementioned Chinese official privately confirmed that he sees this concern as an important factor in Soviet thinking.

inhibiting major new Soviet weapons transfers to Pyongyang. There are some grounds to suggest that such factors do exist.

Although the Soviet leaders for a number of years have behaved as if they assign Korea a lower priority than the Chinese do, this attitude could well change over the next decade. It is clear that Northeast Asia is continuing to grow in importance for the Soviet Union as one of the focal points of its global confrontation with the United States. Since the late 1970s the Sea of Okhotsk has become much more important to the USSR as a bastion area for SSBNs whose long-range missiles target the United States. Over the same period, the Soviets have conducted a large-scale air and naval buildup in the Soviet Far East, confronting U.S. forces in the region and also steadily augmenting the role of Northeast Asia as a platform and staging area for Soviet deployments southward, to Cam Ranh Bay and the Indian Ocean. In large part because of the adamant Soviet refusal to return the Japanese "Northern Territories"—the islands adjacent to the southernmost Kuriles that were taken from Japan after World War II—Soviet-Japanese relations have become increasingly embittered, and Japanese-American security cooperation has steadily grown. The Soviets have meanwhile increased their nuclear deployments of SS-20 missiles and Backfire bombers intended to intimidate China and Japan, as well as Backfire deployments directed against U.S. naval forces in the Western Pacific. Soviet tactical reinforcement and hardware modernization also continue throughout the Soviet Far East, where the weaknesses of Soviet warning and air defense were recently dramatized in humiliating fashion by the Korean Airlines shootdown fiasco. All these trends are given impetus by residual Soviet concerns about the possibility of further evolution of Sino-U.S.-Japanese security cooperation against the Soviet Union. Finally, the question of wartime control of all the straits adjoining Japan and Korea has become a matter of increasing concern to both the United States and the Soviet Union, and has evoked public polemics between Japan and the USSR.

In addition, if Soviet planners become increasingly concerned about the prospects for U.S.-Japanese-South Korean security cooperation, this will reinforce the other considerations that impel the Soviet buildup, and could, in time, strengthen Soviet reasons to take a more conciliatory line toward North Korea. Nevertheless, there is every reason to believe that, notwithstanding the vociferous Soviet propaganda assertions, the USSR is not yet greatly concerned about this possibility. Soviet experts are almost certainly fully aware of the powerful political impediments to the construction of important Japanese-ROK security relations.

The Soviet Union has nevertheless continued to speak of such relations as an established fact for the sake of the political advantages such propaganda may procure in both Japan and Korea. This Soviet rhetoric emulates that of North Korea, and has probably been seen in Moscow, in part, as a cost-free means of demonstrating to Pyongyang that there is an area in which Soviet foreign policy interests coincide with those of North Korea, whereas Chinese interests do not. The Soviet Union has had relations with Japan and is confronted by U.S.-Japanese military collaboration, and therefore has no inhibitions about portraying that collaboration as also menacing the Korean peninsula. China has good relations with Japan, has no objection to U.S.-Japanese military ties directed against the Soviet Union, and cannot conveniently support Pyongyang in linking those ties to South Korea.

This particular Soviet propaganda advantage over China was dramatized in striking fashion in April 1984, when North Korea publicized a TASS interview with Kim Il-song in which Kim pointedly thanked the Soviets for their propaganda about Japanese militarism and the "U.S.-Japan-South Korea tripartite military alliance," and exhorted Moscow to beat this drum even more vigorously. A somewhat toned-down version of the interview was published in *Pravda*. Kim noted that "with regard to *this* problem, our stand completely tallies with yours" (emphasis added). It would appear that as of the spring of 1984, largely because of the convergence of Moscow's and Pyongyang's interests on this issue, some modest improvement in Soviet-North Korean relations was in progress. It would also appear, however, that this process still has very far to go, and that the prospects for more fundamental improvements still depend largely on the chance of changes in each side's perception of its broad underlying national interests.

The Kim Visit to Moscow. This conclusion—that some limited improvement is taking place in Soviet-North Korean relations, but that the overall relationship remains cool—does not appear to have been altered by Kim Il-song's visit to Moscow in May 1984.

On the one hand, it seems clear that the mere fact that the Soviet Union agreed to this visit, the first in seventeen years, reflected a Soviet decision to take some small steps to improve the relationship. These steps were particularly notable in view of the fact that in previous years, during the 1970s, the USSR had evaded Kim's efforts to arrange such a visit. The tone of speeches exchanged during Kim's stay in Moscow was cautiously warm, the level of Soviet leadership participation was high, and it seemed quite possible that some increase in the level of Soviet economic assistance to Pyongyang might eventually follow. The Soviet leaders appear to have felt a need at this juncture for some movement in their relations with Pyongyang, partially

because of the recent growth in Sino-North Korean contacts and diplomatic activity, but more importantly because of a Soviet perception, just discussed, that the Korean peninsula is growing in importance for Soviet interests because of the increasing gravity of the Soviet-American strategic confrontation in Northeast Asia.

The visit also provided evidence, however, of the many continuing difficulties in Soviet-North Korean relations, and of the continuing role of China in preserving those difficulties. Kim Il-song did not secure from the Soviets on this occasion any move toward recognition of the Kim Chong-il succession. In their private conversations, the two sides apparently reiterated their discordant positions regarding Indochina.²⁶ In addition, Kim Il-song found during his visit that his Soviet hosts were unwilling to make public mention of his proposal for tripartite Pyongyang-Seoul-Washington talks, which the North Koreans continued to reiterate publicly in Moscow. It seems clear that the Soviets remained intensely suspicious of the Chinese role in brokering diplomatic exchanges on this issue. At the same time, the Soviets were probably somewhat chagrined that on this occasion, their public allusions to the alleged Washington-Seoul-Tokyo military alliance met with no public response from Kim. Despite continuing complaints about Japan in the Pyongyang press, the North Korean leaders made no public references to Japan at all while in Moscow, presumably because Pyongyang, at Chinese urging, was apparently simultaneously making an overture to Japan.²⁷

Against this background, in the immediate aftermath of the Kim visit, it remained highly uncertain whether Kim had succeeded in what was probably the most important single object of his visit—to obtain long-coveted advanced military hardware from the Soviet Union. Although a meeting took place between the North Korean Defense Minister and his Soviet counterpart, it was unclear whether and to what extent the Soviets were prepared to relax their ban on supplying such military technology to Pyongyang. Given the precedent of Soviet past behavior toward other recalcitrant clients such as Egypt's Sadat, it is conceivable that the Soviets agreed to grant some of Kim's requests

²⁶According to the Japanese press, Cambodia's Prince Sihanouk subsequently alleged that in Moscow Kim requested the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia, and the Soviets asked Kim to sever his diplomatic relations with Sihanouk's coalition. Neither side appears to have made concessions to the other on this issue.

²⁷The Japanese press reported that Sihanouk, during a visit to Tokyo at the end of May 1984, carried a message from Kim to Premier Nakasone avowing a desire to improve relations. The Soviets probably believed that this gesture, although tactical in nature and unlikely to bear immediate fruit, was decided on in Pyongyang as a result of Nakasone's April visit to Beijing and Chinese party leader Hu Yaobang's talks with Kim in Pyongyang shortly before Kim's trip to Moscow.

but not others. It is also not impossible, in view of past precedents, that the Soviets made ambiguous commitments to Kim, the fulfillment of which will remain dependent upon Soviet evaluation of future North Korean behavior toward Moscow.

Factors That May Encourage Further Change. However, even if the Soviets continue to show reluctance to satisfy North Korean desires for advanced military weaponry, there are other factors that could in time alter this Soviet attitude. These considerations derive from the strategic situation in the region.

In view of the growing tension in Northeast Asia, it might be considered remarkable that the Korean peninsula has thus far remained largely exempt and isolated from the larger strategic confrontation. Despite the large concentration of opposing military forces in the peninsula, these forces today still remain primarily Korea-directed, intended to help determine the political fate of this peninsula, and do not contribute directly to the larger Soviet-American confrontation. Because of increasing military requirements on both sides as a result of the expanding confrontation in East Asia, however, there may be increasing temptation for both the Soviet Union and the United States to seek to use the Korean peninsula against the main opponent.²⁸

On the Soviet side, there have been rumors for some time that the USSR would like to obtain from North Korea air and naval facilities analogous to those it has secured from Vietnam. There have been some reports, unconfirmed but not innately implausible, alleging that the Soviet Union has in fact made approaches to Pyongyang to secure such facilities, which have allegedly been rebuffed. Moscow would find such facilities a considerable convenience to its operations against Japan and the United States. The Soviet Union during the 1970s had sufficient temerity to seek military facilities—unsuccessfully—from a number of avowedly neutral states, and it is therefore by no means impossible that it could have made an analogous request from North Korea, with which it has, at least nominally, a military alliance.

²⁸It can be argued that entirely apart from strategic military factors in Northeast Asia, the deterioration of Soviet-American relations in recent years has given the Soviet leaders new incentive to try to exacerbate U.S. political difficulties in South Korea, and to support Pyongyang's efforts to encourage instability in the South to the degree that such instability does not increase the risk of Soviet nuclear war with the United States. In principle, the Soviets may indeed have such a desire; in practice, however, they are probably still constrained by concern over the chances of escalation and over the difficulty of predicting Pyongyang's actions.

As earlier noted, this constraint derives primarily from the risk to the USSR created by the U.S. presence in South Korea. In the absence of such a U.S. presence, the Soviet attitude toward North Korean efforts to destabilize South Korea would probably be considerably more relaxed, and possibly supportive.

To be sure, even if the Soviet Union has indeed sought such facilities from Pyongyang, it has failed to get them, and securing them from the North Korean regime, which has been so pugnacious in asserting its independence for the last two decades, is likely to remain extremely difficult. Nevertheless, the Soviets may believe that the example of Vietnam has shown that given changing circumstances and a sufficiently great incentive, radical changes in hitherto strongly held positions may become possible.²⁹ Some Soviets may calculate that given enough time, sufficient North Korean disquiet over the fading of prospects for reunification on Pyongyang's terms, and enough North Korean anguish over the growing obsolescence of key military equipment, major concessions which now seem impossible to extract from North Korea may become attainable.

In sum, the possibility exists that despite the good reasons for the Soviets to continue to withhold advanced military equipment from North Korea, the Soviet leaders would accept the associated risks and lift this ban if they could secure use of air or naval facilities from Pyongyang. The Soviet Union may, in fact, be waiting for Kim Il-song or his successors to yield on this point.

Finally, on the other side of the coin, there is one circumstance that might induce the USSR to reverse its policy on sending advanced military equipment to Korea even if the North Koreans do not make such major concessions to Moscow. This would be the arrival in South Korea of U.S. strategic weapon systems directed against Soviet territory. Despite vehement Soviet propaganda directed against U.S. forces and weapons in South Korea, and despite greatly inflated Soviet allegations of growing U.S.-Japanese-South Korean military collaboration, the Soviets are well aware that the United States as yet has made little effort to use South Korea as a strategic base against the Soviet Union. The Soviets probably believe, however, that there is an increasing chance that this situation may change in the 1980s, as the United States searches for ways to counter Soviet nuclear preponderance in Asia, and particularly to counter the ongoing Asian deployments of the SS-20. The Soviets are likely to suspect that Washington will become increasingly tempted, as time goes on, to consider theater nuclear deployments in South Korea as one element in such a response.

There is no indication that the Soviet leaders have any intention of halting their deployments, which according to some press accounts may produce over two hundred deployed SS-20s when present construction

²⁹Hanoi, like Pyongyang today, was unwilling to allow the USSR the privilege of making even naval port calls until changing circumstances and the pressure of necessity—the Vietnamese decision to invade Cambodia and the consequent Chinese threat to Vietnam—compelled it to change its stand in 1978-1979.

is completed in the next few years.³⁰ The important Soviet theater nuclear advantage in Asia created by the advent of the SS-20 and the Backfire bomber is thus likely to grow significantly in the remainder of this decade unless offset by new American measures, particularly since Soviet nuclear capabilities will be further augmented by new weapon systems, including new intermediate-range air-launched and sea-launched cruise missiles.

The problem created for the United States and its allies by the Soviet nuclear and conventional buildup in Asia is thus indeed a grave one, and U.S. options in seeking appropriate responses in this decade to redress the balance in the face of this growing threat are somewhat limited. The Republic of Korea offers a potential platform for deployment of offsetting weapon systems which has some attractive features, including the likelihood that such weapons would be readily accepted by the Korean government.

Nevertheless, the strategic value of any such deployments would have to be weighed against serious offsetting disadvantages. Aside from the probability of adverse reactions in Japan and China, deployments of this kind would be likely to bring about a grave transformation of the present great-power stakes in Korea, ending the peninsula's present degree of isolation from the larger Soviet-American confrontation, and probably ending the Soviet aloofness from Korean issues that has been advantageous to the United States and to stability. Specifically, there seems a substantial chance that if the United States did decide to deploy in Korea long-range nuclear weapon systems such as the Pershing II or cruise missiles, this would seriously affect the Soviet attitude toward supplying North Korea with advanced military hardware. Moreover, the Soviets would acquire a much more direct stake in undermining South Korea than they have at present. One net consequence of these changes might be to significantly increase the chance of instability on the Korean peninsula.

³⁰*Washington Post*, May 8, 1983.

III. PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

The evidence reviewed in this report suggests that, from both the Soviet and North Korean perspectives, continuation of a basically cool and reserved relationship between the USSR and the DPRK remains the most likely prospect for the coming decade. Although some modest improvements are possible, the kinds of concessions on either side that would probably be required to significantly change this relationship conflict in important ways with the view that each has consistently taken of its fundamental interests. In the absence of major changes in North Korea's definition of national interest or perceptions of trends as they affect these interests—neither of which at the present time seems probable—or in Soviet policies toward the DPRK without such North Korean changes, a dramatic modification of the Soviet-North Korean relationship seems unlikely to occur in the 1980s.

There are, however, a number of factors that could alter this forecast. Among these factors, the most volatile from the North Korean perspective would appear to relate to the perpetuation of the ruling regime. If active and expanded Soviet support became essential to the regime's basic existence, a dramatic alteration of North Korean policies would certainly be possible. Although this seems the most potentially volatile area, at this point the prospects for such a state of affairs developing must be judged to be minimal.

The area with the greatest *potential* for change from North Korea's perspective would appear to be that concerning the objective of reunification on North Korean terms. Here, the key question is whether Pyongyang's past perception of itself as superior to South Korea undergoes major alteration. Should the conviction develop that it had lost its superiority and with it the prospect for ultimately reunifying Korea under its control, North Korea could well be inclined to modify its policies in an effort to garner greater Soviet assistance. Such an inclination would be heightened by clear indications on the part of the Soviet Union of a willingness to assume greater risks in support of North Korea's version of reunification.

Among the factors influencing North Korea's perception of the prospects for reunification, three seem likely to be particularly important: the nature of USSR and PRC policies toward South Korea; the state of Soviet and Chinese relations with the United States; and the evolution of South Korea's internal political, economic, and military situation. North Korea's perceptions of trends in these factors, and their

interaction with other North Korean perceptions, require careful study.

On the Soviet side, there are two factors that could impel the Soviet leadership to consider important changes in policy toward Pyongyang that might involve the acceptance of risks hitherto considered unjustified. One would be the possibility of obtaining concrete security benefits—in the form of naval or air facilities in North Korea—that have thus far been ruled out by the DPRK's unwillingness to jeopardize its independence. Although it appears unlikely that the attitude of North Korea—under either Kim Il-song or a successor leadership—will change enough over the next decade to make such radical concessions to the USSR possible, there is a modest possibility of such a change if North Korean anxieties over secular trends on the peninsula, and over the obsolescence of critical DPRK weaponry, become sufficiently severe.

The other factor that could reshape Soviet attitudes toward risk-taking in the Korean peninsula would be a decision by the United States in the next decade to use South Korea as a platform for strategic theater nuclear weapons directed at the Soviet Union. Such a decision might well alter the Soviet evaluation of costs and risks sufficiently to lead the USSR to restore the flow of advanced military hardware to North Korea even in the absence of policy changes on the part of Pyongyang, and to take a much more supportive posture toward North Korean efforts to undermine the Republic of Korea.

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