

**CHALLENGES POSED BY THE DPRK  
FOR THE ALLIANCE AND THE REGION**



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# THE NORTH KOREAN NUCLEAR ISSUE

## THE ENIGMA OF THE NORTH KOREAN REGIME: BACK TO THE FUTURE?

by Kathryn Weathersby

Five years after the historic North-South summit of 2000, North Korea is still widely viewed as an enigma—a secretive, isolated, and enfeebled state whose belligerence and anachronistic worship of its leader provoke unease among all its neighbors. Yet the isolation of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) has begun to break down since the famine of the late 1990s, with increasing numbers of foreigners granted unprecedented access to the country and to its growing ranks of refugees. However, while recent reports have significantly expanded our knowledge of the current situation within North Korea, they have penetrated only slightly the wall of opacity that surrounds the thinking of the DPRK leadership. As a consequence, the present debate in the United States over whether Kim Jong-il is genuinely embarking on a reform path, and which carrots and sticks will be most effective in moving his regime in that direction, is not underlain by any shared understanding of how the North Korean leadership perceives its relations with the rest of the world.

This paper draws from a source of information on the DPRK—the archival record of its former allies in the Communist world—that provides some of the most extensive and reliable evidence yet to emerge on the thinking of the North Korean leadership. Three years ago, the Cold War International History Project (CWIHP) at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, D.C., began systematically examining the newly declassified records on North Korea in the archives of Russia, China (People’s Republic of China, or PRC), the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), Hungary, the Czech

Republic, Poland, Bulgaria, Albania, and Mongolia. These documents, which date from the Korean War years through the end of Communist rule in Eastern Europe in 1989, include transcripts of wide-ranging and often remarkably frank conversations between Kim Il-sung and fellow heads of state within the Soviet bloc, memoranda of conversations with senior North Korean officials, reports on DPRK affairs written by Communist diplomats stationed in Pyongyang, and analyses of the North Korea situation written by the foreign ministries of Soviet bloc countries.<sup>1</sup>

These archival records provide partial documentation of the evolution of the Kim Il-sung regime through the collapse of Communist rule in Eastern Europe in 1989. Unfortunately, they do not extend into the contemporary period, when the circumstances of the DPRK changed profoundly as a result of the loss of North Korea’s charismatic founder and its economic and security lifelines. This record cannot, therefore, equip us to forecast with certainty the choices Kim Jong-il will make as he accommodates to this radically altered environment. However, a careful examination of these documents can provide a more informed understanding of the mental framework within which Kim Jong-il and his associates were educated and groomed for their roles. At the very least, such understanding will enable us to discuss present policy options in more realistic terms.

This paper examines a small portion of the newly available documentary record to assess what conclusions can be drawn from it about Kim Il-sung’s approach to using military force to reunify Korea. It argues that

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1. For translations and analyses of the first batch of these documents the project has obtained, see K. Weathersby, ed., “New Evidence on North Korea,” *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, 14/15 (Winter 2003–Spring 2004): 5–137, [www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm).

although Kim Il-sung remained committed to the “liberation” of South Korea, regarding it as his solemn duty, he remained constrained by the judgment of the Soviet Union and other allies as to whether circumstances were favorable for a full-scale attack on the Republic of Korea (ROK). With U.S. troops remaining in South Korea following the 1950–53 war, the DPRK’s allies, on whose support the country relied for its existence, continued to insist that a war against the ROK was not feasible. However, the formula Stalin set down in March 1949 had an important loophole; it stipulated that although the North Koreans had to wait for favorable circumstances before invading, they could defend themselves against a U.S.–South Korean attack. This loophole thus inadvertently encouraged Kim Il-sung to stage provocations disguised as attacks from the South. Deluding himself that actions such as the commando raid on the Blue House in January 1968, allegedly perpetrated by Southern partisans, would spark an uprising in South Korea and a consequent request for DPRK military aid, Kim staged such thinly disguised aggression. These actions pushed the limits of his allies’ tolerance. However, because the DPRK had a special status within the Communist camp as the front line against U.S. imperialism in Asia and simultaneously its chief victim, the Soviet Union and its client states continued to prop up their troublesome Korean ally. Having lost these allies at the end of the Cold War, the DPRK is now theoretically free to launch aggressive action against South Korea. The evidence suggests, however, that by the end of Kim Il-sung’s reign the North Korean leadership, presumably including Kim Jong-il, had learned that the DPRK’s economic weakness and U.S. nuclear power rendered a military solution impossible. A corollary to that lesson, however, is that North Korean nuclear weapons would similarly make a U.S. attack on the impoverished DPRK impossible.

### Lessons of the 1950–53 War

During his first years in power, Kim Il-sung enjoyed the rare privilege (as he saw it) of being personally

tutored in international relations and revolutionary war by Joseph Stalin, the awe-inspiring leader of world Communism. From this master, whose legacy Kim never repudiated, the young Korean leader learned first of all that the use of military force to liberate the rest of his homeland from capitalist oppression was not only proper, but was his solemn duty. As Stalin framed the question, whether or not to invade the South was only a matter of judging when circumstances were favorable. The Bolshevik party had come to power in Russia through a prolonged civil war, and Mao Zedong had just recently unified and liberated his country after an even lengthier armed struggle. If Kim Il-sung were to rise to the ranks of Communist heroes, he would have to accomplish the same victory in Korea. It was therefore impossible for Kim to accept that the 1950 war ended with the status quo ante. He could only regard the 1953 armistice as a temporary expedient necessitated by domestic and international circumstances. As soon as the “correlation of forces” shifted in his favor, he must resume the struggle.<sup>2</sup>

Second, Stalin made it clear that the most important circumstance to be evaluated in deciding whether to attack was the likely response of the United States. At every stage in the deliberations over a possible invasion in 1949–50, the most important question was whether the Americans would intervene to defend their South Korean “puppet.” Accordingly, it was only after Stalin came to believe in early January 1950 that the United States would not intervene that he agreed to support Kim Il-sung’s request to mount an invasion of the South.

Third, Kim learned the painful lesson that the DPRK’s dependence on its allies rendered it unable to make the decision to attack the South on its own. The DPRK would need military support from its allies should the United Nations (UN) intervene to defend the ROK. Consequently, an attack on the ROK risked a general war between the United States and the Soviet bloc, making the issue a matter of grave concern to the Soviet Union and its allies. According to the formula

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2. The following discussion is based on documents on the decision making behind the June 1950 attack published and analyzed in K. Weathersby, “To Attack or Not to Attack?: Stalin, Kim Il Sung, and the Prelude to War,” *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 5 (Spring 1995): 1–9; and “‘Should We Fear This?’: Stalin and the Danger of War with America” (working paper no. 39, Cold War International History Project, July 2002). For an expanded discussion of the evidence, see K. Weathersby, “The Soviet Role in the Korean War: The State of Historical Knowledge,” in *The Korean War in World History*, ed. William Stueck (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 61–92.

Stalin set down in March 1949, the eager DPRK leader could not initiate an attack on his own; he could only respond with a counterattack if his country were attacked by the Americans and South Koreans. As will be discussed below, these parameters remained in place at least through 1986, if not beyond. Throughout this period, Kim Il-sung took pains to assure his patron and allies that any aggressive action against the ROK was a countermeasure to an alleged U.S.–South Korean provocation. Despite the considerable political autonomy he achieved after the 1950–53 war, when it came to military action against the South, Kim remained constrained by the limits set by his allies.

Fourth, the 1950–53 war demonstrated to Kim just how thoroughly subordinate his revolutionary goals were to those of his patrons, and how bitter such subjugation could be. On 14 October 1950, when Mao Zedong informed Stalin that despite earlier assurances to the contrary, China would not send troops to aid the DPRK, the Soviet leader held fast to the terms he enunciated to Kim in April. The Soviet Union would provide all necessary military supplies, but if the North Koreans needed troop reinforcements, they would have to rely on the Chinese. Thus, after receiving Mao's telegram, Stalin ordered Kim Il-sung to withdraw his remaining forces from Korean territory. The next day the Soviet leader received word from Beijing that the Chinese would, after all, send troops to Korea. Stalin promptly cancelled his evacuation order,<sup>3</sup> but Kim was nonetheless profoundly shocked to learn that his patron and mentor would sacrifice the very existence of the DPRK rather than fight the Americans himself. Kim's address to the assembled party cadres in December 1950, after Chinese troops had driven back the UN advance into DPRK territory, was strikingly different from his previous speeches. After

five years of lengthy addresses filled with the most ornate, fawning praise of the great Soviet leader and the great Soviet fatherland, mention of his patron was abruptly reduced to a couple of unadorned parenthetical phrases.<sup>4</sup>

Compounding the trauma of Stalin's evacuation order was the humiliation Kim Il-sung suffered as a result of his rescue by the Chinese. Fearing a reassertion of traditional Chinese hegemony, Kim resisted Chinese commander Peng Dehuai's reasonable proposal to create a unified military command. The matter was resolved only after Stalin intervened to instruct Kim to accept the Chinese plan. Kim was similarly forced to agree to the Chinese strategy of halting the advance in January 1951 in order to reorganize, rather than press the attack south of the 38th parallel. In the spring of 1951, Kim attempted to block Chinese efforts to take control of the DPRK's railroad system, only to have Stalin intervene again in support of the Chinese position. Once cease-fire negotiations began in the summer of 1951, Stalin and Mao formulated the approach to the talks; Kim had a decidedly minor voice. Thus, while the Korean leader was prepared to bring the fighting to an end by early 1952, in order to spare his country further destruction, he had to cede to the wishes of Stalin and Mao, who decided to continue the war for reasons of their own national interests.<sup>5</sup>

Fifth, the ferocity of the prolonged U.S. bombing of North Korea, the lack of resolution to the war, and the continued presence of U.S. forces in the ROK gave the DPRK a special status within the Communist camp. As the chief victim of U.S. aggression (a status later shared with Vietnam) and the front line in the struggle against U.S. imperialism in Asia, North Korea received nearly boundless material support from

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3. For translations of these orders, see Alexandre Y. Mansourov, "Stalin, Mao, Kim, and China's Decision to Enter the Korean War, September 16–October 15, 1950: New Evidence from the Russian Archives," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 6/7 (Winter 1995/1996): 118–19.

4. The texts of Kim's speeches are found in the Russian State Archive of Social and Political History, the former archive of the Central Committee of the Communist Party.

5. For the evidence from Chinese archives, see Shen Zhihua, "Sino–North Korean Conflict and Its Resolution during the Korean War," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 14/15 (Spring 2004): 9–24. For evidence from Russian archives regarding the armistice negotiations, see K. Weathersby, "Stalin, Mao and the End of the Korean War," in *Brothers in Arms: The Rise and Fall of the Sino-Soviet Alliance*, ed. Odd Arne Westad (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 90–116.

the fraternal states, no matter how strained their own resources might be. For the countries of the Soviet bloc, therefore, it became politically inexpedient to refuse to aid this socialist poster child. In 1956, for example, the GDR Politburo was stunned by the size of the DPRK's aid demands, but Politburo members worried that, if they failed to fulfill them, the Koreans would complain to the Soviet Union and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (Comecon). Thus, even the East Germans, who were themselves on the front line in Europe and who had extraordinary economic needs after the destruction suffered during World War II, felt compelled to plead their poverty to Comecon, explaining in detail why they could fulfill only a portion of the Korean requests.<sup>6</sup> Throughout the postwar period, however strongly Kim's allies disapproved of his domestic policies and worried about his provocations against the South, they could never permanently withdraw their patronage. As O. B. Rakhmanin, deputy head of the international department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, explained to an East German party official in February 1973: "In the interest of our common tasks, we must sometimes overlook their stupidities. None of us agree with the idolatry of Kim Il-sung."<sup>7</sup>

Finally, the experience of having survived sustained bombing by U.S. planes for nearly three years created the dangerous, if paradoxical, combination of a profound sense of threat and a faith in the country's ability to prevail in a future military conflict. While the post-Stalin leadership in Moscow was unwilling to support a risky conflict in Korea, by the late 1950s the DPRK leadership expressed confidence in its ability to unite the country.<sup>8</sup> Pyongyang also began to

declare, in keeping with its special status, that the Korean question was the most important issue in the world. Such statements created conflict with the GDR, which quickly dispatched a delegation to Pyongyang to "make the leading Korean comrades understand that today the main threat to peace is not in the Far East but . . . in West Germany."<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, protected by their special status, and given enhanced leverage as a result of the Sino-Soviet split, the North Koreans continued to plan for unification.

### **The Raid on the Blue House and the Seizure of the USS *Pueblo***

Throughout the early 1960s, the North Koreans' enthusiastic statements about the prospects for reunification were received coolly by the Soviets. In February 1964 an exasperated Nikita Khrushchev told the Korean ambassador to Moscow that, although the Koreans had assured their Soviet comrades that revolutionary forces existed in the South, "the reality, however, suggests that they are not there. The situation is altogether different in South Vietnam, where a sharp struggle has been taking place." The Soviet premier went on to say:

The situation in South Korea must be thoroughly examined since there is no revolutionary situation there. He [Kim] cited the example of Fidel Castro having asked the Soviet Union for weapons for Venezuela on the grounds that there was a revolutionary situation there. The Soviet Union sent the weapons but nothing came of it and the weapons fell into the hands of enemies. One cannot provoke a revolutionary situation from the

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6. Bernd Schaefer, "Weathering the Sino-Soviet Conflict: The GDR and North Korea, 1949–1989," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 14/15 (Spring 2004): 27.

7. Axen visits CC KPSS from 27 February–2 March 1973, East German Socialist Unity Party. Archive (SAMPO), DY 30 IV B2/2.028 (Buro Norden), File 55. Translated by David Wolff. I am grateful to David Wolff for drawing my attention to this passage.

8. For documentation from Hungarian archives, see Balazs Szalontai, "'You Have No Political Line of Your Own': Kim Il Sung and the Soviets, 1953–1964," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 14/15 (Spring 2004): 95.

9. Szalontai, "You Have No Political Line of Your Own," 95.

10. Memorandum of conversation with Soviet ambassador to the DPRK, Comrade V. P. Moskovsky, 26 February 1964. Archive of the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, Collection 02/1, File 56, Archival Unit 60, Information 2, 1964. Translated by Vojtech Mastny.

outside . . . Regarding South Korea . . . no revolutionary situation has ripened there and you are not going to awaken it.<sup>10</sup>

Kim Il-sung could do little about the Soviet assessment of the situation in South Korea, but Moscow's open conflict with Beijing after 1960 enabled Pyongyang to press its case indirectly by accusing the Soviet big brother of providing insufficient support to revolutionary movements worldwide. Kim Il-sung particularly felt free to criticize Soviet foreign policy after Khrushchev's capitulation in the Cuban Missile Crisis and his subsequent removal from power, which amounted to an admission by his successors of Khrushchev's mistakes in foreign and domestic policy. In February 1965, when Andrei Kosygin, chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers, traveled to Pyongyang to restore good relations with the DPRK following Khrushchev's ouster, the high Soviet official felt obliged to defend Moscow's record of fighting U.S. imperialism. "Let's map out the program of the struggle," he proposed, "and agree which method is better, whether yours and the Vietnamese, that is to say the Chinese, or ours and that of other fraternal countries."<sup>11</sup>

As the lengthy discussions with Kosygin progressed, however, Kim attempted to walk a fine line, pressuring the USSR to support his reunification policies while avoiding a Soviet-U.S. war, which would place the DPRK again at the mercy of U.S. bombers. According to the report of the Soviet ambassador, "even outside the negotiations, he [Kim Il-sung] asked several times with great trepidation about the views of the

Soviet comrades about whether the current events in Southeast Asia might not lead to a 'major war.'<sup>12</sup>

In keeping with this concern about avoiding a major war, DPRK Foreign Minister Pak Song-ch'ol assured Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko in May 1966 that, while "the main task of the Korean Communists is the liberation of the South Korean people, who are under the yoke of American imperialism," the position of the Korean Workers' Party (KWP) "is to achieve unification of the country peacefully, on a democratic basis, relying on the Korean people to make the American imperialists get out of South Korea. The struggle of the South Korean population itself plays a very important role in this regard."<sup>13</sup> In the fall of 1966 when the Chinese, inflamed by the Cultural Revolution recently unleashed by Mao Zedong, demanded that the KWP pursue revolution in South Korea, the Korean party pointedly adopted a centrist position.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, however, China's Cultural Revolution seems to have pushed Kim toward a more active approach to unification, as it presented him with an irresistible opportunity to seize the mantle of revolutionary leadership in Asia from the distracted and discredited Mao. The acting Vietnamese ambassador to Pyongyang, Hoang Muoi, reported in May 1967:

Our President Ho Chi Minh is already very old and will die soon. Whatever happens to Mao Zedong, his role as a world leader is nearing its end. [The Mongolian leader] Tsedenbal has a very weak personality. Kim Il-sung is relatively young and has a strong per-

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11. Memorandum of conversation with Soviet ambassador to the DPRK, Comrade V. P. Moskovsky, concerning the negotiations between a Soviet delegation, led by chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers Kosygin, and the Korean Workers' Party (KWP) leadership, which took place on 16 February 1965 at the USSR embassy in the DPRK. Archive of the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, Collection 02/1, File 96, Archival Unit 101, Information 13, 1962-66. Translated by Vojtech Mastny.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Record of conversation with the minister of foreign affairs of the DPRK, Comrade Pak Song-ch'ol, 9 April 1966, from the diary of A. A. Gromyko. Archive of the Foreign Relations of the Russian Federation [AVPRF], Fond 0102, Opis 22, Papka 107, Delo 4, Listy 1-5. Obtained and translated for the Cold War International History Project by Sergey Radchenko.

14. Bernd Schaefer, "North Korean 'Adventurism' and China's Long Shadow, 1966-1972" (working paper no. 44, Cold War International History Project, October 2004), 6.

sonality. The Korean leadership is pursuing a long-term strategy to propagate Kim Il-sung as the leader of the Asian people. They are assuming Kim might become the strongest personality of the revolutionary movement in Asia within ten to fifteen years.<sup>15</sup>

To claim this exalted role, however, Kim had to present the DPRK as being at least equal to Vietnam in fighting against U.S. imperialism. Consequently, Pyongyang increased the number of clashes along the demilitarized zone (DMZ) and then inflated their numbers, which had the side benefit of “providing grounds for soliciting substantial military aid from other socialist countries, mostly free of charge.”<sup>16</sup> The DPRK escalated its propaganda by calling for the liberation of the South in the present generation. Moreover, Kim Il-sung declined to attend the celebration in Moscow of the 50th anniversary of the 1917 revolution, on the grounds that he could not leave the country because the tense situation at the border with the ROK reminded him of the situation in the summer of 1950.<sup>17</sup>

Kim was careful, however, to insist to his patron and allies that the DPRK would not initiate a war. Pak Song-ch’ol, who represented Kim at the anniversary celebrations in Moscow, explained to Gromyko “the enemies of the DPRK insistently repeat that after the pull-out of American forces from South Korea, North Korean forces would allegedly attack the South. This is nothing but an attempt to mislead world public opinion, to fool the people. There is no basis for saying that North Korea is trying to solve the reunification problem by military means.”<sup>18</sup> Still, echoing Stalin’s original formula of 1949, the DPRK foreign minister noted:

There remains a tense situation along the demarcation line, which is reminiscent of the

events leading to the war in 1950. Recent events suggest that war could be resumed at any time. Separate minor clashes could grow into a major conflict. For example, in the spring of this year, a coastal artillery unit of the DPRK sank a South Korean coast guard vessel that trespassed into North Korean territorial waters. After this, mobilization activities were carried out in the South. Certain steps were taken in the DPRK as well. If an attack from the South occurred, the DPRK would reply with a counter-attack.<sup>19</sup>

Underscoring the point that the Soviet Union had an interest in events in Korea, Pak noted that “the DPRK army is strong, the struggle against the puppet regime is being unveiled in the South, the DPRK has strong allies—the Soviet Union and China. In such circumstances, the Americans will hardly attempt to resume the war . . . However, one should not forget that the Americans have been in occupation of South Korea for twenty-two years, they will hardly content themselves with this.” Echoing the Soviet position on Korea since 1945, Pak declared that the Americans “want to conquer the whole of Korea so as to use it afterwards as a platform for attack against the Soviet Union and China.” Moreover, upping the ante with a play on Moscow’s greatest fear, he stated that the United States was “trying to involve Japan in the realization of their plans for conquering Korea. In recent times, the Japanese have visited the demarcation line more often. Not too long ago, the Japanese military attaché went there from Seoul. The Americans and the Japanese have several times carried out joint military exercises. They have a concrete joint plan for invading North Korea.” Gromyko was not particularly impressed by Pak’s alarmist declarations, stat-

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15. *Ibid.*, 10–11.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, 20.

18. Record of conversation between A. A. Gromyko and the deputy chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the DPRK Comrade Pak Song-ch’ol, 20 November 1967. AVPRF: Fond 0102, Opis 23, Papka 110, Delo 3, Listy 93–96. Obtained and translated by Sergey Radchenko. The full text can be found in the appendix to Schaefer, “North Korean ‘Adventurism’ and China’s Long Shadow,” 42–45.

19. *Ibid.*



ing: “the Soviet Union does not possess any information regarding an American preparation for war in Korea.” Nonetheless, also echoing Stalin’s 1949 instructions, Gromyko added that “imperialism remains imperialism, and one should always be ready for possible provocations.”<sup>20</sup>

It was within the context of escalating claims of impending attack that the DPRK mounted the commando raid on the Blue House in January 1968. By describing the commandos as South Korean partisans, North Korea avoided violating the parameters set by Moscow. Moreover, the DPRK did not attempt an invasion, but rather an assassination that would spark a popular uprising and a military coup d’état, after which the new leaders would ask Pyongyang for military support. The complete failure of this poorly disguised aggression created an acute need to manufacture a U.S. aggression to distract attention from Pyongyang’s amateurish “adventurism.” Thus, the hapless USS *Pueblo* was seized.

The newly obtained documents reveal that the DPRK did not consult with the Soviet Union or any other ally in advance of the seizure of the *Pueblo*. Instead, the DPRK Foreign Ministry called a meeting of all ambassadors and acting ambassadors of the socialist countries at 9:00 p.m. on 24 January to inform them of the “invading armed American ship seized by our navy.”<sup>21</sup> All the fraternal countries were displeased by the Korean action, and the Soviets were particularly alarmed by its provocative nature. However, since the United States responded to the seizure with military mobilization aimed against the USSR as well as the DPRK, assuming the action was part of a broader Soviet advance, Moscow felt compelled to offer public support for Pyongyang.<sup>22</sup>

General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev explained the Soviet predicament to a Central Committee (CC) plenum on 9 April 1968. The text of his speech reveals the framework within which the incident occurred and is thus worth quoting at length. Brezhnev began by noting:

Despite the limited scale of these events, they had principal importance, both from the point of view of rebuffing the aggressive actions of the USA and in terms of our attitude towards certain peculiarities of the policy of our Korean friends. The Politburo has reported many times to the CC Plenum regarding our line in relations with the KWP and the DPRK. The essence of this line is consistently to strengthen friendly relations with the KWP and the DPRK despite the existence of different approaches between us and the Korean comrades to a series of questions of the international communist movement and other [problems]. On the whole, the situation in the course of the entire preceding [in the text mistakenly written “subsequent”] period developed precisely along these lines. We had developed contacts with the Koreans in various spheres and above all in the economic [sphere]. Trade was developing; we concluded a series of agreements on cooperation in timber clearing, building an oil refinery, etc. We continued to provide aid in defending the DPRK. The Korean press stopped publishing unfriendly statements addressed to the CPSU and the Soviet Union.

One should remark in particular that during his meetings with us, Comrade Kim Il-sung

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20. Ibid.

21. Informational report of the Foreign Ministry of the DPRK on 24 January 1968, 9:00–9:40 p.m., for the ambassadors and acting ambassadors of all socialist countries accredited to the DPRK. MfAA, C 1023/73. Translated by Karen Riechert.

22. For a detailed history of the U.S. side of the *Pueblo* incident, see Mitchell B. Lerner, *The Pueblo Incident: A Spy Ship and the Failure of American Foreign Policy* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002). For a discussion of the implication of the first batch of documents on the incident translated by Cold War International History Project’s Korea Initiative, see Mitchell B. Lerner, “A Dangerous Miscalculation: New Evidence from Communist-Bloc Archives about North Korea and the Crisis of 1968,” *Journal of Cold War History* 6, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 3–21.

assured us that the friends do not intend to solve the problem of uniting North and South Korea by military means, and thereby unleash a war with the Americans, whose forces, as one knows, are stationed in South Korea. However, several indications have appeared in recent times that have appeared to suggest that the leaders of the DPRK have begun to take a more militant path. This became particularly noticeable at the time of the incident with the American vessel *Pueblo* . . . One should say that the measures taken in this case by the government of the DPRK appear unusually harsh: as a rule, in the practice of international relations, in case of an incursion of a foreign military vessel in the territorial waters of any state, it is simply advised to leave these waters or is forced to do so.

Nonetheless, because the U.S. reaction was directed against the Soviet Union as well as the DPRK, Brezhnev believed he had to respond forcefully, even if that meant supporting the North Korean action more than he otherwise might have done. “Washington’s reaction was fierce, rude, and aggressive,” the Soviet leader declared, and continued:

The government of the USA made accusations and threats addressed to the DPRK; considerable naval forces and air forces were deployed near North Korea’s shores, including the flag carrier of the 7th fleet, the atomic aircraft carrier *Enterprise*. Calls for the bombardment of Korean ports, the forced return of the *Pueblo* etc. were heard in the USA. The Americans clearly counted on forcing the DPRK to retreat before the cannon barrels of their ships. In addition, President Johnson used this incident to further increase military preparations and heat up military hysteria on the international scale. New categories of reserves were mobilized into the US army, demonstrable measures were taken to increase military preparedness in Europe. Under these circumstances, the CC CPSU and the Soviet government found it necessary to voice public support for the DPRK, a socialist country with which we are moreover tied by a treaty of friendship and mutual assistance. We did it, supporting the right of

the DPRK to defend its security and censuring the aggressive behavior of the USA.

Besides this, the Politburo and the Soviet government considered it useful to exert direct pressure on the US leadership to lessen its urge and desire to inflame provocations in the immediate proximity of the borders of the USSR, and in relation to countries allied with us. In this connection, a decision was made to send a communication to President Johnson on behalf of the Soviet government. The 3 February letter to Johnson drew attention to the fact that the USA is concentrating naval and air forces on an unprecedented scale in the immediate proximity of the Far Eastern regions of the Soviet Union. The American President was told ‘in our actions we must take into consideration what is happening near our borders and what touches on the interests of the security of the Soviet Union.’ At the same time, it was stressed that efforts to act with regard to the DPRK by means of threats and pressure can only lead to a dead end and to further complications fraught with far-reaching consequences.

At the same time, we took certain measures to increase the military preparedness of Soviet military forces in the Far East in order to protect the country in case of complications and to let the Americans understand that we are not joking, but are approaching this matter seriously. The measures that were adopted worked. On 6 February Johnson sent a reply in which he tried to explain the amassing of American military forces in the Sea of Japan by referring to militant statements and actions by the DPRK and assured us that “prompt settlement [of the crisis] serves our common interests.” The President’s message said in the end that he “gave an order to stop any further amassing of naval and air forces at the present time” and decreed that they would pull out one of the aircraft carriers with accompanying vessels from the region of the incident. Indeed, the aircraft carrier *Enterprise* was pulled away from the DPRK’s shores.

At the same time, the Soviet government intervened with its Korean allies in order to avoid a dangerous escalation of the crisis. Brezhnev explained:

We insistently advised the Korean comrades, with whom we maintained systematic contact throughout this period, to show reserve, not to give the Americans an excuse for widening provocations, to settle the incident by political means. When it became clear to the entire world that US attempts to make the DPRK retreat before blackmail and military threats failed, and when the government of the USA was forced to conduct talks regarding the *Pueblo* with representatives of the DPRK in Panmunjom, we expressed the opinion to the Korean leadership that now, without suffering any harm and even gaining political advantage, one could finish this affair by disgracefully deporting the crew of the US spy vessel from the territory of North Korea.

Pyongyang was not yet ready to defuse the crisis, however. Kim Il-sung apparently wished to use the situation for domestic mobilization and to reinforce Soviet obligations to the DPRK. Brezhnev recounted:

The Korean comrades maintained a fairly extreme position and did not show any inclination toward settling the incident. DPRK propaganda took on a fairly militant character. The population was told that a war could begin any day and that the military forces of the DPRK are “ready to smash American imperialism.” In effect, a full mobilization was declared in the country. Life, especially in the cities, was changed in a military fashion. An evacuation was begun of the population, administrative institutions, industries, and factories of Pyongyang. At the same time, the leadership of the DPRK took one more step

that alarmed us. On 31 January Kim Il-sung addressed an official letter to Comrade Kosygin, [writing] as the head of the Council of Ministers of the DPRK. This letter said “Johnson’s clique could at any time engage in a military adventure in Korea.” The policy of the American imperialists “is a rude challenge to the DPRK and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, who are bound together by allied relations according to the treaty of friendship, cooperation, and mutual assistance between the DPRK and the USSR. [It is] a serious threat to the security of all socialist countries and to peace in the entire world.”

Returning once again to the rule established by Stalin that the DPRK was permitted to counterattack in case of a U.S. attack, Kim Il-sung went on to say that his government was “forced to conduct preparations in order to give the aggression an appropriate rebuff.” He then pointedly expressed confidence that “in case a state of war is created in Korea as a result of a military attack by the American imperialists, the Soviet government and the fraternal Soviet people will fight with us against the aggressors . . .” Kim Il-sung’s letter ended with a proposal that, if such a situation materialized, the Soviets should “provide us without delay military and other aid and support, and mobilize all means available.”<sup>23</sup>

Kim’s transparent attempt at manipulation was more than Brezhnev would countenance. As he put it to the plenum, at this point “matters took a serious turn.” Bypassing the more respectful party-to-party communication channels, the Soviet leader sent an official government communication requesting that Kim Il-sung come to Moscow “for a comprehensive exchange of opinions regarding the situation that has emerged.” The Politburo, Brezhnev explained, had concluded that the “time had come to state our attitude clearly to the Korean comrades” regarding their “intention to bind the Soviet Union somehow, using

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23. Excerpt from Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev’s speech at the 9 April 1968 CC CPSU plenum, “On the current problems of the international situation and on the struggle of the CPSU for the unity of the international communist movement.” Russian State Archive of Recent History (RGANI), Fond 2, Opis 3, Delo 95, Listy 50–58. Obtained and translated by Sergey Radchenko. For the full text of this speech and other documents cited in this paper, along with an analysis of the Soviet role in the crisis, see Sergey Radchenko, “The Soviet Union and the North Korean Seizure of the USS *Pueblo*, Evidence from Russian Archives” (working paper no. 46, Cold War International History Project, April 2005).

the existence of the treaty between the USSR and the DPRK to involve us in supporting plans of the Korean friends which we knew nothing about.”

With remarkable chutzpah, Kim replied: “At the present time circumstances do not permit him to leave the country.” In his place he sent Deputy Premier and Minister of Defense Kim Ch’ang-bong. Brezhnev had a long discussion with Kim Ch’ang-bong on 26 February, telling him that the Soviet comrades “still do not depart from the assumption that the Korean comrades maintain the course of peaceful unification of Korea, for we are not aware of any changes.” Again not disagreeing in principle with the use of military means to accomplish unification, Brezhnev explained: “under the current circumstances we are against taking the matter towards unleashing a war.” Continuing Stalin’s formula, he added, “We fully understand the desire of the DPRK to strengthen its own defense, which we actively support.” However, Brezhnev explained, the Soviet government does not “understand the meaning of the information that reached us regarding the evacuation of Pyongyang.” It has no information from the Koreans “regarding their talks with the Americans, or the aims that these talks pursue.”

As for the serious issue of the Soviet-Korean treaty, Brezhnev quoted verbatim from his message to Kim Ch’ang-bong, which reinforced the continuing Soviet unwillingness to allow the treaty to drag the USSR into war with the United States:

Indeed, we have a treaty. Its essence is known both to you and to us. We would like to stress that it has a defensive character and is an instrument for defending the peace-loving position of North Korea. Since Comrade Kim Il-sung did not put the circumstances and the details of the current situation in a concrete form, we consider it very important to conduct serious consultations with him on this question. The problem of military actions is a very difficult question, especially under current circumstances, when the entire world struggles against war. It is impossible to talk about a military situation,

much less about some kind of military actions, by means of short letters. This is a very serious question and it demands serious consultations.

Brezhnev also expressed the opinion to Kim that “the question of the *Pueblo* crew, this whole incident, should be settled by political means without much delay, because otherwise the DPRK could lose the serious political gain it obtained in the early stage of the incident.”

Brezhnev concluded his report to the plenum by listing indications that the measures he had taken had borne fruit: the DPRK Foreign Ministry had quickly published a statement stressing its commitment to preserving peace in Korea; the Koreans had begun informing the Soviet ambassador of the progress of their talks with the Americans; and the Koreans had made it known that they were willing to exchange the crew of the *Pueblo* for North Koreans arrested in the ROK. Moreover, on 1 March, Kim Il-sung asked the Soviet ambassador “to pass along to Moscow his gratitude for the conversation with Kim Ch’ang-bong, for the sincere exposition of the opinion of the CC CPSU. At the same time Kim Il-sung assured us that the evacuation activities conducted in Pyongyang did not have an emergency character, that measures had been taken to stop panicky rumors, and that corrections were being made to the DPRK press statements.” In conclusion, Kim Il-sung assured the Soviets that the North Koreans “have no intention of raising military hysteria.” At a closed meeting in Pyongyang at the beginning of March, Kim reinforced this message by declaring: “War is not a question of tomorrow.”

Summarizing the present state of the crisis, Brezhnev noted that, while the situation might deteriorate once again, “on the whole one might say that by pursuing our consistent and principled line in this affair, we managed, first of all, to chip away at American arrogance, to rebuff their blackmail and threats, and, secondly, to exert considerable dissuading influence on the leadership of the DPRK, especially in connection with the question of the treaty, which has important meaning for the state interests of the Soviet Union.”<sup>24</sup>

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24. Ibid.

While Moscow was indeed able to exert a restraining influence on Kim Il-sung, the latter was hardly chastened by the experience. He soon ceased providing the Soviets with timely reports on the crisis and simultaneously attempted to exploit the crisis to extract even more aid from his Soviet patron. Just weeks following Brezhnev's report to the plenum, the new North Korean ambassador to Moscow, Chun Doo-hwan, informed Alexei Kosygin, chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, that Kim Il-sung had instructed him to work toward "all-around strengthening of the traditional Korean-Soviet friendship." He then reported that after the *Pueblo* incident "the situation in the Korean peninsula region had become rather tense, the United States and the South Koreans are resorting to blackmail and provocations, they are hastily preparing for a new war." Continuing to put forward the fiction that a revolutionary situation existed in the South and that the DPRK was not involved in the commando raid on the Blue House, Chun reported: "[T]he people of South Korea, inspired by the successes of the DPRK, are conducting an energetic military struggle against the puppet regime of Park Chung Hee. In the beginning of this year, a group of South Korean guerillas undertook an attempt to attack the residence of Park Chung Hee." He also invoked the Japanese bogeyman, declaring that "Japanese militarists contribute to the heightening of tensions on the peninsula . . . Japanese militarists are preparing plans for war against the DPRK."

Coming to the pitch line, he affirmed: "[T]he position of the DPRK government on the question of peaceful unification of the country remains unchanged. However, in light of the increasing danger of war, the DPRK is facing the task of defending the gains of socialism. That's why construction in the country is proceeding simultaneously in the economic and military fields." Ignoring the enormous aid the DPRK had received, and was continuing to receive, from the fraternal countries, he declared:

Successes in this regard are the result of the wise leadership of the party and the consistent implementation of the spirit of independence and self-reliance (*juche*). The Korean

people, fully and wholly supporting the political program of the DPRK government presented by Comrade Kim Il-sung at the session of the Supreme People's Council of the DPRK in December 1967 are achieving successes in the field of economic construction . . . However, in the metallurgic industry, because of the shortage of coal, certain difficulties have emerged. Considering the tense conditions in Korea and Asia, the government of the DPRK is striving to develop and strengthen cooperation between the DPRK and the USSR.

Before he would discuss supplying coal, however, Kosygin wanted to ensure that the North Koreans would again provide the Soviet Union with adequate information on the developing crisis. "We are not aware of the considerations and plans of the DPRK government with regard to the further development of events," Kosygin noted pointedly. "This makes it difficult for the Soviet Union to provide the DPRK with support in the international sphere and, in particular, in international organizations. The Soviet comrades are compelled to use only materials published in the open press." Kosygin asked Chun to tell Kim Il-sung that they "would like full trust and frankness in our relations. As far as we are concerned, we always acted like this before, and we are acting like this now. We do not have secrets from you, and we tell you everything frankly."

Refusing to commit to specific economic aid until the reporting issue was resolved, Kosygin noted that the Soviet Union was sending coal from the Donbass basin, even though the cost of transportation was greater than the cost of the coal itself. The only promise he would make was to consider sending the deputy head of the Council of Ministers, V. N. Novikov, to Pyongyang to participate in the second session of the Intergovernmental Soviet-Korean Consultative Committee for Economic, Scientific, and Technological Questions. Kosygin asked Chun to tell Kim Il-sung "that we remember talks with him in the Soviet Union, when questions of Soviet-Korean and inter-party relations were frankly discussed," and "stressed that

the spirit of frankness remains the main thing in Soviet-Korean relations.”<sup>25</sup>

Novikov did, in fact, go to Pyongyang later that month, an opportunity Kim Il-sung exploited to make a direct appeal for additional economic aid. In a meeting on 31 May, the North Korean leader again claimed that the DPRK’s failure to fulfill its economic plan was a consequence of the shortfall in deliveries of coal from China as well as of insufficient precipitation over the winter. After declaring that the DPRK would exchange no delegations with the PRC, he turned to the *Pueblo* issue, pointedly noting that the South Koreans had exploited the incident to receive major military aid from the United States, including modern fighter jets. A Soviet embassy officer, Zvetkov, deflected this line of discussion by pointing out the DPRK’s responsibility for this development. Referring to the commando raid on the Blue House, Zvetkov noted: “[O]ne should not overlook the fact that the events in Seoul that occurred before the *Pueblo* incident would also have constituted a major reason for the United States to concede to South Korean pressure to deliver modern weapons and equipment.”

Undeterred, Kim Il-sung asked for an acceleration in the construction of the second thermoelectric power plant in Puktschan, delivery of 20,000 tons of aluminum, construction of an aluminum plant, and additional deliveries of copper wire. Finally, to reinforce his claims of having turned away from China, and his vulnerability to a U.S. attack, Kim asked for permission to use an air route for special flights by members of the party leadership or the government that would go straight from the DPRK into Soviet territory. Kim explained: “[I]n this way, any contact with Chinese territory or flight over the open sea would be avoided . . . A forced landing might happen on flights over Chinese territory and insults by Red Guards might occur. The flight route over the sea would be dangerous, especially after the *Pueblo* incident . . . We do

not fear death, but we have to live in order to finish the revolution.”<sup>26</sup>

### The 1976 Ax Murders

Only a small number of the documents on the 1970s and 1980s that the Korea Initiative is collecting have thus far been translated. Among them, however, is an East German report on the ax murders at Panmunjom in August 1976 that suggests that the limits on Kim Il-sung’s freedom to engage in military action were still in place eight years after the *Pueblo* incident. A report on the visit of a GDR military delegation to the DPRK in October 1976 noted, with regard to the incident in the DMZ, that the Korean leadership was eager to demonstrate to the East German party, “and certainly to the Soviet leaders as well, that it will not initiate military actions against the South.” Kim Il-sung explained that, “with such incidents, it is always difficult to tell whether it was a deliberate provocation or an inadvertent accident. But we obviously ask ourselves what might have caused the adversary to think that after 20 years it suddenly has to fell a certain tree in the demilitarized zone.”

After describing the tree incident in detail as a deliberate U.S. provocation, he offered the lame explanation that it was designed “to create favorable conditions for Ford in the presidential elections. Furthermore, it provided a pretext for Park Chung-hee to put the patriots on trial that had been arrested in the spring . . . The Americans started this provocation in our country, and they struck first. It can always happen during a fight that someone gets killed. We declared to the Americans that we regret the incident, but we didn’t concede anything on reparations.” Kim then stated frankly, “We are sorry that this incident worried the socialist fraternal countries.” He still declined to accept responsibility, however, maintaining that it was not their fault, “because the Americans staged this provocation . . . They do this in our country all the

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25. Record of conversation between the chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, A. N. Kosygin, and the ambassador of the DPRK in Moscow, Chun Doo-hwan, 6 May 1968. AVPRF, Fond 102, Opis 28, Papka 25, Delo 2. Obtained and translated by Sergey Radchenko.

26. Memorandum of a conversation with the first secretary of the USSR embassy in the DPRK, Comrade Zvetkov, and Comrade Jarck, on 26 July 1968, between 14:30 and 16:15 in the USSR embassy, 29 July 1968. Ministry for Foreign Relations of the German Democratic Republic (MfAA), G-A 320. Obtained by Bernd Schaefer and translated by Karen Riechert.

time, it was the same with every president. In 1968 Johnson staged the *Pueblo* affair, Nixon organized in 1969 the incident with the spy plane EC-121,<sup>27</sup> and now Ford in 1976 attempted in Panmunjom to use a little tree to stir up the entire world. Now they need to resort to such petty means to drum up support before the elections.”<sup>28</sup>

According to Balazs Szalontai, Hungarian documents suggest that the incident was part of a DPRK campaign to raise awareness of the Korean issue during the meeting of the nonaligned countries in Colombo. Kim Il-sung’s aim was to increase support in Third World countries and simultaneously to isolate South Korea. Thus, Pyongyang had sharply increased provocative actions at the DMZ for several months before the tree-cutting incident, and had attempted to persuade its allies that the situation on the peninsula was acute. A North Korean diplomat even told a Hungarian colleague that the Korean People’s Army already had long-range missiles armed with Korean-made nuclear warheads, aimed at South Korea, Okinawa, and Nagasaki. However, no large-scale military preparations were made.

Pyongyang’s strategy failed, however, as the ax murders backfired. Third World countries disapproved of the murders, as did the Soviets and Chinese. The DPRK therefore quickly backed down, offering the explanations cited above from the GDR document. Szalontai notes that both the USSR and the PRC were less inclined to provide public support to the DPRK in 1976 than they had been in 1968, and for that reason the North Koreans had to retreat more quickly from their claims.<sup>29</sup>

## Late Kim Il-sung-ism

At some time between the mid-1970s and the mid-1980s, Kim’s thinking regarding military action against South Korea underwent a dramatic change. East German documents include remarkable transcripts of far-ranging discussions in May 1984 and October 1986 between Kim Il-sung and his “best friend,”<sup>30</sup> East German leader Erich Honecker, that suggest that the aging North Korean leader had finally shed his delusions about being able to prevail in a military conflict with the United States. Acutely aware of his country’s economic weakness, he presented the situation with South Korea primarily as a drain on the DPRK’s scarce resources. He explained to Honecker in 1984 that, every time the South Koreans and Americans conduct military exercises, the DPRK has to take countermeasures “and this is a great hindrance to our production. Since the number of soldiers in our army is smaller than that of the South Korean army, we have to mobilize many workers in these cases. But when the workers are mobilized, one work shift is dropped for up to one and a half months per year. That is a great loss.”<sup>31</sup>

Kim went on to inform Honecker that the DPRK had proposed tripartite talks with the United States and the ROK in order to reduce tensions. Gone were his earlier efforts to impress his allies with the imminence of a U.S. attack. Instead, he explained:

The goal of these [proposed] talks is to replace the armistice with a peace treaty with the US. We also proposed a non-aggression pact to South Korea and hope that this will

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27. For an analysis of East German documents on the EC-121 shoot-down, see Bernd Schaefer, “North Korean ‘Adventurism’ and China’s Long Shadow, 1966–1972,” 24–28.

28. Defense Minister Heinz Hoffmann to General Secretary Erich Honecker, report on the visit of a GDR military delegation to the DPRK in October 1976. German Federal Military Archive, Freiburg. Obtained and translated by Bernd Schaefer.

29. Balazs Szalontai, 16–17 March 2005, correspondence with the author. Szalontai is preparing an analysis of the incident for future publication.

30. During a meeting with Prof. Manfred Gerlach on 26 May 1986, Kim Il-sung referred to Honecker as his “best friend and comrade-in-arms.” “Report on conversation between Prof. Dr. Manfred Gerlach and Kim Il-sung, 26 May 1986. SAPMO-BA, DY 30, 2460. Translated by Grace Leonard,” *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 14/15 (Winter 2003/Spring 2004): 64.

31. “Stenographic record of conversation between Erich Honecker and Kim Il-sung, 30 May 1984. SAPMO-BA, DY 30, 2460. Translated by Grace Leonard,” *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 14/15 (Winter 2003/Spring 2004): 57.

help improve the tense situation, as well. Then the armies for both sides would be reduced and the Americans would withdraw from South Korea. Our opponent is using the pretext that we would attack South Korea, and says that this is why the Americans have to remain in South Korea. There is constant talk in the US House of Representatives about how our military forces are stronger than those of South Korea—the purpose of this talk is to deceive the people of the world. In truth, it is not even possible for us to have more armed forces than our opponents. We have a population of 17 million, while South Korea has a population of 30 million. Just looking at these figures it is clear that it is impossible for us to be stronger militarily.

Just looking at the weapons potential, our opponent gets all of its weapons from the US. And then there is the US army that is stationed in South Korea. And they even have nuclear weapons there. It is very plain that we are not militarily superior to them. But they use the pretext that we are stronger militarily in order to build up their weapons even more. And it would be impossible for us to attack them. This is all just a pretext for them to continue to occupy South Korea.

. . . In a word, there is little chance of reunification coming about as long as the Americans occupy South Korea. It is necessary to put forth proposals for peace over and over again in order to show the world that the US does not want this reunification. This is also necessary in order to encourage the South Korean people in their struggle. In the past we made a proposal for peaceful reunification, and, as I said, this year we proposed conducting tri-partite talks. So much for the situation in South Korea.<sup>32</sup>

Two years later Kim was even more direct in his discussions with Honecker. He reported that the anti-U.S. mood in South Korea had grown, although no rapid change in relations between the powers was to be expected.

The US rejected proposals made by the DPRK for reducing tensions on the Korean peninsula because it [would] lose its reason for remaining in South Korea if the initiatives were realized. Comrade Kim Il-sung affirmed that the DPRK does not intend to attack South Korea, nor could it. More than 1,000 US nuclear warheads are stored in South Korea, ostensibly for defense, and it would take only two of them to destroy the DPRK. The DPRK supports the proposals made by Comrade Gorbachev in Vladivostok and Reykjavik. Many problems could not be resolved with South Korea. Progress in relations between the Soviet Union and the US would also help to resolve the Korea problem.

. . . During his visit, Comrade Kim Il-sung openly and repeatedly spoke in favor of the comprehensive initiatives Comrade Gorbachev proposed for preventing a nuclear war, in favor of transforming the Asia-Pacific region to a peace zone, in favor of cooperation, and in favor of the proposed halt to the nuclear arms race, and averting the danger of a nuclear inferno. He characterized the Soviet proposals as responsible and evidence of a peace-loving foreign policy.<sup>33</sup>

The “elder statesman” had clearly come a long way from the thinking that underlay the commando raid on the Blue House in 1968. Rather than manipulating the Soviet Union into supporting North Korean aggression, he was now relying on radical Soviet peace-making to solve the DPRK’s problems with South Korea.

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32. Ibid, 57–58.

33. “Report on the Visit by Erich Honecker to the DPRK, 18–21 October 1986. SAPMO-BA, DY 30, 2460. Translated by Grace Leonard,” *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 14/15 (Winter 2003/Spring 2004): 66–67.



## Conclusions

The documentary record examined here is clearly far from complete; much work remains to be done in the archival gold mines of the DPRK's former allies. No information has yet been uncovered on the Rangoon bombing of 1983, the Korean Airlines bombing of 1987, the digging of the tunnels into South Korea, and many other issues. Nevertheless, enough of a pattern has emerged to make it possible to draw some preliminary conclusions about the North Korean approach to unification by military means from the late 1940s through the late 1980s. The first is that DPRK actions followed a logic that is comprehensible once sufficient information about it is known. North Korea, in other words, need not be seen as an enigma.

This logic, briefly stated, is that, during the first decades, "liberation" of the South remained an unquestioned goal and indeed a duty and in principle the use of military force was regarded as proper to achieve such an important end; however, the decision to employ such a strategy could not be made by the DPRK alone. Because North Korea depended on its allies for economic survival and because military action against the ROK risked general war between the Soviet and U.S. camps, only the Soviet Union (and in 1950 China) could make the final decision to go ahead with such dangerous action. As long as U.S. forces remained in South Korea and the United States remained committed to the defense of the ROK, the Soviet Union would not consider a repeat invasion of the South.

The Kim Il-sung regime was therefore restrained from attempting another conventional assault on South Korea, even though during the 1960s the North Korean leadership appears to have maintained an unrealistic optimism about its ability to prevail in such a contest. However, Soviet constraints had a loophole: Kim was allowed to defend the DPRK against a U.S. attack. As a consequence, the North Korean leader tried to manufacture such an attack or at least persuade his allies that one was imminent, particularly in the late 1960s when he was attempting to enhance his revolutionary stature internationally. Kim also tried to elude Moscow's constraints by persuading the Soviets that a revolutionary situation existed in South

Korea and that southern partisans had carried out the DPRK's aggression. Since these attempts were completely unsuccessful, North Korean provocations, while deadly, did not signal a real possibility of renewed war on the peninsula.

By the 1980s, if not earlier, Kim Il-sung had become persuaded of the deterrent effect of U.S. nuclear weapons. At the same time, he also recognized that the DPRK's economic system was not going to prevail over the capitalist system of the South. For both these reasons, even though Soviet leverage over the DPRK weakened in the late 1980s as a result of Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms, Kim ceased to speak of military means to unification of Korea, or even of unification at all. Instead, his goal was to ease tensions on the peninsula, and his method was to rely on Gorbachev's dramatic negotiations with Ronald Reagan over nuclear disarmament.

In the 1990s, with this same logic, it would seem that once the Soviet bloc collapsed, the best the Kim regime could hope for was survival. To fill the economic needs once supplied by the fraternal countries, the DPRK would use its well-honed skills at extortion. Having lost the protection of the Soviet nuclear umbrella, North Korea now feared attack from its long-time adversaries to the South. Hence, while Pyongyang's pursuit of a nuclear weapons capacity of its own might be interpreted as a return to its long-standing hopes for reunification by force, the evidence suggests that it is more likely that the DPRK concluded that its best security strategy was to rely on the nuclear deterrent that had been so successful against its own aggressive aims. In other words, if U.S. nuclear weapons deterred a North Korean attack, North Korean nuclear weapons would similarly deter a U.S. attack. Therefore, it would follow that the DPRK's nuclear program does not necessarily signal aggressive intent and that the essential precondition for a denuclearization of the DPRK is credible assurance that North Korea is not in danger of attack by the United States. At the same time, the DPRK's record of mendacity toward its patron states suggests that the United States and its allies would be wise to accompany such assurances with extremely vigilant monitoring of North Korean compliance.

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